The Virtue of Patience

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The Virtue of Patience

by Runlights

Summary

So you've never felt the attraction that comes when someone capable of doing terrible things, for some reason, cares only about you?

Winter is the prime season to weed out the weak, the unprepared, the old, the young, the sick. It has no mercy, no regard for the bodies it leaves in its wake, no sense of yielding, and certainly no ability to be anything that what it was made to be: a weapon. A weapon is nothing to fear; fear comes when one looks into the eye of the man with the finger on the trigger that says your number is up.

The Winter Soldier was designed to be a weapon unlike any other, unfeeling and cold. Brock Rumlow was designed to be the finger on the trigger, ambitious and cunning. Plans by their design are subject to change and not every variable can be accounted for.

Notes

Yes, I should be writing the rest of Taming Winter, but this bullied my brain into being written. It's an origin story where I've taken a different spin on how Rumlow and the Winter Soldier met, but I'm taking a different track with it than I wrote in my other fic.

I'm also trying something different with the Winter Soldier's characterization in this one, so we'll see how it goes. I can always scrap it, right?
Anyway, this work is based around the song "Want" by Recoil. Lyrics will be posted at the beginning of each chapter, and I hold no claim over the song nor can I even pretend to make any money from it. It is a good song though.
Rumlow was all about order now that he had had a taste of it, but there was one rule he always had trouble following even on a military base and that was curfew. The night time was when he had lived most of his life, when he had felt the most alive and done most of his action. It was not a friendly time to sleep as it should have been for most people, but he had long ago given up on the idea that he was going to have a good night’s sleep or even a solid eight hours. He lived on six typically, but he was functional on four routinely. He was probably the only one he knew who napped actually, and as much as the others made fun of him for it, the day was safer. More people and less shadows skulking in alleys waiting for an opportunity to shiv a kid trying to scrounge out a living.

So, he slipped out of his bunk silently, ignoring the sighs, snores and the unconscious farting that only a group of men could accomplish. He grabbed his boots and eased across the floor, and thankfully, even about to be shipped out, the barracks were clean and organized. He had no trouble ghosting across the floor to the exit and slipping out into the cool night air.

He tugged on his boots one-by-one and slipped into the shadow of the building, avoiding the night patrols until he was at the edge of the military encampment. It was quiet out on the edge of the desert, but there were still enough scrub bushes where a man could technically have a piss in peace if they wanted to. He crouch down behind one of the scrub bushes, not that it mattered to him if he was caught out here.

He fished in his back pocket for his pack of cigarettes and pulled out a stick, jamming it between his lips. He lit it and took a long drag as he stared out over the scrubby desert, just minding his own business and reflecting on how far he had come. There was still a ways to go, but he had a plan. He’d fill this tour with the rest of his HYDRA team and then ask for a transfer out so he could begin his climb higher in the ranks that mattered.

His cigarette end lit up red and orange in the night air, and he ignored the smoke that billowed out around his face before he exhales, blowing more away from him. A breeze stirred the bushes near him, but it wasn’t until half his cigarette was done and he was regretting leaving his jacket back in the barracks that the night seemed to grow quieter.

Brock pushed his cigarette to one side of his mouth and glanced around, years of skulking in little shadows allowing him to realize that the night hadn’t been so still and quiet a moment before. He ducked his head and jammed his butt out in the sand before his head snapped up at a flicker of something out of the corner of his eye.

His head turned around towards it, but only a breeze stirred the bare branches of the desert scrub bush nearby. Slowly, he rose to his feet, belatedly realizing he probably should have tied his boots up. Some soldier he made looking like a half-dressed gutter-slut.

There! He snapped his head to the right, a movement out of the corner of his eye, his peripheral vision picking it out. He almost demanded to know who was out there, but he knew that was pointless and would only draw attention to himself standing where he was. He shifted his weight on
his feet, his hand falling to his empty belt.

Shit… he was still on regulation on not bearing weapons in camp. His fingers still groped along it as if hoping to find a knife, his pistol, anything, but there was nothing to be had.

Instead, his eyes moved constantly, flicking around as the hairs on the back of his neck rose. He felt something like a rabbit hiding in a bush hoping to be overlooked by a fox, but he reasoned that was stupid because he was alone out here. No, he wasn’t, and he turned his head to the right again at some sort of flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye.

Something – no someone - bled from the shadows, like walking right out of a nightmare that happened to be the long straight shadow cast by the flag pole. He stared openly as he felt his measure being taken, but the masked face didn’t register as any military garb that he knew. Of course, it was the middle of the night in the dark, but there was something that itched at the back of his mind that something was wrong, so very wrong.

It was only the moonlight catching the glint of silver that gave him any opportunity to move, and he threw himself to the side even as the bite of a knife cut across his upper arm. He rolled immediately into a crouch, but the figure by the flagpole was gone. He ignored the slow slide of blood down his arm and looked around wildly.

A flicker of movement to his left this time and he leapt and rolled through the sand to put some distance. He came up to his feet immediately, hissing like an enraged cat because he couldn’t shout out. No one would believe he was dodging shadows. He knew better than that, but he set his hands into fists as he prepared to defend himself. Come on, where was it now?

His world exploded in a haze of white as something hard and metal impacted with the side of his head, knocking him over, and he lay dazed for a few seconds before survival instincts screamed through the ringing in his ears. He somehow managed to flop over, narrowing avoiding a combat boot slamming into the sand where his head had been a second before.

And then he just kept rolling, sending a spin to his already hurting head, but somehow, Rumlow rolled up to his feet, bent awkwardly and swaying. He stumbled slightly when he tried to take a step back to camp, his vision spinning and fading. Yet, he twisted aside when something entered his vision, a flash of silver, and he ended up in the sand again, gasping and cursing as he shook his head to clear it.

That’s when a hard boot impacted with his ribs, and pain exploded in his world as he felt himself leave the ground and sail like some live golfball to impact hard into the sand near the flag pole. His momentum had him rolling even as he clenched his arms across his broken ribs until he made impact on the hard pole, the snap of the flag in the breeze almost comical in a morbid sort of way.

Still, like an asshole aware he was about to die, he forced his hands up above his head and yelled, “hole-in-one!” Or he tried to yell but each word was a stab of hot pain, and he ended up croaking and choking on the words. It was really the thought that counted.

Brock huffed short little breaths of pain as he stared up at a masked and goggled face, his vision swimming in and out as if he were looking at the man looming over him from a great distance. Then suddenly the face was closer, and he felt his neck burn as his dogtags were roughly grabbed and he thought perhaps examined. He made to push at the masked man, but he was backhanded so hard he saw stars behind his eyes before he must have lost consciousness.

When he was next aware of anything but the pounding in his head, he found that he was being dragged by his foot over the ground. Clearly he had lost his boot along the way, which he absently
thought would earn him a few good punches and a public dress-down in the morning. There was also enough sand up the back of his shirt and down his fatigues to make a sand castle, and while it should have been hilarious he got his ass kicked stealing time for a smoke outside of camp, he was too busy just trying to breathe. He made no attempt to fight back even as he hit some snags as he was dragged God knows where.

He thought the stars looked nice from this angle. They still swam before his eyes occasionally, but that might have been the pain when someone suddenly nudged his ribs. He hissed in pain, trying and failing to roll away from the contact.

“It’s been awhile since you dragged in a stray.” It was a man’s voice, and even from the distance of laying on his back, Brock knew there was amusement there. “Kill him. No witnesses.”

A second voice said something, but it wasn’t in the English language. He actually tried to pick puzzle out what it might have been, but there was hands on his dogtags again dragging his head and neck from the ground. There was a moment when his shoulders left the ground and then a sudden sound of metal on metal and the chain of his tags broke, cutting into his neck before leaving him completely. He hit the ground with a groan, his vision threatening to go dark again.

“No, it’s not your decision. It comes from the top,” the first voice said, but the amusement was gone now. “Kill him and then I’ll let you in.”

Brock turned his head, viewing two men before the shorter one dropped with a sudden wet sound, though he hadn’t been able to pick out movement to indicate why. He groaned when his leg was grabbed again, and he was dragged into a tent that was for tactical planning. There were many voices in there, many men, but he couldn’t get a good look at any of them because of his headache hazing his vision at the sudden light punching him in the eyeballs.

The second voice, clearly belonging to the masked man dragging him, growled words in that same foreign language before something metal hit the table. Shit, those were his dogtags. There was a hushed silence, only broken by the shift of men and the pounding in his bruising face.

“Speak.” It was a new voice, calm and assured that broke the silence.

“I want him.”

He tried to lever himself up on his elbows, but his ribs protested and he managed only to struggle onto his side, his captured leg dropped without apparent care either. Once there, Brock got one elbow under him as he drew his legs closer to his chest, rolling his weight awkwardly up to his knees and somehow managed to push himself up to kneel. He felt many eyes on him, but he didn’t look because he thought he was about to vomit on the floor.

“Who is he,” The calm voice asked.

“Brock Rumlow, according to the tags here.” He lifted his head at the sound of his name, the side of his face purpled with bruising. He stared balefully at the men gathered around the table and especially at the one whose back was turned to him.

“Why?”

“He saw me,” said the man directly in front of him. There seemed to be no question in the tone, just authoritative certainty.

“Our policy is no witnesses,” said the calm voice.
There was a sudden rapid fire of that foreign language again, spilled quickly, effectively and clipped. He was suddenly grabbed back the back of his neck and hauled from the ground and beyond his feet like he weighed nothing at all. It hadn’t been since he was eight years old that he had hung like a bedraggled mess in the same way he did now at a steady twenty-five. “He evaded me, and he lived. I want him.”

Brock blinked his eyes rapidly in an attempt to clear them as a man moved around the table to come and stand in front of him. He growled when his chin was seized and his face forced from one side to the other awakening his pain all over again, and he caught sight of the older man who he should have recognized. He didn’t know why that face was familiar, but his headache just made a name impossible to come up with.

“You’re certain of him,” the man holding his chin said, glancing at the one holding him up.

“Yes.”

He sneered like a beaten dog, curling a lip in threat to bite as any mangy cur would. He glared at the man who was now double in his vision, but he found his chin dropped as his dogtags were once again examined closely by the blond man in front of him. There seemed to be a great consideration going on before his dogtags were tucked into his pants’ pocket.

“Take him then. He’s yours,” the blond man in front of him said. “We’ll see if your intuition is still as good as it used to be. If not, at least we won’t have to concern ourselves with a witness regardless.”

Brock had no idea what was happening, but the grip on his neck loosened. He made an attempt to get his feet his back under him before he was dropped, but he was shoved over with a grunt of pain that sent shards of hot pain through his ribs again. The last thing he remembered was being dragged out of the tent like he was some child’s favourite blanket.

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“It worked then.”

“He survived the process, yes. With the serum being so old, it’s surprising. As you know, our replication attempts have been unsuccessful.”

“Did you supplement it with the asset’s?”

“No, it would have been impossible given his current state, and his serum is notoriously volatile when introduced to subjects. We’ve tried to rectify the situation, but the globulins are very virulent.”

“But he’s viable.”

“Our tests indicate he is viable for service.”

“What benefits?”

“He’s… we don’t actually know. No doubt his physical attributes are supplemented, but his regeneration is only slightly higher than normal. My assistant proposed that he was very hardy.”

“Hardy?”

“Er, it’s just a hypothesis right now, but we suspect he can survive heavy damage when others can’t. His old scars are even healing persistently.”
“Hmm, it fits with his background. It makes him valuable in the field as well.”

Brock gritted his teeth against the annoying chatter of male voices, twitching as much as he could in the full restraints that he was held down with. He strained slightly against the bands that held him in place before giving up, instead turning his head slightly towards the sound of the voices. He was blinded with some kind of grey material that covered his eyes, but his hearing was as good as ever, if not slightly better than he remembered.

He recognized one of the voices now that he thought about it, but he couldn’t put a face with it. He thought that the one voice had swam up from the depths of his fragmented memories of his assault from the military encampment. It sounded old, certain and calm, like all of this business was just another project on the side. That older voice was so familiar it was like an itch in the back of his mind, and it annoyed him that important information was missing. He hated not being in the know.

“…is it true, sir? The asset chose him?”

There was a pause as if this information was bridging on classified. He knew those kinds of pauses. “Yes, after twenty years, the asset finally sniffed out a viable candidate it seems.”

“A pity on the others…”

“No, we don’t pity the dead, not even those who died for our good cause. They knew the cost, and besides, the asset didn’t dislike them, just turned his back when asked if they were viable. It was a worthy sacrifice all the same.” The old voice didn’t seem bothered about whatever it was that they were talking about, which seemed odd. It sounded like men had died.

Questions crowded into his brain about his situation, who the asset was, why he was here at all, and what serum had been used on him that hadn’t worked on others. Brock shifted, but the restraints were unyielding and he could barely shift his bare toes. Despite his questions, he realized he was cold, like he had been laying here for a long time without clothes on. Of course, he was wearing fatigues, but an assessment made him realize the rest of his equipment had been stripped from him.

Shit, they took his cigarettes. He could use one right about now, the only real bad habit he abided by in his life.

The next odd thing that made itself present to him was the fact that he didn’t hurt when he distinctly remembered getting his bell rung and his ribs broken. He could open his eyes behind the blindfold and didn’t feel particular discomfort from what he would have thought would have been an obvious concussion. Hell, the way he had been hit twice in the head, he might have had a cracked skull. So aside from cold, he felt in perfect health. Even that knife scar on his back that he had had since he was seventeen no longer itched as it always seemed to.

“We’ll run a few more tests to be certain in the next few hours.”

“Good, alert me when he’s awake.”

“I’m awake,” Brock said softly, not all that interested in being any kind of experimental guinea pig and almost eager to be able to move freely again. He shifted his head towards the direction the voices had been coming from and was able to pick out footsteps coming closer to him.

A pair of hands worked at the material covering his eyes, and he blinked and squinted when light suddenly flooded his vision. He saw double again for a few seconds and grunted in discomfort, but his eyes were quick to adjust to the change. He immediately looked to his left and saw an older man in a suit standing next to the table he was strapped to. Unlike that night however long ago, he
recognized the man immediately now.

“You’re Secretary Pierce,” he said, taking the man in with more of a shrewd assessment. The guy didn’t look as impressive as on television or standing on a podium, but there was something about the man that made him instinctively weary.

“Brock Rumlow, how do you feel?” There was a formality to the use of his name, and it caused him to sneer in reply. Normally he would temper his base reactions, but he was currently tied down; it seemed like the perfect time to show his teeth in his own defense. “No, let’s not do that, shall we? I was informed your impudence gutter-rat attitude had been put in order.”

There was the sharp bite of a backhand across his face, but it was the cut of the man’s ring that set his teeth on edge. A slow lazy burn of blood smothered the injury in which it had come. He shifted in the restraints as if to fight them, but even he knew it was pointless.

“Answer the question.”

“I’m alive, and my ass is cold,” Brock replied with narrowed eyes.

“But you are whole,” Pierce said simply, stating a fact and not bothering to elaborate.

“Better than I was... however long ago,” he agreed. He was back to eyeing the older man wearily. Why was someone so high up politically talking someone so low down in the mud as he was?

Pierce offered him a gamely smile, but it never reached the man’s eyes. They crawled over him, apparently playing most attention over the wound that had been inflicted on him. The blood on his face had clotted, but he personally paid it little mind.

“When did you join HYDRA?”

He stiffened both at the abrupt change of subject and the word of the secret organization that he had joined years before. He had always been told that unless it was absolutely necessary, HYDRA didn’t exist and was not to be spoken off. That lesson had been beaten into every single one of the guys who had joined around the time that he had joined up.

Brock stared at the man above him, but he realized he wasn’t being rushed to answer. “When... I was seventeen,” he said carefully. He half-expected another backhand for admitted it but nothing happened.

“You were in a juvenile detention centre at the time, were you not?” His eyes flicked over beyond Pierce and fell on a rather thick file, and without even being able to read the manila cover, he knew it was his.

“Yes.”

Alexander Pierce gave him a measured look, clearly having followed his eyes to the file. “Your attitude did a rather abrupt change in that detention centre. You finished high school and shortly after your release, you joined the military and have served with the honour befitting a United States soldier. Five tours, is it?”

“Yes.” He shifted as much as he was able at the pointed look. “Sir. Yessir.”

“That’s better,” the older man praised softly. “You’re a smart man, and you have a quality that I find appealing above all others.”
“Sir?”

“You’re patient.”

That seemed like a strange thing to be interested in, given there were so many other qualities that made a soldier. Of course he had to be patient because he was a sniper, and he was put into position to find targets, to wait for them to come into his crosshairs through all manner of uncomfortable situations. He had learned patience early on because a rash action would get him kicked or worse caught. He had survived by biding his time for the best opportunity, but he was also keen enough to be able to pick out when that ideal opportunity came about too. Street smarts he had in spades.

He stared up at Pierce, deciding to say nothing and let the man come to him so to speak. He had no idea where this was going, but he was kind of hoping that he would be let up soon so he wasn’t freezing and maybe to ask where his cigarettes were.

“You’re going to quit smoking,” Alexander said into the silence.

“Why?”

“To prove to me that you can, that nothing, not even addiction to nicotine, is going to get in the way of you following an order that I give you,” Pierce said and leaned down so that they were almost nose-to-nose. “I expect great things from you, Rumlow. Many great things.”

Brock couldn’t help but swallow hard as he stared at the aging face above him. At the same time, he mentally squished the urge to have a cigarette and shoved it to the back of his mind. “Yes sir,” he said slowly, taking the other man’s measure now that they were so close. “I won’t let you down, sir.”

Pierce seemed satisfied with the answer and rose again. “You’re going to Russia where you will meet up with your new team.” He just nodded in reply. “They are a self-contained unit, and they generally govern themselves. They are not a military unit and your rank means nothing to them, so bear that in mind. You’re a greenhorn through and through to them, and they’ll work out any kinks in your behaviour and your… night activities sooner than you’d think.”

It seemed that his little midnight walks were known then. He hoped he was still going to be allowed to have naps regardless. “Is this unit… HYDRA?”

“Yes… and no.” Pierce reached out to scratch some of the dried blood from his cheek and smirked as if it was pleasing to the older man. “You live inside a different organization, but your allegiance hasn’t changed.”

“Yes sir,” he replied softly, ready and willing to puzzle it out himself.

“And Rumlow, ambition is a great trait to carry with you, but don’t let it go to your head, hmm? Remember the attribute I think will serve you best,” Pierce said with a smile that almost reached the man’s eyes before the old Senator left his field of vision and left. That was a political prod to be patient, wasn’t it?

Well, no one could say anything against him for the fact that he was always out for number one at all times. He couldn’t rely on anyone or anything to get him through, and that was a lesson that he had learned early. He had long ago told himself it wasn’t being selfish either, that it was about survival and using every skill and cunning guile that he had to get what would serve him best, would allow him to rise to the top of the shit pile that happened to be life.

The only difference now was that the pile that he wanted to live on top of was no longer the poor gang-riddled streets of New York. He was part of HYDRA, and he burned with message of that
kind of liberation where the assholes who had spat on him, looked down their noses at him or gave him those disgusting pitying looks would realize that their freedom was as much a lie as his was.

The world was a piece of shit, and the chaos was only getting worse. HYDRA would provide the world with the true sense of freedom where chaos was snuffed out, where terrorism was abolished, where little girls didn’t have to cry as their pimps raped or beat them for not lifting their skirts high enough. The world was a cruel place and all the shadows that lurked there in the stinky underbelly happened to be everywhere, but people were in delusion that because they turned a light on that the shadows were chased away forever. It didn’t work that way; the same shit was just easier to ignore when not cast in shadow anymore. People were comfortable to live in their bubble slowly buried alive in the chaos of the world beyond their windows. Sometimes good people died and bad people lived, but not when HYDRA’s world order came into being. Bad people, even those in hiding, wouldn’t stand a chance.

And in the end, Brock Rumlow was going to be there for it, for whatever order that HYDRA had planned. Better, he was going to help give a push where he could. He was not only looking out for HYDRA but he was looking out for numero-un and that’s all that mattered to him. Friends were a lie. Parents were useless. Lovers were just cheap excuses to chase away the loneliness for an hour or two. All of those things were useful, but it didn’t change the fact that if you wanted something done, it had to be done yourself. No one else was going to do it for him, not without a cost.

He shifted in the restraints, and he reflected that his ass was still cold. His toes weren’t feeling all that warm either anymore, but at least he could move those. “Going to Russia,” he muttered. “And quitting smoking. How bad could either be?”

It turned out that quitting smoking was far more pleasant than being shipped to Russia. It wasn’t just Russia either, which was bad enough to freeze his balls to his thigh if he didn’t move often enough, but it was Northern Russia. He had to take whatever he thought he might not mind about the old Soviet country and throw it down so that he could piss on it and then light it on fire. That was pretty much Northern Russia, a godforsaken place where it was more winter than even Santa Clause had to endure.

His team was a group of twelve people, who on the first day of his arrival had stripped him to the waist, surrounded him in a circle and beat him to a state of unconsciousness. He knew that attitude well, had faced it often in juvenile detention where boys set for HYDRA had been gathered together to fight each other to toughen them up. If one couldn’t take their beats, they had no right to keep on living.

Brock was not the smallest of their group either thankfully, but he was the newest and that meant that every shit duty that a team could think of was one that he had the pleasure of dealing with. That too only assured him of his way of thinking, but it also brought out in him the survivor attitude that mixed very well with militaristic discipline. He would survive even the hell duties like midnight patrol in a blizzard, taking on the extra duties around their camp and working on less sleep because it was hard when there was always a risk of a polar bear banging down the door to eat any one of them.

He kept thinking that it would be Jack Rollins to get eaten first, or at he liked to called the guy ‘shovel-face’. Jack was the next in line to get shit on, he being at the bottom of the ladder, and it was in the almost shared harshness that they had united in purpose. They weren’t friends or anything, not even after four months of grueling drills, midnight operations into the ass end of nowhere, sparring, and having to rub shoulders together as they tried to keep their drinking water from freezing.

Of course, they were a good unit, worked solidly together and eventually accepted one another.
There was trust in the drills, especially when one of the old grizzled officers came and took them all to task, pushed them all harder, even shot at them in the snow. If they disliked each other and the fact they were in the ass-end of nowhereland, they disliked any officer that came in to set new missions for them. It was the way of things, the way of training, and even after six months, he had no idea what they were training for. One didn’t ask questions at the bottom of the shit heap of a unit.

Then they were assigned an operation of search and destroy with real dangers and real stakes. It was as sound as an operation could go, minus the explosions that usually accompanied any other mission he had been on. Brock had the only kill, a quick snipe from a rooftop that was probably the only reason the alarm wasn’t raised on the rest of the unit contaminating the food stuffs they had been sent in for.

Of course, getting the only kill earned him some points. He wasn’t stuck out in the cold on midnight watch duty anyway. That was as much of a bonus as he could consider happening.

However, the unit’s success was noticed. They began to be sent on more missions and not all of them were in the Soviet land either, but they completed all of them with success. In the year that he worked as the greenhorn, they only lost two members of the team, but those were replaced with others, and he and Jack moved up the internal proverbial rankings. He also tormented the new recruits as much as the rest of the unit did.

A year into his training, which was all military tours anyway, he still was no closer to understanding what he was doing here. It was no different from his other assignments save for the secrecy, but he was patient and gouged out a niche for himself as the company sniper. It still didn’t feel any different, and that chaffed on him greatly. He was supposed to be moving up the ladder, not wallowing at the bottom or worse sinking.

It was frustrating, but he bit his tongue, kept his head down and his nose clean. He worked hard, but he wanted something to allow him to advance.

Two weeks after his full year with the unit known only as ‘White Company’, Brock’s world altered in a way that he had never planned for, never considered possible, never realized it had happened until the dust of his shattered selfish ambitions stuck in the back of his throat like a bad choked on dream.

He was hidden in a safehouse for HYDRA with the rest of his unit, cleaning his rifle as he always did in the interim wait for the mission parameters to be given to them. They had been there only a day, Jack seated next to him and sharpening a knife as most of the unit idled away time as productively as they could in checking weapons, equipment, chatting softly all the while waiting for the big details to come down the line. They weren’t normally in Moscow, usually too far North to reach it.

“Think this is it?” Jack nudged him slightly in the ribs.

“Who knows. We’ve been freezing off our balls for it long enough,” he replied with a shrug of his shoulders, hiding his frustrations behind a neutral voice. “How’s that rib doing?”

“It’s fine,” Jack replied. “I gave out better than I received anyway.”

Brock snorted softly in agreement, glancing over at the young punk Rollins had taken to task for sneaking some booze into camp. The kid looked like a frozen raccoon with the pair of shiners and broken nose. “Thought he was going to take you for a few seconds there.”

“You had my back.” Jack gave him a pointed look as if to add ‘didn’t you?’
“Only because I wanted a piece of that little shit stain if you couldn’t handle the situation,” he replied airily. He denied having much association with any of the team beyond what was necessary. “I would have given him more than a face lift though.”

“What, the patented Rumlow-headbutt?”

They both issued snorts of amusement, neither of them finding it odd that he was best known for being able to headbutt pretty much anyone and do it extremely well. The only one of their current unit who hadn’t been on the receiving end of one was the current unit commander, Seever, but Brock had his number and would sooner rather than later impact his forehead with that asshole’s. He vowed that would be the day he would take over the unit.

“White Company, atten-hut!”

They were all on their feet and standing at attention the moment the order was sounded, weapons abandoned at their feet along with the rest of their equipment. The door to the safehouse opened without a sound, and Brock wasn’t the only one who snapped a crisp salute when Secretary of State Alexander Pierce stepped into the room with them. It suddenly felt very crowded, yet a great warm energy suffused him.

This was it. This was the turn of the tide! He was going to make his break on this mission; he just knew it.

However, Pierce wasn’t alone and another man stepped into the room and shut the door soundlessly. That man came to stand with a strange sort of benign ease at Pierce’s elbow, but the guy was so decked out in weaponry anyone looking would have thought that the second person was a bodyguard. The pair made quite the sight, Pierce in his crisp suit with an expensive jacket and scarf and the second man wearing heavy tactical gear meant for winter missions. There was oddly no hood to the man’s coat.

Brock stiffened only a few moments into staring at the pair. He knew that mask and goggles! They belonged to the asshole who had kicked the shit out of him and dragged him around through his military camp as if he were nothing but a sack of potatoes. A quick glance around showed him that no one else had any idea who the second man was. It was all polite disciplined interest.

“Gentlemen, at ease,” Pierce said and they all relaxed into parade rest naturally. “White Company has shown an excellent fortitude and come together under the harshest of environments. That’s good; we need you all as tough-as-nails for the future.”

They all remained silent and still, not moved by the praise or the idea that their forging as a unit had been anything but purposeful in the cold and ice of the north. There was only the small shift of weight that indicated nervous energy, but neither he nor Jack next to him dared to move or even breathe more than necessary.

“This unit will soon make the transition from White Company to a different name: STRIKE, alpha unit. You will all be the first of your kind, a specialized defense force for homeland security and your outward affiliation will be with SHIELD under the Director Nicolas Fury, who I might add is a personal friend.” He had a feeling that Pierce had less friends than he did, but then again, being as high up as Pierce was, it was all about appearances wasn’t it? Their new designation didn’t surprise him though.

“Lieutenant Seever, for this mission, you will be relegated to second,” Pierce continued on brusquely. There was a stir to that, given how long old Seever had been running this unit and no one, not even the current second could wrestle command away from the man. Yet, the Secretary stripped
“White Company, your orders and your mission shall be in the capable hands of this man.” Everyone
looked at the man standing at Pierce’s elbow silently and ever imposing. “For the ease of
designation, you may refer to him as ‘Soldier’.”

What an odd way to refer to someone, and he met Jack’s glance with a bit of raised eyebrow. They
listened to the mission before Pierce handed Seever a package of written instructions to go over with
the unit before they were shipped out in two hours. That was very little time for proper preparation,
which meant that this entire mission was really a test, and he was determined to pass no matter what.

“Agent Rumlow,” Alexander Pierce called. He snapped to immediate attention. “Upstairs if you
please.”

Of course, there was no option but to follow the command regardless of how many ‘please’s Pierced
added onto the end of the sentence. He quick marched to the rickety old stairs and headed up first,
and it was all he could do not to look back to see who was following him up. The landing on top
was supposed to be bedrooms, but the rooms had long ago been stripped and broken down, no doubt
the wood used for a fire. This wasn’t exactly a rich area of town.

He turned and stepped into the largest bedroom that Pierce indicated once all three of them were on
the top of the landing, and he again stepped through first, sweeping his gaze for any danger. He
about-faced and found himself looking between the masked man and the Secretary, uncertain of
where this was going to go. He planned on making the most of it; this was an impression that he
wouldn’t screw up.

“Good things have reached my ears of you,” Pierce said conversationally. “You’ve quit smoking.”

Brock shifted his weight on his feet. “Yes sir, as ordered.”

“Did you have trouble?”

“No sir, no time to worry about it as I had to concentrate on keeping all ten of my toes from freezing
off,” he replied, stating it as if it were fact. Normally he wouldn’t elaborate, but he wanted Pierce to
know that he survived and did so well.

“Still a good sniper, but you also can lead unit operations,” Pierce said in that same conversational
tone. There was something in the Secretary’s gaze that had his shoulders setting. “Patience; the lead
will be yours in a few short years.”

That was the best word he had heard since old JT had been shot in the streets and would no longer
haunt his little areas. He was moving up, as he thought he would, as he knew he could. Discipline,
self-preservation, patience and cunning was all that it took. As always, he would survive and claw
his way to the top of the shit pile.

There was no sign or indication from Pierce, but Brock shifted his gaze over to the masked man who
had so far not even creaked a movement. Yet, when movement happened, it was like a horrid
flashback to a year ago. He barely twisted to the side as a knife passed through his previously
occupied space as he shouted, “son of a bitch!”

He dumped himself on the floor a moment later to avoid a swinging fist, and so much like the last
time, he rolled just before a boot slammed into the floor where he had just been. He came up to his
feet, pulling a knife and drew back his hand to let fly.

“Enough.” Pierce’s command stopped them both in mid-motion. “Stand down, both of you.”
Brock only relented when the Soldier shifted and returned to Pierce, but blood was pounding in his ears still as he dropped his hand to his side and slipped his knife back into his belt, eyeing the masked man with weary caution. He slowly moved back to his previous spot where the floorboards were splintered under his boots from the brief impact. His dark eyes shrewdly flicked between the pair in front of him, ready to dive out of the way.

“You will be working closely with the Soldier. He is also a sniper, and I’m sure there are all manner of trade secrets that you two can exchange.” Not bloody likely if every time he saw the guy he had to crawl around like a gutter-rat. “You also will have a very different honour than your fellows, and I will now impress upon you the importance of this. Our policy is no witnesses. Ever. You life hangs in the balance of this when you are assigned to missions with the Soldier.”

It was the tone that immediately indicated the gravity of the situation more than the words themselves. It really was kind of amazing that with a razor tone, Pierce could indicate that he would suffer so badly that he would beg for death if this policy wasn’t followed. It wasn’t many people could make him shiver, but it was more in revulsion rather than fear. No one made him beg.

“I understand, sir,” he said neutrally.

“Reveal,” Alexander said to the masked man.

Slowly, as if to further impress the importance of the moment, the movements of the Soldier were fluid but without hurry. First the gloved right hand rose and grasped the side of the goggles, pulling them free with a snap and tucking them into a belt loop. He was confronted with the most blue eyes he had ever seen, eyes that seemed to stab right into his chest and able to see how his heart did a strange flip-flop as if just commanded to stop beating. He felt frozen, but he stared right back, trying to master an expression of polite indifference.

The right hand rose again, slow and methodical to grasp the edge of the mask. Brock thought it looked strangely like some kind of muzzle. With a simple jerk, it came free and was lowered, revealing a clean-shaven face that was no older than his. The expression worn was neutral in every sense of the word from the set of the man’s mouth to the position of the jaw to the way the man’s brows were perfectly arched over those blue eyes.

His heart gave another strange flip-flop as they stared at each other, no more than ten feet separating them. It felt like some kind of strange face-off, like he should expect another knife at any moment. It was strange though the longer those eyes appraised him, the warmer his belly and chest felt, like some kind of bubbly heat was rising and threatened to choke him. It had never happened before, and he didn’t like feeling discomforted.

“This is the Winter Soldier,” Alexander Pierce said into the thick silence. “HYDRA’s greatest asset, and the asset has chosen you by whatever merit made itself apparent to him that you will be a handler.”

“A handler, sir?” He had enough time to order his tone to be neutral if a little curious.

There was silence for a moment while the staring contest continued. “You are responsible for the asset’s comfort, you will be present at any rendezvous point at the right time to retrieve him; you will assess his state of health and report discrepancies in behaviour. Your pack will always carry enough supplies for yourself but also for the asset. You will be given commands to use in case of malfunction.”

Brock couldn’t help his eyebrows heading straight to his hairline. It was like Pierce was talking about a robot or a sharpened knife that had just been jammed into his hand. “Malfunction, sir?”
The Secretary looked at him a moment before snapping the quick Russian word, "Kneel."

The Winter Soldier dropped so abruptly that the wood splintered under the sudden weight and impact. It was also the first time those blue eyes left his to stare at the floor instead. It was like watching the strings from a puppet cut, but there was nothing so graceless in that fall, only a different kind of fluid motion that ended with the command being met.

“HYDRA’s greatest asset may look like a man, but he is in fact a weapon. He is the greatest science-made weapon, and you are to treat him as such. Like any weapon, you will keep him clean, functional and see that he returns to the appropriate location.” Pierce threw the Winter Soldier a look and gestured, and the asset rose without verbal command. “You’re too green to know what to do, so your job on this mission is to simply follow him, don’t get in his way and learn. When White Company is assigned to Washington, you will be paired with a senior handler be trained.”

This was it, Brock thought with a strange sense of soaring greedy elation. This was his moment to shine, the assignment that would allow him to claw to the top where he felt like he was best working from. He was being given a special assignment, one that no one else was able to compete with him on. Ambition twisted in the warmth of his guts, so close, finally so close!

Suddenly the Winter Soldier pointed at him, and he came to attention immediately. A jab of the finger earned a shift from him, but Pierce issued a soft chuckle of amusement, the kind of laugh of a grandfather taking in the sight of grandchild doing something cute. “He’s taken a shine to you; that’s good, you’ll need it to survive.”

He shifted his shoulders, having no idea what was going on. The asset was still pointing at him. He glanced at Pierce for guidance, uncertain if he was allowed to speak directly to the Soldier.

“I think he wants you to have the knife he threw at you,” Alexander said, that same parental amusement present.

Brock turned and looked to the wall where a wicked serrated knife had been embedded. He swallowed and shifted his weight, and when he wasn’t contested, he walked over to the wall and grasped the hilt, jerking it from the wall with a violent motion. He flicked the knife around his fingers expertly before his eyes caught on an old flaky line of brown on the side of the blade. Who in the hell let a blade like this go to rust and kept it?

He rubbed his bare thumb against it, watching as it flaked off. He stilled suddenly. That wasn’t rust; that was blood, old and dried. His blood.

His dark eyes lifted from the blade to stare into the blue eyes that promised all manner of pain, a lack of mercy, but complete rigid control. There was an infinitesimal shift of the Winter Soldier’s chin, barely a nod, barely an acknowledgement, but it impacted him as hard as if he had just been sucker punched.

“Thanks… I think,” he said, gruff and dispassionate while his insides squirmed uncomfortably. He tucked the knife away, intending on getting a sheath for it from his equipment bag.

“Cover up,” Pierce ordered, and that ended the discussion or the confrontation or whatever it was.

The Winter Soldier slipped that mask into place and slid the goggles back on, hiding outward appearance, and he was given no more instruction than the little that had been handed to him. It really meant that he was to fall in line, keep up, don’t get in the way, but also no one will miss you if you die out there. If he survived this, if he rose to the challenge, he would be granted his golden bloody ticket to the top. If he failed, well… he may as well have died in the desert a year ago.
They returned downstairs and while everyone seemed curious as to what had happened, the very fact that he was still in one piece seemed to indicate that it couldn’t have been that interesting. He returned to his pack and fished around for a spare sheath for a knife, but his eyes caught on the blade as it flashed in the light of the room. Cold, impersonal, deadly, but well-made and comfortable in his grip… the perfect knife.

“You take a couple of bumps up there,” Rollins asked him in a whispered voice. “We heard a lot of thumping up there, thought Pierce wanted you done in.”

Rumlow ran his thumb over the blade, shaking his head at the question. This was his: his moment, his opportunity, his secret. He wouldn’t share what was his with anyone. “Shut your dirty mouth and pack up, Jackie.”

They glared at each other, aware that Rollins hated the name ‘Jackie’, which was why he called the man that when it suited him. “Someone took an ass reaming upstairs,” Jack replied with a sudden smirk. “Hope ol’ Pierce at least gave you an asspat on the way out.”

Snorting, he punched Jack in the ribs, aiming specifically for the damaged one, but they broke off any sort of tussling and he was content to see Rollins eyes watering in pain. Like any good sniper, he always hit his mark, anything that entered his crosshairs, even an ugly upstart like Rollins or maybe especially because of ol’ shovel-face.

“I’m going to call you pillow-biter from now on,” Jack suddenly whispered.

“Shut your shovel-face, or I’ll pound you into the floor,” Brock whispered back as they set their gear. “You don’t want that kind of humiliation in front of Pierce.”

“As if a fairy like you could take me.”

“At least I get some. Face like yours, you probably can’t pay enough even after putting a plastic bag on your head,” he replied, slipping the new knife into the sheath.

“Fuck you, Rumlow,” Jack replied with a hiss as if actually burned.

“Nope, keep dreaming about me though, Jackie.”

There was nothing quite like pre-mission military banter to set the mood for the fact that he had no idea what the mission was aside from the tag along after the Winter Soldier, who no one else knew as anything more than the commanding officer. He almost asked Jack what the objective of the mission was, but his pride wouldn’t allow him to seem like he hadn’t been debriefed with Pierce. It was stupid and childish, but he was all about surviving on his own.

He stood and grabbed his day pack, strapping it onto his back and tightening the clips so that the small back wouldn’t move around when he had to run. He picked up his sniper rifle and slung it the strap over his shoulder, allowing the rifle to hang down his front to settle across his hips. As he was pulling on his black beanie, his eyes darted to the door as Pierce left, leaving the team alone with their new commander.

No one seemed to know what to do or say, so they just kept glancing and waiting.

The Winter Soldier seemed either unaware or uncaring for the tension, or perhaps the asset was the kind of guy who thrived in that sort of situation. There was a small tilt of chin, and despite the goggles that revealed nothing at all, Brock knew the Soldier was looking at him.

His heart seemed to seize in his chest, and he swore if it didn’t stop happening, he was going to ask
for a doctor to check him for an arrhythmia. He shifted to pull his goggles’ strap around his head, patting down his beanie so it was comfortable over his ears and the back of his head, but the weight of the asset’s gaze was constant, almost as if silently demanding he come closer. He didn’t, just shuffled his gear until he was comfortable and it felt a lot warmer in his uniform than it normally did.

His fingers gravitated to the new knife at his belt, playing his gloved fingers over the ebony hilt. He was not a man who was reminiscent on anything; memories were just experience to draw on, not play some fond mental game on. He could think of few bright points of his life where it hadn’t come with a mountain of pain or too many close calls. The knife though, like some twisted gift, a reminder of how he had come to be here.

It was like a silent demand for a thank you, but he only thanked insincerely because a situation demanded it of him. Never had he meant it.

Brock swallowed hard as it felt like a trigger just jammed in his head. He wasn’t thankful, but the alternative was far worse to consider. He shifted his weight on his feet and the Winter Soldier’s goggled gaze found him, and he felt the previous sucker punch all over again. It made his knees feel weak, his palms clammy, a lump rise in his throat and the twist of his guts just release to warmth similar to when he had gotten way too drunk and pissed himself.

“Fuck,” he muttered and ignored Jack’s sudden look. “It’s nothing, got a muscle cramp.”

It wasn’t. It was so far from a muscle cramp that he wished it was, a real big one right in his leg or something. It was much, much worse. Denying it would get him no where, only distraction which he couldn't afford.

He had never believed in anything like love, had never really felt it much since he was a very young kid, so he had passed it off. Kids in high school thought that they knew what it was too, all that bullshit about love at first sight or soul mates or whatever other nonsense that spread like contagion in the hallways. He didn’t believe a word of it, thinking even early on that such drivel was nonsense and never allowed himself to get close enough to anyone to let it happen.

It would slow him down. He was greedy and selfish, a man who looked after himself. He had no time to look over his shoulder at someone else unless it was to use them for his own gain. He fell in line when he needed to, buried his ambition and resentments with a cocky smile when he was young and a cocks sure smirk now that he was a man.

Of course, he had lusted. Who didn’t? Hell, the first woman he had slept with had been his defense lawyer. The second had been her sixteen year-old daughter a few hours later. He thought it was a fair trade; his virginity for her daughters’, but she clearly hadn’t seen it in the same way.

Okay, that might be one memory he still had a chuckle over years later.

He had never believed in anything but the ordered ideals of HYDRA and the merits of his own hard work. There was never room for anyone else. He was too selfish, but the warmth in his belly that was a slow burn that suffused energy to the rest of him. If he hadn’t had such a mastery of control of himself, he thought he might have to shoot himself to end the sensation of giddiness that tried to crawl up his spine.

Brock Rumlow didn’t love. He certainly never believed in love at first sight. His world never had room for more than him inside of it. He’d never even found himself attracted to a man in his life.

Until he looked into the blue eyes of the Winter Soldier.
“I want you to call me on your drug phone. I want to keep you alive so there is always the possibility of murder later. I want to be there when you learn the cost of desire.”

“So the Secretary didn’t tell you, huh?”

“Tell me what,” Rumlow asked before he tried to wheel backwards and ended up just coming to a lurching stop a moment before his head snapped to the side as a hard backhand rocked him.

He had to take a step to the side in order to keep his balance, but his cheek burned as he stared balefully at the old grizzled man who was watching him as if trying to ascertain if he deserved another strike. He had learned within the first week that giving cheek back only earned him the heel of the man’s boots in very uncomfortable places, and while he was all for taking his lumps, he at least liked to feel like he deserved them when they started.

That wasn’t ever the case with William ‘Striker’ Gormer. Hell, he actually wasn’t certain that he had earned the first hit that seemed to come his way, but the high-ranking handler got results all the same. He still disliked the man as he disliked very few people, but he suspected that was why he was paired up with the man in the first place. They weren’t supposed to like each other; he suspected that the only one who hated their arrangement more was Striker himself, hence the swinging fists even when he did nothing at all.

“Watch your attitude, rookie,” Striker snarled at him.

“Yes sir,” he said through gritted teeth, biting back the venom in his tone. Boot camp had been pretty much like this, so he knew he could take it. He was determined to prove he could take it.

Striker eyed him for a long moment as if waiting for another sign of impudence before the man snorted and curled a lip at him. It was like facing down a scarred up snarling dog. If he hadn’t been told this was all the training he was going to get, he’d have arranged for his current mentor to meet a bloody end.
“As I was saying before you had to open your mouth and annoy me with the sound of your voice,” Striker continued, walking on as if nothing had happened. “Pierce only gives information to those he trusts anyway. You’ve got to earn trust from a man like that.” The smug tone seemed to indicate that Gromer thought himself in that select group of people who had earned anything.

Brock wisely kept his mouth shut, probing at his bruising cheek to make certain it wasn’t bleeding. The handler he was following around liked to wear rings for the express purpose of cutting up someone’s skin. All part of the vicious discipline of HYDRA, and he was used to that. It was just that Striker took it a bit far.

“…the asset only reacts to men exposed to an old cocktail of serum and drugs…”

He was only half paying attention to the lecture which would drone on and on for far too long. Striker liked to hear the sound of his own voice and thought everyone else should enjoy it just as much. The problem was the guy liked to broadside any apparent victim and assault them with questions on what had been said, and he had stopped paying attention because he couldn’t win even if he gave a right answer. It was better to just put the bug up Striker’s ass and give all the wrong answers. It annoyed the asshole more.

“…we work in the confines of our orders…”

Yeah, yeah, blah, blah, he knew what his orders were and right now that happened to be to follow at Gromer’s heels and pretend like he was learning something. He wasn’t aside from the fact that the world was still a piece of shit and as unfair as ever. He accepted that, but he had thought for a moment his life was going to get a bit better from the frozen wasteland he had been training in previously.

“…you, being an ungrateful waste of my time, haven’t got the gull or discipline…”

Brock hadn’t even seen the Winter Soldier again after that mission, but he still daydreamed about it when he was being lectured. Unlike Striker, it had been an odd pleasure to have to try to doggedly keep up with the asset, though there was no mercy in the pace set. He simply was expected to keep pace and the killing shot for the mission had been difficult and brilliant, something he had watched down his own scope. He didn’t know many people – not even himself – that could have made that shot.

The Winter Soldier also took command with an ease that startled the team. The orders were crisp and left no room for question, expectation or the idea that mercy would be given for disobedience. The cold confidence had bolstered the team who had performed as well as they had trained to be, but any sort of compliment or praise had not come from the Soldier who simply left once the mission was over. Seever had immediately taken command afterwards.

“…you’re not to embarrass me…”

He lifted a hand to scratch an itch at the side of nose, but Striker turned to look at him at that exact moment and seemed to take personal affront like he had just been caught with his finger wedged up his nostril. He skipped back two steps to avoid the punch aimed at him, only to allow himself to be shoved back against the nearest wall, the arm across his throat only causing him to curl his lip. Gromer slammed a fist into his stomach, and the only reason he didn’t double over was the arm across his throat. He choked, a dribble of spit leaving the corner of his mouth, and it was all he could do not to shoot a wad of his saliva right into the asshole’s glaring eye. They stared with brimming dislike that hedged so close to violence that he anticipated it at any moment.
Instead, the older handler cracked a hand painfully on his thigh like a horrible Charlie-horse, and then he was released from being choked against a wall. “You’re not to embarrass me, rookie. You step out of line at all, and you will regret the day your mother uncrossed her legs to get you,” Striker snarled in his face.

Presentation and order was everything to the man. Brock sneered as he normally only would have when he was sixteen and had nothing going for him. “Will that be all, sir?”

He was viciously backhanded and this time he felt the bite of Gromer’s ring slashing across his cheek and nicking the bridge of his nose. He shook his head a bit but allowed the blood to ooze freely as the man spat on the ground at his feet and marched off as if the confrontation was now beneath the other handler.

They entered the elevator and stood as far away from one another as humanly possible, but the keycard that Striker used took them to a level of compound that he had never been to before. He felt the elevator sink far deeper than the building obviously looked from the outside, and he tried to muster some anticipation for wherever they were going. He felt too let down as of late to make that much of an effort, not when both cheeks were red as if he had been out in the cold and one cheek oozed blood.

He and his team had been two months back to the States, and it was huge learning curb being shuffled one-by-one into SHIELD. Those who hadn’t officially been pressed into service were left to complete tasks for HYDRA in secret, gathering information, proving their skills, learning new ones. While he was still expected to do morning drills, he had been shuffled off to endure Gromer. He was assured that his official hiring at SHIELD would come very soon.

The doors the elevator opened, and he followed Striker out to cross a wide hallway with a few doors on either side. They proceeded straight down the hallway, and the bright lights couldn’t hide the cold cement that was all business and led to nothing in the way of comfort. It was military precision and nothing else, and when they crossed into another large hallway, he only glanced at the few people going about their business with an air of boredom. Down the second hallway they went until a large door was buzzed open and they proceeded into a training room.

It was huge, practice mats laid out to the right, equipment laid out purposefully as if to make a set program faster and easier to move from one piece of equipment to the next. There was a weight set, a circuit bike, and even a small ring for boxing, though he saw no boxing gloves around. The area to the left was given over to an indoor rock climbing set up, but it was mostly blocked off with a long table where many different weapons and types of the newest technology was laid out in ordered precision.

There were two chairs close to the table but only one was occupied. The Winter Soldier was clothed simply in a set of sweat pants and a sleeveless shirt, hair tied back messily as if it had been a hurried almost half-hearted job. The Soldier sat with a sort of casual ease, ankles crossed slightly under the chair, head dropped forward to examine the gun that the asset was working on taking apart. There was only the sound of tinkering as various parts of the Soviet weapon was removed, examined and then set aside.

His heart did that odd flip-flop, and it was only then he was thankful that his cheeks were bruised because there was a strange flush of heat to his face and neck. It was disconcerting that he had to fight the urge to smile – really smile for once – when the Soldier looked up at their approach.

Brock fought hard not to acknowledge the asset, aware that drawing any manner of attention to himself right now in front of Striker would probably end him up flat on the floor with a broken nose. It was hard, far more than it should have been.
“Soldier,” Striker said to acknowledge the asset. For once, there was something other than aggressive snark to the man’s tone. It was business-like but respectful even.

The Winter Soldier stared at Gromer for a few moments before those blue eyes fixed on him, and it felt for a brief moment like the asset was very much aware of his flushed pleasure. There was no acknowledgement for him, but he felt no disappointment at that fact either. Like a shy schoolgirl, just the fact he had seen the Soldier was enough to tantalize him and make him forget all his previous sullen aggravations.

“I've been made aware of your training itinerary,” Striker said as if the asset had verbally acknowledged the man. “Are you fully operational?”

“Who is he,” the Winter Soldier asked with such a careful tonelessness that Gromer peered even if the older handler turned to glare at him like he had done something wrong.

“No one worth mentioning, Soldier.”

“Who,” the asset said, but there was a dangerous edge suddenly.

Brock couldn’t help but glance at Striker who had gone very still in front of him. It suddenly became clear that while Striker might be the handler, might be able to command and control, the asset was going to direct the conversation for now. It was like the mission, crisp clear orders that required answers and once given, they could all move on with their days. He had no idea how Striker, a man who didn’t seem to acknowledge orders bashfully from anyone, would take the fact the asset had cut across the conversation.

Yet, Gromer gave him a single scathing look and gestured at him absently as if only then realizing he wasn’t a disgusting insect. “This is Agent Rumlow, a rookie. He’s only here to observe the proceedings.” Striker twitched a hand as if to shoo him a few steps away. “Someday he may be fit to be your handler, if I can train the obstinance out of him.”

The Winter Soldier looked between the two of them as if appraising. Then, as if interest had passed, the asset returned to dismantling the gun. The air changed as well with the asset seeming to give up all control back to Gromer and returned to passiveness.

“Sir…”

“Shut your worthless dirty mouth, rookie,” Gromer snapped at him. “You will speak only when spoken to.” He really had only been intent on asking after this apparent itinerary, but it was clearly above his clearance level. The man turned as if to add another backhand to his still reddened cheek.

“Stop.” The asset hissed the soft word in Russian and Gromer reacted as if burned, side-stepping both him and the Winter Soldier. If the asset’s eyes were a weapon, he suspected Striker’s heart would have been pinned the man’s spine.

Yet, even for a man who was abusive, he had to give it to his mentor that the guy bounced back very quickly. If the Winter Soldier was not allowed to give commands at this point in time, it seemed that Gromer knew it and, after recovering from the shock of it, reached out to seize the messy ponytail that the asset’s hair was bound up in. He didn’t step in, knew better than that as Striker jerked the asset’s head back hard, forcing the Soldier’s neck to crane awkwardly. The gun lay forgotten in the asset’s lap and hands.

“You don’t get to give me orders during training, and don’t think I won’t take you to task for it either,” Gromer hissed and it was kind of like listening to a kettle boiling noisily. “I let go your
previous lip, but you know you get one chance with me. You’ve used it.”

The asset stared at Gromer or at least in the general direction of the man, though there was apparently little else to stare at because their faces were so close. However, HYDRA’s weapon seemed no more cowed by this show of dominance and certainly didn’t acknowledge the tight and no doubt painful grip on the Winter Soldier’s hair.

“Is there a problem?”

“No,” the Soldier replied neutrally.

Brock shifted his weight but refused to glance aside from this apparent learning situation. A small part of him was affronted that his mentor could treat the asset in such a way. Another part was so used to the violence of HYDRA that it seemed acceptable that if he had to take a beating, he probably wasn’t the only one. He also knew that in one step he could bring himself in and drive the knife that he always wore on his belt right into Gromer’s kidney and quickly into the man’s liver, ending this reign of abuse.

He didn’t. Gromer, for all the man was and wasn’t, happened to still be his mentor and he’d leech every tidbit of good information before he killed the man. For now, he took his lumps, even if the made little to no sense to him aside from that power and abuse probably were a huge turn-on for his mentor.

“Get back to training,” Gromer snapped and released the asset. The Winter Soldier returned to disassembling the rifle without further word.

Yet, the apparent dominance of the Soldier seemed to have momentarily softened Striker towards him. The man regarded him with a shrewd dislike but not outward hate as usual. “He’s a weapon regardless of the monkey clothes they put him in. You let him get out of hand during training, you let him think his life is his own, and he’ll malfunction. Our job is simple: keep him on task. Always. If there is no current task, you make one to keep him occupied.”

Brock nodded his head but said nothing, aware that the pause was not an invitation to speak. He glanced between Gromer and the asset who seemed indifferent to them.

Striker walked over to him, hedging very dangerously into his personal space. “He doesn’t get time to think on things outside of a mission, rookie. He acts like we want him to; he thinks like we want him to; his pisses like we want him to; he kills who we want him to. There is no question to order here, and if you think you can let him have a thought of his own, he’ll snap your neck like a twig or worse… string you up and peel your skin off.”

There was something in the tone of the man on front of him, a casual invitation. God, he couldn’t believe he was doing this, being played like a damn fiddle. “Sir, has he done those things?”

“Yes, and I’ll be sure to pass on the files to you for a lesson in what happens to people who fail in handling him,” Gromer said softly with a hint of pleased sadism like those files were plastered on the guy’s ceiling so Striker could wack off to them at night. “Those were critical malfunctions.”

“Have you ever seen him suffer from a malfunction, sir?”

“No, my time with him is flawless. He’s never toed the line with me, and I don’t give him an opportunity to think that he can,” Striker said with so much oozing pride and arrogance, he thought he might just puke on the floor. “Handler fatalities are rare because handlers are rare.”
Brock had seen that to be true, given what he remembered from the time that he woke up and met Alexander Pierce for the first time. It seemed that the asset chose handlers and it was those choices that worked best. Though, he really had to wonder what was wrong with the Winter Soldier to choose an idiot like Gromer for the job. Maybe there had been a ‘critical malfunction’ when that choice happened.

Still, when it seemed safe to do so, he looked at the Winter Soldier and the pistol the asset was putting back together quickly and effectively. His eyes caught on those deft fingers, long fingers and well-shaped, the first length and size for most guns and handling combat knives. The rest of the asset was also built well for combat, broad-shouldered, muscular and above average in height. He even acknowledged that the metal fingers and arm moved with the same grace and certainty as the rest of the Soldier.

His gaze flicked to Gromer who was apparently also appraising the asset, but he doubted it was for the same thing. The pistol was back together and set on the table and the next weapon, a rifle, was next in line to be disassembled. The Soldier took time to remove each part, examining each one and setting them in particular order which probably only made sense to the asset himself.

It was probably rookie weakness not seeing the asset as a weapon. He had seen something distinctly human in those blue eyes, but he wasn’t willing to test that theory for the time being. He was not about to create any kind of critical failure.

“Agent Gromer,” came a call from a technician who had just entered the room.

Striker moved in that direction and waved him off when he tried to follow. He was all too content to stay where he was. “Observe the Soldier. It’s good practice.”

Brock nodded and turned his gaze back to the table that still had many weapons lined up. He moved over to it and peered at a sniper rifle, picking it up and looking it over. If this wasn’t the latest model released in Soviet Russia, he actually didn’t know what was. He pulled it up to his shoulder and peered down the sight, finding it a neat fit against his body with comfortable reach to the trigger and a nice weight. He would have liked to fire it, but none of the weapons had bullet cartridges.

He was about to set it back down on the table when he felt eyes on him and flicked his gaze to his left where the asset was watching him. He managed a small smirk at the corner of his lip, slowly setting the rifle back down among the others. He wanted to say something, to open communication but suddenly wasn’t certain if it was allowed.

He glanced across the way to where Gromer was talking to the technician. “How long have you been with HYDRA?”

The Soldier’s gaze sharpened, fingers momentarily stilling at fitting a piece back into the disassembled rifle. “I don’t know,” came the slow reply.

That seemed an odd thing to say, but he knew better than to pursue it. He decided on something else. “I still have the knife you gave me.” He shifted slightly, drawing up a pant leg to show the bottom of a sheathe hugging his calf.

The brunette considered him for a very long time, far longer than he would have thought necessary to remember a moment that he couldn’t ever hope to forget. “I cut your arm with it and then threw it at you again. I never cleaned the blood off, your blood.”

Brock felt a thrill of pleasure at the recognition. “Yeah, you wanted me to have it after I met you again in that Moscow mission.”
“I don’t remember,” the Soldier replied softly, dark eyebrows drawing together. There was a twitch and a strain across the previously relaxed shoulders, and he felt danger rising.

“You don’t have to,” he said firmly. He leaned forward so he could rest his hands on the table, using every ounce of daring that he had to stare the asset in the face. Something cold and dangerous was rising in those eyes. “I’ll remember for us both. When you need to know, I’ll tell you.”

Like a ripple on the water reaching the shore, his words appeared to smooth everything out and calm returned. The asset watched him again for a long time, considering him. “Show me the knife.” It wasn’t a request.

Slowly, so as not to draw attention to himself, he bent and tugged up his trouser leg, slipping the serrated blade free and standing again. He turned the black hilt in his hand and then nimbly turned the knife around so he was holding the clean blade, offering it to the Soldier. It wasn’t taken from his hand but the asset looked at it and then slowly rubbed a thumb against the top of the hilt.

“I know you.”

His gaze met that of the other man and suddenly he thought that the Soldier knew of his previous – and continued – infatuation. He swallowed but didn’t look away, not caring if he was rejected because he expected this to go nowhere. Like his most selfish endeavours, this was his emotional state to enjoy and covet. He didn’t need the Soldier’s approval, though he admitted he wanted it all the same.

“Put it away,” the Soldier said suddenly, breaking the moment. He did as subtly as he had taken it out and a moment later, Gromer turned from the technician and started back towards them.

Rumlow pretended to be examining a pistol that he was standing directly over when the senior handler returned and looked between them suspiciously. The Soldier was reaching for a new gun to take apart and he immediately side-stepped deferentially to Gromer, keeping his eyes more to the floor.

“You finish that one up and we’re moving on to other matters. Your training regiment is being pushed hard for your next mission,” Striker said. There was a sharp disgusted look towards him. “You will keep your miserable mouth closed and just observe.”

He nodded, not daring to break the order so soon after it had come. He’d no doubt earn a few more bruises today regardless of his intentions to avoid them.

***

The first mission was one that Gromer would be handler on, and he was relegated to company pack animal. His pack was bulging with supplies, weapons and basic medical equipment, and he had been forced to pack it three times to get all that was required into it. Like always, he took a small pack of candies to suck on for any long stake out, an old tactic to keep him in line when he was much younger. It was also the new habit to replace smoking cigarettes.

He had trouble keeping up with the fast pace that was set to get to the area in question before the asset was released with stern crisp orders. By that point, Brock was exhausted as he was carrying fifty pounds extra and most of the places that they had slogged through had been hills. His legs burned, but he knew better than to complain about the physical exercise. It was too much a pleasure to be close to the asset again on the open road. This was way better than tangling with Gromer’s usual taciturn personality.
Striker was also shown to be a good handler to the asset, and he could see why he had been paired with the man. There was no question about what was required, the time frame, the objectives, and how it was all going to go down, the world be damned if it tried to do anything else. The man had complete control of the situation and even if there were elements that couldn’t be counted on, Gromer adjusted so seamlessly that it never seemed like there was a discrepancy at all.

The handler’s mood also improved somewhat on missions. There was far less abuse for him or anyone as the focus was on the mission and as long as everyone did their part there was no problem. Oh the guy was still a complete ass, but it was dropped to a more tolerable level of simmering dislike.

Brock also learned an incredible amount on that first mission and in being a handler. It made the last two months almost worthwhile.

During the flight home, he was left to mind the Soldier who was to review the details of the mission and catch some sleep since the Soldier had been going eighteen hours straight. He didn’t mind, aware that Gromer was probably snarling about something or another about how the mission had gone, and he pulled out his small package of Skittles and poured a few into his hand to suck on to occupy his mind away from the soreness of his back and legs. It had been a heavy load and a lot of struggling on his part.

He pressed one of the colourful candies between his lips and tucked it into his cheek pouch, staring at the ceiling of the cargo plane as he sucked soundlessly. The others he rolled around in his palm, unable to hear the way that they clicked gently together over the roar of the engines. It was a yellow one; he knew it by the taste.

The Winter Soldier, supposed to be in a state of sleep, stirred nearby and ghosted away from the seat that the asset had been ordered to and came to sit next to him on the floor. He froze when the cold metal arm pressed against his own right one, contrasted completely by the warmth of the asset’s thigh against his own.

This was malfunction, wasn’t it? He could be strung up to the skeleton of the plane and taken apart at the seams at any moment.

Instead, he casually opened his hand to reveal colour candies. “Want one?”

“No.”

Brock turned his head, seeing the intense focus by the Soldier next to him on his palm. Almost mockingly, he jiggled his palm so the candies bounced a bit. “Are you allowed one?”

“No.”

“Ever had one?” He raised an eyebrow, though it was unseen by the man next to him who was fixedly gazing at his open palm.

“No.”

He chuckled softly, “Then how can you know if you don’t want one?”

“I don’t know.”

Brock smirked and turned a little, picking up one of the Skittles from his palm – an orange one – and held it up. “Open your mouth,” he ordered softly, though he had no ability to actually command right now. Still, the asset complied and he slipped the candy beyond the Soldier’s lips. “Okay, push it into your cheek pouch and suck on it a bit.”
He could tell the exact moment that the artificial taste flooded the Soldier’s senses, and it was such a child-like look of confused delight that he froze. He waited for his head to get ploughed off of his shoulders, but the asset only shifted and a look of great concentration took over. It was funny to see a man he had witnessed garrote a man to death just a few hours before with such a look of bewilderment.

“Taste the rainbow, kid,” he said with as much daring as he could manage. He opened his hand and offered another. “We’ll share.”

Slowly, the asset took another and repeated the same gesture and that same look of child-like wonder returned before turning to a confuse bewilderment. It was so amusing and endearing to him that he shared the rest of the candies with the Soldier, savouring the warm press of their thighs together even if they said nothing at all to each other.

Brock glanced over once they were all gone, not about to pull out more when he always relegated himself to a small handful. It didn’t matter that he had given half his handful away either. It was the rule that he played by, and he wasn’t about to stop just because he was sharing.

“What do they feed you?”

“High calorie enhanced rations for missions,” the Soldier replied neutrally. Those rations clearly had nothing on Skittles. “High calorie and protein rich smoothies are for maintenance.”

“So no steak and potatoes for you, huh? At least they don’t feed you through your nose or something,” he said jokingly.

He suspected that the only reason that an answer was given was because the asset had been given either or both recently. Outside of missions and recent training, the Soldier appeared to have a very bad memory, and he had no idea why that would be. The brunette was clearly very intelligent and picked up new skills quickly and effectively, yet there were other things that never seemed to require any kind of short or long term memory.

It made getting to know the asset and even having a conversation very difficult. It meant that he ended up filling the silence with whatever came to his head, though he stayed away from any details of his life. While he didn’t know how much the asset couldn’t remember, it was equally as uncertain what information was retained. While his file was pretty clear, he wasn’t about to reveal he was giving details to the man he was both in very much interested in but also to treat as nothing more than a weapon.

The Soldier eased away from him towards the end of the flight to return to the designated seat, and Gromer soon came in to take charge of the disembarking routine. Strike barely acknowledged that he was even in the same part of the plane.

While he never found out if Gromer knew of the fact he shared candy with the Soldier, the beating that he took four days later left him questioning it as his busted lip and the inside of his mouth was sewn up again. That certainly didn’t stop him from wanting to do it again, but it made him far more cautious about it.

However, his time with the Soldier was very limited, and he was instead forced to endure the older handler on different kinds of missions that trained him on dealing with scenarios and how to deal with the potential for malfunction. He learned commands to use, signs that had been recorded about some of the signs of an impending malfunction and how to head it off. He watched the early black and white videos of some of the procedures done to make the Soldier responsive, the abuse it required, how older handlers dealt with certain situations that happened to be caught on tape that
occurred during training.

Brock wasn’t the type of man who turned away from abuse or corrective behaviour. There was a part of him that thrived in it and recognized its use and the pleasure of it. Objectively, he applauded the wonders of the work that went into making the Soldier and he wished that he could already have a more direct hand in applying it. Emotionally, he disliked the hard-handed approach on someone who he was horribly love-sick about. It was kind of like asking Gromer to pull his fingernails out slowly with each video, and if anything, it made him hate himself more for the continued infatuation.

The world really was just a big piece of messed up shit. The sooner that HYDRA took out the assholes and criminals and questionable people that polluted up the surface of the planet, the sooner everyone left behind could finally know some peace. A tiny part of himself hedged a bet that when the world was a better place, the asset wouldn’t be needed and would be eliminated or set free.

He hoped to be high enough in HYDRA to collect a just reward for his loyalty to the organization and to earn it with hard work and cunning. He was going to get high enough to get to possibly take charge of the Winter Soldier. He couldn’t wait for HYDRA’s world to be realized.

Brock Rumlow would be there, the Soldier at his elbow, and finally the world would be a better place. There was nothing better than a dream like that.

Except when it wasn’t.

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Nine days after his twenty-seventh birthday, Brock was hauled out of his morning drills by a practically seething Gromer. He received a punch for not walking fast enough, another for apparently not paying attention, yet one more for stepping too close to the senior handler and a bruised throat in the elevator for just being there apparently.

By now, he was so used to such behaviour that he only snarled about it. This was different though, the air about Striker was bubbling with energy and the glares that he received were hot but less full of dislike than usual. He wasn’t even told what this was about, but he could tell that asking was not going to earn him an answer and instead more bruises. It was rare that Gromer was worked up to this level of giddy sadism even towards him after almost a year of working with the asshole.

He still marched smartly at Gromer’s elbow as they headed down the familiar hallway that he had come to know very well. He even seen some parts of the wall where he had impacted, but he ignored that in order to keep a close eye on Striker next to him who was in a right state of giddy anticipation. He had never seen the man this way, and it made him weary, yet he couldn’t help but be infected all the same.

They didn’t go to the training room or any of the other rooms that he was familiar with. There was also a bustle of activity that he had never seen before either, people gesturing wildly or talking in harsh hissing voices. As he passed by a group of lowly technicians, he thought he heard Alexander Pierce’s name dropped, though he dared not linger to inquire. He also dared not ask Gromer about it because he could tell the man was so focused on getting them to wherever they were going that any delay would be met with fist and foot.

It didn’t take them long to push inside a large room that was so crammed full of people that he thought it was some kind of emergency meeting. Armed men both lined the walls and were in a semi-circle facing the far wall, and there were enough technicians to fill a small hospital. Most were keeping a distance from the same area, though he heard commands to set up the machine for the procedure.
“You’re going to see something that rookies like you are undeserving of so early in your training, but we don’t deny the opportunity when it comes,” Gromer whispered at his ear.

He glanced over wearily, but there was a glint in Strike’s eye that made him think that the opportunity to ask questions had finally arrived. “What’s going on?”

“The Soldier suffered a malfunction,” Gromer said with a hiss of delight. “Killed a member of the extraction party.”

“What about the handler assigned?” He knew that Strike was prideful of being the best and generally wasted no time dress-down the ‘lessers’ of their group of unique men.

“She’s weak, which… you know, being a woman makes it obvious. As I hear it, she was distracted reporting some minor behaviours with command, asking advice on what to do.” Gromer grabbed his elbow in a steely grip and propelled them both forward through the milling crowd, shoving forward until the reason for all the armed men became apparent. “She had her back turned, but next thing anyone knew, the Soldier was knifing one of the rookie members.”

The Winter Soldier sat quiet and obviously disoriented in a black chair, looking like some cross between a dentist’s chair and a throne. The asset was clad only trousers and boots, but there was a speckling of blood across the brunette’s cheeks and across the metal fingers, though if the Soldier realized it, it was apparently a detail not worth spending any time on. There was a twitch to those muscled shoulders, a light sheen of sweat that didn’t belong on the asset’s skin, and the asset’s head either hung down or swung around to the sound of noise. The air of twitching confusion was obvious, like the Soldier suddenly had no idea where the man was.

There appeared to be a debate going on with some numbers, but Brock’s eyes flicked to the machines that were putting out readings. The technology was far more advanced than he had encountered, though the dials were many and there were a few buttons. He wasn’t close enough to read to writing, nor was he going to risk moving closer to see what the paper read out said either.

“…Brooklyn…?”

Everyone in the room, himself included, froze at the word. The armed unit shifted, hands tightening on the rifles and Gromer beside him straightened. All eyes fixed on the asset who was looking imploringly but still with the air of confusion at the man he knew to be the head technician and in charge of the health and maintenance of the Soldier.

“Which train… to… Brooklyn?”

Gromer sucked in a sharp breath next to him, fingers tightening enough to bruise on his elbow before releasing him. A few rifles nearby twitched upwards, but the head technician, an aging balding man with a huge grey moustache, seemed calm. He walked over to the asset and reached out to press those sweaty shoulders back to rest in the chair. There were some words exchanged before the man gestured and another technician arrived with some kind of mouth guard.

“This is it,” Striker hissed next to him. “Watch and learn, rookie. This is the greatest maintenance on a weapon that you’ve ever seen.”

Rumlow glanced at the senior handler next to him, but even he noticed that the room filled tense silence but something so close to anticipation that he shifted on his feet. The old technician walked over to one of the nearby machines and pressed a few buttons before stepping back to the asset who was sagged in the chair looking lost and closed metal restraints on the Soldier’s arms, flesh and metal.
He watched as the machine was prepped for something and if Gromer was previously giddy, the man barely restraint outright excitement. However, he only had eyes for the pathetic looking Soldier who was muttering something around the mouth guard, looking around the room, and he wondered if the asset was sitting this room or imagining somewhere else. Perhaps a train station or perhaps a train or maybe somewhere completely different than this cold room loaded with people who were all about to witness how to reprogram a man who had been turned into a weapon.

The first crackle of electricity alerted him what was going to happen as the head piece swung down slowly. The Soldier suddenly knew as well, blue eyes going wide and darting around, a new fresh sheen of sweat coating that tanned skin that was rapidly losing colour, and the Soldier’s breathing became more violent with great gasping breaths as panic rose. The mind might not remember, but the flesh never forgot. Gromer had harped about muscle memory with the asset.

The senior handler pushed him forward into a space between two armed guards so he had a better view, and the motion caught the Soldier’s eye. He stared into those widening blue eyes, seeing the confusion first and the flicker of fear but also anger. A person lurked there just beneath the surface and for that brief second, Brock saw who he would later find out to be James Barnes. Angry, proud, and deadly James Buchanan Barnes trapped in a world and a body that repressed everything a man was.

Those seconds seemed both infinitely long and frustratingly short. The asset flashed him an almost accusing look that said ‘are you really going to let them do this to me?’ Yeah, he was. The look changed as the head piece came down and settled against the asset’s temples, but he never received a plea for help, just accusation like he was supposed to be a better man than this. He wasn’t.

Brock only pretended to be a better man, but he certainly wasn’t one. He couldn’t even consider himself a good man or a nice man. He wasn’t any of those things. He was the ambitious, cunning street kid who was about to watch the only person he felt he might care for get zapped in the head.

The screaming began after those seconds ended, and the asset’s body twitched and writhed in the restraints. Those blue eyes unfocused but still stared in his general direction, but the body fought the strain of such a process. The screaming continued though and so did to process known as wiping, the scrubbing clean of a malfunction.

It was a funny thing about infatuation. It was an even funnier thing about love. It made a man (and woman) do very stupid things. Sometimes they weren’t even conscious choices. It was just a snapping of decision based on emotion and boom, there was no control but a wash of rage so deep and so harsh that he felt like he was being wiped clean with how hot it burned.

Rumlow hadn’t realized he moved until he was at the head technician and his fist impacted with the man’s face once, twice and then a third time before rough hands were grabbing him away. The technician went down to the floor, the asset still screaming in agony, and he turned on the men with the guns. No one could ever say that he was a bad fighter in horrible numbers, and he proved that if anyone might have been in doubt.

To the loud serenade of the Winter Soldier’s screams, he brawled four men at once, taking punches but dealing damage that he had no qualms about doing. When he was knocked down, his brow cut and half blinding him with blood, he brought out the knife that the asset had given him. After he had successful knifed two men and then stolen one of their guns, Gromer shot him in the thigh and then a pile of six men jumped on him and smothered him into the floor.

“Don’t kill him! Don’t kill him!” It was Striker and the man was practically shrieking and stamping over to the pile of men struggling to keep him down. He’d lost his knife and that caused him more agony than anything; it had been a gift. His gift.
It was only in the interim that the screaming of the asset stopped, but the air was filled with the smell of ozone and the groans of wounded men and those putting forward tremendous effort to keep him on the ground. Now that the pain had stopped for the asset, his mind latched desperately on finding his knife, but his arms and legs were pinned, some at awkward angles.

“Get that piece of shit up and out of here,” Striker screamed in rage. “Containment room six and string him up!” It took all six men to get him up and still contained and he was hauled out. “And you, call Pierce and get him down here!”

“Sir, what do I tell the Secretary?”

“You tell him that limp-dick piece of shit he paired me with is a dead man,” Striker screamed, still beside himself in rage. Clearly, he would never be forgiven for ruining the show. “I’m going to kill him!”

Brock only smirked as he was dragged out and down the hallway, giving up his struggles as pain crept through his limbs and especially in his left thigh where he had been shot. The soldiers watched him with an almost amused air because no one had ever pushed Gromer so far, had never earned the kind of ire that he had in such a short time, and they also probably were going to be involved in whatever events would lead up to his death.

He was taken to a small cement room that had a metal table inlaid into a wall and little else. There was a deep sink to the other side but chains hung from the ceiling and there was a drain in the floor. Dried blood still was evident, and he chuckled softly as his wrists were manacled and he was hauled up to hang there. He didn't even have the benefit of his toes touching the floor, but he simply watched the six with his own air of amusement. This was damn funny after all.

All his control and plans thrown to the wind for a man who would never even remember who he was or why he was there. Love made people do really, really stupid things.

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He jerked his head up from his chest irritably before he convinced himself that he was awake. His arms had hit that point of being beyond pain, a numb coldness that only ended where his shoulders ached terribly from hanging so long. His back was a blanket of pain where he had been lashed with Gromer’s belt until he bled and the man’s rage had been terrible and infinitely amusing to him.

He’d only been lashed funny enough, but the sessions had been frequent and long. He’d gotten a stray few across his ribs and one insulting one across his backside like he was some misbehaving child. It was always Strike’s personal belt though, the jingle of the metal clasp alerting him to each falling strike. He knew that was purposeful as much as each lash was. By the time fatigue set in, his body had automatically begun to react to the metal sound and tensed, making it hurt more and the damage worse.

Brock had no idea how long he’d been allowed to be unconscious for, but when he managed to drag his chin from where it rested on his chest and open his blurry eyes, he found two men occupying the same area as he was. It took him several blinks and peering to realize that they had been waiting for him to wake rather than force it upon him.

Striker stood by the door, looking every bit like an angry bulldog, a bruise having blossomed on the man’s cheek and there was the dried stain of blood from one nostril that coated the man’s chin. His mentor looked angry and resentful, continually casting veiled accusing looks at the other man in the room.
The second man was none other than Alexander Pierce, and if he expected any kind of sympathy, he knew better. The man was dressed simply in slacks and a collared shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow and the nicest pair of tennis sneakers a man could wear. Despite being casual, there was a hardness to the man’s expression, the casual indifference long gone.

“Agent Rumlow, welcome back,” Pierce said in a deceptively calm voice.

“Sir,” he managed, his voice cracking slightly from where Gromer had actually earned some noises of pain from him.

“You’ve caused quite a stir with your impulsiveness,” Alexander replied in a conversational tone. “Nine men injured, four of them seriously from that little stunt you pulled.”

“Is that all?” He had been hoping for more, but then again, it had been very close quarter fighting. “Where’s my knife?” It seemed suddenly important to know.

Gromer issued a growl that probably would have proceeded some kind of rant and a few choice swear words, but Pierce held up a hand. It was strange to see Strike lapse into silence with such a simple gesture. He was still given death-worthy glares from the man.

“It was confiscated after one of the technicians pulled it from the last man you left it in,” Alexander said. “Very sloppy work losing your weapon like that, Agent Rumlow. I expected better from you.”

“It’s fine… I expected better from me too,” he agreed, his fingers flexing where they felt cramped and cold. “I won’t let you down next time, sir. I’ll double the numbers.”

“There won’t be…!” Gromer seemed to have mastered speech again.

“That’s enough, Agent Gromer. I’ve already told you that if you interrupted this interview again, I would send you out,” Alexander said coldly. Again, Striker lapsed into miserable silence. “As for you, Agent Rumlow, I will impress on you the seriousness of your actions and I expect triple the numbers, not double.”

“Sir,” he muttered, his head sagging on his neck again. It was uncomfortable to hang for however long that he had been.

“Now, explain to me why you interrupted a standard procedure with regards to the asset,” Pierce said, and it was clear from the tone that the man expected an honest answer.

Brock lifted his head and looked at Gromer. “I would like to have this interview alone, sir. I don’t believe that my reasons will satisfy Agent Gromer and he’ll take opportunity to be bias towards me.”

As if Gromer had been anything but with all the dealings with him, but he liked to see the blood suffuse the man’s face in anger.

Alexander Pierce considered him for a long moment, no doubt trying to decide at the worth of alienating another handler or just plain considering why the hell he would have reason to attack men during that kind of procedure. The silence stretched until he almost expected Striker to explode.

“Agent Gromer, you’re dismissed.”

“Sir…!”

“Out.” There was something in Pierce’s voice, some unyielding promise of something far worse than pain that came on the heels of a single glance that stopped whatever argument’s the senior handler would have made. Gromer left without a backwards glance.
The Secretary walked away from the wall to come to stand in front of him, aging hands in the man’s pockets. He realized that he could kick the man if he wanted to, but Pierce certainly didn’t seem concerned at all standing so close to him.

“Explain yourself,” Alexander said.

“I love him,” Rumlow said simply, admitting it to the world at large for the first time. “I lost my head in the face of his torture. I’m weak, sir.”

Pierce stared at him for a long time in silence before backhanding him hard enough to make his teeth rattle and the inside of his cheek cut against his molars and fill his mouth with blood quickly. Instead of spitting it with impudence, he slowly grinned at the very important man in front of him. He expected to die regardless, so he may as well go out with the last laugh. Blood leaked around his teeth and dribbled down his chin to drip on the floor.

“Men don’t love the guns that they wield, Agent Rumlow.”

“I love the Winter Soldier,” he replied back, still grinning. “I’d kill for him. Probably even you.”

“You’ve never loved anything in your life;” Alexander replied back, a slow smile appearing at the corner of the man’s lips.

Brock snorted. “That’s not true, sir. I’ve always loved myself.”

The point seemed to stick and Pierce nodded as if their brief verbal sparring had ended with a mark to him. For some reason, he didn’t fear this man who could ruin everything that he was and bring about such pain for himself. He accepted so easily that if it was going to happen, nothing he could do was going to stop it.

“I can’t kill the Winter Soldier, but you are not exempt from that idea. You don’t hold even the slightest measure of value when compared to him.” Perhaps it was supposed to cow him after he had been so badly beaten, but he just did the equivalent of shrugging his aching shoulders. “However, I also don’t underestimate your value when compared to other handlers.”

He frowned and tried to piece together what that mean. He knew the current handlers were an aging core of men and women and that he was literally the youngest in active duty, even if it was training. “My value, sir?”

“Let’s be frank and honest with each other, Agent Rumlow,” Pierce started with, the man’s expression turning shrewd. “I’ll start us off, shall I?”

“Yes sir,” he replied because really, what was he supposed to do otherwise?

“The Winter Soldier is a unique weapon in our arsenal to better the world. He requires handlers who can keep him in order, in line at all times. He needs someone to pull the trigger because a weapon is only as dangerous as the finger that pulls the trigger in the right direction.” There was enough of a pause to allow him to digest the information. “You are a trigger finger; you are the eye down the scope to aim the weapon at the target; you are even the man behind the weapon that keeps it clean and returned safely to its holster. Did you know that Agent Gromer gave you the lowest marks I have ever seen on your mission debriefing assignment?”

Well, it was sort of expected, even if the abrupt change of subject was not. That had been his second mission with the asset and he had only been allowed to give the debriefing. He suspected Pierce was using this tactic to startle him into answering unwittingly and with the truth. “I’m not surprised. He hates me.”
“Agent Gromer hates you to the bottom soles of his shoes,” Alexander agreed, but it was with an odd kind of mirth. “The Soldier favours you. He always has since the first moment I saw him with you. Agent Gromer can’t stand even the thought of someone usurping his position. He’ll try to kill you in future, especially after this.”

Brock suspected that this meant that he had a future. “He said he was going to kill me when I was dragged out.”

“I stopped him, of course. Handlers are rare; you are the first in many years. That presents me with a very specific problem.” Pierce replied and reached up turn his face from one side then the other. “He favours you. He listens to your orders as well as he listens to mine and you aren’t even an approved handler yet.”

He felt a brief thrill at the praise however small it was. Did it mean that the asset felt even a margin of the same as he did? No, Pierce would insist that a weapon didn’t feel, that he was treat the asset in a business-like fashion only. He tried to scrape up something to say, but his back and shoulders ached enough to be more of a distraction than usual.

Pierce moved away from him to the door and opened it, gesturing with a hand and the Winter Soldier stepped inside with smooth motions that gave nothing away of the previous mind altering conditioning. However, the asset was still and certain, focused on nothing in particular but drinking it all in anyway. Blue eyes took him in with a keen enough look that was assessing him for level of threat and nothing more than that but there was a flicker of familiarity.

“He will know you as a handler because of your previous treatment. All memories of your previous associations and interactions have been removed,” the Secretary said before producing a knife from the man’s back pocket and offering it open-handed to the asset. It was the knife he had lost in the struggle, clean and serviced. “Say nothing until he approaches, Agent Rumlow.”

Brock knew that was an order to follow, and he remained silent as the Soldier took the knife from Pierce and examined it before seeming to lose interest. The Soldier remained passive and still next to the Secretary and then he strained to hear the whispered words that were offered, but they were below his level of hearing.

The asset flicked the knife along the fingers of the flesh hand and the ebony hilt came to rest on the Soldier’s palm so easily. There was a gesture and the asset drifted away from Pierce, stalking to him where he hung relatively defenseless, blue eyes playing over his body as if looking for the softest spot to start cutting him open. He expected it really and the knife rose gracefully towards his soft exposed belly.

His eyes met that of the Soldier’s, and he smirked arrogantly. “Taste the rainbow, kid,” he said as a mockery, given he now suspected the face that looked up at him was far older than he was. “The package is in my bag under my bunk, left most inner pocket. You can have the rest. After this, the red ones might remind you of me, right?”

Slowly, the knife paused and the asset’s head tilted just slightly to the side. Then the Soldier straightened and gripped his pant leg, tearing it to reveal the sheath that was secured there. The knife was placed safely back into it and then the brunette withdrew to move back to Pierce who was staring at the sheathed blade like it had created such a grievous wound on his person.

Then Alexander Pierce laughed, the kind of laugh of a man who had just gotten a joke told and found it to be unexpectedly funny. It was warm and full of mirth, but that wasn’t a comfort to him. His shoulders still hurt and the laughter caused the asset to stir and watch the Secretary.
“You are to survive your next months of training with Agent Gromer,” Alexander said after the laughter had died away. “Do that, and I will ignore your love affair, Agent Rumlow.”

He blinked in shock, drawn out of his pain entirely. Love affair? His eyes snapped to the Winter Soldier who was not looking at him but did a moment later. There was nothing in those blue eyes to hint at any kind of favour or warmth for him. “I’ll survive, sir.”

“Yes, I think you will. The stakes have never been higher.” Pierce said with mirth still colouring the man’s tone. “However, no one, and I mean no one, outside of myself is to know it exists. Is that understood?”

Brock slowly nodded his head, understanding very clear. He could carry on as he saw fit beyond the prying eyes, ears and wagging tongues of anyone else, but the moment that it was revealed that he was caring for the Soldier and perhaps the Soldier doing so in return he would lose everything. Like Pierce said, now more than ever, the stakes in his life had never been higher. He had something – someone – else to live for, and it would curb some of his behaviours. Pierce knew it.

He also knew that, while he had always been a cog in the machine, he was now perhaps something else. His value had risen because the Soldier favoured him, and his presence and life would temper bad behaviour in the Soldier as much as the asset’s existence would do the same for him.

There was no escape. Life dedicated to HYDRA was a one-way ticket and retirement was death. The only way he could have access to the Soldier was to survive and do well. The only way the Soldier could be close to him was if he survived and stayed within HYDRA.

That better world of HYDRA had better come fast. He would see that it did no matter what it took. He wasn’t giving up on the only thing that fit into his world where only he generally existed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who took the time to read this chapter, and I hope that you enjoyed it! Thank you to any and all kudos or comments!
Secrecy

Chapter Notes

So the next two chapters are laid out a bit differently. I'm going to speed through some of the love-affair stuff, and each section can elude to multiple years passing. I'm doing this because I've decided on where I want the fic to go and most of that happens post-TWS movie. This chapter and the next will hopefully not be too fast or uninteresting.

As always, chapters are not beta'd, so I apologize for any mistakes made therein.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I want you to understand that my malevolence is just a way to win.
I want the name of the ruiner.
I want matches in case I have to suddenly burn.”

***

Rumlow shook his head, spattering blood all over the floor in front of him where he was on his hands and knees. The slash up the side of his right side of his face hadn’t been entirely unexpected, but the fact that he was still alive right now when his back was open was a surprise. He wiped pointlessly at the blood flowing freely over his face, dripping down his chin and ruining the hardwood flooring he was braced on.

Slowly, he forced himself up to a crouch, his heavy tactical gear weighing on him but thankfully having limited the damage to the previous knife fighting match that he had engaged in. His coat was ripped but his bulletproof vest had saved him from getting too badly slashed. He couldn’t say that his opponent had done any better though, despite the fact that the hole in the wall to his left indicated that Striker had gone in that direction. There were no sounds of a struggle.

He rose to his feet and grabbed his blooded knife as he stalked close to the man-sized hole, ignoring the blood now coating his neck and starting to drench his undershirt. He peered through the hole, noting that the bastard had been lucky enough to avoid a wood stud in the adventure through the wall.

When it was clear that Gromer wasn’t just on the other side, he withdrew and went around to the door where he would have a better vantage point of the room. He paused at the sight of the door hanging half off its hinges but more the fist-sized hole just below the knob where the locking mechanism would have been. It had been torn out with a vengeance.

With his left hand, he pushed the hanging door to the side and stared into the darkened room. It was a sitting room for entertaining guests, but the plush couches had been overturned or knocked out of their original positions. The side tables were tipped over and at least one picture had fallen off the wall and smashed on the floor. Books had been hauled off one of the shelves and scattered on the floor, partially covering the boots that stuck out behind the couch, one at a particularly odd angle.

Brock reached out and flipped on a light, bathing to room in a warm glow. He stepped carefully into the room, but the pair of feet didn’t even twitch from where they disappeared behind one of the
upended couches. He advanced carefully but with full intention of seeing if the senior handler was still alive back there, his knife held easily in his hand as he crossed the distance.

Striker lay face down on the nice area rug, eyes closed but breathing. There was obvious damage to the man’s legs that indicated that Gromer had lost the struggle to escape very badly. The man’s wrists could be broken as well, but as he crouched, he noted the blood welling from the middle of the man’s back just above the pelvis. Striker had been stabbed in the spine, and there were few in that kind of struggle to make such a cut expertly who weren’t a qualified surgical doctor.

He nudged Gromer’s leg but the man didn’t respond. He pressed next on the man’s wrist, which earned a soft groan. Then he stood and struggled with his damaged jacket to pull out his communication unit so he could radio in the problem.

“Hotel-bravo-whiskey-oh-five-niner,” he said, his eyes fixed on the unconscious handler even as another presence made itself known from behind the door. “Dispatch, I have a downed handler and require immediate medical assistance.” The male dispatcher seemed unconcerned but informed him that a team would be assembled and he wasn’t to leave his current location.

He sighed and tucked away his radio, leaving it on in order to receive further instructions, his gaze finally flicking over to the Winter Soldier who watched him keenly. He glared despite his injury. “Asshole. I had it under control.”

“Is that why he almost cut off your face?” The Soldier had no expression on those exposed handsome features or the dark make-up around the assassin’s eyes. The tone was just as expressionless. Still, talking back was relatively unheard of, but it amused the hell out of him.

“Awww, were you trying to keep me pretty?” He huffed in mockery and wiped at the blood still flowing down the side of his face. “Sorry to disappoint, but I only get ruggedly handsome, never pretty.”

The Winter Soldier shifted to prowl closer, stroking metal fingers through his blood and then seeming to be very interested in smearing it around with a thumb. He didn’t much care for it and instead ignored the asset to crouch beside Gromer who still hadn’t moved. This was a mess.

“You sure shit on his day,” he commented casually.

“He was trying to kill you.” The asset lingered closer to him, the outside of a thigh pressed to his shoulder. “I stopped him.”

Rumlow snorted softly. “You ended his career, that’s what you did.”

The Soldier apparently wasn’t remorseful at all, but he expected no such thing. “He was trying to kill you.”

“Since you saved my life, you can have the candy in my pack,” he replied, intending it as a joke. Instead, he looked up to find the asset watching him intently and then gestured for him to stand. For a moment, he thought the Soldier actually wanted the offered candy.

Instead, when he came to his feet, he found the front of his uniform grabbed and hauled forward, forcing him to step in. Their noses bumped awkwardly and the asset seemed to fight for some kind of forgotten memory, eyebrows drawing together as that familiar sense of danger rose in those blue eyes. His breath quickened as the Soldier’s cheek brushed his as the brunette glanced around as if the chaotic room held an answer.

His right hand lifted and pushed to asset’s face back towards his, and he daringly dipped in and
pressed their lips together. At first, nothing happened on either side aside from a meeting of flesh. There was no spark, no nudging, no sense of this being anything but a strangely awkward gesture. It wasn’t one that he regretted because the Soldier’s lips were still soft and pliant. It was the more than he ever had with the man.

And then those lips shifted as they stared at each other, a flicker of something in the asset triggering the fingers at the front of his vest to tighten. They were kissing a moment later, a simple turn of their faces to meet each other in the inch of height that separated them, lips nudging and testing, the tip of his tongue darting out to trace the Soldier’s. There was a shudder that rocked the brunette’s body in response and they pressed just a little closer to each other.

“…you’re… a fucking… faggot….”

Rumlow withdrew sharply at the sound of the voice, turning his body to stare down at the baleful eyes that glared up at them. He set a hand to the asset’s chest when the Soldier moved to engage Gromer who was in no position to harm either of them, not even with words.

Instead, after so long and so much abuse, he simply smirked as if this moment, that kiss, had been the best victory prize he had ever received. “How are the legs feeling?” He purposefully nudged one with a boot, watching at Gromer’s eyes followed the motion.

Then the senior handler’s face suffused with blood. “I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll be lucky if you walk again,” he replied maliciously. Finally, he had the sweet taste of revenge on his final mission before his approval to be a handler. “Handlers are rare, so I’m not allowed to kill you. If you’d followed your own advice, you’d probably still have working legs.”

Striker seemed to deflate with confusion, angry eyes glancing between him and the asset who stood next to him. “How did your order override mine?”

Rumlow knew the answer because it was very simple. “I didn’t give an order. He malfunctioned when you tried to kill me, and he made a conscious decision on who he’d rather see dead. That would be you, Agent Gromer.”

“Impossible.”

Brock grinned and purposefully nudged Gromer’s flaccid leg again as if to prove his point. “Well, you’ve got plenty of years left in you, so I guess you can ponder this while you get used to your wheelchair.” He couldn’t help rubbing this in, grinding in the dirt on a man who had made his life hell the last year. “That is… if HYDRA lets you live. Not my call… that’s above my rank for now.”

Gromer growled and tried to get up, but only the man’s upper half moved. There was a moment when all efforts were put into rising, but the senior handler’s legs were completely unresponsive. It only took two tries before it was abundantly apparent to the man.

“A clean-up crew is coming. I don’t intend to be in this room when they arrive.” He knew that Gromer was armed, and while he’d love to see the man take a shot to the head, he had better things to do. He’d had his revenge after all.

Instead, he grabbed the Winter Soldier’s wrist and led the asset out of the room to the one where he had almost been killed. He turned when he had pulled the Soldier into a darker area of the house, the dead body of their target nearby stinking up the place, and it seemed like the perfect scene in his mind to finish what they had started.
His hands cupped the asset’s face as he leaned in for a second kiss to follow the first. It took him no time at all to appreciate old muscle memory either, and it seemed to him in that moment, their love affair began in earnest.

Two days later, he was informed that Agent William ‘Striker’ Gromer would never walk again but would live. He was promoted into a handler position within an hour after that announcement. He was hired at SHIELD a day after that.

Brock Rumlow still remembered the kiss the most fondly though.

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Way back when he was actually in school, his favourite subject had been drama. There was something wonderful about mimicry and pretending to be someone that wasn’t him for a little while. There was also something wholesomely pleasurable learning and developing techniques to hoodwink other people. He had been good at it, picking up things about other people and being able to use them in his own repertoire of skills to be able to act extremely well. It helped that he had an extreme knack for lying with a smile on his face and a good enough memory to be able to keep track of the lies that he had told to keep them up until it didn’t seem like it would matter or was more hilarious to let the lie falter and the truth to stick like a bone in a dog’s throat.

Drama class had been his best one, and his teacher had been certain that he would go on to be an actor, but life was still that great ball of shit, and he had dropped out in high school to pursue the life of the skuzzy underbelly of the alleys. However, he had used his acting skills even there, earning money and working his way out of beatings all the same just with some expression changes and some words.

Now that he was with SHIELD, he found that his knack of acting, lying and keeping track of who he had lied to and what it was came in immense handy. He rejoined his team now listed as STRIKE alpha, and it slipped back in as if he had never left. That was the way of that team really because they had all been forced to come in at different times.

Rollins had filled him in on the situation over some friendly beers in some overcrowded bar within the first week of his rejoining up. Alexander Pierce was still involved in SHIELD, apparently calling the organization ‘his baby’ now that his kids were growing up. The current Director was a hard ass named Nick Fury and Rollins hadn’t liked the abrupt paranoid personality much.

“He was a field agent, one of the best, and he apparently overrode some orders to put the lives of people ahead of diplomatic methods,” Rollins said between sips of beer. There were salty pretzels on the table and they were both pretending that they liked baseball. “He currently doesn’t like to send STRIKE out much in the full unit.”

“Figures too many of us with guns will mean we’ll blow our own dicks off?” They were all of military or intelligence field agent background. There was a lot of testosterone on their group though. “He has read our backgrounds, right?”

“He’s read our grade school report cards no doubt,” Jack said with a shake of the head. “That is a man who we better watch out for. He’s also got an excellent memory and has the term ‘detail oriented’ down to a tee.”

Brock shrugged his shoulders and flicked a pretzel at Rollins. “I’ve got no problem working for that guy. I like detail oriented people.”

“You didn’t seem to like the hairy eyeball he gave you, especially with your carved up face,” Rollins
replied. He noted the guy’s gaze fixed on a server girl passing nearby. “You of all of us have to be careful; you’ll be pulled more often.”

He wasn’t concerned about that at all because Pierce had already set the stage for his removal of duty from time to time as ‘personal security’. “I’ve got my ass covered, so don’t you worry about me, Jackie.”

As usual, he received a glare for his nickname of Rollins. “How was your training anyway? It took you long enough to come back.”

“Classified,” he replied with a toothy grin. He purposefully turned his head so the line of sutures was obvious and telling as if they were the best assessment of how his training had gone. “My mentor was a piece of work. He made Seever look like a nun.”

“So you two got along brilliantly,” Rollins replied with a smirk as if the man was enjoying the idea of him getting the run around. It wasn’t above Jack either to enjoy that. “So, you killed him in the end?”

Brock barked a laugh and tilted his head a little when Rollins watched that same server again. This had to be an attempt to integrate into society and look like some kind of normal human being type mission the guy was on. It was amusing as hell because Jack really didn’t have a type that he could tell. “You gonna ask her out or what?”

“Answer my question, Rumlow.”

“Nah, I didn’t kill him,” he replied, but he allowed the corner of his lip to rise in a faint snarl. “He was backed into a corner all the same. He won’t be troubling me.”

Rollins raised an eyebrow at him and seemed to understand that what happened was probably far worse than death. They returned to their beers and pretended to watch the game for a little bit, since everyone else was cheering about something or another. Oh right, ninth inning on this important game leading into the World Series.

They pretended to care, got another mug of beer each and eyed one another across the table from time-to-time. It was like old times really just with less violence. There wasn’t even an apparent bar fight about to break out. When had the world gotten so tame?

Rumlow glanced at Jack next to him, rolling a pretzel around his fingers, and he noted that the big man alternated before watching the game and watching the waitress. There were a few moments when she seemed to notice Rollins back and offered a wink or a smile. He personally thought it was for encouraging Rollins to keep drinking so she earned more, but there was something shyly genuine.

There was a flare of jealousy in him, dark and unbidden. He stared at his beer, rolling through his mind the few times he had been close to the Soldier. More than most men but still nothing like those little shy glances. He wasn’t even allowed to make obvious eye contact sometimes. He choked down his emotion with a quaff of beer.

“You ever been in love, Jackie?” The question popped out before he could think or regret them. He leered at the other man when Rollins turned incredulous eyes on him as if to check to make certain he was sober.

“What do you care?”

“I don’t, but I admit to being curious,” Brock said casually, chewing on a pretzel obnoxiously to see
if he could raise Rollins’ ire. “Is that question for a question an admittance or a denial?”

Rollins still eyed him for a long moment like he might suddenly sprout another head or something. “No, I haven’t. Have you?”

He expected the returned challenged question, and he grinned, fully prepared to lie. Then he didn’t want to. “Yeah, just once.”

Jack Rollins was not a man of many words, but even he felt a sick sort of pleasure at seeing ol’ shovel face draw up short from some kind of snarky rebut. The other man eyed him for a long time, taking measured sips of beer. “You were looking in the mirror, weren’t you?”

Rumlow felt his face flush. “Fuck you, Jack.”

Rollins smirked and went back to the game. If they weren’t in public or the attention could be hidden, he probably would have punched the other man square to the side of the head. It was as the jerk deserved when he was being honest, but he knew better than to push that either. It was his love affair, the first and hopefully only one he had to suffer through. It wasn’t like Jack would understand; hell, it wasn’t as if he actually understood it most of the time.

Instead, he watched as Rollins and the waitress made silent overtures with their eyes. It was so lame. It had been hours, and he sighed as he finished his beer and pushed the empty mug to the middle of the table.

“Ask her out, Jack.”

“You’re my wingman, Rumlow,” Rollins replied smugly as if the bastard had been waiting all night for that exact demand from him. “Set the stage, and I’ll play my part.”

He cursed softly and rolled his eyes. “Fine, but I’m not sleeping with her friends once you talk her up, since I know you’ve got my back in that.” He was still feeling the effects of being so close to the Winter Soldier, tingling and heart-sick on how short their time had been together. He wasn’t looking to get laid just yet.

Rumlow still slipped off his seat and went to the bathroom before coming up and planning his attack on the apparent unsuspecting server. He moved on over with a confident swagger, flashing her an award winning smile and easily talking her over to the table with him and Rollins. He, of course, told her of Jack’s best qualities and added the barb about a paper bag to the face to get her laughing.

When her shift was over, Rollins and the server, Cheryl, left together. Brock finished his last beer alone before he headed to the apartment that he had bought. It was still full of boxes of all the crap that he would need to fit in but mostly stuff that he was going to use to live. He had a recently unwrapped coffee table with some pamphlets with advertisement for hobbies, as he was advised to have one in order to have something to talk about on coffee break aside from him doing some martial arts or some manly bullshit.

He read a few of them over, but none of them took his fancy. He wanted something unexpected but that would require a steady hand and patience. It also had to be something that he could do inside his small apartment when he had time to do so. None of the pamphlets were something like that, so he decided he needed to strike out on his own. What did government employees know about hobbies anyway?

He settled on one a few weeks later after poking around. Not only did it involve the qualities that he would need for a good future, but there was a hint of constant danger and a bit of pain, something
minor but just enough to be entertaining all the same. A little pain was good for everyone. It even came with courses with an older woman who was surprised at his interest but seemed tickled with his applied charms.

Between SHIELD, HYDRA, setting up a place for living and taking a few courses, he was busy. There were times when he ached to be close to the asset again, but he knew better than to ask after the Soldier. He knew now from his training that the times that he would have would be fleeting and far between. He was determined to work higher in SHIELD and HYDRA to earn the right to be close to the Soldier every time the asset was unfrozen.

It was a good thing that he was a patient man. He soothed his personal and unvoiced love-sickness with memories that they had together, even the little details that he knew would fade over time unless he reviewed them. He was going to have his cake and eat it too, a high rank in HYDRA and time with the Soldier.

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A year after he had been promoted, Brock was set on a mission with the asset into Brazil. They were sent with a team of eight, a significant portion of STRIKE alpha who had already seen the Soldier and didn’t need the usual snarling of how important it was to never mention the asset’s existence to anyone. STRIKE alpha had proven itself on SHIELD missions to have both professionalism, integrity, and a sense of survival when it came to orders.

The cargo jet that they flew in was big, bulky and meant to look like the usual carrier jets that flew into the larger airports. It was loud inside, filled with equipment and crates of imports, and it was difficult to review the mission debriefing or concentrate on anything but the fact that the Soldier was strapped into a seat at the rear of the plane. Because he was the handler, he had more reason to listen than most.

It would be his first mission as independent handler of the Soldier, though he knew there was no reason for him to be here aside from to trouble-shoot if something went wrong. The asset was in good condition and ran missions with the team for the most part, and he was set to be a point sniper at the rendezvous. The Soldier would undertake the actual mission objective alone, an assassination of a small time government minister who was trying to bring attention to the corrupt aspects of government and how it destabilized the area. HYDRA needed the world in corrupt state to make it better after all.

When it seemed appropriate or at least wouldn’t draw much attention, Brock rose and made his way back to where the Soldier was seated, sniper rifle settled across the man’s lap and eyes closed. He paused a moment to gaze upon the object of his continued affections, the way that the Soldier rocked subtly with the turbulence, the placement of the Soldier’s feet on the deck, the fact that the asset’s hair was almost black in the current light. It was inappropriate and dangerous.

He did it all anyway before he motivated himself to approach. He had never had much in the way of shame.

He took the seat on the bench next to the brunette and stretched out his legs casually, savouring the closeness despite them not touching one another. He reasoned that he was allowed to sit this close to request information on the mission, to go over important details as were his right. He didn’t, but it was the Soldier who initiated first contact again, the slide of a foot along the deck until their knees bumped.

Brock sighed, feeling very much like a giddy girl sneaking in time with her crush. He dropped a hand down to his own thigh and leaned his head back against the skeleton of the plane. Two breaths
later, he shifted his hand and settled it on the asset’ thigh. It was warm and hard under his light touch.

“I brought some candy for afterwards,” he said, keeping his voice low enough that anyone coming back wouldn’t be able to hear the content of his words. “We can share.”

“Candy?” There was a hopefully flicker to the asset’s rough voice, clearly too soon out of cryostasis to have full use of it yet. “Like… before?”

“Nah,” he said with a shrug but flashed the Soldier a smile. “I brought M&M’s this time. Do you like chocolate?”

The Winter Soldier considered that question for a long moment, clearly digging around for a memory to go with the word. “I don’t know,” was finally said. For once, there was no rising danger with a memory wasn’t found.

“They melt in your mouth, not in your hands,” he said good-naturedly as he never did with anyone else. It didn’t seem the asset understood the catch-phrase at all. “You’ll like them. It’s better than the slop they give you.”

“You give me good things,” the asset replied slowly next to him. The Soldier’s knee shifted away from his own suddenly.

He lifted his hand and scratched his cheek in time to avoid one of the other STRIKE members from catching him with his hand on the Soldier’s thigh. They had an estimated time of arrival for fifty-six minutes from now. He acknowledged that information with a nod and glared when the member lingered to watch the asset. This was his time with the Soldier, and he wasn’t sharing it with anyone.

Rumlow settled back again when his look had sent the other man away, but it wasn’t until the Soldier’s knee returned to his own that he lowered his hand, higher this time but no less companionable. This sort of contact was going to sustain him for a long period of time, so he was going to milk it for all that it was worth. The Soldier didn’t seem to mind at all, even if the asset passed him glances that thrilled him, attention that no other received.

They shared his M&M’s after the successful mission. As long as the hard candy coating remained intact, the catch-phrase remained true. The Winter Soldier accepted his offering of sweets with a lightening of those blue eyes and a calm almost quiet pleasure that he had never seen beyond him. One of their thighs was always pressed against each other as they shared the less colourful bites of candy.

They risked a few kisses too, and the Soldier was far more adamant of getting a tongue in his mouth this time around. He could tell there was some kind of drive like a distant memory urging the asset on, and like he would with no one else, he indulged. The brunette tasted like chocolate with minty tang from old toothpaste.

He was left breathless and full of greedy pleasure when he dropped the Soldier off back to the technicians. Aside from a whisper of their fingers, they parted without even a glance at each other. It was the way that it had to be, and it was only later in life that he realized how much he resented having to hide his affections.

They still shared candy on every mission that they did together. That was a moment and a ritual that he never let anyone take from him, not even Pierce.

Everyone on STRIKE teased him when he went out of his way to buy foreign, sometimes exotic candy, and he took the ribbing with a grin and an allusion that he had a girl in his back pocket that
stuck around only because he had access to all the strange wild candies in the world. Too bad the Soldier favoured original style Skittles over anything else, and they shared those more in the later years.

That was, except when he had snuck in the new sour flavoured Skittles, and he had laughed when the usual pleased intensity have the artificial candy had turned into betrayed eye-watering growling. He carried the bruise to his ribs for his prank for a month, and it was the first time the asset had literally turned a back on him and given him the cold shoulder.

He hadn’t even been able to affect a change with the offer of kissing or touching. He never brought sour candy again, but he still laughed when he was alone staring up at a darkened ceiling.

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He had always been a man who knew that a good working weapon was the only one to have on his person. He kept his equipment in perfect working order, clean and ready for use in a single moment of notice. He could take apart and put together all of his guns, his equipment and even his uniform the fastest of anyone that he knew. His preparedness earned him more than a few nods from Fury who seemed to like preparedness more than the guy liked the people behind that.

Brock suspected that his organizational skills, his gruff manner of keeping a team in line and his complete preparedness was one of the reason he was turned to alpha team’s second within the unit in a few short years. Fury cared nothing for any ruffling that made to the hierarchy of the team, expecting that they would work it out between themselves.

They did. Rumlow reduced the four who considered themselves better fit for second into groaning red-faced piles of men on the floor every day for a week. He took his own knocks, including a dislocated finger during that week, but he broke two noses and at least three ribs before they grudgingly accepted that he was going to be second unless killed.

The unit went back to working very well together after that. Pierce only reminded him to be patient when it came to being the captain of the unit, since Seever still had a strangle-hold on the position at the present time. And so he was.

Instead, he waited long periods of time to see the Soldier, and Alexander tended to indulge him and the apparent ‘love-affair’ as the man called it. He and the Soldier were discreet save for the one time the asset had slipped behind the tree where Brock had been trying to take a piss for a kiss. He had been subjected to an aggressive tongue so far down his throat that he had almost gagged, but his hands were grasping tightly the asset’s wrists to not let the other man get away. He didn’t hesitate to slit the throat of the translator who caught them there.

It was a non-issue if it was for keeping what they had secure.

It was the routine maintenance of the Winter Soldier that brought him down to the Vault, a long-standing HYDRA base where the asset was most often kept when in the United States. He had always figured it was here to be close to Pierce and the main aspects of government for the States, no doubt both a prime target and a prime place to protect if the Soldier was required immediately. He also thought it was so that Pierce could have a good laugh at the people who had no idea the world’s deadliest assassin slumbered so close to them all. HYDRA’s greatest threat was so close to the center of American democracy.

Rumlow had not been given information as to why he was sent double-time, not until he began to see blood on the floor as he walked down the hallway. He passed the body of a soldier who was supposed to guard the door that separated prep area to the rest of the facility. There was more blood
and he paused at the sight of medical officers working feverishly on another guard who was stripped to the waist and laying in a growing pool of blood.

The closer he walked to where the asset was woken, the more chaos he saw. People were running about issuing orders and he picked up the noise of yelling and crashing as if a room was being destroyed. He knew that waking was a disorienting process, had even asked the Soldier what it was like, but he knew that no one but the asset had first-hand knowledge on what the process felt like. No one else had survived it.

“Agent Rumlow!”

He stopped at the sight of a technician, someone he probably should have recognized but didn’t because the old man in question was so covered in blood. It didn’t look like old man’s own, and he marched smartly over to a closed door that was distorted on its hinges and snarls of rage were followed by panicked screams inside. Somehow, he kept his cool head and only raised an eyebrow.

“The Secretary said he was sending you, but we can’t contain him much longer. It’s a miracle we lured him back in there at all. It’s been too long since he was wiped. He’s too erratic and dangerous for us to work with,” the technician said with a hint of panic. The loud chaos from the room continued.

“How long has the asset been awake?” He actually had no idea what information would help him with a rampaging weapon. He knew this was a test as well, one he thought for the first time he might fail. He could care less that people were dying in there; his concern fell with what was going on in the Soldier’s mind. “And how long since his last wipe?”

“The last wipe was three years ago,” the older man said, hysteria entering the man’s tone. “Pierce assured me you could handle it.”

Of course Pierce would. He knew that this was a trial on how deep the connection with the asset went, how much control came from him being able to calm the rampaging machine that had been created. The fact that the Soldier hadn’t been wiped since he had seen it told him a lot, and he felt a well of stubborn determination to end this with his life intact on the other side.

“Open the damn door,” he barked suddenly. “How can you not even control a man in a temper tantrum?”

The loud crashing indicated it was probably nothing like a temper tantrum and the technician gazing at him clearly thought that he was insane. He pointed at the damaged door like he had no idea why it wasn’t opened by now to admit him.

“Close it and don’t open it again until you hear my hollering at you to let me out,” he added as the door was forced open.

“But what if you die?”

“Call Pierce and he can give you leave to drug the hell out of him.” He grabbed the technician by the bloody lab coat and pulled the man close. “And if you even think about hurting or terrorizing the Soldier, I’ll cut you to little pieces. No one in or out until I give the order. Got it?”

“Yes… sir.”

Brock stepped into the room and took a quick assessment of the situation with a flick of his eyes as the door closed behind him, locking him inside a war zone. There were steel tables overturned, expensive equipment sparking in corners or parts of them hauled off and thrown. Walls were
damaged from what looked to have been punches, and the tiled floor was slick with blood. Most objects in the room had some blood on them, and he counted at least five bodies on the floor not moving. There were two technicians in sight making a run for it.

Well, make that one technician now. The Soldier had caught the second and thrown the woman into a damaged machine where she was promptly electrocuted. The smell of burnt hair and cotton was added to the smell of blood, loosed bowels, vomit and piss. There was certainly nothing sterile about this room anymore, and he heard sobbing in the attached room where he knew the showers were.

The last fleeing technician slipped on blood and went down hard with a hysterical wail. The Winter Soldier, clad only in dark trousers was closing the distance with complete murderous intent.

“That’s enough,” he snapped, drawing full attention to himself. “Get your ass over here! Who gave you permission to rampage like some psychopath?”

The Winter Soldier had the look of a madman, blue eyes wide and wild. Yet, there was some brief flicker of recognition at the sound of his voice, but he had never particularly spoken to the Soldier in such a way before. Blood splattered the Soldier’s skin and particularly that metal arm, and the asset abandoned the technician on the floor after clearly assessing him the greater threat. It might have also been because he had ordered the asset closer.

When the Soldier had a clear path to him, he was subjected to a charge, and he dropped to a crouch to avoid the metal fist from taking his head off. His hand grasped the knife hilt in his boot and drew it as he slashed at the asset’s legs. It was easily side-stepped but still gave him room to rise again.

It was his turn to side-step another punch and then he had to back-pedal another full-bodied lunge in his direction. His knife scored a hit against the back of the Soldier’s flesh hand, a minor injury really but it had the asset withdrawing to an apparent safe distance. It was probably more the shock of minor pain than anything even legitimately debilitating.

“Easy now, you know me,” he said roughly.

“Stevie…?”

“No, you idiot, it’s Rumlow,” he barked, offended that his name had been so mangled after all they had shared. There was a new flicker of confused recognition from the asset. “You have to calm down or you’re about to get loaded with drugs and put in that awful chair again.”

The Winter Soldier wavered slightly and then suddenly lunged at him, and he was unable to evade the speed and ferocity of the attack as he was tackled to the blood-stained floor. His head cracked against the tiles, causing him to see stars, but his arms automatically fitted themselves around the Soldier’s waist to both hold and grapple. He managed to keep his knife in hand somehow.

His head was rocked to the side with a punch, but it was thankfully the flesh hand and not the metal one which would have probably killed him instantly. “Easy, big guy,” he managed to get out before the second punch took him on the chin, and pain narrowed his vision.

He lay holding the brunette, and even despite his ringing head and pained jaw, he heard the soft keen of distress. He didn’t know what made him do it, but his hands smoothed up that Soldier’s back and then back down again, smearing blood and sweat.

“I need…. I need to see him….” There was confused desperation in the asset’s soft tone.

“Sorry, but you only get me instead,” he murmured in reply. It was the truth, especially since he had no idea who ‘Stevie’ was. “Why do you need to see him?”
“I… don’t know.”

Rumlow shifted under the asset’s weight, but he was forced to still with the brunette simply lay on him completely. The Soldier was heavy, dense with bones and muscles, yet there was a strange fragility that he had never seen before. It was like the man in his arms was lost and confused. He suspected that any other person would have felt disgust, and while he could have pretended to easily, he felt only a selfish longing to fill that obvious void.

“Brooklyn.” The word was breathed like a prayer, and his hand stroked the Soldier’s back again. That had been the same thing asked on the last major malfunction.

“Is that where you lived?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you want to go there then?” Rumlow had begun to stroke the Soldier’s back in a calm placating gesture while also savouring the feel of that hard body under his hands. “Is… Stevie in Brooklyn?”

There was a long silence which he could only take for careful consideration. “Maybe…”

Brock turned his face, ignoring the bruising that was blackening part of his jaw and pressed a kiss to the shell of the brunette’s ear. “If you promise to calm down and settle, I’ll go to Brooklyn and ask around for Stevie, okay?”

“I… yes,” the Soldier whispered, leaning towards the previous press of his lips. “Find Stevie.”

He knew the chances of finding a single man with a common first name was going to be impossible, and he also wasn’t certain that he wanted to find this man who had so taken the Soldier’s attention. He choked on a surge of jealousy, but that ebbed away so easily when the Soldier shifted and peered down into his face, staring at him with those startling blue eyes.

There was a shadow of that dangerous violence in those eyes, a storm of confusion, pride and coldness. Behind that, he saw recognition that grew until he was certain the Soldier knew him. His fingers lightly scratched down the asset’s bare back, earning a shiver from the man on top of him.

“Rumlow,” came the whispered word. “I know you.”

“Yeah, you know me,” he agreed, able to grin despite the pain in his head. “We’re a team.”

“A team.”

Brock smiled despite his aching face. “More than a team when we’re alone.”

The Winter Soldier stared at him for a long time and then leaned down until their lips met, and he could tell the moment that the confused fog gave way fully to recognition. His arms shifted until he was really holding the asset, their lips moving together despite the fact that he wanted to pass out right about now. He wasn’t going to miss this because he’d gotten another concussion.

Earnest and passionate, he poured his feelings into the kiss, his tongue battling against the sly aggressive one that so often found its way between his lips. The Soldier tasted bitter like morning breath and blood mixed horribly together, but they kissed until he surprised them both with a moan. They parted and peered at each other, and his expression softened when metal fingers caressed the pained throbbing against his jaw.
Rumlow urged the Soldier up, noting for the first time that the brunette seemed uncomfortable, shoulders shifting and rolling now that the flurry of activity and hunting was over. “Come here, are you hurt?”

Obediently, the Soldier came to him, but it clearly wasn’t for inspection with the way that arms circled his waist and he was pressed back against an overturned table. He had to use his hands to explore for signs of injury, and his eyes fluttered when the asset’s lips found his neck and began to kiss a line up, and he was driven to distraction at how good that felt.

Soon enough, there where fingers tugging on the bottom of his shirt, but he batted the hands away. Like so many things with the Soldier, persistence and patience to accomplish the mission were applied in everything. He had fingers up his shirt on the second assault, and he got his revenge by suddenly pressing their warm muscular stomachs together.

He was pressed harder to the table that shifted on the tiled floor with a harsh noise. They suddenly drew apart at the wail of fear nearby, his lips swollen from kissing and his shirt no longer settling smoothly over his stomach.

The technician who had been abandoned on the floor had wedged under an overturned table but with a clear view of them. He set a hand on the asset’s flesh arm to still the other man before he set off gingerly down the cluttered aisle.

“It’s okay, I’ve got him settled down,” he said softly, giving the young man a smile and offered a hand. “It’s safe now, so come on out. Are you hurt?”

“Yes…” The reply was tentative and still brimming with fear. The guy had probably been recruited in college.

“What’s your name, kiddo?” He may as well allay some fears about his own presence here.

“Brian. I… is it safe?” There was a definite tremble to that voice that forced Rumlow to give a sympathetic look. “He just… went mad.”

“Come on out, and let’s have a look at your injuries, okay Brian?” Brock urged the technician out and checked the man for those injuries while the Soldier watched impassively. There were some bruises and a nasty looking gash that would require some stitches. His inspection pulled the young man into a false sense of security, right where he wanted the new liability to his affair.

He urged the young man in the blooded lab coat forward towards the Soldier, flexing his fingers around his knife hilt. “Easy now, kiddo, he seems harmless right now.” The trembling indicated that his words weren’t entirely believed, but the technician was fully focused on the Soldier. “It’s nothing personal, but I can’t risk you having seen us together, Brian.”

The reaction was delayed, but, as the young man’s head turned to look at him, he drove his knife up into the right side just under the ribs into the man’s liver. He stabbed twice more despite the cry of pain and then dumped the flailing body to the floor at his feet. Brian the technician was dead in seconds.

He stepped forward and kissed the Soldier full on the mouth, keeping it brief. “Stay here,” he whispered like a promise to better things. He stepped around the asset and headed into the attached room where two terrified men were huddled together at the back of the showers. One was badly injured.

Brock murdered them both without a thought. There was no amount of bodies he wasn’t willing to
pile up to keep what he had with the Soldier between them. He abandoned their cooling corpses outside of the showers and peered at the asset, his gaze swimming.

He should sit down or risk a black out. He knew his head had been hit hard, but again, he set himself to remaining awake and as cognitive as possible. They had limited time before Pierce would come looking for results, and he had to produce them and he had to do so well and efficiently.

“Come on, let’s get you cleaned up,” he said, gesturing for the Winter Soldier to leave behind the smell of putrid death and come to the showers.

He knew the routine was pretty much just standing under the water until it ran clear and then combing out tangles afterwards. He gingerly stripped himself of his clothes because they were by now spattered with blood. The brunette stripped as well and followed him into the safe tiled area, and the asset steadied him when he stumbled from the sudden vertigo that he suffered from. The grip was the only reason he stayed upright or functional to get the shower going for them both.

He had made out in a shower before, but it had never been like that, the Soldier’s strong arms around his waist holding him tight and upright. For the first time, he had the freedom to touch and explore the other man, and doing so gave leave for the brunette to do the same to him. It was a slow shower, touches with fingers and lips distracting them from the events of general cleanliness.

At the same time, the Winter Soldier used a sly freedom to return the favour and with an energy and determination that was reserved only for missions. The only reason he wasn’t marked up with bites and hickey on his neck was the almost near constant cussing and telling the Soldier not to. The asset lived a miserably isolated life, so the ability to let loose for once drew out all manner of behaviours that he should report.

He didn’t. He savoured each and every one of them because they were going to sustain him in the coming months or years.

Instead, after getting clean (after getting dirtier first), he had casually rubbed the asset’s hair down with a towel that wasn’t too bloody. They stared at each other, sizing the other up before he offered a cocksure smirk. “What happened in here stays between us, okay?”

“How?” The Soldier did not normally question, but he had carefully cultivated the ability to do so with him.

“Because if you talk about it, people will take it away,” he said simply. “It’s our secret doing this. No one can know.”

“That’s why you killed those men.” He thought his reasoning obvious. They lapsed into a silence as he rubbed down the Soldier’s neck and shoulders next. The mangled shoulder twitched under his touch. “Will they kill you if it is found out?”

Brock shrugged his still damp shoulders, taking the Soldier’s flesh arm and rubbing away the water from it. “They might. They’ll definitely keep us separated. The only one who can know is Pierce.”

The asset knew Pierce by name, one of the few. There was a silence as the information was processed quickly and the Soldier’s blue eyes followed the motions of the towel as he wiped off the metal limb and moved to do the asset’s bare chest. Their eyes met several times in the occurring silence before he gave in and leaned up to steal a chaste kiss.

“Recite our times together.” It wasn’t a request.

Brock had learned long ago that he would always be the one who did the most talking in their duo,
and he had no problem with that. When the Soldier was around, he admitted to liking to talk and not just to fill the silence so he wasn’t stuck just staring like some love-crazed stalker. He probably would still be considered one, but he had stopped caring after Gromer had been sent somewhere cold and dark to live.

So he told every single meeting that they had no matter how fleeting or brief. He told of their first meeting, the second with Pierce, passing one another in the hallway with no more than a glance, the missions, the transports, the stolen kisses like secret love-birds. The more he spoke on it, the more he remembered and thought fondly of it. Really, the Soldier was the only one to have such an effect on him. Everyone else could burn.

There was no room in his world of climbing to the top but the Winter Soldier. He had set himself on this path, and he was going to see it through until one or both of them lost interest or died.

“I won’t forget,” the brunette whispered softly but with a trace of deep hopelessness. They both knew the words were a lie.

Brock cupped the Soldier’s rough cheek with a palm. “I’ll remember for the both of us until that won’t be needed anymore.”

The Soldier’s eyebrows drew together in consideration. “When won’t it be needed?”

“Well…” he trailed off, not entirely certain what he meant either. However, tactless comments were often pursued by both HYDRA and the man in front of him, so he forced himself to grin instead. “When HYDRA’s new world order comes into being, you’ll be free.”

“Free.” The asset said it like learning a new foreign swear word.

“Yeah, and then we can be together all the time.” There was no one but him to think that was probably a lie. It was a new dream that he had added on top of all the ones made in his youth that had begun to sour in his mind. Paltry childish whims those… not that he expected this one to be any different.

Rumlow had no idea it would be the dream that he would cling and fight for in the coming years. It would never seem childish when all the others were. Even when he was getting older, it was the dream that came to him often, far more often than he saw the Winter Soldier.

Over the next seventeen years, he would be the one to almost entirely bathe the Soldier. In that same time, the asset was wiped a total of four times compared to the previous years of at least once every three or four missions. After each wiping which he was always present for, he would shower the Soldier down and whisper every single meeting no matter how fleeting in the ear closest to his mouth, his arms strong around the Soldier’s waist and remembering for them both.

Brock never questioned the man he became in that time. He lived his life within HYDRA; he played his part for SHIELD; he was the youngest handler for the Winter Soldier. For him, after the day in the shower, he never particularly questioned what the best part of it all was.

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Two weeks after the Soldier had rampaged into the Vault, Pierce had personally told him that it had been triggered by a technical error. Before the asset had been put into cryostasis the last time, aspects of the metal prosthetic had been replaced but had been improperly secured so in moving the weapon out of cryostasis the next time, there had been electricity irritating nerves that had been integrated in from the shoulder. It was very painful, and it caused the asset to wake in malfunction.
Alexander had congratulated him on a job well-done with a razor smile. It was the kind of expression that meant that Pierce was aware of what had happened but was going to let it slide because he had done what was otherwise considered impossible. He had become an asset to the organization because of the control he could exert. He would perhaps later become aware of how much Pierce could play them off of each other.

As he had promised, he went to Brooklyn and looked up men named ‘Stevie’. There were few, but it was a dead end all the same because he couldn’t give details of the Soldier. There were no missing person reports made by any man named Stevie or even Steve that matched the description of the Winter Soldier. He never asked for further details about this mysterious man.

However, his apparent attempt earned him something akin to respect from the Soldier. He was recognized a lot faster when he entered a room at least.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I appreciate any comments or kudos that I receive. You’re all amazing.
This is the last of the pre-TWS aspects of this fic and while there were a few things I would have liked to expand on, the chapter was getting a bit long to throw it all in. The rest of the fic will be post-TWS and it will go a bit differently and not all of it will be from Rumlow's POV because I'm pretty much juggling more than a few characters.

The loving term of "murder boyfriends" is dedicated to Lauralot, who gave it to me during a review of my other fic. I now use it here in this for her. I will beat that term to death in this fic.

The usual disclaimer that I have no beta and thus I can make mistakes in my writing and it is hopefully not those embarrassing typos. Sorry in advance for any of them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I want you to know that being kind is overrated.
I want to write my secret across your sky.
I want to watch you lose control."

***

Rumlow settled into the life and dance that had become his working career at both HYDRA and SHIELD, and even though the years dragged by, there was an end coming together for HYDRA that hadn't entirely been put together with details. He knew that the higher ups in various countries were often meeting, planning and drawing in different groups to offer advice or at least given technological support to whatever project had taken over.

Neither he nor any member of STRIKE alpha was involved in the meetings themselves, but they were drawn into the matter subtly all the same. Groups or individuals who had been contracted in or offered some kind of assessment, engineering quotes, of whatever it was that came in discussion were either drawn into the fold of HYDRA, perhaps not even realizing it, or they were eliminated. Engineer designs were often commandeered out of those incidences, evidence destroyed. Very few of those people involved were ever important enough to call in the asset.

Of course, not every group was peaceful to begin with. Some were considered terrorist threats already; some were considered spy agencies; some were considered totalitarian regimes who had horded their aspect of the world to some semblance of useful threat. That also made those groups dangerous.

Brock Rumlow, Jack Rollins, old Seever, and one of their rookies, Adam Hunter, were assigned to go in easy and take out a few choice moles in a sand castle for their part in eliminating a key contact for HYDRA’s new world order. It was supposed to be a warning for others who were considering double-dealing, and while they weren’t to show their faces or give away the country that they worked for, they were to be brutal all the same. No prisoners. No survivors.

There were two ways in and out of the underground bunker. Seever and Hunter were assigned
together, the pair being the most and least experienced, and it was standard protocol. He and Rollins had proven that they could work together extremely well, though he had noted that there was a subtle increase in the hours that he put in with Jack on work time. The more dangerous the assignment, the more likely Jack was his partner.

He didn’t think much on it, since it was a subtle encroachment over the last few years. He took point despite being a skilled sniper, stalking his way with his rifle lifted to his cheek for any sign that their little group of hostiles were going to bolt from their desert warren. He came to stop at a metal door that no doubt led inside, his gun aimed at the heavy steel as Rollins moved in automatically lift it open.

Their gazes met for a moment, a silent acknowledgement before Jack hauled on the door, pulling it up and out of the way. The young hostile – no older than thirteen – turned wide eyes at the sudden daylight and moved to lift an AK-47 to aim. He put a bullet in the kid’s brain, spattering the metal door and watching dispassionately as the body fell from the rungs of the ladder down to thump in the dirt below.

Rumlow dropped a grenade down as standard procedure, hearing a similar blast at the other entrance where Seever and Hunter would be forcing an entry. He waited a few seconds for any sign of life that might try to crawl out before he dropped his rifle to hang down his front, bumping his hips. “Cover,” he ordered simply. He turned to head down into the rabbit hole when Rollins shifted to go first. He growled. “I said, cover,” he barked.

“I’ll go first,” Rollins replied and pushed him aside. He was second in command, which meant he was the one to give the orders. This kind of insubordination was not Jack’s style. Yet, he was left glaring as the other man slipped down the hole.

He covered before he got the cue to come down himself, marching smartly down the rungs driven into the thick dirt. He turned, but the visibility was poor and the rabbit hole narrow so that they had to travel one in front of the other. Rollins already blocked the way, and at seeing him, the man moved forward into the lead position. In warrens like these, it was the more dangerous position, the one most likely to get shot.

If they weren’t presently in the middle of a mission, he would have taken Jack to task. Instead, he let his displeasure be known in the heavy tread of his feet and his growling words to acknowledge that Jack made it clear passed a few branch offs to smaller rooms. Most of them seemed like either supplies or bedrooms. Gunfire beyond them indicated that Seever and Hunter had made contact. “Double-time, Rollins,” he ordered.

“Acknowledged,” Rollins replied.

They began to move faster and suddenly Jack’s gun spoke in the cave, and there was a distinct sound of a body hitting the ground. They moved on quickly, coming to the main branch with Seever and Hunter engaging down the left side with the hostiles inside that room. There were two bodies laying in the dirt when they arrived.

Despite entering a larger area where he could pass, Rollins shifted to block him. “Stand down, Rollins. I’ll take point,” he hissed in frustration. What the hell was wrong with the guy? They were going to fight when this was done and if he didn’t break Jack’s nose flat again, he’d be pissed at himself.

Rollins ignored his aggravation and headed down the right hallway, the big man in front firing and
dropping another hostile. They were both forced to duck when the automatic rifle replied as the man fell dying to the ground. Rollins finished the hostile with another bullet. No mercy.

They proceeded forward carefully until he felt Jack shift, revealing closed door. It opened inwards, and he nodded his head as Rollins made room for him to fire at any hostiles on the other side. The other man threw the door open, and he sighted the single male occupant and blew the man’s brains out before he proceeded into the room to do a sweep.

It was small, not even really a proper living quarters since anything that might even be considered a bed was rolled up weaved mats and woolen blankets. He swept the room, freezing at a small boy hidden on the other side of the door, looking petrified and holding a gun. No, not a gun, he amended quickly. A grenade.

His eyes dipped to the dirty floor and found the pin laying there. “Grenade,” he shouted and dived for the door as the grenade went off. It blew the door right off its hinges, decimated the small room, and kicked up enough dirt and dust to be considered a sand storm.

“Rumlow!”

He hadn’t made it very far outside of the room. In fact, only half of him had succeeded in getting out of it and part of that could have actually been because of the grenade blowing him into the wall. He coughed and pulled himself up, dragging and crawling on his elbows and one of his knees in time to avoid getting half buried as the room collapsed. Visibility was poor, the air thick with dust, and despite the ringing in his ears, he heard coughing and calls for a status report from Seever.

“Rumlow is down,” Rollins shouted, which seemed odd because Jack was not a man to raise any kind of fuss. One dead man meant a rise in the ranks, and Jack had joked about getting the rank second over his corpse. “Rumlow!”

He coughed, revealing his position as the shock wore off enough to be replaced with pain. He shifted his legs lamely, trying to get his weight under him, trying to rise to his feet, but it was a struggle all the way. He managed it and would have collapsed if Rollins hadn’t almost bowled him over and instead grabbed a hold of his belt with one hand and an arm around the big man’s shoulders as he was hauled out.

He leaned heavily on the larger man, his feet dragging and it was all of his concentration to keep them even vaguely setting down appropriately. They met Seever in the main crossroads, but the dust had made it to this area and visibility was poor here as well. The captain ordered for them to leave and made the final sweep personally.

Top side, it was Hunter who hauled him out by his arms with Rollins literally shouldering his ass to get him up. Once up, he wavered on his feet and then plunked down unceremoniously, wiping at dirt and sweat covering his face. He should have worn goggles, but he hadn’t wanted the impairment to his visibility in those kinds of close quarters.

“Jesus Christ, your legs,” Hunter yelped, coming to his aid and looking sick at the same time. Adrenaline only went so far. “Rollins, we need medical!”

Brock shifted to lean back on his hands as if he were just lounging on the beach. His eyes dropped to his legs at the same time that Rollins arrived to personally assess. Most of the wood door had lodged in large splinters in his thighs and calves, protruding at different angles. Where there wasn’t wood, there was damage from the blast itself, and it was probably the door that saved his life despite almost taking off his legs.
He smirked despite his intense pain, giving Hunter a wink. “Now this wouldn’t have happened if I’d taken point like I was supposed to,” he said to Rollins, who glared at him. “Next time follow orders, Rollins. I’d kick your ass, but I’d probably lose a toe.”

“Shut your big mouth, Rumlow,” Rollins snapped and began to cut through his trousers with a knife, carefully avoiding the large chunks of wood. “Hunter, get my first-aid kit. It’s in your pack.”

Old Seever appeared out of the entrance and approached with all the menace of a snarling feral dog. “Status,” the man barked at Rollins.

“He’ll keep his legs if we get transport A-SAP, captain,” Rollins grunted, not leaving him any manner of personal decency. “Build me a stretcher out of whatever we have, and in that time, I should have most of this bandaged up to move him.” Because Rollins was the one with more first-aid, even Seever deferred to the man in cases of medical emergencies.

“Who the hell had a grenade down there,” Seever demanded before gesturing to Hunter to get the stretcher made up now that Rollins had a medical kit.

“A kid, hidden behind the door,” Rumlow managed to reply, shock having made him a bit more docile. “I saw him on my sweep of the last room on the eastern hallway.”

“You were point, Rumlow. What the hell were you doing entering rooms?” Seever looked positively incensed but was helping to make the stretcher with Hunter all the same. They still glared at each other over Jack’s bent head.

Rollins was wrapping bandages around the various pieces of wood to keep them from shifting in his legs during transport. The big man appeared to not be paying attention to the conversation but still gruffly said, “it was me.”

“Explain yourself,” Seever snarled. Defying orders had never ever gone down well with the man.

“I had orders,” Rollins said simply, and it was impossible to miss the significant look that passed between the two men. He saw Seever narrow eyes but surprisingly did not pursue the matter anymore, but he was not so generous when he looked at Jack.

“What orders?”

“Shut your blow hole and let me work, or do you want to lose your legs? Some sniper you’ll be squeaking after us in a wheelchair,” Rollins said, cutting off any sort of snarling from him by tightening a bandage on his upper leg, earning a noise of pain from him. He lapsed into silence but glared all the same.

While he was stretched out, Seever called for immediate pick up at the rendezvous. By the time they had reached the designated extraction point, he was drugged pretty high to avoid squirming because of the jostling that came with moving him. With nothing to do, he thought about his favourite subject and the drugs just made it all the better, enhancing mental images and dulling down imperfections to his memory. More like he didn’t care about any imperfections in it, just enjoying the ride.

Rumlow had been a victim of damage from combat, but he had avoided debilitating injuries for his entire military career. He admitted that being restrained while hours of work was put into removing the chunks of wood from both of his legs made him appreciate only getting bruises, cuts and the occasional need for sutures.

The next day when it appeared that he wouldn’t lose his legs from the damage, Seever and Hunter flew out to report back to Washington. He was left with bandages from ankle to hip and on
medication that was only marginal to manage the pain, but he knew better than to complain about those. No, he had a bigger issue with the antibiotics he was required to take.

“They give me the shits,” he complained to Rollins who was stuck with him. It was supposed to be punishment from Seever, but he suspected there was more to it. “I’d prefer intravenous antibiotics.”

“You’ve got a working big mouth, so they’re going to make use of it,” Rollins had replied while flipping through an outdated cooking magazine. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

Rumlow scowled at the other man. “So are you. If I had two working legs, I’d have reduced you to pulp by now. If you pull any of that insubordination bullshit again, I’ll put a bullet in your ugly face.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m serious,” he growled, wishing he had a gun to prove it right now. He had no time for wondering if the guy he was paired with was going to do what he was ordering. “Cross me again, and you’ll wish that grenade took me out.”

Rollins gave him a measured look but the man’s expression revealed nothing. He watched Jack shift in the chair and stretch out long legs towards his bedside casually. “Fine, what makes you so damn special?”

If there was a response that he had been expecting, that hadn’t been it. He kept the confusion that he felt off of his face and stared at Jack. “I’m a damn good sniper, and I can lead willing men. More than you can say,” he replied, cocksure as usual.

“You were shooting blanks if you let some kid blow your legs off,” Rollins said with great relish, curling a lip in the man’s version of a smirk. “Is it that classified training that makes your shit not stink?”

Brock glared daggers at the other man. “No, I assure you, with those antibiotics I don’t even want to be in there when I have to take a shit.”

Rollins chuckled and the general camaraderie that they had together came through. They went back to companionably ignoring each other, Jack to the magazine and him trying to find a comfortable position on the bed again. He mostly dozed because there was nothing else to do and he almost always did when he was recovering from some kind of injury. Rollins joked that he slept it off rather than healed.

He became mobile again after about five days stuck in bed, and while he hobbled, he returned to gun training as soon as he could. He was taken from it to be informed that he would be shipped back to the United States at oh-five-hundred tomorrow. He would have gone back to his training, but he apparently had a call on the satellite phone on further details of his objective once returning State-side.

He took the call in private and was extremely glad that he did when Alexander Pierce’s voice found him through the ear piece. Instinctively, he straightened as if to snap a salute, but he eventually hobbled to the bed to seat himself.

“When you return to the States, you’re to take whatever duties that Director Fury decides for you,” Pierce said over the soft crackling of the satellite phone. “It will be most likely desk duty until you can get a physician’s note that you’re fit for duty.”

Rumlow wondered why the hell a man as important as Pierce was telling him such common information that would no doubt be repeated to him when he arrived as SHIELD. He had already
been told what to say when reporting his injury, given that his mission was supposed to be ‘training’.

Still, he knew better than to piss too much with Pierce. “Yes sir, I’ll report promptly. Am I off duties for our organization?”

“Yes, I’ll keep you informed if your special skills are required,” Alexander replied with the man’s usual patient tone. It gave nothing away, and it annoyed him greatly. He hadn’t seen the Soldier in almost two years. “Until then, heal and be patient.”

“Was it you who ordered Rollins to ignore my orders?”

“Watch your tone,” Pierce immediately growled at him. It also wasn’t an answer to his question either.

“Sir,” he added in as polite a voice as he could muster.

Alexander made him wait, forced him to take a deep breath because he knew the man could wait him out or worse not answer at all. He drew on his reserves of patience and stroked a hand down his thigh to spark a dull ache from his healing leg, bring about an order to his thoughts and his mind. He was not of rank or importance to demand anything of Pierce. He didn’t even know why he did.

He drew a deep breath, held it and then released it slowly. That seemed enough for Pierce on the other end of the line.

“Agent Rollins has been given leave to watch your back, Agent Rumlow,” Alexander said, the tone conversational but the undertone message very clear to him. He was important, and his life was to be preserved even if it meant disturbing the flow of the chain of command. “You are not a careless man, but I want double the eyes on the situations you are walking into.”

He ground his teeth a little and sighed, rubbing a hand through his mused hair. “I can’t run an operation if I don’t know if my men will listen to my orders.”

“You aren’t running the operation,” Pierce reminded him simply. “Agent Seever is in command of STRIKE alpha and when you are a handler, the Winter Soldier is the official leader of the operation.”

“Yes sir, I understand, but when it comes time for me to lead STRIKE…”

“Then you and Agent Rollins will have worked out the appropriate arrangements for this system to work and continue,” Alexander said, cutting across him so easily. It had to have been some strange mastered technique from playing in the Fish Bowl. “No exceptions. Am I clear?”

“Yes sir, perfectly clear,” he replied, unhappy but aware there was no getting out of this. “I’ll report to Director Fury upon my arrival to SHIELD.”

Rumlow finished his call to Pierce after a few more instructions related to HYDRA and then spent the flight back watching Jack, trying to decide how to deal with the man’s orders. There was probably only resentment having to baby-sit him like he was going to get blown up every mission. It was not good for long-term health of a team, especially one under high pressure as they were acting within SHIELD to hide their true identities. He said nothing to Rollins’ silent inquiries to his staring and waved the man off.

The day that he reported to SHIELD and was indeed assigned desk duty, he noted how Rollins was also assigned the sticky and boring duty of writing and reviewing mission reports, supply forms and all manner of government paper work that only served to bog down an agency. When changing, he
noticed the heavy bruising to Jack’s legs that kept the man unable to perform missions with the rest of the team.

It was because of him. The injuries he had sustained had translated to punishment for Rollins for failure. In this game they played, there was no room for failure.

“Hey Jackie, you want to go out for beers tonight?”

“Nah, me and Cheryl are having dinner,” Rollins replied simply. “She’s trying all these new recipes on me.”

“Look at you all domesticated now,” Rumlow replied with a smirk, stiffly walking over to the other agent. “She must give a brilliant hummer.”

Jack glared at him, but he was making kissy motions at the other man. He took the swinging punch on his shoulder and caught Jack’s wrist in return. He then pulled a handgun on the other man with a wink. “You’re a jackass,” Rollins snapped.

“Yeah, but I’m the jackass that’s going to keep us both alive for the long term, Jackie.” He smirked at the suspicious look Rollins gave him before the man sobered and nodded. He tapped the pistol against the side of Jack’s face. “Seems like we’re gonna be pals now, huh?”

“Hurry up and get yourself a girl so I can force you on double-dates,” Rollins said with a smirk. “It shouldn’t be hard for you with a smart mouth like you have. You’re not a twink, are you?”

Rumlow rolled his eyes and tucked away his handgun, flipping Rollins’ captured wrist aside. “As if,” he replied with more confidence than he felt. “Unlike you, I don’t need someone to set up a scene for me to play the part.”

“Prove it, smart ass.”

“Fine, I will,” he said and tried to swagger out of the locker room. He didn’t want a girl; he wanted to see the Soldier. He wanted more memories so badly his love-sickness had come back after a year of it being obscure. Still, he was going to have to play his part.

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Brock shifted his shoulders and huffed as eager lips nipped along the curve of his shoulder blade, keenly aware of the sweat drying along his spine. He rested his chin on his stacked forearms in front of him, the corner of his lip tugging into a smile at the intense pleasurable sensations of teeth nipping his skin, a little pull here and there to work moans from him. His fingers clenched in the ratty wool blanket that he was laying stomach down on.

Suddenly, he chuckled when a solid naked weight came to rest on his back, one hand slipping out from under his chin so that he could press his fingers into long dark hair as the Soldier’s mouth kissed up his neck and then sucked on his ear. “Ah, so eager… best decision I ever made was to sneak stuff on this mission,” he sighed out. The Soldier was relentless in a way that was so different from their usual interactions even.

He could even pretend that they were free for a few hours. Soon enough, it would be time to go back to being weapon and handler.

Brock, aware of the mission layover in Berlin of forty-eight hours, had snuck four tablets of ecstasy into his pack and because he had them hidden in an open Sweet-tarts package, no one even thought to question him. He had given a tablet to the asset at the beginning of the layover and taken one
himself, not really expecting an effect from the Soldier.

They had sex sixty-two minutes after its consumption. He was thirty-four years old and getting his cherry popped by HYDRA’s greatest weapon when they had previously only managed some make-out sessions and some petting. He had absolutely no regret.

His fingers scratched at the Soldier’s scalp as warm fingers, metal and flesh, played along his sides before slipping under his arms and grasped his shoulders from the front. His eyes closed as he felt the tell-tale sign of the asset’s interest, still affected by ecstasy and far freer than ever before and so utterly his that he pressed his backside into the curve of the Soldier’s hips.

It was not a flurry of rushed activity like the first time, but it was a slow still rough affair all the same. The Soldier held him strong, a grip that might have frightened others but he had long ago accepted this kind of touch. His breath came in quick gasps or moans, his body so easily following the eager motions, and he regretted that he hadn’t snuck along a few more condoms to hide evidence of their activities for the most part. He at least wasn’t going to get a medical exam after this to wonder why he was walking funny.

After wards, when ecstasy had began to wear off and the actual need for hunger and thirst made itself apparent, Brock smoothed his fingers along the asset’s rough jawline. Those blue eyes were more alive than he had ever seen them, and the Soldier’s face had an animated quality that had long ago been ground down.

“We should… have names for each other,” he said softly, his fingers stroking through the Soldier’s sweaty hair. It was sentimental and stupid, but it seemed like a good idea right now. “Just we’d know them.”

The corner of the asset’s lip pulled in a close approximation of a smirk. “I’ll name you, and you name me.”

Brock nodded, having looked up more than a few names that would just be theirs. It was a desperate play on his part when he had been alone, frustrated and railed against the situation that he found himself in. It had been one of his bad days, a mission gone bad, too many months between seeing the Soldier, a bad fight between himself and Seever which he had lost. He had moodily consoled himself with flipping through various dictionaries looking at words.

“Ase,” he breathed softly. He saw the Soldier consider for a moment before nodding in acceptance. “You’ll be my Ase, and no one else can know.”

The Soldier leaned down and kissed him deeply, their fingers interlacing on one hand so his other could remain petting the asset’s hair. The ecstasy had almost worn off completely by that point, but he still had a bitter moment of wanting it to remain just like this. A fervent moment when he entertained the idea that they could just pick up and slip away, never to return to HYDRA, SHIELD or even the United States. It was a pipe dream.

The Soldier pulled away from the kiss first and watched him silently, those blue eyes alive with something almost human, something so real it was breath-taking. “Ravasz,” the asset said softly. “When I forget, remind me.”

“You shouldn’t have to forget anymore,” he said forcefully. “I’ve kept you almost exclusively out of the chair so you won’t have to forget.”

“I’m aware of that,” the Soldier replied and there was a sadness that crept into the weapon’s voice. “HYDRA owns me and designates what I can and cannot remember. I am their weapon.”
Brock frowned, his fingers tugging on the hair at the back of the asset’s neck. “We could run away.”

“No, we can’t.” It was a gentle sort of rebuff, but it was far too true. “HYDRA would never stop until I am found, and you’d be executed. They would make me watch.”

Rumlow huffed and curled his legs around the asset’s thighs, hating this but accepting it as the path that they were walking together. “I love you,” he said gruffly. “I’d do anything for you.”

“I know.” There was the shadow of pride there, swimming and crawling for the surface in the asset’s generally expressionless face. “You are the only one who makes me feel human.”

It was such a damning statement to hear from someone who had been reduced to the capacity of a weapon, and only the lingering pleasure in his limbs and the heavy weight of the body on top of his own was the reason he didn’t throw something. Instead, he lavished kisses all along the Soldier’s jaw and neck, tasting skin he had previously worshipped and sucking a possessive mark into the Soldier’s skin. It would be gone within four hours.

He clenched his hand around the asset’s flesh one, his Ase now and for as long as he lived. They lapsed into a sleepy silence, and eventually, the Soldier settled down to doze against his shoulder. He watched the process greedily, watched as he looked into the face of James Buchanan Barnes and realized the human quality of it. He saw the man buried in the weapon for a few hours, drank in the sight and realized then how pathetic and short-sighted his goals were.

The world was sinking ever deeper into chaos with the fast rise of technology. People were losing the ability to speak, to be functional slowly as computers came online for the common man. Governments were fighting increasingly on smaller spaces of land, religious and personal freedom had never been so coveted and misused before. It was only going to get worse, and his childhood dream of standing on top of the shit pile was put aside as he stared into the face of a man who knew nothing of freedom except stolen kisses, little pieces of candy and this one day where he had given more to a single person than he ever had to anyone else.

They were both prisoners to the affair that they were engaged in. The Winter Soldier could never be free to see him or pursue anything. He would grow old, bitterer and sly as he lived a life hoping for just one more glance, one more shared kiss.

“I’m going to get you out,” he vowed softly into the musty air that was fresh with sex, sweat and gun oil. It was the least selfish thing he had ever said to anyone and perhaps the most honest too. He stroked a hand along the sleeping face and sighed softly. “I promise.”

Perhaps it was the last lingering effects of ecstasy in his blood, but Rumlow shifted his goals to begin to work against the organization that had taken him in and given him purpose. He supposed it wasn’t odd that HYDRA gave him a new purpose either given how dedicated he was to the organization, but his new path was doing everything he could to research ways to break his Ase out of the endless cycle of freezes and thaws with its business-like maintenance and putrid food and harsh training schedules.

Order would come through pain, and he had given more than enough pain, blood, and sweat. He met the Winter Soldier nine years previous, and they had perhaps had less than six months together. Because the Soldier never changed, it worked.

So began Brock Rumlow’s new goal which was made so much easier with the announcement of Project Insight and the helicarriers that would bring the bark of their message through firepower that reduced the unwanted scum of the earth to dead piles of waste in the streets. There was a chance he might even survive to see it.
After the full member meeting of all the STRIKE teams – unheard of at this stage – he had caught Pierce before the man could leave to go about some other business that required the man’s attention. The project would mean that Pierce was going to be working harder than the rest of them, but the man would be in no more danger either. They all had to keep a tap on intelligence after all, feeding the government what needed to be acted on. Pierce just got to wear a swanky suit while doing it.

“Sir, a word,” Brock said to Pierce. Most people had filed out and those that remained were discussing the big announcement. Alexander smiled almost affectionately at him, like he was the new ace in the hole. He had begun to see that more. “Project Insight… what will happen to the asset when it goes off?”

“That matter is still in question, but his job will be obsolete now won’t it?” Pierce eyed him. “Why?”

“If I do everything in my power to rise in the ranks, to kiss whatever ass I have to, to see Insight in the air no matter what…” he said, watching as Pierce’s eyebrows climbed higher with each word. “If I see the asset through every mission until this goes off, do whatever you ask… I want the Winter Soldier assigned permanently to me after Insight.”

Alexander Pierce gave him such a measured look that he swore the man could see right through him and knew every little dark detailed thought. “It’s been six years, Brock. Really, isn’t it time to give up this little tryst?”

“No sir,” he said firmly, jutting out his chin stubbornly. “And it’s been seven, sir.”

“Keeping count that diligently, have you?” There was something dangerous in those words but also the tone of voice. “You’re a good man, Brock, and you will rise far if you keep your current work ethic up. The Soldier favours you, yes, but he’s incapable of love or care. You tickle his fancy because of familiarity.”

He nodded his head, understanding but emotions never made sense to anyone and they certainly weren’t reasonable at times. “Do you love your wife, sir?”

“Excuse me?” It was impulsive, but it was also the first time he had seen Pierce even marginally caught off guard. It was probably not a position many lived through. He didn’t repeat himself and the Secretary watched him for a very long moment again. “Yes, I do.”

“Even when you have go away and not see her much for months or years on end?”

“Yes.” He could see Pierce knew where this was going.

“Then don’t tell me to give up my tryst. It’s more than that; it always has been.” He looked stubborn still, stiff in his posture as if preparing to defend himself further.

Alexander smiled in a paternal way like a son had just gone off to the wrong track and was only now admitting some kind of wrong. “He cannot love you. That has been removed from him.”

Rumlow shifted on his feet and had to fight down the urge to pull the knife that the Soldier had given him seven years ago and had killed more than a few witnesses with. He had grown far more careful of those antics as of late, hiding far better the victims of his affair. “Even so, sir, I feel it would be just reward for my efforts. The Winter Soldier in exchange for my absolute and complete surrender to give everything to HYDRA and Insight.”

Pierce clearly saw the power of his belief that he could single-handedly make a difference on Insight, and the aging man gave him another measured look from the tip of his boots to the top of his head. “Very well, I will discuss it with other members,” he said slowly. “Until then, you are to prove to me
and make me believe, Agent Rumlow. Do that, and I will give you the Winter Soldier, assuming your love affair lasts that long.

Four missions later with STRIKE alpha, Rumlow sabotaged it so subtly that Seever took a bullet to the mouth while calling commands, and he immediately took command of the mission and called in Rollins as his second. Aside from the complete debilitation of one of their own, the mission was a well-oiled and well-played success, and they had gone above and beyond the call of duty to capture not only the objective but Hunter had gotten hands on files relating to the newest Stark technology with some brilliant hacking skills.

The arrangement of him being STRIKE captain and Rollins as his second was not subject to change. Director Fury had personally congratulated the team and told them they had earned top marks for their ingenuity and functioning despite the loss of their team captain early on. He received a note in his locker with non-descript text from type-writer that simply said:

“Well played.”

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The announcement of Project Insight brought about a change to many people, including the Winter Soldier who was thawed more often and put to work. There were more missions as the world descended into the required chaos for Insight to be most effective. With more chaos came the lame attempts to staunch the flow of blood that came from crime, terrorism, and even well-performed accidents. It only helped the slippery slope but instilling more fear.

Industry was taking over as well, gaining speed in adding to the effects of a government controlled by different subtle branches of HYDRA. Big business tied up things and began to slow the workings of many governments, particularly the United States. It was all purposeful to keep the focus on just how unfair the world was for the time being, but Brock didn’t particularly care about any of that. He admitted it, but it was no longer a concern for him as much as it had been even a few short years ago.

He was busy working to undermine the Winter Soldier Project. When Pierce headed off his attempt to learn everything that he could about maintaining, freezing, thawing and programming the Soldier for each mission, he began to undermine the technicians who were responsible for those duties. He made friends with some to get the information that he wanted, rubbing elbows with both those in high positions with direct responsibility but also those with low responsibility who often knew more than they let on. Ears were made for listening and humans were a horribly gossipy race.

Rumlow also knew that Alexander was watching him closely. He had figured out early that the man kept tabs on him after it was clear that his feelings for the Soldier were not about to fade. He was still the youngest and most capable handler, but his teams were often large now. Since he couldn’t murder the entire STRIKE team without giving himself away, it was clear that Pierce thought that arrangement would keep him in line.

It didn’t.

If anything, the Secretary’s attempts to keep him restrained caused him to develop a streak of cunning that he wondered if Pierce regretted later on. He found opportunity in mission travel, preparation and down time to sneak in with the Soldier. They even had sex in a small bathroom of a safe house where a man could barely turn around; he had bitten down on his own safety vest to limit sound and the asset was the master of quiet. STRIKE on the other side of the door had no idea he wasn’t just helping the Soldier wash the blood off.

His greatest plan had come with agreement from the Soldier’s endorsement. It was clear that the asset
was still as smart as a tack, able to figure out that a situation was changing. Their lack of time alone was probably a tip off, and he still had some free time on mission debriefings and weapon checks to have at least a little time alone. Their teams were so large though that aside from talking and maybe a brush of fingers or legs, they had little opportunity for anything else most of the time.

“Does STRIKE have to report when you do a behaviour that’s considered a malfunction?” He was putting together his sniper rifle, the Soldier doing much the same near him. STRIKE was doing their own equipment checks.

The Winter Soldier didn’t look up nimble fingers pressing the pieces of the gun together. “The handler and STRIKE captain and second are required to report aberrant behaviour.”

Rumlow glanced over to where Rollins was checking the communication units. So, it was just his current second that he had to deal with, huh? He and Rollins had been getting along, but he didn’t think the guy would allow for the men reporting bad behaviour of the asset to slide. He had to figure out a way to convince the team to report to him alone. Maybe being handler and STRIKE captain could be pressed as an advantage?

“Well, if the men report malfunction behaviour to me, I’d have to take you to task.” He lifted his rifle and peered down the new scope before tinkering with its position. “I wouldn’t want to give away my trade secrets on how I do so to the men though. It’s a handler’s right.”

It was. Pierce didn’t want the normal team to witness the Soldier taken to task unless it was out in the field or something critical to the mission. With the rarity of handlers, the Soldier had to know who was in charge without the distraction of a bunch of men leering and having their sadism fueled in a show of power. He was to discipline out of sight when it had to be done.

And what better opportunity then now?

The Winter Soldier was in and out of cryostasis more than ever, longer time spent in training to keep up with the now fast changing technology, and the missions that just seemed to keep on coming. The world needed a push, and the Soldier was that silent urging in a particular direction when no other push was doing the job. More time out of cryostasis, more opportunity for aberrant behaviour.

The Winter Soldier locked in the bullet cartridge and looked down the scope to test its placement before blue eyes flicked up to sight him. “Understood, sir.”

Brock smirked and stood from his seat, swinging his rifle strap over his head. “Alright STRIKE, listen up, we move out in five,” he called to the men. “Gear on and get to your positions. We’re on a time constraint.”

The asset rose and began to head towards the door of the bomb shelter they were in. The men gave way to the Soldier out of both respect intermingled with just enough curious fear to make them stay in line and not push. From now on, it was the Soldier’s lead that they followed with him in second and Rollins his third.

There was the usual low murmur as gear was settled, straps were tightened and helmets were slipped
on. He moved to stand with Rollins, rubbing a hand through his spiked hair. They glanced at one another before his second handed him a communication short-range radio and moved on to hand them out to the rest of the men. He caught the Soldier’s blue eyes before goggles fit of the asset’s gaze, but he knew that the years of flickering malfunction had begun.

For a year, it worked too. The Soldier never went over the top with a real malfunction, but there were just enough hints of it that he caught it himself or the men came to him about it. It was simple, a hand grasping another member, the Soldier shaking his head as if fighting off some bad memory, intent gaze normally saved for victims.

The current malfunction was literally shoving another STRIKE member down to knees with a growl of predatory intent before Brock had gotten there and told the Soldier off. He always ‘disciplined’ the weapon in private whether it was in the bushes away from camp, in a different room of a safe house, or the back of a plane. He only made certain there were no cameras to catch what they were really doing.

This mission had thankfully had a safe house for them in which he drew the Soldier off to a back room that had once been a bedroom. The only evidence of comfort was a ratty old brown couch that sagged dangerously in the middle and had had most of its cushions knifed to pieces. Otherwise, there were peeling paint that might have been white to begin with but not appeared an unhealthy shade of yellow. The room smelled vaguely of old cigarette smoke.

“Disarm,” he ordered, standard in pretty much every disciplinary interaction with the Soldier. He might be behind closed doors, but he kept up what appearances he must.

The Winter Soldier moved away and began to lay out a few knives, two handguns and the sniper rifle before added a proto-type grenade and ammunition cartridges in neat order. He watched the proceedings with a dispassionate look, but his eyes still roamed over the roll and shift of shoulders with each movement of those strong arms, the twist of that back which he had been forced to cling to on more than a few occasions.

He folded his hands behind his back when the asset stood, turning his head slightly at the perked attention of the Soldier towards the closed door. He could hear the men settling down for a game of cards, but there was a dirty hole in the ground for a bathroom that was to the left of the room he currently occupied. He was smart enough to pick up on the Soldier’s silent signals by now.

“Sit,” he ordered crisply, gesturing at the couch. The Soldier sat, stretching out long muscled legs in an air of relaxation that no one else in the world saw. “Explain yourself.”

“Martinez was out of position. I showed him his place,” the Soldier drawled tonelessly. Those blue eyes stared with familiar interest.

“You know you aren’t allowed to touch a member of the team on the clean up,” he replied as he approached silently, sliding his feet very carefully over the loose floorboards to hide his own progress. “I’ve informed you multiple times now. I’ll report this to the technicians next time. You know what they’ll recommend, don’t you?”

“Yes sir.” The Soldier shifted legs apart more as their knees brushed, and hands reached out to grasp the front of his belt, pulling him in. “They’ll recommend wiping to remove malfunction.”

Rumlow smirked as he pressed his knees into the Soldier’s thighs, forcing the asset’s legs further apart as he leaned forward until his hands came to rest against his Ase’s shoulders. “And we don’t want that, do we? Not after all we’ve worked so far for.”
“No sir,” the asset replied before their lips met, as teasing brush that turned a bit more frantic when the Soldier teased the commissure of his lips with a seeking tongue. They parted so the Soldier could add, “will you punish me?”

“Yes,” he replied silkily like it was exactly what he wanted to do. It was, as his fingers closed on the front of the asset’s leather jacket, pressing the other harder against the couch. He kissed his *Ase* with a barely restrained passion, rolling his hip when fingers crept along it, but it only encouraged their kiss to become more fevered.

They both paused, foreheads touching, as a member of STRIKE passed by the door to the bathroom, heavy steps meaning that it was one of two men. Probably Riley; the guy couldn’t help but piss every hour on the hour. There was a roar of laughter from the other side of the house, and he was content to let the boys have fun while he did too.

The fingers of one hand lifted and caressed his fingers along the side of the Soldier’s cheeks, affection plain as they looked at each other. “*Ase*,” he whispered, earning the equivalent of a faint smile of acknowledgement. His fingers stroked along stubble-rough skin, tilting his head down so that the side of their noses caressed for a moment.

Footfalls passed by again a moment later, and he waited until they had faded with the call of Riley’s name to tell the man what round they were on. The asset flicked eyes towards the door to acknowledge the passing.

He shifted and slid into the Soldier’s lap, his charge shifting legs to accommodate the new position. He began to unzip the side of the asset’s jacket, sliding a hand inside as soon as he could to caress a nipple with his finger tips. The Soldier arched under him and that expression smoothed, and he was both amused and turned on when his *Ase* had to bite a lower lip to prevent making a sound of pleasure for his efforts.

They began to make out heavily after that, lips sealed and soft little sighs the only indication of their treatment. He teased the Soldier’s nipple until a metal hand settled on his thigh and squeezed hard enough to bruise, the only warning that he had that he was about to be up-ended if he didn’t stop. He paused only, letting the tingle build up the moment as his hands lifted and he pressed his fingers into the long hair just behind the Soldier’s ears.

The door to the room opened a minute later, and the Winter Soldier was the first to jerk away, a delayed reaction because in the effort to get his tongue winning this round, he had unwittingly pressed his palms over the asset’s sensitive ears. He jerked back and found Jack Rollins standing in the door way.

Rumlow shifted a hand from the Soldier’s face to his belt where his knife always sat. “What the hell…?”

“Don’t bother, Rumlow,” Rollins said, nodding towards his dropped hand. “I’ve been suspicious for years. It’s taken me months to catch you though.” He eased his weight from the asset’s thighs, standing up slowly as the Soldier shifted. “Tell him to stay sitting. This is between us.”

He gestured with a hand and the asset stilled, but there was something defiant in those blue eyes. He wondered if the Soldier would actually stay seated when everything was about to come down around them. He had trusted Rollins enough to keep the men occupied, aware that Jack’s life relied on his good health. Now he had to eliminate his second.

Rollins, cool in the face of certain death, pushed the door to the room closed and leaned against it. He noted that the man was fully armed. “So... when did you two become happy murder boyfriends?”
Rumlow curled a lip at the name but didn’t refute what it meant either. There was no point given that they had just been caught lip-locked. “Get out.”

“You can’t command me about this, dickbag,” Rollins challenged aggressively. “Answer the question.”

He glanced at the Soldier, and he almost flicked a hand to allow the asset to make a go for Jack, to have the pleasure of defending what they had together. It had always been him doing the messy work because the Soldier was more tightly controlled. However, the death of a STRIKE member at the hands of the Soldier was something that would guarantee a wiping. He wanted to avoid that.

“It had to have been years,” Jack finally said into the silence. “You only ever go doe-eyed on a mission with him, and you’ve had a bug up your ass since STRIKE has become more involved in the mission parameters.” Finally, Rollins pushed off the door. “I don’t give a shit who you’re rolling in the sheets with, but don’t put me in a position to have to cover for you all the time, Rumlow.”

His jaw worked, formulating a plan before he glanced at Jack. “I’ll kill witnesses, Jackie. It’s been ten years when I knew, and I’ve murdered nine people who either saw or suspected us.” His hard gaze indicated that Jack was about to become the tenth.

Rollins issued a soft whistle of a fake attempt to being impressed. “So you really are a twink.”

“I’m not. It’s just… him. It’s always been him,” he growled, impatient with the implication. The Soldier really had been the only man he had been attracted to. He was technically bisexual as his interest in women still persisted in the background not involving the Soldier.

“Pierce ordered me to keep you alive and healthy. He never told me why, just that my health and life was now tied to yours,” Rollins said, glaring at him like this was completely his fault. It was, but he didn’t care. “Now I know it’s so you can be rainbow scouts with the Soldier.”

Rumlow smirked. “You should have eaten that offered bullet from Pierce’s fancy vintage pistol.”

“Yeah, I should have. It would have tasted better than swallowing this, you pillow-biter.” The tone indicated that Rollins was less bothered by his male-male relationship and more bothered that the guy’s life was tied to his because of this. “Here’s the deal: you don’t kill me, and I continue to cover for you. I know you can kill me, and I know damn well a ruthless piece of shit like you will.”

Brock glanced at the Soldier still seated on the couch, the side of the asset’s jacket hanging open. “I can’t risk it.”

Rollins barked a laugh. “You already have been. The only reason there aren’t more rumors is because of me. Besides, the way you look at him is different. You need to work on that.”

He scowled at his second in command. “What do you know?”

“A lot. I’m still dating Cheryl, aren’t I? It’s not because I love her either, but she’s useful to me to keep people from wondering. I know how to look at her to make people believe I care,” Rollins said, sounding incredibly pompous. “You’re different. There are times when you look at him that I know you care. Damning hell the day I come to realize that Brock Rumlow has the capacity to care about something other than himself.”

Rumlow ground his teeth and had to fight the urge to throw his knife at Rollins just to shut the cocky piece of shit up. His fingers twitched towards the sheathed blade, but he froze when the Soldier’s warm fingers curled around his hand. He looked over at the Soldier, and he knew that look. It was so rarely given, but it worked every damn time. “Traitor,” he hissed at the Soldier.
“Hmpt, why am I not surprised he’s the more logical one?” Rollins had the audacity to smirk at the Soldier who remained otherwise impassive. “Do we have a deal, or am I going to have to spill my guts?”

He had underestimated his second in command. He wouldn’t make that mistake again, but Rollins had his balls in a vice, and he had to protect the Soldier above all else. “Fine, you can keep your miserable shovel face intact. Now get out.”

“One more thing: Cheryl has an old high school friend who’s recently been through a messy divorce. You should meet her,” Jack said with an air of indifference.

“I’d rather gargle with bleach,” he replied, in no mood for this.

“You want to keep this little fling safe, you should meet her,” Rollins replied with such seriousness that Rumlow had to frown. “The men are starting to talk. Get a girl, bring her to a Christmas party or two, talk about her once or twice and you can still rub your balls on this guy’s face whenever you want.”

It was sound advice and that perhaps annoyed him the most in the current mood that he was in. He had been careful, and he had dedicated to two things in his life: HYDRA and the Soldier. He had hoped that his hard-nosed, solid dedication to HYDRA would ease suspicion of his association with the Winter Soldier, but it appeared that too many years had passed since he had been seen in public with any kind of female companionship. He couldn’t lose face or have uncomfortable questions asked about him, not when he was getting ever closer to finding out a way to get the asset out and hidden. He couldn’t risk anything, but paranoia was a hard thing to deal with in everything that he had been doing in the last few years. Maybe it had worn on him too much.

He glanced at the Soldier, waiting to see some expression of betrayal but found only something hedging on understanding. Yet another sacrifice he had to make to keep them together. He would, of course, do it. The Soldier nodded slightly, and he worked his jaw before grunting softly.

“…this is mutual?” Rollins sounded suddenly incredulous.

“Yeah, you prick, it’s always been mutual. He technically made the first move on me,” he growled.

“And you… you know… care about him even though he’s all, you know… frozen?”

He gave Rollins a flat look. “You can say it. It’s just a word, shovel face. Let me hear you use your words,” he said, sarcasm bleeding over the anger he felt for the situation.

“You two actually love each other.” If they had been closer to the hole in the ground, Rollins might have actually tried to vomit. He wondered if Cheryl ever heard that word uttered before?

Rumlow gave the Soldier a sidelong look and then drew a breath before staring Jack right in the face. “You bet, Jack. I love him, and I’m going to get him out of the shitty situation that he’s in if it’s the last thing that I do.”

Rollins snorted a laugh. “You’d have to outmaneuver Pierce…” The laughter cut off and his second sobered at the look on his face. “You cunning stupid son of a bitch… you’re actually trying to outmaneuver Pierce.”

“I will outmaneuver him,” he replied with all the confidence he was known for. “The old man is slowing down but not only that, he’s got Insight in his back pocket.” He knew that the Soldier might be his after Insight, but he wasn’t going to rely on that. He’d make his own way if opportunity presented itself.
Jack looked between him and the Soldier who had now risen from the couch. He hadn’t stopped the asset, and the Soldier slipped an arm around his waist and leaned against his back as if to hit home just how mutual this relationship was, screwed up as it happened to be. They stared at each other for a long time in silence.

Brock finally reached out a hand. “You with me on this, Jack? I’ve kept us alive this far. Are you going to trust a bisexual captain like me to lead us the rest of the way?”

Rollins didn’t actually hesitate, and it was a statement to the man’s actual loyalty. They shook hands, and he didn’t take the opportunity to gut his second right there. That was a true show of his trust in return.

“I’ll arrange for you to be introduced to Sylvia when we finish this op,” Rollins said simply and glanced at the Soldier. “Until then… I’ll see to it that you two aren’t disturbed. Just… don’t fuck up, Rumlow.”

“I’m technically fucked down into things,” he said, which pretty much drove Rollins from the room in record time.

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Rumlow bent over his light table to examine the pattern that was laid there, and he added the piece that he had just cut. Once down, he raised his thumb to his mouth and sucked on the small cut there, a prize from his recent endeavors. He returned to his cutting table and traced out the next piece with a black sharpie and went to work, the soft sound of his cutter on the glass the only sound in the small room in which he worked.

Standing, he used a pair of thick-head pliers and broke off the excess glass from his cut. He returned to the next angled cut, but he paused at a soft sound in another part of the apartment, which was unusual given its age. Old pipes and the occasional sound for a neighbor, he thought. Of course, it was getting a bit late for anyone in his building to want a shower.

The lamp under which he worked cast shadows around the room, and he set down his cutter, his glass and slipped from the room without a backwards glance. He moved around to systematically check his place, born from a tireless paranoia that had begun to make him a bit more taciturn with his dealings with people.

He froze at the body settled in his living room window, and he casually flicked on a light to bath the room in a warm glow. The Soldier sat in the frame, large body barely fitting and one leg dangling on the inside, almost touching the floor. The muzzle was in place, but the deepness of the night had the Soldier only wearing black make-up around the eyes, but everything else was the same.

Everything else was always the same with the Winter Soldier.

He had wrinkle lines around his eyes and mouth, and the asset got a new shiny gun but never aged. He still gestured the Soldier inside, and he wondered about the asset’s presence in his personal home. It was part of a contingency plan that if a mission failed, the Soldier would go to the nearest handler or known HYDRA agent. It had never happened before.

“Report,” he said simply, falling back into old habits despite them technically being alone.

“Ruger is dead,” was the reply, toneless but sounding tired.

Brock knew of Ruger, another handler who was easily in the sixth decade but was still a functional man. They had met maybe twice before, and he hadn’t had a problem with the quiet guy. Being
younger, he was generally put to use more, especially with his love-affair still going strong. The fact that Ruger had been on a D.C. mission was not that unheard of, sometimes the guy called in when he was too in deep with SHIELD.

It would be a blow to the program to have the man dead, since the only other functional handler was either in the seventh decade or fast approaching it. The asset had made no other handler choices since he had been brought on board, despite exposure to more missions. It was just the way it was. Thankfully, Insight was within a year of launch so that strain on him to take up Ruger’s duties would be short-term.

“How did Ruger die?”

“He fell,” the Soldier replied simply, prowling closer to him. “He broke his neck and cracked open his skull. His body is in the sewers.”

Rumlow would have to call that in, get a team to retrieve the corpse. “Status?”

“Optimal,” was the reply before the asset’s forehead came to rest on his own. “May I watch you work?”

He huffed softly, not surprised by the fact he had been spied on and hadn’t even known about it. He stroked a hand through the asset’s hair before pulling off the muzzle and setting it on the coffee table. The Soldier’s metal fingers caressed the showing signs of age around his eyes, eyebrows drawing together as if it were the first time the Soldier had noticed them there.

“Ravasz…”

“Don’t,” he murmured, pulling the Soldier in for a kiss to stop any other words from spilling out. “You always get to be the pretty one, that’s all.”

He stepped away, leading through his small apartment to his work room, and he was by now used to the Winter Soldier lurking after him that he didn’t look back. The asset immediately went to his window where a finished piece hung, recently decoratively soldered at the edges and over the blue that made up the water of the sunset. Metal fingers caressed the piece with great care.

He settled down and began to finish cutting the piece that he had been working on, breaking the excess glass and setting aside those pieces for use later on a different project. He cut himself when breaking a big curve, not entirely focused on his work with the Soldier in the room poking around at his things.

He cursed softly and sucked on his index finger. Glass cuts were never all that deep, but they were fine and often bled far more than they should. His Ase eased closer and tugged his hand from his own mouth and peered at the injury. It was nothing serious, but it clearly was worth investigation.

“How old are you?” The blue eyes seemed to pin him, more so than the question itself.

“Forty-four,” he replied softly. He had no reason to lie after all.

The Soldier’s eyes moved almost hungrily over his face, picking out the signs of his age and committing them to memory. It was such a waste, but he knew better than to stop the process. “How old were you when we met?”

“Twenty-five. Why do you want to know?”

“You look different,” the asset said with a glance at his face. “You look…”
“Aged, I know,” he said, though it was gently. He smoothed a hand over the asset’s smooth cheek, no doubt shaved for this mission. “When the big mission is done, I’ll probably be forty-five, but that doesn’t mean anything. We might finally be together.”

His maneuvering had come to a stand-still when Pierce had taken notice of the extent of knowledge that he had gathered, who he had associated with and how subtle he was being. He had tried, had been on the edge of something before it had all fallen apart. Rollins might have been the only reason he had lived to see the other side of that.

He had instead begun to wait for Insight, putting everything into it. It was his only chance, though still not much of one. With Captain Rogers lurking around, it was harder to divide his time appropriately. Sometimes he wondered if he’d ever be able to stop living a lie.

The Winter Soldier pulled him in suddenly, ignoring the fact that he was holding a pair of pliers. He felt the solid press of an arm along his back holding him in place, and he huffed softly at the urgency in that grip. Had Ruger’s death affected the normally unmoving Soldier?

“What will there be time for us?” The question was quiet, uncertain, and it almost made him laugh.

“Yeah, there will be when the new world order comes. When HYDRA rules the world and everything settles down, let’s say we get fifteen years together,” he said to soothe his charge. It was a random number, nothing he thought consciously about. If he made the age of sixty, he’d be shocked.

“I will take fifteen years,” the asset replied carefully.

Brock eased back, tugging the Soldier with him as he left his work area messy and cluttered, not the way he did things, but he had time with his Ase and that was more important. He would clean up in the morning before work, and he tugged the Soldier to his bedroom after turning off all the lights to the place. They were both highly functional in the dark; they had to be after eighteen years of fighting for trysts.

They left their clothing, body armour, weapons and boots in piles in a messy line towards the bed. It was the first time that they had had sex in a clean comfortable bed, his bed no less. It was some of the best sex of his life, or maybe he was just getting sentimental in his old age. He could grasp the illusion of being lovers like that, touching one another, kissing the spots they knew each other liked, earning little gasps and moans with this or that.

He had never felt more alive than he did in those moments. He really was getting old, he thought. The only ‘normal’ bright spot in his life was a cryo-frozen unaging murder boyfriend. Life really was a piece of shit, but he wouldn’t take any less moments of this either.

He ended up lying under the Soldier’s heavy solid weight, the sheets a tangled mess around their legs, moisture drying on their skin and his head tipped back to allow his Ase opportunity to finish lavishing kisses and nips on his neck. He didn’t even scold for the reddening hickeys; the men at work gave him knowing smirks when he did, and they were always gone before Sylvia or Cheryl saw them. His fingers instead combed through the Soldier’s damp long hair, encouraging.

“What will it,” the asset whispered harshly against his neck, biting the skin as if that might prompt a faster response.

He chuckled, yanking on the Soldier’s hair in revenge. “I love you,” he murmured without caring. The Soldier never replied equally to his sentiments, and that was fine. He didn’t want words the asset couldn’t entirely understand; he knew that Soldier felt for him in that limited capacity allowed.
“Will we have to sneak around when the world is a better place?”

“You’re an assassin; all you do is sneak around,” he teased before relenting at the look he was given. Damn beautiful blue eyes! Even the dark, he knew them so well. “No, we’ll be free to be together and it won’t matter who sees us. You can bend me over a park bench if that suits you.”

The Soldier’s lips twitched in that attempt at a smile, so lame but so much effort all same. “I want to be free.”

He inhaled sharply and stilled. The word ‘want’ was not one that the Soldier ever said, and he knew as they lay in the dark staring at each other, aware of the wrongness and danger of such a word that by the time the year was out, the Soldier would be back in the chair.

Rumlow rolled their position and took the Soldier’s hands with his own, lacing their fingers together. “I will give you whatever you want, just don’t ever say that word again to anyone else,” he murmured and imprinted that statement with another round in his already messy, stinking bed. Yet another promise to add to all those he had said and most of which he had failed with regards to the Soldier’s freedom.

He would keep trying. It was something worth living for.

***

As he predicted, the Winter Soldier returned to the chair within a year. In the same year, Project Insight failed to rise on all the promises that had been made for it. Alexander Pierce died as much a failure as the rest of them. HYDRA went to ground and disappeared faster than water in a desert.

The Winter Soldier took freedom in the flames of the world order. The full scope of Brock Rumlow’s sturdiness came to light when he was pulled barely alive from the ruins of the Triskelion after a week trapped in the rubble. He became a medical miracle but certainly not the first to live to see that while attached to a hospital bed by handcuffs.

Chapter End Notes

Ase – Finnish for gun
Ravasz – Hungarian for trigger

Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I hope that it was enjoyable. I appreciate any comments or kudos left.
Revelations

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in this chapter, but I had a bit of writer's block for one part in the middle. It's all cleared up now, and I had one of these classy fic-epiphanies while I was at it.

As always, the fic is not beta-read, and I apologize for any spelling or grammatical errors that might make themselves glaringly obvious to everyone reading this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I want to watch you lose.
I want to know exactly what it's going to take.
I want to see you insert yourself into glory.”

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It had been the longest ten months since the war with Germany, and there were moments where he still thought that it was better over there in Austria. He was at least fighting some time, not wishing he was fighting like now. The influx of information was far worse this time around because there were more names, places, and frustration searching up the last of HYDRA’s hold on the United States, even though everyone he spoke to acknowledged that it was a world-wide problem.

The organization had sixty years to worm its way into every government, every independent agency, every country, and sometimes even every family. To put it simply, the whole thing was a big mess that was also currently clogging up the internet and promoting so much chaos and hoaxes that it only made matters worse.

“So we can cross these two off the list, right?”

Steve looked up from the map that he was looked at to view the list that Sam was indicating next to him. He rubbed his eyes with the back of a hand to focus. “Yeah, those two proved to be deserted. The FBI confirmed with the local police.”

Sam nodded and crossed out the two locations with more enthusiasm than he would have. “And we have local municipalities looking into these six?”

“There should be eight. Nat has been working with the municipalities under some new name she’s thought up,” he said as he leaned over and pointed out the six and then two more. His friend added dots to indicate. “We should have word by the end of the week.”

“So what you’re actually telling me is in all these lists, all this information, we’re not actually any further ahead of capturing or removing HYDRA, man?” Was that a hint of exasperation? It wasn’t his fault that HYDRA had gotten so deep, but it was apparently his priority to get rid of it.

Steve shrugged and flopped down in his chair, pushing his fingers through his hair and scratching the back of his head. This was a mess. “Our actual problem is that every high-level HYDRA operative is
either dead, escaped or being systematically eliminated in every secure facility we have for them. Most won’t talk anyway.”

Sam grunted softly, shuffling some papers for the sheer pleasure of doing something. “What about the STRIKE teams?”

“Rollins got his aspect of the team out in the chaos when the Triskelion almost collapsed,” he replied, gritting his teeth at that. “Rumlow’s half of STRIKE was dead before then. The other STRIKE teams, when cornered, systematically killed themselves.”

That was a lot of good men and women who were dead, even if they had been working the enemy’s side. He had known most of them if not personally at least by name. He had trusted them, and he admitted that they had his back on missions even if they were under order by Alexander Pierce to do that. He knew they were skilled, and even having half of a STRIKE team on the loose was already havoc. Rollins was not a man of many words, but he led well and effectively. Anyone would have to in such a high position.

“Outside of SHIELD’s collapse, the other governments are overworked with damage control. Police, the legal system, the military and every agency is overworked and taxed beyond capability,” he added for what felt like the hundredth time. It had taken six months to realize the scope of this. More than a few people fell between the cracks in that time.

“So what’s the plan? We should personally assess some of these bases,” Sam said, jockeying for a more pleasant tone, something uplifting in all this chaos. “Does he know anything?”

Steve looked up from where he had been rubbing his face with a hand and sighed. Sam was clearly referring to the Winter Soldier. “He doesn’t remember most of the places he was held at, not their actual locations anyway. He knows their lay-out once he’s in.”

“No luck then?”

“He’s captured or killed more than a few operatives,” he replied carefully. “It… depends on his mood at the time he infiltrates.”

Sam had the good grace to plaster a smile on regardless of the man’s feelings. “Well, at least he’d doing something productive other than lurking in your closet or perched at the end of your bed.”

In the early hunt for both HYDRA and the Winter Soldier, he and Sam had personally taken on a lot of the work load of infiltration. The problem was that they often found the Soldier there first, at least the man’s back walking away from the bodies left behind. Sometimes there were prisoners, but it wasn’t often in the early days. Sam liked to call them the ‘Bloody Winter Days’. The Winter Soldier always disappeared, but he had seen gradual change over six months, a lingering glance that indicated that the Soldier was remembering, perhaps even knew them. More people were left alive in those late infiltrations and elimination missions, but those people were killed quickly by HYDRA splinter groups about a week or two into capture.

Then he’d found the Winter Soldier sleeping in his bedroom closet, all the clothes pulled off their hangers and made into this little nest. That had been four months ago and now James Barnes came and went like a bird flitting in a window, always safe to the nest that was his apartment. The irony was not lost on Sam who jokingly called Bucky ‘The Sparrow’ for all the generalized perching his damaged friend did.

Steve was drawn from his wandering thoughts when Sam tapped a pile of papers on the table and set them aside, giving him a look that indicated he looked partially as tired as he felt. He smiled
apologetically. “I’ll talk to Natasha, Clint and Tony about any new leads.”

“You never told me is uh… John actually still alive?” Sam glanced around as if they might be overheard.

Steve managed a bit of a grimace. “Yes, he’s so far made it through against all odds. The doctors are baffled.”

“Yeah well, he is kind of a new breed of cockroach or something,” Sam said with a smile. His friend had recovered well from almost being killed in a fist fight and subsequent collapse of the forty-first floor of the Triskelion. “He hasn’t said anything?”

“No,” Steve replied softly.

“Can he?” It seemed that Sam had some kind of vested interest in ‘John’. They didn’t talk about the guy often.

Steve drew in a breath and held it. “Not in the beginning, but the doctors aren’t so sure if his muteness is a front or actual scarring to his vocal cords. They’ve heard him making soft croaking noises when he’s alone like he’s trying to speak.”

“Or he could be trying to choke on his own tongue.” Sam, ever the optimist, had thankfully never requested to go and try to get more than a glower out of the man.

SHIELD’s perhaps greatest secret – the only good secret that they had left anyway – was locked up in a private medical facility that had nothing to do with any government aside maybe from the College of Physicians and the FDA. Brock Rumlow had been listed as ‘killed’ because by the time they had dug the guy out of the rubble, it was assumed the man was dead. He wasn’t despite a baffling amount of injuries, and the HYDRA captain had survived. Interestingly, the man had healed fast at first in order to sustain life and then slowed down to what was considered a normal rate of healing.

Until this day, Rumlow was listed under the name John Doe with the pretense that the man had never identified himself and had no current capability of doing so. The HYDRA agent was also the highest ranked individual that they had alive and in their care, and a huge amount of pressure was on to get the man to talk. Unfortunately, Rumlow apparently had sustained so much damage from dirt, fire and smoke that the man’s larynx had been horribly damaged. All the broken bones and sloughing skin hadn’t helped to encourage Rumlow to write things down aside from the occasional swear word when pressured to produce.

“I’m thinking of taking a trip to visit him,” he finally said into the silence. “I haven’t seen him since he was still in that drug-induced coma and they weren’t certain if he’d survive the infections.”

Sam shifted to stand, gathering up more papers. “You want me to come along? He and I have history.”

That brought a soft smile to his face. “No, I think I can handle one chained up HYDRA agent on my own.”

“I don’t know, man. Do you know sign language?” He actually didn’t, but he wasn’t of the opinion that Rumlow knew any either.

“No, I think I’ll manage.”

“Well, here’s a few that I know,” Sam replied and proceeded to show him all manner of rude hand
gestures and some he actually thought might be sign language. He was laughing by the end of the show, and it felt good. It had been a long time.

They both paused in their shared mirth when a soft sound indicated that they were no longer alone. He turned his head in time to watch the Winter Soldier slip into his apartment by a living room window and then ease away to pad silently towards the bathroom. He and Sam glanced at each when the sound of water running reached them.

“The Sparrow has landed,” Sam teased and began to gather some of the papers up in order to take away to study later this evening. “He still does that every time?”

“Before he even says ‘hi’, yeah,” Steve replied with an affectionate grin. “He takes comfort from routine and rules.”

“Does he actually sing ‘happy birthday’ three times?”

Steve snorted and looked towards the bathroom where he knew his friend to be washing hands. It was always the first thing that happened after the first day he had found Bucky dirty and malnourished. “I’m not sure he remembers the ‘happy birthday’ song, and I’m not entirely eager to teach him that one. He picks up the weirdest stuff sometimes.”

Sam smiled with a sort of grudging affection that was still tinged with a bit of sadness. Both of them knew what the Winter Soldier had endured. “You should get him a haircut, you know. He’s looking like a hipster.”

“Ah well, I would if he’d let me,” he said almost helplessly. “His appearance is a bit more difficult to change for him aside from new clothes.”

“Yeah well, he’s the one in need of baby steps,” Sam agreed softly. “You still cook for him?”

Steve glanced towards the bathroom before leaning his arms on the table. “Sometimes I think it’s that which draws him back to the nest,” he said before unable to help smiling. “Thankfully, I get to try out all these new recipes on him and he doesn’t complain even when I screw it up. He’s pretty much content to have food on his plate.”

“So you’re teaching yourself to cook more by using his delicate stomach as a weigh in on how good it is?” Sam looked momentarily sour. “Not one of your best ideas, Steve.”

“You’re just upset because he puked on you.”

Sam definitely looked sour that time. “Damn Sparrow was probably just trying to feed me or something. You know mommy birds spit up for their babies, right?”

Steve snorted in amusement and rubbed his face with a hand. He really had no reply for that, though he acknowledged that Bucky’s aim that night might have been purposeful. He had never been vomited on after all and when he was first getting Bucky on track to eating a normal diet, most of it had come back up. Those had been... trying times. He was glad they could look back on those fondly.

The sound of the water turned off and it took a few seconds before the Winter Soldier emerged and padded back to the living area to where they were. He noted his friend still moved like a shadow and came to stand near the table where all their papers were stacked neatly.

Sam grabbed a pile and tucked it under an arm. “Perch anywhere interesting today?”
“Perched, yes, but nowhere interesting,” the Soldier said softly. “I walked the Smithsonian again.”

“You’re going to have to start living there soon,” Sam teased gently. The man had a keen perception of when to push, when to remain silent and when to tease. “Another relic from an Ice Age.”

Steve rested his cheek against a hand and sighed softly, giving his friend a knowing look. Perhaps he was the only one to actually understand what it was like to be so displaced from time, to feel more at home among the old World War II relics of planes, tanks and uniforms than in the clothes that they wore. Of course, he also knew that Bucky was searching for answers in history, a key to a person that had been lost through the brutal techniques used by HYDRA.

While the Winter Soldier didn’t respond to Sam’s gentle ribbing, he knew that Bucky had come to recognize the conversation as something good. He hadn’t yet convinced his friend to accept a psychologist, but like so many things, they were working on it.

“Right Steve, I’ll do a little more digging tonight,” Sam finally said into the prevailing silence. “However, you two should come down to the VA soon. There are a couple of people I think you’d be interested in meeting.”

“Sure, when do you want us?” Steve was used to making the plans for the two of them. If they were set, Bucky would show up.

“How about Friday? That gives me time to contact them,” Sam replied with a boyish smile.

“Alright,” Steve agreed while the Soldier remained silent next to him. “Afternoon would work best.”

“Do you have a list of the dead HYDRA agents from Washington?”

Steve turned his head at the seemingly unrelated question, and he heard Sam inhale sharply. It was not unusual for these strange the jumps in logic that Bucky made from one topic of conversation to another to happen. It might not seem related to anyone else, but it made sense to Bucky and those jumps were happening more frequently. It took every ounce of self-control not to reach out and stroke a hand down his friend’s back, but with Sam present, he wasn’t going to make things potentially awkward.

Instead, he and Sam exchanged a look with each other. “There is one available, yes.”

“You sure you want to open that can of worms, though?” Sam watched the Soldier with professional warmth of someone who knew the value of avoiding that kind of information too soon. “It might be better if you settle yourself more.”

“I’m looking for someone,” Bucky replied softly but with a tone that indicated that there was a memory feeding the need.

“Do you know his or her name?” Sam sat down again and it was clear his friend was going to stay for a little while yet.

“No.”

“So you’re going to need names and pictures,” Steve said warmly and pulled the laptop over to him. He opened it and turned it on, allowing it to warm up as he cast little subtle glances at the Soldier standing ramrod straight next to his elbow. “I can get something drawn up, but…”

“…are you sure,” Sam asked with a touch of concern. “This might be a bit much too soon.”
The Winter Soldier looked between them as if sizing up their argument, but there was some distinct cast of stubbornness in the set of his friend’s jaw, a returning remnant of the Bucky of old. While they made certain that they weren’t coddling the Soldier, they were points where they had to warn his friend off of trying to progress too soon into potentially dangerous areas. Both of them had seen outbursts of emotion that were both healthy but over-exaggerated after so long repressed.

“I need to know if he’s dead,” the former assassin said carefully.

“Alright, as long as you’ll recognize his face and name then,” Steve replied, ignoring Sam’s little frown that he gave in so quickly. He couldn’t help it; Bucky asked for so little as it was.

He instead booted up the old SHIELD program of agents where the database had been updated for the names, facial pictures and the location of death for the recent HYDRA agents. He knew it had been thrown together by angry computer technicians who had only this way to express their impotent betrayal at the co-workers who had suddenly not been so friendly. The list was constantly updated, and it was considerably longer than he would have liked.

When the pictures loaded with names listed underneath, he turned the computer screen towards Bucky who had taken up the chair next to him. Sam came around to rest hands on the back of their chairs and look down into the screen. They filed through in silence, all the names alphabetical and the faces of men and women who he had sometimes worked with scrolled passed as Bucky began the arduous task of looking for a face in a sea of HYDRA agents.

There were several pauses along the way, and he exchanged more than a few looks with Sam when Bucky stopped on a particular picture to stare at it for a long while. Some were STRIKE team members who he had worked closely with, some were random people who he didn’t think had anything to do with the Winter Soldier Project.

Bucky paused for almost twenty minutes on Alexander Pierce’s photo, metal fingers even reaching out to caress the image at one point. For a moment, he feared that was the man that his friend was looking for, but a ripple of hot barely controlled anger flared across the normally passive handsome features. He reached out and set a hand on the metal one currently clenching tightly. “Bucky…”

Sam knew better than to touch the Soldier in this state but didn’t back off or give distance. “We should take a break. We can come back to this after dinner.”

“No.”

“Bucky, you don’t have to…”

“I do!” The outburst was unlike his friend, but it stilled both himself and Sam. There was something so angry and broken in those two little words. “He took…” The Soldier lapsed into tightly controlled anger and one wrong move could have it exploding out.

They waited in silence Bucky glared at the picture of Alexander Pierce. It was probably a good thing that the ex-Secretary was dead.

“Let’s take a break,” Sam said softly, reaching out to set a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “You can perch on the couch arm.”

“He took…” Bucky said lamely, but the anger had melted away to leave something akin to despair.

The Winter Soldier refused to stand and continued through the photo line-up at a slower pace, clearly caught on Pierce but unwilling to be drawn away. Steve gave in and rubbed a hand up and down Bucky’s back which was hard with tense muscles. There was another pause at the end of the ‘R’s
and four photos stared at them. He couldn’t tell which one had caught his friend’s eye, but there was a strained vigilance that had only come with Pierce before.

Slowly, the Soldier reached out and stroked a finger across the photo of one HYDRA agent. It took him a moment to realize that Bucky was tracing the faint age lines around the agent’s eyes.

Brock Rumlow, STRIKE alpha (Captain)
Deceased: Triskelion

His palm was the first to feel the tension bleed out of his friend’s back, and he knew. The tension in Bucky melted away while the tension between himself and Sam rose to an almost painful degree. It was easy to look at each other because the Soldier was now practically nose-to-nose with the photo, and he saw Sam shake a negative for him. The expression said simply don’t do it, man.

For once, he listened to that silent advice and returned to stroking Bucky’s back. He wanted to clarify that this was the man, but he was afraid of the answer. He was afraid that there would be another explosion of anger, since his friend had not clarified if this person was one to kill or to keep close. It was better for Bucky’s healing for Rumlow to stay dead perhaps.

Sam leaned closer to the screen himself. “Don’t you want to move on to see the other faces?” It had nearly been twenty minutes again.

“No,” Bucky said softly. “I found him.”

Gentle flesh fingers stroked the screen of the computer, and it was almost uncomfortable to see the raw longing on his friend’s face. Who was Rumlow to the Winter Soldier? Why did a hardened HYDRA agent provoke the same sort of response in his friend that Steve himself could bring about?

He had known Rumlow to be a gritty, cunning, smart man in good control of the unit, the mission and himself. He knew that Rumlow had also been dating a woman for a few years based on teasing from the other members of STRIKE and having seen her once at a Christmas party.

He and Rumlow hadn’t exactly been close, but they had been good soldiers together, working easily and well together. There had been banter and seriousness, and there had never been a point where he suspected that the man had been anything but who he presented himself to be. Of course, that was the cunning of the man same as Jack Rollins… they had everyone fooled.

Suddenly, the Soldier rose from the chair, almost knocking Sam over and stalked away from the computer. He let his friend go, his hand still poised in the air where it had been against Bucky’s back. This was not how he wanted the night to go.

“Give him time,” Sam said softly. “He’s got to process this.”

“I know,” he replied with a heavy sigh. “The memories are coming faster now, little-by-little. I just wish it wasn’t…”

Sam took the seat that Bucky had vacated. “Look at me.” He did. “We read what they did to him over the years, the things that they took away from him, the abuse he suffered. He’s doing exceptionally well for a man who suffered like that not even ten months ago. You have to give him time, but more than that, you can’t take this all on yourself.”

Steve nodded, fully aware of that. He had been reminded over and over that there had to be a certain distance so that he didn’t get sucked into Bucky’s sometimes erratic emotions. He was the support and the safe place to come back to, but there were times when he had to let all this struggling happen so that Bucky was capable of coping in the future.
“Is it wrong to want to take away his pain?”

“No, it’s very normal, Steve. However, you’re no help to him if you’re debilitated with his issues,” Sam said firmly. “And I’m not strong enough to pick your sorry depressed ass up off the floor, so keep it together, Cap.”

Steve snorted a sound of amusement. “You should swing by tomorrow if you can. I still owe you breakfast,” he said, thankfully for the support system that he had.

“I’ll swing by to see how you two made it through the night,” Sam agreed amiably. “No pillow fights now.”

“As if any pillows could survive that kind of battle,” Steve said as he rose and clapped Sam on the back. His gaze flicked to the still image of Rumlow on the screen, and a part of him, selfish and small, almost wished the man had not survived the collapse. He hated being a liar for any reason.

He saw Sam to the door and wished his friend a safe drive home before he locked up the place and padded off to the bedroom where Bucky often took the most unfavourable emotional outbursts. He picked up the sound of water in the attached bathroom, but he was used to his friend’s little coping tricks and pulled open the closet door first. His clothing remained on the hangers, so he groaned as he had to move to the bathroom.

This had been bad. He could judge how deeply the emotion had run based on where his friend ended up. The bed, it wasn’t so bad and could be coped through with some physical closeness. The closet, it was mid-range in the effect it created and that required convincing his friend out and then trying to deal with the situation that had caused it. The bathroom was pretty bad, and it had only happened once and taken him hours to deal with. The only worse thing by his measure was when Bucky just plain left; he was forced to wait days at a time for his friend to return and often couldn’t coax the details out.

Steve stood silently for a moment to emotionally and mentally prepare himself. It was going to be a long night. Not for the first time, he mentally cursed HYDRA and everyone in it.

He reached out and grasped the handle of the door, but it was locked. Oh, this was a new level of bad then. He sighed and twisted the knob until a crack sounded as he simply broke it and forced the door open with a shoulder, almost stumbling into the pile of clothing right in the middle. His heart went out for the trembling mess of a man sitting in the middle of his bathtub.

The Winter Soldier sat with legs drawn up to the chest, arms wrapped firmly around Bucky’s knees. His friend was staring straight ahead, clearly uncaring about the water that was pouring from the shower head onto his curled form, or perhaps this was exactly the way that Bucky wanted it. There were faint trembles that drew him closer, and he seated himself on the edge of the tub so he could reach in and grasp some hair that was plastered to the broken man’s face.

The water, he realized, was ice cold.

Steve pulled his hand out of the spray of the water and reached up to turn the tap off. He was not going to have his friend reduced to hypothermia over a picture.

“Don’t,” the Soldier said hoarsely as his fingers closed on the tap.

“Bucky, you can’t do this to yourself,” Steve rebuffed gently. “There are other ways to be sad.”

The trembling from the broken man in the shower turned to active shivering. “It will cool the heat inside of me. It’s too hot, too close to the surface.”
Steve turned off the cold water anyway, aware that nothing in that temperature would dampen the heat of emotion in his friend. It was a common HYDRA punishment anyway, and he was not about to allow Bucky to be reduced to wanting that kind of punishment to cope with emotions.

It wasn’t healthy. None of this was healthy, but right now, it was about coping.

He reached out and smoothed back some of Bucky’s soaking wet hair, tucking the strands behind his friend’s ear. He ended up cupping the back of the Soldier’s head when Bucky shuddered and remained curled up in the same position. He rubbed gently as he remained seated on the edge of the tub and watched as Bucky’s trembling gained more energy rather than less.

When it seemed that the Soldier wouldn’t calm but perhaps was actually cold, he reached out to grab one of the towels hanging nearby and curled the material around his friend’s shivering shoulders. He rubbed with the towel the other man’s hair and shoulders, but Bucky finally shifted slightly where seated. It was better than he could have hoped.

“Why don’t you tell me about the man in the picture?” It wasn’t often he could convince his friend to speak on that kind of volatile emotion. He still had to try.

“Skittles,” the Soldier replied softly.

“Excuse me,” Steve questioned in his surprise.

“Taste the rainbow,” Bucky said as a way of explanation.

If there had been an answer that he was expecting, it certainly wasn’t that. Beyond his shock of such an obscure and relatively worthless reference, he heard the deep confused longing in his friend’s voice. It must have meant many things, most of which he currently wasn’t prepared to acknowledge.

“Are you saying that he gave you candy?”

“The Sweet tarts were the best,” Bucky replied. This time there was a wistful almost lewd tone that made him have to fight from blushing.

Steve knew that Rumlow had a particular interest in candy, though he had never actually asked why. On every mission, the STRIKE captain had had some and generally ate one or two pieces before or after an operation. He also distinctly remembered Rumlow being teased by the other men about the habit of stopping in some foreign backwater places to put down way too much money on something exotic but always some kind of hard candy.

He remembered asking after the candy’s purchase, not the reason why. Suddenly it made all too glaring sense to him that his hand stilled on Bucky’s back.

Brock would smile that teasing twist of lips, the look of a man who had done this all before and was used to be questioned about his strange habits. There was something in those dark eyes, a selfish hidden pleasure that was Rumlow’s own and no one else’s.

“Ah, it’s for my special someone back home, Cap. It’s the one thing on these down-under missions I can do for them to ease us being apart so long. You know how it is.”

At the time, he had never particularly understood, though he had thought that it had been all about Sylvia. However, in looking at Bucky who was no longer trembling, he had to wonder at Rumlow’s choice of words. ‘Special someone’ was not gender specific.

Steve cleared his throat and reached in to rub Bucky’s hair, not certain how to feel anything but
miffed about the entire idea of Rumlow and the Soldier sharing candy. He wanted to deny the memory as something that Bucky just happened to pick up from something, but the tone had been clear. There was a memory there and his friend was genuinely upset to find out that Rumlow was dead (only the guy wasn’t yet).

“Um… what else?” He rubbed the towel down his friend’s back and gently urged Bucky to uncurl under the presentation he just wanted to dry the Soldier off.

“He loved me.”

Steve accidently fumbled the towel and it dumped into the Soldier’s lap. Those had not been the words he had expected to hear either, mostly because his friend had shown little inclination towards men. They had been as close as it came, but there had been a fine line with friendship between them still.

“You mean he said that to you?” He shifted as he grabbed up the towel and urged his friend to stand. “Are you sure he wasn’t giving you a good line?”

“Yes.”

Steve really wanted to believe his friend in this, but he just couldn’t, not with how he had got played with all of STRIKE. It had been proven to him the hard way that Rumlow and the rest of STRIKE had been in place for a very specific reason and they knew how to play the part so well that it had been impossible to see the difference until it happened.

“Bucky,” Steve said softly, surprised when it was easy to convince his friend out of the tub. “The man in the picture was good at many things. I really don’t think love was one of them.”

“He… loved me,” the Soldier replied slowly, expression lost and confused. “He promised…”

Steve tucked the towel around his friend’s waist and then grasped Bucky’s shoulders, turning the broken man towards him so they faced one another. “I knew him, Buck. I worked with the man in the picture for over a year, and he played a brilliant role to keep the wool pulled over my eyes. I never suspected him; worse, I trusted him. He betrayed my trust, and he tried to kill me. I don’t believe that man could love anyone but himself.”

The Winter Soldier watched him mournfully, and he reached out and pulled his friend against his chest in a fierce hug, wishing he could chase away the hurts and damage. His hands stroked Bucky’s bare back, as much to comfort his friend as to take comfort himself. He almost admitted that Rumlow was alive, but the words stuck in his throat.

No, not yet, he decided. He was going to visit with Rumlow in the private hospital soon and he would decide after that meeting.

“He… promised…” The Soldier whispered softly.

Steve pulled away and rubbed his hands up and down Bucky’s mismatched arms, smiling down into his friend’s confused, hurt expression. “How about I make you a promise?”

“…alright,” Bucky replied, focusing avidly on him.

He smiled and pressed a hand to his own chest. “I, Steve Grant Rogers, promise you, James Buchanan Barnes,” he started, making his voice heavy with formality that was obviously teasing for the graveness of his tone, his smile pure and as happy as he could make it. He waited until Bucky’s expression cleared slightly. “I promise to take you to Brooklyn and buy you an ice cream while
we’re there. How does that sound?”

He was given a dubious look. “It sounds like you just made that up.”

“Oh, I did, but for you, my best friend, I’ll even follow through with it,” Steve said, hoping to inject enough enthusiasm into it to alter the mood that Bucky had fallen into. It would be the first time he had actually.

The Winter Soldier looked away before mutely nodding, but Steve stiffened when his friend suddenly returned the hug with rib cracking force. He relaxed and stroked a hand down the back of his friend’s damp hair, making a soft soothing noise that his mother so often made when she was tending him when he was gravely ill. It didn’t seem odd to him at all that Bucky responded to the noise, and he planted a quick friendly kiss on the Soldier’s temple.

“Come on, let’s get you something clean to wear and I’ll make us some dinner,” he whispered, unwilling to risk breaking the moment. “Do you want to help me tonight?”

“No,” came the low reply even as Bucky’s arms tightened to a painful degree.

“Are you sure?”

“No,” Bucky admitted brokenly.

“Why don’t you give me a hand then, hmm? I bet having something to occupy your hands will help,” he said, his hand stroking the back of his friend’s head again. “Try it once, and if you don’t like it, you can always stop.”

Steve smile sadly when Bucky peered up at him, and it wasn’t the first time (nor would it be the last) that he wished he could take away his friend’s pain. His smile altered to confusion when the Soldier suddenly rose up on toes to even out their height difference and their lips almost came together. He turned his face aside just a few degrees and turned the potential for a kiss into a little nuzzling instead.

Neither he nor Bucky were prepared for that kind of development. Not yet anyway, and especially not on the heels of the Rumlow discovery.

Aside from looking slightly confused, Bucky didn’t seem to notice his trick, and he was able to convince the Soldier out of the bathroom where he urged his friend into warm clothing. He combed out Bucky’s tangled hair gently, an activity that he had taken up early on and seemed to be one that his friend wanted him to continue. It wasn’t a forming tradition that he was inclined to stop either.

Steve ushered the Winter Soldier into the kitchen with instructions on how to cut up the vegetables and the meat. It was all done perfectly to his instructions and if Bucky’s gaze became shadowed from time-to-time when glancing towards the computer still on the table, he chased those away by engaging his friend in the simple pleasure of cooking.

It seemed to work. He was well pleased with himself for it too.

In the night, Bucky left the small nest of blankets and foamy to join him on the bed. It was the first time he had slept with arms tight around his middle, the warm sigh of breath against his shoulder blades and the strange muttered syllables that made no sense to him.

“Ra…” Bucky would sigh out mostly.

“Vas,” came in the early hours, picked out through muttering and shifting.
By the time that the sun came up, Steve was left wondering as to the meaning of “Ravasz.”

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The Woodgate-Hulle Medical Hospital was an old facility with tired staff that had seen far too many patients through the doors and seen altogether the usual amount of violent-related crimes. The care was good enough, and it had a relatively new physiotherapy building added onto the grounds. It was nothing like a SHIELD run or government-owned hospital, and that was why it was the perfect place to hide one of the most sought after men inside of it.

Steve walked the halls with the usual two high-level agents, nodding politely to nurses who were finishing rounds or speaking with one another. The halls were well-lit, but this section of the hospital had seen more than its share of wear over the years with the private rooms small and dated looking. The locks on the doors were old, easy to break and wouldn’t contain a patient that really, really wanted to escape or had the skills to do so.

He stopped at the small room at the end of the hallway and peered through the window at the empty space. Hand cuffs were still half-attached to the bed railing, and he glanced at the clock to make certain that they wouldn’t be waiting long. The two men with him were for observation only, to write down any information that the absent patient might happen to give away.

It wasn’t likely at all.

They entered inside and Steve stayed on his feet because there was no room for a third chair in the small space. Aside from a small table with a glass of water, there was only the bed and a small television mounted high up on the wall. The room was eerily silent, and even he admitted to feeling itchy in it for how drab and cold it was.

Within ten minutes, he could hear the sound of chain-links clicking together and the soft grandmotherly like voice of a woman. A plump nurse escorted the dark-haired patient back from the physiotherapy session, chattering away about the cookies she was going to bake for a school function, and the patient, the man he was here to see, didn’t even look at the three of them.

Steve had never seen Brock Rumlow so docile before. He eyed the HYDRA agent as the nurse smiled at them and ushered Rumlow back into the hospital bed and almost kindly set the hand cuff to the man’s faintly scarred wrist before removing the leg and wrist chains and bobbed her head at them.

“I’m guessing you gentlemen would like for me to provide him with some paper and a pencil today?” She had dimples when she smiled, he realized, and he couldn’t help but return it as he nodded.

All four of them waited for her to bustle and to return. In that time Steve allowed his gaze to crawl over the man he had once served over a year of time with, a man he had once trusted with his life, and a man who had apparently been sharing Skittles candy with the damaged best friend who was no doubt off lurking somewhere in Washington. Yet, here was the same man lying pale and mused and a shadow of the impressive STRIKE captain who had led men into some of the most complex situations imaginable.

Rumlow had suffered significant damage in the way of broken bones, burns from the fuel of the helicarrier, lacerations from fallen debris. He had been lead to believe that Rumlow had pretty much shed skin like a snake, all in one gory scaly piece. The man who lay on the bed was indeed scarred, but only ten months after Rumlow had been found, the man looked as if the present skin scars were years old and might even fade with some sun and a better diet. Even for Steve who healed rapidly
and didn’t scar, it was surprising to see.

The nurse returned with paper and a pencil and smiled kindly at them all before casting a single worried glance at the HYDRA agent and then left them alone. Rumlow didn’t even acknowledge her efforts or any of them, just stared at the wall opposite to them.

“Your recovery is going better than anyone expected,” Steve started with as a way of introduction. “By the end of this month, I’ve been given orders that you’re going to be incarcerated and sent to a maximum security penitentiary until your trial.” He waited for a moment to see if Rumlow would respond, but aside from blinking or breathing, the agent did nothing. “This process could be changed if you were to provide meaningful and accurate information about HYDRA.”

He noticed that one of his witness agents sat forward, intent and with some anticipation. He knew it was pointless, but he had been asked to formally prod at the agent. He didn’t even think that Rumlow was capable of speech at this point.

“Captain Rogers, if I may?” He nodded and gestured to the second agent. “You are a known agent of HYDRA, who willingly and knowingly participated in orders, assignments, and activities in order to advance a cause acknowledged now in the courts as mass murder and considered genocide of persons of the United States. If you are unable or unwilling to provide pertinent information to disable future HYDRA activities, you will be charged according to records of your known actions and sentenced harshly.”

Even to Steve, that long-winded speech sounded entirely arrogant and pompous. As if Rumlow didn’t know by now that the agent’s life as a free man was over. However, the HYDRA agent was their highest ranked and no doubt had considerable intelligence as to the future, past and current activities of HYDRA.

Steve approached the bed and set his hands on the railing, eying the metal of the hand-cuff attached to it. “You need to tell us something, Rumlow.”

Finally, the other man turned eyes away from the wall to look right at him. The man that looked at him was not one who had been critically injured, a man who had lost everything there was in the way of freedom, a man who had killed, betrayed and lied for years. This was a man who held more cards than what was left of SHIELD had and knew it.

Both of their gazes shifted to the paper and pencil set on the table, and Steve reached out and pushed it over so that Rumlow could write something. He waited and the two agents behind him rose from their seats when the HYDRA agent picked up the pencil and wrote a simple message.

“What day is it?”

Steve glanced at the two in the room with him so that they didn’t crowd in too close. “It’s Wednesday.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Ten months,” Steve replied, wary and on guard. Rumlow had never written anything but profanity to anyone else who had come to interview the man before. “Eleven come the end of the month when you’ll be transferred unless you can give me something to work with.”

Rumlow stared at him, and all he could actually think about was Bucky tracing age-lines and eating Skittles. The agent’s hand moved slowly over the paper. “Sam Wilson.”

Steve peered at the HYDRA agent silently for a moment. How much information should he give?
He glanced at the other two, who only made encouraging hand motions. Of course they would. “He made it out of the Triskelion, and aside from some bruises, he’s healthy.”

There was a noise that came from Rumlow, but it was so mangled that he couldn’t tell if it was a snort, a laugh, a growl or some alternate noise. It really just sounded like rocks rubbing together. Instead, the pencil tipped tapped on the paper before another question was asked. “Romanoff?”

“You know her, she’s a survivor,” Steve said softly. “How about you tell me who your direct superior was at HYDRA?” All he received for his troubles was a bored look. “I answer your question and you answer mine. That sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

Rumlow gave him a nasty sour look and scribbled, “Life’s not fair.”

One of the agents behind him (and he didn’t know who) made a disparaging noise, and Steve knew instantly that Rumlow’s ears were perfectly functional. He shot the two men a withering look when it was clear that whatever small piece of agreement between them had dissolved.

“Out,” he ordered almost immediately.

“Captain Rogers, we’re charged with…”

“I said, ‘out’, and I’m not going to repeat myself. I want both of you in the hallway right now and if I even see you peering in here, I’m sending you to the car,” Steve barked, pushing off of where he had been resting his hands on bed railing. He pointed to the door when both men hesitated, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rumlow look smug.

He waited until the pair of agents were outside of the room and the door clicked shut before turning back to Rumlow. He was in time to grasp the man’s wrist tightly to prevent himself being stabbed with the pencil. He tossed the agent’s hand aside roughly, glaring at what he considered childish behaviour at this point.

“That’s enough,” he remarked and gestured at the paper in front of Rumlow. “Answer my question. Who was your direct superior in HYDRA?”

Rumlow looked mutinous but still wrote down, “Pierce.”

“How long have you worked in HYDRA?” Steve gave the man in the bed a flat stare as if daring Rumlow to refuse.

“Twenty-two years.”

Steve had to gawk at the number presented to him and looked at the man lying in the bed. That meant that Rumlow had been working in the man’s teen years. Was HYDRA really recruiting that young, brain-washing troubled or able-bodied kids right from the get go? The sheer idea, though not shocking, was still staggering. Rumlow had served HYDRA longer than Steve had served in the army.

“Is Jack Rollins dead?”

He stared at the question before pursing his lips for a moment; this was getting into territory he wasn’t certain he wanted the man to know. “No, he’s not,” he finally settled on. “Was your mission within SHIELD to see Insight into the air?”

“Yes.”
And so they went back and forth, asking questions and giving answers to one another. He refused to answer any questions relating to current events and his own missions, and Rumlow refused to answer any questions about movements of HYDRA, their plans beyond Insight, or the names of possible sleeper agents who still might be in play.

It also wasn’t enough information to keep Rumlow out of a maximum security penitentiary either. Even when he told the agent so, he was given little more than a shrug and a flat stare. It was clear that Rumlow really had no preference about serving time or the rough consequences of doing so. Steve knew the man was ruthless by now, but physically, Rumlow was no longer in shape.

Finally, it seemed that their interview was over when a nurse came in to bring Rumlow a tray of food. Steve backed off, aware that he would get little else. It just meant that he had to come back and hope to coax more out of Rumlow another time. At least he hadn’t had to read explicit profanity.

“We’ll chat again,” he finally said and was about to leave Rumlow to eating when a treacherous thought invaded his mind as his hand settled on the door. “What does ravasz mean?”

Rumlow froze mid-bite, dark eyes pinning him where he stood. Something flicked through the agent’s eyes that he couldn’t say he understood. Instead, Rumlow seemed to swallow hard and sat forward a bit on the bed, suddenly very intent on him. “So…ld…ier?”

“It means soldier?”

That was the first time that Rumlow had shown any capability to speak. The man’s voice was rough, gravelly with both disuse and damage. It was clear from the numerous swallows between each forced syllable that to get anything out was a tremendous struggle. No doubt that it was far easier to write than to attempt words, and he felt only a small amount of pity for this man.

Rumlow shifted on the bed and shook a negative at him, instead gesturing with a hand. It took him a moment to realize that the HYDRA agent was drawing a star on his own left arm. Soldier. The Winter Soldier. The man with the metal arm and the red star on the shoulder.

Steve suddenly knew that the two men knew each other, and there was something in Rumlow’s intent need to know that moved him. He shouldn’t have answered. He had to protect Bucky for the threats of the world, but Rumlow was a sad shadow of the man’s former glory. The man was also soon to be locked away and never to be seen again. Medical miracles had only one place in the world.

“He’s alive, and he’s free,” Steve said softly, watching Rumlow carefully.

He had never seen anyone look so relieved in all of his life, and he hesitated at the door. It looked like Rumlow’s dream had just come true, but wasn’t that dream to see millions of people murdered because their thoughts and alliances didn’t align with HYDRA?

“We’ll talk again,” he finally murmured and left the room.

Steve returned twice a week for the next three weeks. Rumlow never spoke again, never sought to answer any of his questions and never asked after the Winter Soldier again in that time. It was as if the man who had been so capable of terrible things was at peace with the world and had no reason to alter its current course of action. Maybe it was then that he was forced to admit that Rumlow just might have actually had the capacity to love something other than a bloody cause, himself or HYDRA.

Near the end of those three weeks, he finally had the courage to ask Bucky the question that had
been plaguing him. “Buck, what does ‘ravasz’ mean?”

The Winter Soldier went still but seemed to think about the answer carefully for a few moments before returning to chopping up carrots. “It means ‘trigger’. Why?”

“I just heard you muttering it in your sleep a few times,” Steve admitted, unable and unwilling to lie to his friend unless he absolutely had to. He was already feeling uncomfortable when it came to Rumlow’s existence. “Is that… what you called Rumlow?”

“Yes,” Bucky replied, almost shyly. “It was my name for him because I was not allowed to know his name and didn’t have one myself. If I forgot, he told me our names so I would know.”

Steve stirred the contents of the pan in front of him, considering his next question very carefully. “What did he call you?”

“I was his Ase. It means gun.”

“That… is really, really unoriginal. I thought he had more imagination than that,” Steve remarked dryly. Who actually named a person ‘gun’? “He couldn’t have thought of anything better?” Okay, he was letting curiosity get in the way of good reasoning at this point.

The Soldier smiled that awkward smile at him and breathed the word Ase, and Steve felt his ears heat up at how sexualized three little letters could sound. He hastily returned to stirring the prawns so they didn’t burn, but he caught the brief flicker of a smug look that flashed on Bucky’s face. It was as if the tone made the word something completely different, made it special in a way that perhaps only Rumlow and the Winter Soldier could fully understand and appreciate.

“Right well… you better throw the carrots in the pot to get steamed,” Steve replied and cleared his throat a little.

***

The phone rang. It was one of the old dial phones that had long ago been passed off to a museum as an ancient show of how far technology had come. It had a very annoying ring that sounded like ‘brrring, brrring’ and it always rung in that double-tone. Even the tone had long ago stopped being appreciated by most people who lived in this cold detached planet.

A man picked up the receiver and casually put it to his ear. “Yes?”

“Sir, we found him.” The woman sounded tentative. He didn’t like that.

“You’re certain?”

“We have verified it twice, but he’s been difficult to track down.”

It was good enough for him. He had waited a long time for this anyway, and he was content to think that confirmation was finally good enough to go on. He was pleased. He was probably more pleased than he had been in many years, and he even managed a soft chuckle.

“Very good. Proceed with the plan,” he said and abruptly hung up the receiver on the old cradle and leaned back into his chair. He didn’t want to hear excuses anymore. He wanted to see productivity.

The man sighed softly and folded his hands across his lap, peering up at the ceiling where paint was peeling off in long strips. “Hail HYDRA,” the man whispered to himself, a reminder of the good cause he served.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I appreciate any comments or kudos that I receive.
Reunion

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the slowness of my posting. I'm actually having trouble writing this fic, so it takes me longer to work out the details and get them down. I also pine a lot about how I don't particularly like some of this. I'm not certain if I'm going to continue with it long-haul. I have started on the next chapter, so here's hoping it gets easier from here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I want your touches to scar me so I'll know where you've been.
I want you to watch when I go down in flames.
I want a list of atrocities done in your name.”

***

The apartment was small and had seen better days, but there was effort to keep it clean and livable. It was only a one bedroom, but there was a small den that allowed for a television and small home theatre system to have been installed. The mantle had pictures of nieces and nephews as well as Christmas cards over a year old, a showing of better times or perhaps just times better remembered.

The couches were a gaudy flower print, probably either second hand or a hand-me-down from other relatives. They were based around the television in the den. The kitchen table and chairs were obvious hand-me-downs as there were still marks from age old crayons in the surface and particularly around the legs. The only possible fashionable thing about the place was the round carpet under the dining room table and the one in the middle of the den.

The Winter Soldier was silent as he slipped a thin knife from his belt and carefully slid it along the side of the window, carefully slipping it down until he found the latch of the lock. He jiggled the knife slightly and found the mechanism with certain fingers and began to work it open with a soft audible clicking. He used his metal fingers to catch the edge of the window and slid it upwards to admit him.

He allowed the window to slide closed without a sound once he had surveyed the living and dining room with a flick of his eyes. All was dark and quiet inside.

The Soldier padded soundlessly towards the bedroom after a quick peek into the dark kitchen, and there were soft sounds of activity from that direction. He ghosted up to the open door and slowly eased his head forward enough to peer into the small room that was mostly bed and chestier drawers. The closet door was also open, but the source of the noise was doing up a belt with deft movements.

He gently bumped the heel of a boot against the wall to make a soft scuffing noise. The man in the room froze, hand poised mid-motion, clearly considering if the gun on top of the chestier drawers could be reached.

The tension across the man’s broad shoulders loosened a moment later. “You could have knocked.”

The Winter Soldier stepped in to fill the doorway with his size. “We agreed to meet in the living
“You’re early.”

“No,” he replied coldly.

The man turned to regard the alarm clock next to the bed and huffed softly, casting him a look of distrust and disdain. He knew the man as the second, but Steve had told him that the man’s name was Jack Rollins, the man just below Rumlow in the STRIKE hierarchy and the one who had escaped from the fall of HYDRA at the Triskelion. The man’s bruising and concussion had long ago faded, but the cunning blank-faced man had not changed at all.

“Out,” Rollins ordered him with a wave of a hand. “We aren’t doing this in a bedroom.”

The look that he was thrown raised his hackles, as if there was some silent joke being played on him with that comment, but he couldn’t understand what that might have been. He still withdrew and prowled his way to the den and chose the most defensible position possible, which happened to be a yellow flowered love seat that had his back to the wall.

The STRIKE team member joined him with the confident swagger of man who was in control despite having lost everything. It was one of the reasons that he was here. He gave Rollins a flat stare, waiting for the man to uphold the end of their association.

“Huh, I think you’re more of a creeper without someone’s hand jerking your leash,” Jack said with a shake and pulled a file out from under the coffee table. “Your file is inaccessible. I don’t have the pull to get it either, but I have this.”

He reached out and took the photo that was offered to him. It was a golden rod with a strange blue stone in it, not exactly what he had been looking for. His eyes flicked up to Rollins for silent clarification as to what he was supposed to do with this apparently helpful piece of information. He stared and Jack stared right back.

Ah, right. Use his words.

“What is this?”

Jack settled down on the couch nearby, stretching out long legs under the coffee table. “That is Loki’s staff,” Rollins said. “It has direct ties to the Tesseract, which if you know anything about history - and you should after lurking in the Smithsonian so much - is a power source from Asgard.”

The Winter Soldier regarded the picture with only a bit more interest. “I don’t want this.”

Rollins snorted. “As if you know what you actually want.” They stared at each other with a war of blank expressions. “That staff has the potential to reverse your memory loss in one go. Agent Barton had it used on him before the Battle for New York, and he served just like you did, a mindless soldier for the greater good.” Jack gestured to the picture in his hands. “If it can turn grown men into mindless puppets, it can probably do the reverse, wouldn’t you say? It is a power source after all. Power conduits work both ways.”

He nodded his head and found himself regarding the picture again. If this object could reverse the crippling mental damage done to him, perhaps even give him back all that he had lost then he could finally and truly be free of HYDRA. If it couldn’t, he was still one step closer to getting to that goal, which was the most important to him, the only mission worth serving right now.

“Where do I find it?”
“It’s not in the United States, but with HYDRA as it is, I can’t just ask either,” Rollin replied. “If I could make a guess, it’d be kept in some underground piss town that has no idea there’s a secret base.”

“An artifact like this would be useful,” he agreed and set the picture in his lap. He would have to look into the matter personally. “If this doesn’t work?”

“I suggest that you buddy up to Roger’s big friend Thor and ask pretty please to be knocked in the head with the real Tesseract.” Rollins shrugged and that seemed to be as far as the subject would go for the time being.

He handed back the picture, having seen enough of it to know what he was looking for. “I want that file.”

Rollins snorted softly. “Anything else I can get you for Christmas, Dorothy?”

“Fake identification,” he said because Rollins had pretty much offered. He made it policy to ignore sarcasm.

“You, my creepy stalker, are getting a lump of fucking coal, but I’ll see about the identification. It’s going to be tough, but considering you technically don’t exist at all right now, still doable.” Jack flipped through the manila folder and held up a picture of him, one of the few from HYDRA’s files. “Don’t change your appearance too far from this.”

There was a flare of hot anger as he studied the picture held up, though he had no reason for it. His appearance wasn’t displeasing, but seeing the blankness roused something inside of him, a rebellion that surged up and tried to consume him. He spent too much of his days bored or hyper-focused on something or fighting internally with the sweep of emotions that continually tried to assault him. This was one of those times when he waged a battle that no one could help him fight.

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment to push down the heat. “Are you going after another target in Washington?”

“Yeah, but it will be the last one,” Rollins said. “My team and I will be leaving the country after it.”

He nodded his head, aware that he could still contact Rollins when he had to on the specifically created channel between the white noise of transmissions. It was the HYDRA way to communicate and so far, it had remained untampered with by sources. No agent worth even an inch of their living flesh would give it up; that kind of loyalty was lodged deep and often with considerable pain.

“I will cover the matter as we agreed,” the Soldier said.

“Yeah, thanks for the snipe on the last operation; it saved us a ton of trouble and casualties,” Rollins said in that grudging way. He wasn’t officially working operations, but STRIKE’s success was because of his hand easing the way in and out. “You want out of the country with us?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so, but you’re going to have to go to find the staff,” Rollins said simply.

“Rumlow is dead.” He looked over at Rollins who had the survival sense to at least look slightly sad by the news.

Rollins rolled forward and rested elbows on the man’s knees. “Rumlow wanted you free, you know. The stupid bastard fought the last ten years to get you out, and you better at least remember that.”
HYDRA and STRIKE in particular have no use for personal attachments. We go in, we hit hard, we get out and we move on to the next mission.” Jack momentarily looked disgusted. “Saved his ass twice from Pierce when he stepped over the line for you.”

The Winter Soldier drew in a deep breath and held it. Rollins was the only one who he could speak to on Rumlow now that he knew the man’s name and face and what it had meant to him. He wouldn’t forget. “He loved me.”

“He did, and like the asshole tied to his survival, I even helped him hide a body,” Rollins grumbled. “It’s too bad a man as ruthless and talented as Rumlow got nailed down by the likes of you.”

There was that double meaning again, the slide of mockery that had his eyes narrowing. He pursued his lips and pushed himself out of the love seat, and he looked down at Jack watching him with respectful disdain. “I should break your nose.”

Rollins smirked. “Maybe, but you’re not going to.” Instead, the STRIKE second offered him an envelope fat with paper. “Information on the new op. I’m going to need you to cover the way in. We can take it from there.”

He nodded and opened the envelope to brush his thumb over the paper inside. They weren’t orders, but they gave him a purpose outside of languishing in his painful solitude to hunting down HYDRA targets. The only reason Rollins and STRIKE still walked the planet was because they were useful, and he now realized because they were his one link back to Rumlow.

“…and by the way, you better lay low for the next week or so.”

He looked up. “Why?”

“HYDRA sent in a special sleeper,” Rollins replied almost conversationally. “I don’t have details, but it sounds like an assassination.”

“Target?”

“Not listed, but apparently HYDRA.” Jack seemed unmoved by the information. It was not a threat to the man’s operation then. “However, rumblings about retaking an asset have been going around.”

The Soldier wasn’t moved or surprised to hear that information, but he was curious as to why he was being warned. He kept his own clean and clear of those things, and the hits as of late had been to HYDRA operatives in detention with the United States government. Those had tapered off with everyone scampering to holes in the ground, and most assets of HYDRA were information or interesting gear until lock down.

He simply nodded and tucked the envelope into the inside of his jacket to read over the details later. He’d just need an excuse to be alone to complete it for the time designated, but that was his business and no one pressured him to be anywhere at any given time.

“So how does it feel to be this far into your freedom and still be a liar?”

The Soldier stepped over and had Rollins by the throat within five seconds, his metal fingers closing as the man’s face went red. “Our deal is clear. I help you, and you help me. Steve and those associated with him stay out of it.”

He jammed the other man into the couch, but he felt the twisting familiar sensation of guilt that he was doing wrong by Steve. He could tell that Rollins saw it in his eyes given the smirk that the man wore in response to being released. He twisted away and stalked from the room towards the window,
the sound of coughing like music to his ears.

“Takes a liar to bond with a liar,” Rollins called from the couch, rubbing a bruised throat.

The Winter Soldier knew that he was being antagonized, and he had no time for those antics. Their truce was always shaky, but he wasn’t going to be the one to break it until he had extracted everything useful out of Rollins, even if he had to give up a little of his old skills to have it happen. Nothing in life was free, and he would give a little to get much more.

He was out the window and up the side of the building to the roof. It was getting late and that meant that he had to return to Steve, assuming something overly productive hadn’t happened today. His stomach twisted and he glanced back down the building and repeated to himself one more time that this was necessary and didn’t affect the relationship he was building with his old friend.

It wasn’t really betraying Steve’s trust, was it? No, it was. He was playing both sides, but he had to. He never claimed to be innocent or lawful or good.

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He pushed open the window in Steve’s apartment window, not yet willing to take the stairs and use the front door. There were just too many vulnerabilities and too many people that could see him on his way up or down, and he just couldn’t consider revealing himself yet. It was normal for people, but he hadn’t yet considered his transition to being a person entirely. He preferred this much better. He preferred to be the Sparrow than James Barnes most times.

The Soldier paused at the sound of voices drifting from the kitchen. His nose told him that food was being cooked, and like always, his stomach gave a little thrill of pleasure at the idea of having the free will to eat. It was such a simple pleasure that he had taken to almost before he had taken to sleeping with a blanket or a pillow.

The window closed without sound, and he moved to go to the bathroom to wash his hands. It was by now habit. Yet, he drew up short and tilted his head to identify the voices when it wasn’t the usual two.

“…IKE needs to be brought in,” said a female voice, one that registered as someone he should recognize with a face and a name. “Their operations are gathering old HYDRA resources, sometimes in places that were not actually registered.”

“You get me a location that they are going to hit, and I’ll be there to throw them in jail,” Steve replied. There was something off with his friend’s voice, a tired frustration that hadn’t been there this morning.

“I’m in too. Figure I owe those old boys a few knocks.” That was Sam, the voice and timber clear to him from months of association. “I want to try out the new wings Stark sent to me too.”

Conversation was interrupted by the sizzle of meat and the general shift of bodies in the kitchen, which really had no room for three. He figured anything interesting being said was over and slipped off towards the bathroom. Some low sound that was Steve’s voice caused him to pause before he had gotten too far, and he certainly wasn’t above eavesdropping. Information was useful no matter where it came from.

“Steve, you’ve done enough,” the woman said with a hint of exasperation. He suddenly thought of red hair. “We haven’t been successful in questioning any of the HYDRA agents that we have incarcerated.”
“If I could just have a bit more time…”

“Steve man, you’ve been there twice a week poking him to write stuff down. He’s checked out,” Sam said with such a careful indifference that the Soldier thought it would be worth puzzling it out. “I’ve seen that far away look before.”

“It could be a front,” the female voice said. “Perhaps I should come with you to see if we can jockey a little out of him.”

Steve made a soft sound over the sizzle of meat but otherwise had nothing more to contribute on the matter. There was a silence punctuated only by the stirring of dinner and the shift of bodies as each one tried to move around another. There were some words that were too soft even for him to hear, but he strained to pick up the conversation again.

“Has it been decided where he’s going to go?” Steve was not generally resigned about anything. He inched closer to the kitchen.

“With HYDRA operatives so active, old SHIELD prisons are compromised for this kind of delicate operation. Hill wants him in a maximum security place.” Ah, Romanov he decided suddenly. The Black Widow was here.

“I didn’t think throwing a burnt out HYDRA agent in prison was all that delicate. Just give a heave-ho and provide him with soap-on-a-rope,” Sam said in that good-natured way as an attempt to lighten the mood. “He going in as John?”

“No, he’ll be given an alias, but we can’t stop him from revealing his name,” Romanov said simply.

“Ah well, maybe he’ll be at home in a pit of snakes,” Sam replied.

“As long as he isn’t planning on shedding his skin again,” Steve piped up. “I don’t want to deal with the mess of having to explain that one to Hill the first time.”

“Boys, let’s tone down the bitchiness. Sam, he beat you up. Steve, he’s still HYDRA,” Romanov said without heat. “And he’s not a snake. Rumlow was always a piranha with a smirk like he had.”

The Winter Soldier froze outside of the kitchen, that restless rage building up like he was a volcano about to blow. For the first time, he almost let it happen rather than struggle for control over it, but the shock kept him staring across the living room. He wasn’t even certain what kind of reaction he should have, but he knew that information had been kept from him. The current hypocrisy of their situations was probably the only reason he didn’t storm the kitchen.

The conversation continued as if he weren’t even present. He wasn’t anything more than an invader to it.

“I’ll try one more time,” Steve murmured stubbornly.

“Maybe you should try punching him,” Sam said helpfully. “That whole ‘order through pain’ thing might be literal.”

“If I punch him, I’ll break something,” Steve replied dryly.

“And no one would be the least bit upset,” Romanov said. “Except maybe that old nurse that’s taken to him.”

“So Rumlow’s gotten himself a cougar, huh?” Sam seemed delighted by the idea.
Steve could be heard excusing himself to get something and then said, “You do realize he’s like forty-five? Pretty sure that nurse isn’t that much older.”

“She’s sixty-two,” Romanov slipped in. “I checked.”

“Oh,” Steve said.

“Cougared,” Sam said with great relish.

He somehow, through some will power he had no idea existed inside of him, convince himself to ease away silently to go to the bathroom. He couldn’t explain why it felt so difficult to breathe or the reason for the tightness of his chest. It was like he was being squeezed, yet there was no outside source to explain how it had happened at all. He was malfunctioning, but there was no one to ask him how to cope with this one.

The way down the hallway and into the bathroom had never seemed so long before, but he was careful to slip inside and shut the door. His mismatched hands settled on the sink as he hunched his shoulders and stared into the drain as if it would allow him to gain control. He forced himself instead to review the facts that he knew.

Rumlow was alive. Rumlow was in a hospital in Washington. Rumlow was going to go to a maximum security prison very soon. Rumlow was also being called ‘John’ for some reasons unbeknownst to him.

Rollins was alive. Rollins was providing him information to him on the mental techniques performed on him and how to reverse the damage. Rollins was leaving the country within the next few weeks. Birds of a feather will flock together, he thought.

The Winter Soldier suddenly reached into his jacket to remove the fat envelope of information and pulled it open to leaf through the contents looking for the mission objective and location. Normally it was obvious, but his eyes were scanning too fast to focus on any one word long enough to identify it. He had to blink his eyes several times and fight for control of himself.

One breath in. One breath out. Focus. Be empty. Be objective.

He flipped to the map and the star where he would be required to be and studied the buildings that were close to his location. They needed help getting in, but he was not required to cover them to get out, which meant the mission had to be clean and easy. The objective was to regain HYDRA intelligence.

There. Woodgate-Hulle Medical Hospital.

The Soldier’s gaze locked on the end word, and his head snapped up to stare at himself in the mirror as the shattered pieces jammed together so neatly that it startled him.

’It takes a liar to bond to a liar.’

Jack Rollins was going into a medical facility to remove Rumlow from care. Steve didn’t know that HYDRA now knew that the STRIKE captain was on the list to be removed. He was going to help facilitate the escape, the last mission that Rollins would serve in the United States before leaving the country. With Rumlow. With STRIKE. Without him.

A scream like a wounded animal rose in his throat and burst out so loud that he almost startled and ran from the bathroom. Instead, he clamped a hand over his mouth and heard sounds of concern coming from other parts of the apartment. He gathered up the paper and managed to stuff it into his
jacket before the door banged open and Steve stood on alert and eyes darting around to find the source of his discord.

Suddenly the bathroom was too small. Suddenly, he was trapped. Instinct kicked in as the Winter Soldier took him over as if he had just shrugged on his favourite shirt.

“Bucky, what…?!”

His metal hand impacted with the mirror over the sink, and he had a piece of it in his hand before a single shard of it hit the porcelain below. His right foot led him forward as he slashed with the mirror as if it were a knife, balancing when Steve managed to jump back, but he followed the set target into the hallway.

“Steve?” Sam sounded alarmed, but it was so far away it didn’t matter to him.

“Don’t…!” If Steve was yelling at him or Sam, he didn’t know. He didn’t care either.

He didn’t give Steve enough time to utter more than one word before he was on the larger man, his shard of mirror slicing into Steve’s shirt and clipping skin. Steve had his metal wrist and forced it down, but he was shorter so his range was only slightly deflected. His right fist moved to slam into Steve’s face, but the blond had his fist cupped hard before he was slammed hard into the wall.

The drywall caved in around his back and only remained on the wall because his back happened to impact with a wood stud. The plates of his left arm rearranged to give him more strength as he tried to shove Steve away into the wall across from him. They ended up grappling until he released the mirror shard so it shattered on the floor.

Super-soldiers had no reason to be gentle on each other. They impacted with the walls on either side of the hallway as Sam and Romanov – no Natasha – watched the proceedings with wariness, neither eager to get involved in that kind of physical contest. Craters appeared in the walls as they slammed each other around, stepping or jumping over foot-sweeps and shoves designed to alter balance. A light switch sparked when he slammed Steve into it, and they were showered with plaster from the roof when Steve lifted him and slammed him high into a wall.

He caught his right foot wrong as he came back down, rolling his ankle and collapsing to the floor. He had enough of a hold to drag Steve with him, but the other super-soldier didn’t resist hard. They end up thrashing in the limited space of the hallway, feet kicking on his part, knees pressing on Steve’s and their arms trying to grab and pin one or the other.

The Winter Soldier managed to get a solid punch into Steve’s face before his arms were pinned above his head and the other man’s weight settled firmly on his chest. There were suddenly two sources of weight grabbing his legs, and he let out an inhuman howl of frustration as he was pinned down. He tried to kick, but he was firmly held.

“Enough, Bucky, snap out of it,” Steve practically shouted into his face. He heaved his entire body in response, but the other man had too good a hold on him now and Natasha and Sam had taken one of his legs each. “Easy now. You’re safe.”

He strained twice more before the fight left him, and he lay shuddering against the floor. Slowly, he relaxed.


“Steve… I’m sorry,” Natasha sounded down by his left leg. “I thought I heard something, but…”
His chest heaved with breath, and he found Steve’s face filling his vision. He tried to continue staring up at the ceiling, but the familiar face encroached on his line of sight more until his eyes finally flicked to Steve.

“Bucky, what triggered this?” Steve looked guarded but earnest.

“You lied to me,” he said, which he hadn’t considered much until that very moment. “And I lied to you. We’re all just liars and pawns of HYDRA.”

Instead of denying it, Steve looked ashamed and guilty. He thrashed anew, but the hold on him remained too tight to throw off. If anything, Steve settled down more on him and shushed him in an attempt to comfort him.

“You were listening to our conversation in the kitchen,” Steve said softly. Sam groaned and uttered a soft curse from his right leg. “Bucky, yes, I withheld information from you. I honestly thought that you would heal better without ties to HYDRA, but I know that can never excuse you finding out like this.”

He arched under Steve’s grip before giving up with minimal effort. “He’s alive. I could… I could be close to him again.”

“No,” Steve said softly. “He’s going to prison.”

“Why?” He stared at his friend with a wounded look that had never failed before. “Why him and not me?”

“Rumlow chose his path; you were never given that choice,” Sam said from down on his leg. He felt weight shifting and watched Steve glance back. “He’s not the same man from the picture either. He's given up on life.”

“He loved me,” he said softly.

Steve gave him a sad smile, pained at the edges and obviously trying to think of an appropriate response. It was Natasha who asked, “uh, Steve, do I get an explanation as to why the Winter Soldier is saying Rumlow had the capacity to love?”

“Later Natasha,” Steve replied.

“They ate Skittles and Sweet tarts together,” Sam informed her slyly.

“Seriously? I don’t believe you.”

“He killed for me,” he said wistfully even as Steve groaned.

“That I will believe,” Romanov replied. “Based on what I read, few people were as effective at it as he and STRIKE alpha were.”

There was a silence, but he had settled enough to where he was pinned to no longer be putting up a fight about it. Steve was still sitting on his chest and holding his arms above his head and Sam and Natasha were still laying on his legs. The heat of anger had ebbed away, leaving him tired and empty, though he was aware of a pain of loss when speaking about Rumlow. He knew the pressure around his chest had nothing to do with Steve sitting on him.

“So uh Steve, man, you have a very nice ass I admit, but can we let him up so I’m not having to stare at it? I think he’s calmed down,” Sam’s dry request had Steve reddening and easing off of his chest
carefully. “Thanks man. No offense. It is really impressive, but the hallway is a bit cramped for four of us to camp out in it.”

“I’ve been in tighter spots,” Natasha said but also eased away from his leg.

Sam’s weight eased last. “If this turns into one of those heavy accented drunken ‘Mother Russia’ stories, I’m voting you off the island.”

Slowly, he pushed himself up to sit, keenly aware of the package of paper against his left side and subtly tucked his elbow in to hold it into place. He allowed Steve to help him to his feet and hung his head to avoid looking at the damage that their scuffle had caused. He was certain that he had a shard or two of mirror in his thighs and back.

He slid his right arm around Steve’s waist in a subtle apology for his outburst, and he didn’t fight when they all moved back to the living room and the attached kitchen. The smell of food made him ill as he allowed himself to be directed to kitchen table and settled in a chair.

“I want to see him,” he murmured softly.

“Bucky,” Steve started, taking the seat next to his where they could face each other. “If you see him and then he is sent away, how do you think you’ll going to cope with that? Don’t you think it would be better for your healing if you…”

“I need to see him to know if the few bits of memories that I have are the truth,” he said, setting his chin stubbornly.

Steve looked troubled but sighed heavily and rubbed the man’s face with a hand. He could see his friend thinking of a reply, struggling with one. This situation put war on two very strong contested subjects for Steve: give him anything he wanted and keep him away from HYDRA. For once, he wasn’t certain which of those wants would win over the other.

It was Natasha who swaggered up to take a seat on the edge of the table, putting herself between him and Steve, blocking his friend’s direct view of him. She folded her arms across her waist and looked down at him. “Can you get him to talk?”

“Natasha!”

“Talk about what,” he asked warily.

“HYDRA, their current operations, people involved or associated but not officially part of the group,” Natasha said relentlessly, leaning so that Steve couldn’t easily see around her. “If you can get him to talk about what he knows, you can see him.”

“No,” Steve said and finally just stood, looming over Romanov. “No, we are not negotiating this. I’m not risking Bucky so whatever is left of SHIELD not under terrorist watch can get information out of Rumlow.”

Sam had come from the kitchen by now, looking between the three of them gathered by the table. He could sense the dark-skinned man lingering on the threshold to the dining area, but his eyes instead moved between Natasha and Steve.

He had to ask himself: what would he do to get what he wanted?

The Winter Soldier was an entity of extremes, willing, trained and ordered to do anything for a mission to have it succeed. He had no mercy on anything that stood in his way of completing his
objectives, and while he wasn’t fully the Winter Soldier anymore, there was too much training, too many scars and too much time that had gone by to get away from what he was.

Already, he was helping HYDRA agents to get an opportunity to learn about his mental conditioning and the ways to reverse his memory loss. He was working with Steve to scratch together the possibility of a life when he was fully aware of what he had done. He might even work with what was left of SHIELD for field missions if he felt the inclination or Steve actually asked. Right now, the Avengers and SHIELD were not the same organization, but Steve seemed to work interchangeably and in secret for one of those. He stood on both sides of those organizations without actually being part of either anymore.

The low bubble of argument filtered from his hearing as he stared at the table top. Instead, he found himself remembering only fragments of something else. The press of his thigh on another, the flick of a knife, open palms and curling fingers drawing him in like he was a rabid dog to be tamed, a brush of lips on the side of his mouth, a promise in the dark, the rough sensation of stubble on his neck…

“…we need to know…”

“…not him. Not Bucky…”

“…Steve, man…”

“Oh stop being jealous that the Soldier has an ex-lover, Steve,” Natasha said with a teasing tone. There was a heavy uncomfortable silence that followed the words.

The Soldier drew his gaze away from the table to look between Steve and Natasha who appeared to be facing off for some kind of uncomfortable dance session. Steve immediately noted his change of attention and offered only a small smile, and it drew him to his feet slowly despite the fact he now was certain he had mirror lodged in his thighs.

“I will see Rumlow,” he said firmly. “If in seeing him, I remember or have confirmation, I will get you your information. If nothing happens when I see him, I will not speak to him and never ask after him again.”

Sam sighed heavily. Natasha smiled and slipped away from being between himself and his friend. Steve just looked tired but nodded. Compromise was not in the Winter Soldier’s repertoire of skills; that was all James Barnes.

“Right well… I think I can salvage dinner,” Sam said and returned the kitchen. “Romanov, can you come and get some plates and utensils?” She didn’t fight that order, perhaps aware of Sam’s attempt to give him and Steve a brief amount of time.

Steve stepped into the space that Natasha had left and reached out a hand to cup the side of his face with the usual warm brotherly affection he had come to expect from his friend. There was a shadow in Steve’s eyes that he couldn’t puzzle out. “Bucky… I just want you to be safe, but I want you to be happy.”

Happiness was a foreign word. He had no idea if what he was experiencing at any given time to be happiness, contentment, pleasure or what. He still was able to comprehend the sentiment all the same.

“Just a single look, and that should be enough,” he murmured softly.

“Alright, but we’ll have to go in disguise. I don’t want you to be identified while were in public and the hospital has a constant flow of people,” Steve said, rebounding easily to making up mission
details for both of their benefits. “You don’t mind wearing a hat for this?”

“No, I wear one when I’m too close to possible cameras,” he replied. “I know how to hide better than you do, Rogers.”

Steve managed a smile, though it was still shadowed slightly. “You always knew how to dress for the occasion.”

He nodded in reply and pushed Steve’s arm away to look at the shallow wound on his friend’s side. It had already stopped bleeding. “We should wash that.”

“Probably, but you haven’t washed your hands yet either,” Steve pointed out. “Maybe we’ll wash up in the kitchen.”

“No.”

“No?”

“It’s inappropriate to be without pants in the presence of a lady,” he said simply. He had absolutely no body shyness, but that was dredged up from somewhere. He didn’t question it.

Steve just scrutinized his fatigues carefully. “For one, Natasha’s not really a lady.”

“I heard that,” Natasha growled from the kitchen.

“And two, why would you be without your pants in the kitchen as opposed to the bathroom?” It seemed to strike Steve as rather funny as his friend pushed at his hip. “Did you get mirror in your ass?”

“I… no. It’s in my thighs,” he said with a shrug. “And my back.”

Steve managed a laugh and curled an arm around his shoulders, tugging him away from the table towards the bathroom. “Alright, let’s clean up for dinner and remove the signs of your blundering from your ass.”

“My thighs,” he rebutted defensively.

“Sure, sure,” Steve said as he was pulled down the hallway to the bedroom rather than the bathroom. "Have I told you of the time you had to pick mirror from my ass when we were little...?"

***

The hospital was a place he could have easily gotten into under the cover of night. Actually, he could have gotten in just as easily during the day. It was just a place with rooms, staff, low security and various medical terms being said over a loud-speaker or with the general hubbub of activity. It was a rainy day outside, making the place seem dreary and somber. That might have also been the faint smell of death that hung in the air as well, though he could tell where it actually came from.

He and Steve stood in a civilian disguise off next to the nurse’s station to avoid being in the way. Steve had arranged for them to be present when Rumlow was walked passed to attend the last physiotherapy session before transfer the next day. He had met the nurse that apparently had ‘cougared’ Rumlow (named Mary base on her name tag), and she had agreed to allow them to stay during the transfer and perhaps wait in her patient’s room if he managed to have any kind of reaction.

Mary was training a dour looking nurse who had been hired to take over when the other woman
went for holidays. They were doing rounds together, and Steve said that she was good at her job but didn’t have the same kind of warm bedside manner that Mary did. He didn’t see a difference, but he could tell based on hints of conversation that Mary was well liked by the patients and doctors alike.

While they waited, Steve was going over the rules again. No touching, no conversation were the most important. They had to let Rumlow shuffle by in restraints and were not to make any kind of public display. If he was going to have a ‘Winter Soldier moment’, he was to take it to a room or leave immediately.

“I let slip to him on Tuesday that you were coming to see him,” Steve admitted with a shrug.

That got his attention away from watching the two nurses going over a clip board nearby. “What did he say?”

“Well, he doesn’t really talk. Damaged vocal chords seem to be accurate,” his friend murmured. “However, he didn’t particularly react when I told him the news. He just… sort of stares at the wall. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up, Buck. He might not react at all.”

“I understand,” he replied. He did, but this was for him to verify his memories and decide what to do from there. Rumlow’s participation was not required for that. “Has he been unresponsive for awhile?”

Steve sighed heavily, and that tired frustration from before lingered at the edges of his friend’s expression. Now he knew the reason for it. “Ever since my first visit. It’s like he’s given up, and that’s not the man I used to know.”

“…remember, feet restraints first, then the wrist restraints and then you can remove the cuff linking him to the bed…”

“…I’ve done this twice now…”

“…off you go then…”

He turned his head and watched the dour nurse head towards Rumlow’s small private room, and he became hyper-sensitive on her progress. Mary followed behind before turning back to the nurse’s station with an apology about forgetting the clipboard Rumlow’s current day file. The dour nurse paused at the door, and, with a measuring look, slipped inside of the room.

Steve shifted next to him and after grabbing a chart from the station, Mary diverted over to them with a smile. He noted she had dimples. “Sarah is just getting him ready, Mr. Rogers. What I’m going to do is get you two boys standing there on the other side of the station in that corner. You’ll have a good view still.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve said with a pleasant smile. “How is your trainee doing?”

“Oh, she’s from a different hospital, but she’s very skilled. It will be nice to have a long holiday,” Mary said with a bright smile. “We’re doing a family reunion for my birthday and all my grandchildren will be there.”

He allowed himself to fall in behind Steve as they changed to the new area which was definitely out of the way. The blinds were closed to the room save the door, and he could see the nurse leaning over the raised bed. The hairs on the back of his neck rose and he felt apprehensive as he looked between the two chatting amiably as they took up residence in the new place next to a window at the very end of the hallway. He realized in that moment that he was about to see the STRIKE captain. Was that... apprehension?
“Well, I’ll just get on helping to speed things along,” Mary said and eased away to the closed door to Rumlow’s room.

The Soldier looked up at Steve who was still smiling. He opened his mouth to ask his friend a question when the elderly nurse’s wordless cry alerted them to something wrong. Steve moved over, but he was faster, and he noted that the door was locked with a flick of his eyes as Mary twisted it side-to-side as if not understanding why it wasn’t opening. Her eyes were staring into the room, a look a horror on her normally pleasant smiling features.

There was a struggle on the bed, and he picked out the knife in the dour nurse’s hand before Mary did. It was clear that Rumlow’s legs were bound and one arm was still attached to the side of the bed based on how the chain jerked. Somehow the patient twisted and the nurse lost her balance, falling into the bed. In a matter of seconds, Rumlow had shimmed down the mattress and dragged the nurse onto it, controlling her legs with his knees.

Then the advantage shifted. Steve moved to break down the door, but he shot out a hand and blocked the way while Mary’s horrified “no, no, no” sounded as a mantra next to them. He gave Steve a warning look as he tested the door and found it locked, but he continued to look inside. "I want to watch this."

"Bucky, you can’t seriously..."

"He will either kill his attacker, or he will die in the attempt,” he replied coldly and purposefully blocked the doorway so that Steve couldn’t easily barge into the room. He had to see. He had to know if he was worth killing for again.

The nurse’s face was bright red, turning purple quickly as she thrashed to try to get away from whatever Rumlow was using to choke her. The knife had fallen to the floor, and her hands scratched uselessly at her throat. Her eyes began to water and then bulge and her tongue lolled out of her mouth as her struggles slowed. Her body bucked and jerked and thrashed, but Rumlow still was using his knees to control some of her motions and preventing her escape. It was clearly taxing both people based on the grunting sounds that could be heard through the door.

Brock Rumlow’s face appeared to one side of the dying nurse, pressing cheek-to-cheek and peering beyond her purple face to where he stood filling the door window. There was a smirk before the STRIKE captain kissed the weakly jerking nurse’s cheek with mocking affection. Their gazes remained locked, and he saw that hungry – almost starving – look that lurked in Rumlow’s expression.

The Soldier remembered other kills done in his name. There were three technicians. There was a foreign guide. There was a translator. There was a STRIKE member. There was a drunkard. They had been careful, but sometimes, elements could not all be controlled.

He was drawn out of himself when a hand settled on his shoulder, and he turned his head to see that Steve had had enough of waiting. Mary was babbling at the nurse’s station, clearly in shock. He shifted and allowed his friend in to break the lock and force the door open. The dour nurse was still, eyes wide with shock, face purple from a lack of air and mouth ajar as if trying to still release a scream that had already long been choked off. He was unaffected by death in such a manner; Steve seemed just as steeled against it.

He entered after Steve, who immediately moved to the bed and kicked the knife away to a corner where it would be out of the way. It was he who moved over and grabbed the asphyxiated woman off of Rumlow, who had clearly used considerable energy to survive the fight. He dumped the body on the floor and noted the long thing tubing that had cut off circulation to the STRIKE captain’s
fingers.

“Ase,” Brock managed to force out. Steve startled at the sound of it.

He reached out and unwound the clear tubing from Rumlow’s fingers, noting how stretched and wrinkled it was. Slowly, he shifted and seated himself on the edge of the bed, not caring how inappropriate it was with security filling the doorway and doctor’s trying to resuscitate the dead nurse. He didn’t even pass them a glance as his eyes roved over Rumlow’s face, noting the faint scarring but more the considerable loss of weight and muscle mass. His handler had always been a man who had been in shape; now, Rumlow seemed almost diminished.

“Ravasz,” he murmured softly for Rumlow’s and perhaps Steve’s ears alone.

The former STRIKE captain relaxed into the bed and then shifted to find a more comfortable position. He fussed with the blankets and smoothed them into place again, earning him a surprised look and renewed studying as if he had become something strange and unknown suddenly.

“Tell me our time together,” he ordered. Somehow, he knew that Rumlow knew, was a storage of all the times that had been taken from him.

“Buck, his vocal chords are damaged. He shouldn’t be talking,” Steve muttered, but his friend lingered almost protectively at his back to keep this moment going without interruption from the general chaos behind them. “We can come back…”

It was Rumlow who waved a hand in the air dismissively, the HYDRA agent swallowing hard but that hungry look was back fiercer than ever. “Shut it and listen, Rogers.” The words were harsh and gravelly, but they were sensible. Rumlow recited every single moment they had together despite the difficulty of doing so verbally, but the HYDRA agent was forced to stop somewhere in the mid-nineties as Rumlow’s voice degenerated to incomprehensible choking squeaks.

By that time, Rumlow’s hand had shifted little-by-little until the agent simply took his right hand and held it. He felt a strange thrill as the smooth thumb pad caressed across the ridge of his index finger. Perhaps it should have alarmed him, but he couldn’t help but have the sensation of warm fullness.

The Soldier turned his head to regard the arrival of the police, but he ducked his head so that his baseball cap visor kept most of his features shadowed. The two officers were talking with doctors and examining the apparent murder weapon, which he overheard being a used length of IV tubing sometimes given to patients to busy their hands and allow them to practice manual dexterity.

John Doe, who apparently was Rumlow here, was not on the list of patients to have access.

Steve had clearly also been listening in, though the STRIKE captain had eyes only for him at the present time. “Did Mary give you that IV tubing?”

Rumlow simply shrugged and nodded.

“I’m going to talk to the police, Bucky,” Steve said and walked to the doorway to introduce himself to the attending officers and to give a statement.

He kept some attention on that from the corner of his eye. The body was bagged and wheeled out of the room, which left him relatively alone with Rumlow who had settled into the bed with the air of a man who owned the place. He assumed that Steve refused to give a statement down at the police station as his friend returned within thirty minutes and shut the door.

Steve approached the bed where neither he nor the HYDRA agent had moved. He tilted his head
questionably as his friend set down a pad of paper and a pen on the hospital table and pushed it into position in front of Rumlow. “Given your inability to speak, the police want a written statement of your account of the attack.”

The STRIKE captain shot Steve a stubborn look but reluctantly took the pen and wrote a report. It was clean and clear without a lie based on what he had witnessed from the doorway. It seemed to all three people in the room that this had been a HYDRA hit that Rumlow had survived.

It made him wonder if Rollins had been lying about not knowing the target, or if the STRIKE second had no idea that Rumlow was the intended kill. HYDRA certainly hadn’t had much in the way of knowledge when it came to where the STRIKE captain had been for many months, which made him think that this was a new development and Rollins just didn’t happen to have the most up-to-date information.

Steve took Rumlow’s statement and folded it up to give to the officers. His friend looked at him. “You too.” He frowned but found it all too easy to make a written report of the events, including date, time and details others might have missed. He printed his name, leaving out his middle initial. “They aren’t going to charge him with homicide, are they?”

“Given he’s still restrained and she came at him with a knife, I think they are going to keep this as a self-defense plea,” Steve murmured and added a sigh at the end. “This does complicate things.”

The Soldier glanced at the STRIKE captain who was pretending not to listen to them. They were back holding hands. “Are you sending him to prison?”

“He can’t stay here now, not if HYDRA knows where he is,” Steve admitted. “I’ll have to make some calls and find a secure location until tomorrow.”

He frowned and would have risen to his feet if Rumlow didn’t suddenly squeeze his hand. “Don’t send him to prison.”

Steve looked between the two of them, blue eyes flicking down to where their hands were linked together and sighed heavily. He supposed he had broken the rules, which meant that he was not entitled to ask for anything at this point in time. It was also probably good that Rumlow wasn’t capable of speech or the agent might not be moved anywhere but some police holding cell for the night. He didn’t think either man would protest that, but he would.

“What do you suggest we do then, hmm? He’s a known HYDRA agent who has been targeted, and now you’re associated with him,” Steve said firmly. “You know HYDRA would do anything to get you back, and I’m sorry but if it’s between you and him, I will always choose you.”

He understood the dangers and the risks, and he couldn’t find any fault with his friend’s logic either. “Can he stay with us tonight?”

Steve raised an eyebrow of disbelief at him. “You want me to take in a wanted HYDRA agent in my apartment for a night?”

“I’ll pay for a motel instead?”

“With what money?” Steve was suddenly scrutinizing him, and Rumlow wasn’t that far behind doing the same either. “Are you associated with illegal activity?”

“No, but I’m a veteran of the Second World War, so I should have veteran’s benefits,” he said firmly. Sam had been going over the odd veteran benefits from the government once over dinner,
complaining about paperwork. “I should be paid for my four years of active service.”

Rumlow barked a wheezy noise that might have been laughter. Steve just stared incredulously at him, clearly processing his words. He just plain looked defiant; he had memorized Sam’s number in case of an emergency.

“Bucky, you can’t suddenly claim to be a veteran,” Steve said softly. “If your name was released to the public, there would be… well, Tony surmises that he would be paying lawyers a lot of overtime, if he backs me up on this at all.”

“But…”

He had never tried to be James Barnes, had even shied away from taking the name back despite it being his. He struggled between the two existences that he had served, in limbo between the two and not entirely one or the other. He knew as his memories returned or if he went in search of Loki’s staff to get them, his two lives were going to come crashing together. He knew he’d have to cope with that, and not even he knew who was going to come out on the other side. Perhaps both, perhaps neither or perhaps only one.

However, he couldn’t leave Rumlow here when he knew that HYDRA was going to know the attack failed. They would be swift to move in and take the agent out or perhaps capture now that it was clear that Rumlow had the capability and the continued viciousness to kill. The man’s usefulness was not something that HYDRA would allow to fall into others’ hands.

The Soldier looked up when Steve’s hand landed on his shoulder, and he met his friend’s steely gaze evenly. “If he gives me information right here, right now, he can… sleep on the couch tonight. However, he’s not staying more than that. Is that clear?”

He could feel his expression softening and a warmth for Steve blossom, and his metal hand rose to cup over Steve’s, squeezing his thanks. He nodded his head, aware that it was the only thing that he could do because he would agree to almost anything to have that one night.

Steve turned to Rumlow and pointed at the pad of paper. “Write down a list of HYDRA safe houses in Washington. All the ones you know about.”

The STRIKE captain looked mutinous and glared at Steve. It was a clear refusal.

“Fine, a list of groups who provided service and information to HYDRA but not necessarily part of the group itself,” Steve said, voice unwavering with any kind of emotion. Perhaps his friend realized that this might be the only opportunity to get real solid information.

Rumlow refused by looking aside to stare at the wall. He removed his hand from the HYDRA agent’s one and folding his arms across his chest. Rumlow shifted uncomfortably on the bed, clearly at war internally.

Steve waited five minutes and doggedly moved on. “What is the contingency plan for removing HYDRA agents from the country? We know there is one.”

Another refusal.

He stood from the bed and this time, Rumlow looked at him as if he had betrayed the man by taking Steve’s side. Instead, he grasped the bed railing and leaned over so that they were almost nose-to-nose. “You promised,” he accused coldly. “You promised me fifteen years, and I won’t take anything less. You write down the information, or I’ll consider your promise false. I thought you loved me.”
Rumlow’s face flushed red with both anger and effort, and the STRIKE captain’s eyes turned flinty and fierce. He watched as the agent’s jaw worked as if chewing on a particularly disgusting piece of gristle. He remained relentless though, stepping away and perhaps worse, slipping in so that he was partially behind Steve.

He could see the moment Rumlow snapped and gave in. “One,” Rumlow croaked out, looking to Steve.

“Which question do you want answered, Steve? He’ll answer and I’ll verify it as truth,” he murmured to his friend.

“Write the list of HYDRA safe houses in Washington D.C.” Steve relaxed across the shoulders. “And New York.”

Rumlow gave Steve a withering glare but picked up the pen and slowly began to write down addresses. There were a few pauses as the HYDRA agent had to take the time to think, but the paper was filled with numbers and street names within an hour. He verified the few addresses he knew, noting that Rumlow’s apartment was actually on the list.

Slowly he returned to sitting on the edge of the bed, his metal hand coming to rest on Rumlow’s thigh, and he handed off the pad of paper to Steve once it was clear that there was nothing else. The STRIKE captain either regarded him or glared at Steve, but his friend seemed unmoved by the show and even smiled at him.

“I’ll see to travel arrangements,” Steve said and then paused. “He’s going to be your responsibility. I’m trusting you to keep him on a tight leash tonight.”

He looked at Rumlow who had gone back to looking positively mutinous. It seemed that the inability to quip back was starting to irk the STRIKE captain. “I won’t let him out of my sight.” His Ravasz was mildly placated by that.

Steve seemed satisfied and left them alone.

The silence that followed in the wake of his friend’s departure was comfortable, only broken by the sound of the covers shifting as Rumlow moved or his hand stroked the STRIKE captain’s thigh. This felt right. Nothing but Steve had ever had the same sensation within him, but now Rumlow did too. It felt like his life was slowly coming together again, even if he knew that nothing would ever be easy.

“Have you ever slept in a pillow fort before?”

Rumlow gave him a suspicious look but shook a negative. He wondered if he was saying what he was suggesting wrong, but no, he had looked it up on the internet at the library.

“Do you want to? We can set it up like a tent with cushions for walls. I can sneak in some Skittles after Steve goes to bed,” he murmured shyly.

The suggestion earned him his first smile out of Rumlow. He intended it to be the first of many. If he had to smile, he would make certain that the other sour person in Steve’s apartment would be forced to do the same.
Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I appreciate any comments and kudos and suggestions.
Yet another long time between chapters, and I apologize for that. I do actually have a start on the next chapter already, so hopefully the next one will not take me 8 billion years (aka 1 month) to post up. I now have a pretty solid idea for where everyone is going except for Steve. Damn man with the plan currently has no plan right now, which is difficult given his POV chapter is next. Oops.

Also, as an FYI to any who have read it, I do have a rough draft plot for a sequel to Taming Winter. I unfortunately have another multi-chapter fic on the go, which I am debating putting on the back burner to write the sequel. I have come to realize I write too much Rumlow, if there is such a thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I want to reach my hand into the dark and feel what reaches back.
   I want to remember when my nightmares were clearer.
   I want to be there when your hot black rage rips wide open.”

***

Rogers had said that he was allowed to stay for twenty-four hours. It was apparently enough time to make some calls, to find if his information was good, and find him a secure facility to keep him in for further questioning. He wasn’t to leave the apartment, wasn’t to use any of the electronic devices except the fridge, the stove or the microwave in that allotted time.

Brock was now on his sixth night in Steve Roger’s apartment. Apparently it was an ingenious place to keep him as no one suspected him to be there. He also suspected that the Soldier had wandered after Steve for at least twelve of the first twenty-four hours giving puppy eyes and begging for him to have more time. No one but certain members of what had once been SHIELD and the Avengers knew that he was within the safe confines of Steve’s apartment.

It was a nice place, modern and with a relatively open concept. He was allowed to stay on the couch over the night hours, which suited him just fine. It was quiet but still held the soft undertone of the street and the low hum of the refrigerator, which after eleven months in a hospital listening to the noise of medical equipment, he found the noise soothing. He tried not to think about the fact that he would, eventually, have to go to some dark pit and be left there.

Of course, the other benefit of the couch was the fact that his Ase came for a two o’clock morning visitation. The couch was too small for them both to cram onto, though they had honestly tried the first night. Instead, he knew the moment that the Soldier had come because the blanket was being pulled off of him and thrown on the floor, and he was pretty soon following it. His Ase then either curled up wrapped around him or lay on top of him.

There was no need to concern himself with being cold. Well, not until a few hours later anyway, or so he had found out by day three.
Brock slept with the heavy weight of the Soldier half on top of him, and the other man’s warm breath against his neck. It was a nice arrangement, especially since the Soldier never moved in the night once settled. That, he knew, was a HYDRA habit.

Not only being in cryo-freeze for years on end, but the Winter Soldier had been forced to sleep in the same position without moving. It would be ineffective for a weapon to give itself away with a jerk or a roll while out in the field. It would also be highly ineffective for the same weapon to make noise, so as far as he knew, there was always a part of the Soldier’s awareness active enough to keep from making noise or moving once a chosen position for rest had been taken up. He supposed he should liken it to dolphins shutting off half of their brains to rest while the other half took over… except the Soldier did dream and worse remembered in sleep.

He groaned softly as he shifted under the weight on top of him, wishing that the tale tell dampness against his sleeping trousers wasn’t there. The Soldier was asleep on him still, but his Ase’s rate of breathing was higher than it should be. A nightmare. There was no other sign that the Soldier was doing anything else but peacefully sleeping, but the bloom of hot urine between them was enough that he knew he would be getting no more sleep tonight.

Rumlow shifted an arm and stroked the back of the asset’s neck, scratching lightly and purposefully shifting and groaning. He turned his head to kiss the side of his Ase’s cheek, nudging gently enough to pull the Soldier from whatever horrible dream or memory was happening. There was a sudden tremor, a little jerk and the Soldier was still but awake.

“Morning, sunshine,” he murmured roughly but without real difficulty now, ignoring their wet pants entirely.

“I… did it again,” the Soldier said softly, voice twisted with a mixture of sleep, objectivity and resignation. “I went before I came to sleep with you.”

Brock chuckled, finding the whole thing funny rather than disgusting or sad. Who knew the extent of the mental scars that the Winter Soldier bore. “Must have thought that I was getting cold, hmm? Always looking out for me.”

“This is where I’m supposed to apologize.”

“For what? Doing something that you have no control over,” Brock said and ran an appreciative and far more sensitive hand down the Soldier’s bare back. “How about you get into the shower and clean up, and I’ll put on some laundry, alright?”

The Soldier nuzzled his neck and cheek, making no move to slip off in the face of his acceptance of the incident that had been common since day three. He frankly didn’t care, though a part of him he refused to acknowledge ached to make this reaction better. He couldn’t, so he forced himself to concentrate on the things that he could do, which was to make the Soldier happy and talk about their times together. Who really cared if a man pissed his pants every night? They’d all get to that age eventually.

His fingers tangled in the asset’s long dark hair, and they shared a deep satisfying kiss before he broke it. Their little problem was cooling, and he was not interested in urine scald on his skin, given how sensitive it was to begin with. He urged the Soldier off of him and winked as he pulled his Ase’s soft – and wet – sleeping pants off. He nipped at a knee that was now bare and that earned him a bit of a smile.

“Off you go to the shower,” he murmured roughly.
“…but the laundry,” the Soldier replied, tone indicating slight anxiety.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t communicate with any members of HYDRA through the washing machine,” he replied dryly. He was given a suspicious look. “Okay, okay, I promise to put it on and return to the couch until you’re back.”

“Yes, you do that,” his Ase said with a nod. The Soldier slipped off to head for the bathroom, clearly not caring about the cold water or the lack of water pressure that would happen when he set the washer on.

Rumlow sat up slowly and with a groan, his body still with more than a few of its own kinks and muscle pulls that keep him from jumping up and around so early in the morning. He pushed off his own soiled pants and wandered to the kitchen to grab a spare wash cloth, rubbing down the skin of his legs before adding that to the pile of laundry that he was about to put on. He’d shower later when he knew the Soldier wasn’t about to sneak in and press him to the tiles and waste Steve’s hot water, which meant waiting for Steve to be up and about, clucking after the Soldier.

He returned to his ‘bedroom’ and slipped into the extra pair of soft sweatpants that he had bartered for with a bit of snark and a threat to just walk around the place naked with the blinds open. He tugged them up and then carefully gathered the urine soaked blanket and clothing before easing silently towards the laundry room, which doubled as storage. He stuffed the material inside, closed the door, added some detergent and fiddled with the settings until he had what seemed appropriate for piss-cleansing.

“Bucky?”

Ah, that would be Rogers coming to check on the Winter Soldier, who apparently had a habit of doing laundry to start every day. He had overheard it being called one of the Soldier’s ‘routine habits’, like coming in and washing hands as soon as hitting the apartment. Brock wasn’t quite as naïve about those ‘habits’, given he knew what they were actually about.

Steve appeared in the doorway and paused at the sight of him rather than the Soldier. “I thought I told you not to touch any technology.”

He frowned and tilted his head, keeping the fact that he had healed his vocal cords to himself and his Ase. He had been told it was some kind of odd ‘concentrated healing’. He just thought that he applied himself to wanting to talk again and his body agreed with him.

“Is Bucky in the shower?” He nodded his reply. “He let you put on the laundry in his stead?” Again, a nod. Rogers seemed suspicious and peered at the running washing machine as if expecting to see the Winter Soldier stuffed inside.

Brock rolled his eyes and slipped around the big blond to head back towards the living room and his bed. He stopped as a hand settled on the doorframe to prevent his easy escape. He realized that Steve had no idea that the Soldier pissed himself at night, and it almost drew a smirk to his lips. He knew better, knew that Steve’s hospitality was only what it was because the Winter Soldier had probably pleaded for him to stay and not get thrown in one of Stark’s safe rooms in some basement.

“How did you convince him to shower instead of put on the laundry?” Steve generally kept questions to him with a general theory that he could only answer in ‘yes’ or ‘no’. He had done nothing to disillusion that belief either.

He shrugged, but he could tell that Rogers was expecting something more than that. “Told him to shower, and he went,” he said, not bothering to hide the improvement to his voice. It was still rough,
but it no longer required him to strain his entire throat to do it.

Steve looked surprised and then angry with his deception. It wasn’t the first time. “Your voice…”


He eyed the big blond to make certain that Steve was not going to take a swing at him, but the man had extremely good self-control. He had tried to push Cap’s buttons a few times to no avail either. Of course, here and now he saw a new opportunity, and it would be a shame to let it pass him by now that the Soldier wasn’t here to glare at him or knock him backwards with a shove.

“You have no idea, do you?” He injected just enough mockery into his rough tone to be obvious.

“Don’t play games with me, Rumlow,” Steve replied, giving just a hint of danger as a warning for him to back off.

He had no fear of Steve right now, not when it was so important to them both to keep the Soldier content and stable. He was not one to coddle his lover, since he wasn’t that kind of man, but even he felt something deep and horrible when things were not going well for his Ase. It was times like that that he both cursed and was blessed to still be dedicated and in love with the Soldier.

“Fine… when did he start to do laundry first thing in the morning?”

Steve eyed him to give time to ascertain where he was going with his question. “Since he came back to me.”

“Did you introduce him to it?” He decided to sound bland and uninterested, all for a better set up.

“He saw me doing it on the first night he arrived, and he started doing it the morning after,” Steve explained warily.

Brock ducked under the arm that Steve still had against the door frame. “He’s a sneaky little bastard. He’ll manipulate situations for his own benefit when it suits him to. I’m sure it’s a survival instinct hardwired into him.”

Steve gave him a narrow-eyed stare. “He’s had to do a lot to survive what HYDRA did to him.”

“Yeah, he has,” he agreed easily. “However, sometimes that instinct can’t protect him. Like when he sleeps.”

“Your point?”

“Come on, Rogers, you have enhanced senses, so you can’t tell me you haven’t detected just a hint of urine when he sleeps in your room. He may not move when he sleeps, but his mind is vulnerable. He’s probably been pissing on himself for months, given the terror and harsh training that he’s endured for years,” Brock said, his voice rough but strong. The corner of his lip upturned. “Some friend you are.”

The barb earned him the expected glare. He could also see Steve’s mind playing backwards, looking for hints to truth in his words and finding it here and there. “He hides the evidence well.”

“That’s what being the greatest ghost story in history does,” he replied with a shrug and padded down the hallway.

“How did you find out,” Steve said with a hint of demand. Was that a touch of hurt as well?
Brock turned around and stared at Steve illuminated in the laundry room light. “Simple. He pissed on me.”

For a moment, Rogers looked stunned but recovered quickly. They were both aware of the Soldier sneaking away in the middle of the night to settle down with him in the living room. “If you hurt him…”

“Relax, big guy, why would I hurt him for something he can’t even control?” He’d seen tougher men piss themselves for multiple reasons. There was no point mocking unless he disliked the person in question, in which case all bets were off. “Besides, you can’t say that you’re perfect either.”

Steve stilled but said nothing, either because there was nothing to deny or nothing worth confirming.

Brock turned away and walk back to the living room unhindered and seated himself on the couch. He noted that Steve was slower to follow, and he was fine with that, instead starting to do his morning stretching to loosen up his back in particular. He was feeling his age more than ever, though previously he hadn’t cared about his fate, aware that he would be killed eventually.

Then his Ase had come to him. After Rogers had said the Soldier was free and safe, he had been content. His goal had been done without his express assistance, but the important thing was that the Soldier was free.

Now, with the asset all over him, he had something worth keeping his body healing up for. He might not want to give up the few edges that he had left, but he would do whatever he thought was necessary to keep the Soldier from coming to harm or falling back into HYDRA. He knew better than anyone that HYDRA was not gone and would, at some point, want the weapon back to use against anyone who might threaten the organization.

He paused and trying to touch his toes with his fingers when Steve appeared and set down a bowl of steaming oatmeal in front of him on the table. Rogers was, if nothing else, a good host regardless of their uneasy truce with one another. There the guy went being a better man than most of them, and he nodded his thanks.

To his surprise, Steve returned a moment later with two other bowls and settled down with one in an armchair nearby. He took up his oatmeal while it was warm and began to eat in the silence that prevailed.

“Have you guys caught the wayward STRIKE team?” He glanced at Steve who was chewing thoughtfully.

“You know I don’t talk about business with you.”

They paused in attempting a new conversation of negotiating around each other as the Soldier padded into the room, sniffing the air hopefully. His Ase was still a little damp and clean-shaven with long dark hair pulled back into a wet tail dripping long tempting lines down the contours down the Soldier’s back. He eyed them as the asset came to settle next to him on the couch, not out of preference for him over Rogers but because there was room and the extra bowl of oatmeal.

“Steve, are you going out today?”

“I have to check in,” Steve replied with a nod. “We’re busy flushing out and locking down the safe houses on the list.”

“Can I help?” The Soldier often made a few suggestions to help out with anything directly related to SHIELD agents. “I might know the interior of some of them.”
Rumlow was not entirely aware of which of the safe houses that the Soldier had been in, but he knew that there had been a few. There was sometimes no large scale or subtle facility to keep the Winter Soldier between transport or just before decommissioning. He had personally seen the Soldier in a few of them, but he wasn’t about to admit that out loud. His information was the only thing of value that he had right now, so he wasn’t about to waste it on a moment of reminiscing.

“No, I’d prefer you to stay here for the time being. I won’t be gone that long,” Steve said between heaping bites of oatmeal. Everyone knew that the Soldier was his baby-sitter. “And if we’re lucky, we’ll catch evidence of STRIKE.”

The Soldier nodded and ate quietly, clearly not feeling any rejection for having to stay in the apartment with him. “Are STRIKE members making a move I should be concerned about?”

Rumlow glanced at his Ase over his spoon, piqued by something in the Soldier’s voice. Both of them knew that Steve was not going to talk about that kind of thing in his presence, given his ties to STRIKE. He knew that he would be useless to them until he trained up again, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t know how those that had escaped would work together. Steve never asked him for advice on catching them. The Soldier never mentioned them, but he was now suspicious all the same.

“Buck, please don’t ask me about that,” Steve said after chewing seriously on a spoonful of oatmeal. “Until Rumlow is safely contained, this isn’t a subject for discussion.”

The Soldier shrugged slightly and passed a glance over to him, but he found the lumpy mess of his oatmeal far too interesting to respond. He was not going to get himself involved in that, nor would he respond to the notion that Steve was actively looking for a place to send him to. It must have been very dark and very deep to be taking this long, regardless of the Soldier’s puppy eyes.

“Do you two want more?”

“Nah, I have to retain my girlish figure,” he replied sarcastically. He also hadn’t gotten more than half a bowl in by the time both Steve and his Ase had finished their bowls.

“I will,” the Soldier said and rose with Steve to follow all the way to the kitchen to get some more oatmeal. He was momentarily left on his own, which he was fine with.

He certainly wasn’t left alone for long as the once-assassin returned to sit down on the couch next to him again minutes later, their shoulders bumping companionably. With Steve slower to follow, he relented and leaned over to kiss the Soldier’s cheek, only to get another full on the lips before he could lean away fast enough. His lover’s metal hand rose and caught his cheek to deepen the embrace, and there had to have been something delaying Steve to warrant this kind of outward affection for him.

He managed to pull back for some air before the Soldier’s mouth found his again, and his half-eaten bowl of oatmeal was forgotten as he lifted his hands to stroke his lover’s cheeks as their tongues brushed and wrestled in his mouth. His interest for furthering their interactions stirred, and he almost thought that the Soldier was going to tip him backwards on the couch to lay on top of him for a few moments.

Brock would have allowed it. He didn’t deny that he had missed the physical aspects of their relationship, but his lover was often careful with him like he might break with too much enthusiasm. That might actually be true, but he was frankly willing to risk it. They had been very good in Steve’s apartment, but he was now more than ready to be bad and sneaky.
He moaned into the Soldier’s mouth, felt himself pressed backwards, and barely caught his bowl before it slipped right out of his lap. They pulled apart to make certain that their antics hadn’t created yet another mess they would have to subtly clean up. All was clear.

He attempted a smile at the Soldier who returned it far more naturally than he had ever seen before. It took his breath away, and he lifted his fingers to trace the upturn of lips, still doing so when he leaned in to kiss that smiling mouth. “I’ve always wanted to see you smile.”

“Me too,” his Ase replied softly. “I want to give you reason to smile. I want to see you happy. I want to remember our times together.” He could hear the breathless want in the Soldier’s tone. “I want…”

“What have you done,” he asked suddenly.

The Soldier looked up at him sharply, and they stared at each other trying to outmaneuver one another with just a flick of their eyes. “Nothing in particular.”

Brock knew better than that. Like the sheets, the ‘habits’, he knew that the Soldier was a sly sneaky individual who risked much to get a certain result. He had probably seen that more than anyone because he had given the Soldier want and opportunity to do it. Now he knew the signs that it was in play right now.

“Tell me,” he ordered with gritted teeth.

“You can’t order me anymore,” the Soldier replied defiantly. He admitted surprise to realize that was true and sat back a little on the couch. Backtalk was not in the Soldier’s skills, but it was no doubt something from old, from Barnes. Yet, his lover relented and nestled up against him. “I’m sorry.”

Brock snorted. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” his Ase murmured quickly.

“You can’t be sorry because there is nothing to be sorry about,” he replied with a roll of his eyes, and he too relented in the way his back and shoulders were stiffly held. “But I know you’re up to something.”

His lover remained silent, no doubt debating the pros and cons of telling him or denying it further. They were both saved from having to maneuver around each other some more because Steve finally wandered back in. That was good; he’d dig for information while they were together. The Soldier had previously assured him that there were no bugs in the apartment, and he admitted that he had looked to no avail.

Steve was tucking away one of those new Stark phone into a back pocket, oatmeal bowl clearly left behind in the kitchen. He noted that Rogers gave the Soldier a significant look. “I have to get going and check in. There’s been a bit of activity.”

The Soldier nodded. “The same activity as before?”

“Yes, but it’s a bit closer to home this time,” Steve said.

These two clearly thought that he had left his puzzle solving skills in the Triskelion when it landed on him. They were being very obvious, and he had worked with them both enough to know what the possible subject was. Even if he didn’t know the full extent of it, he could make wild guesses. He knew they couldn’t trust him with information, but come on, he knew STRIKE better than anyone.

“Rollins took the STRIKE team into where, the hospital?” He ignored the glare Steve leveled at him.
“Come on, my IQ isn’t sixty. I have a few neurons still firing.”

“This isn’t a subject for discussion,” Steve said simply, glancing at the Soldier.

“Come on, I know STRIKE better than anyone; I know how they operate,” he said with a shake of his head. He abandoned his bowl of oatmeal on the coffee table and sat back on the couch. “I could even help you know their next move.”

“No,” Steve replied and stood. He held in a noise of frustration.

“What did they take, Steve?” It was the Soldier, but again there was something in the way that his lover remained too still that alerted him that someone else had an invested interest in STRIKE.

“Bucky…”

“Tell us,” the Soldier snarled, rising to confront the big blond. “They couldn’t get Brock out, so what did they take?”

Both he and Steve paused at the significance of the words spoken, and finally, Brock was on his feet as well. He looked far less impressive given how he was soft and muscle wasted, but his dark eyes fixed on the Soldier next to him. He didn’t have to move closer; the Soldier was keenly aware of him and avoided looking at him. Steve was given much the same treatment.

“Medical records,” Steve slowly admitted. “They took everything in Rumlow’s medical records and erased any computer copies.”

“Now that we’re all being honest…” he said sarcastically and then gave the Soldier a significant look. “Your turn,” he told his lover.

His Ase had the decency to look uncomfortable and finally walked away to stand near a window, arms crossed and doing whatever was necessary to fit into the minimal shadows of the room and appear small. There was a fine tremble along the Soldier’s shoulders.

“Bucky…”

“Don’t coddle him,” Rumlow snarled. “He’ll play you like he’s been doing. Out with it.”

“Don’t talk to him that way,” Steve growled at him. “He’s the only reason you’re still here.”

“I’ll be sure to blow him in thanks,” he remarked with a lewd grin that instantly had Roger’s face flushing both with anger and embarrassment. “If you want me out, get rid of me. I don’t give two-shits about you, Rogers.”

“Yeah, I realized that when you spent the last year playing me,” Steve said, narrow eyed look sharp as razorblades. “You spent how long playing everyone for a fool? Was Bucky included in that?”

Rumlow felt himself flush with anger, and it was oddly a reaction that his new skin seemed to do very well. It made lying rather difficult. “I love him, and I always have since we met,” he said with a dangerous edge to his voice. “You don’t know what it’s like trying and failing for years to get him out, risking everything for him.”

“Oh, I think I know a little about that,” Steve remarked coldly. They could both see they were on the verge of coming to blows. “You’re not the only one who knows how to sacrifice, but no doubt, you can play it as well as all your other endeavours. You’re a fake.”
Brock took a step towards Steve, his fists clenching at his sides. “I’ve loved him for nineteen years. He’s the only real thing that I’ve had, the only person that I’ve cared for beyond myself.”

“Oh yeah…?”

“Enough, stop it,” the Soldier roared at them, the volume and tone surprising them both enough to look where the former assassin was standing by the window looking at them with such a wounded look that it was like a physical blow. “Stop fighting, please…”

He relented immediately and Steve wasn’t far behind. It was Rogers to go over to Barnes at the window and make soft soothing noises, while he reigned in his temper. He shouldn’t have gotten angry, especially not about that. The opinion of others had never mattered to him because he had known that his relationship with the Soldier was real and no one could take that from him. He had never felt angry enough to have to defend his own actions because it hadn’t been important. Now… perhaps it was because the Soldier was all that he had.

He seated himself on the couch again, forcing his arms to span the back of it and just stared up at the ceiling. He took deep breaths like he had been taught in physiotherapy, going through some of his simple exercises to loosen up his legs.

He could hear the soft murmurings of comfort from Steve, and he knew that the Soldier would respond. He had seen how the pair were together, and he didn’t deny that Rogers had made many sacrifices for Barnes, perhaps hoping and expecting the man would come back from the weapon that HYDRA had forged. It was possible, but it would be a long hard road, no doubt one that Steve was completely willing to travel. He would too if that was what the Soldier wanted.

Steve appeared again and sat down in the recliner, and they watched each other. Then the Soldier came over and sat down on the arm of the couch, equal distance between them both he noted. It was clearly significant to Steve who smiled and seemed content again.

“I’ve been secretly working with STRIKE,” the Winter Soldier said, a damning statement for many. “My contributions have been helping with escapes or entries but little else. They are on their own to perform whatever missions they have underway.”

“Bucky, why…?” Steve sounded genuinely hurt. He almost felt sorry for ol’ Cap.

“HYDRA spent years refining me, training, manipulating and stealing away what was mine.” This was Barnes talking, not the Soldier. There was an aching need, a desperation and a willingness to do absolutely anything (including move mountains) that was solely at the base of the Soldier. He knew it was Barnes now, a man trapped against his will. Never looking for pity, but demanding answers for reasons of his captivity. “It was going to be within HYDRA that I get it back.”

Brock had caught on. “You’re looking for the techniques used to brainwash you and how to reverse them,” he said, glancing at Rogers. Their eyes met once. “Those techniques are seventy years old.”

“But they are recorded somewhere. If I know how I was created, I can know how to reverse the process slowly. I can take back what was stolen from me,” the Soldier murmured. “That’s why I was working with STRIKE. Rollins was providing me with information on where to look.”

“And what did you find out?” Steve was clearly very interested.

“Most of my creation was in Russia, but the fall of the Soviet Union complicates matters. HYDRA has taken most of the files and buried them.” Which basically meant that Rollins hadn’t been able to find the paper trail yet, and clearly had other matters to consider as well.
“Jack knows how to find loose threads,” Brock murmured. “God knows he saw me tripping up and helped me to cover my tracks a few times.”

Suddenly, his Ase focused entirely on Steve. “Loki’s staff… where is it?”

“I don’t know. It was confiscated and held by SHIELD in a facility where they apparently keep many hazardous artifacts,” Steve said. It was clear to all three of them that there was nothing secure or sacred within SHIELD anymore, not with HYDRA involved so deeply.

“HYDRA has it,” the Soldier said softly. “Rollins doesn’t know where, but he showed me a picture of it.”

Rumlow looked between the pair and then down at his mostly healed hands. What would he do to give his Ase back everything lost? Anything was the obvious answer to him, and it seemed to him that it was going to happen. Jack was involved, and he knew that soon enough, Rollins would understand that staying in the States would be too risky. They would leave and regroup.

There were a few secure HYDRA facilities across the globe where the other activities would be underway now that the pincer attack of Insight had failed. The Tesseract was lost, but HYDRA had Loki’s staff, which he knew had shown great power but also the ability to alter the mind. He had seen the haunted look that Barton wore from time to time. The effects could be reversed, couldn’t? Make a man into a vegetable with one, the reverse was probably true as well.

“Bucky, we will find this object,” Steve said with fierce determination. “I’ll talk to Natasha, Sam, Tony, Clint… anyone I know who will help.”

“Count me in,” Brock said softly.

Steve looked at him, and he looked at Rogers in return. There was protest all over the man’s face, but it was the Soldier who sighed softly. “Brock…”

“You’re going to need a way in, and HYDRA won’t trust new members with anything,” he said simply, rubbing his palms on his trousers. “You’re going to need team of senior HYDRA agents to be able to dig for information but to put up the front of loyalty. You’re going to need a bunch of men who know how to act better than they know how to hold their own dicks for pissing.”

“STRIKE,” the Soldier and Steve said at the same time.

Brock nodded his head and smirked his cocksure arrogance. “We need STRIKE, what’s left of it, especially if Jack has been active and continuing to prove his loyalty these last months.”

“No,” Steve said, not surprising anyone with protests. “You’re HYDRA, and we can’t trust that you and that team will do the right thing. You could sell us all out and hand over the Winter Soldier all over again. Heck, you could line up all the Avengers and get us all killed.”

“I trust Brock,” the Soldier murmured softly.

Rumlow shrugged his shoulders, though was internally pleased with the Soldier’s faith in him. “First, I am HYDRA, but I live for him. He wants that scepter, I’m going to get him that golden ticket to freedom.” He held up one finger as if he had just made a point. “Second, that ‘team’ listens to me over what it listens to HYDRA. I’ve earned that much out of them.” Another finger rose. “Third, if I wanted you dead, I could have slit your throat in the middle of the night. You don’t lock up your kitchen knives and there’s been a five minute window when Barnes here gets up to take a leak before coming to see me in the living room.”
Steve didn’t seemed entirely convinced, though he could practically see the mental note to hide the kitchen knives. He let the man think about it all the same as the usual two focuses of Steve’s life came into direct conflict with each other all over again. It didn’t seem as much of a contest this time, since him retrieving STRIKE would mean him leaving.

The Soldier seemed to accept the help with a serenity that made the previous agony of lying to everyone and being involved with STRIKE die away. His lover glanced at him more than once in the silence and offered a small smile, clearly pleased with the sudden cooperation. They both knew it was up to Steve to make the final decision.

“Tell me how you’re planning on capturing STRIKE,” Steve said, a resigned note in the man’s tone.

“I’m not,” Brock said airily. “You and SHIELD is going to capture STRIKE, and you’re going to make it public too.”

Steve eyed him as if trying to tell if he was making a joke. He wasn’t, and he made that clear. “Go on, Rumlow. Do you know their next move?”

“No, but it’s clear what the last one was,” Brock said with a shrug. “STRIKE took medical records because the real thing wasn’t available. I bet they were planning on getting me out, but the sleeper agent took their opportunity away, so they took the next best thing: my records.”

The Winter Soldier shifted on the couch arm. “They were looking for discharge information.”

“It was never put in the records,” Steve added, but the relevance seemed to play across the man’s face. “They might think we moved you to a different hospital.”

Brock smirked. “And so you did. Put me back in a hospital bed, keep it hush-hush, but let the Soldier slip it to Jack. STRIKE will close the trap around themselves.” He was well pleased with this plan, especially if he got to see the look of disbelief on Rollins’ face. Man, his second was going to be so mad he would probably laugh at how much Jack sputtered.

Steve was finally nodding in agreement, now getting into this. “I’ve got a secure facility to keep six men. Tony is going to lend me one of his vacation islands.”

“Island?”

“Yeah, he owns like four islands,” Steve said with a shrug, like it was no big deal a man owned a few aspects of the planet. “The six members can be housed there temporarily. JARVIS can monitor them, and I suspect the shark-infested reefs will keep them from swimming away.”

Well, that was a good plan really, and it sounded secure as long as no one knew that Stark was involved. HYDRA was smart enough to look into Stark’s assets if the man was obviously involved. At least they wouldn’t all be stuck in that obnoxiously ugly building in the middle of New York. He’d prefer an island over a floor of that atrocious thing.

“Why would I tell Rollins,” the Soldier asked softly. “I could just break you out myself.”

“You’re in love with me, of course. You can make a play that SHIELD is going to hang me to dry, torture me for information and all that. You can be convinced I’m better off with HYDRA,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Jack will believe you’re doing this for your love of me. HYDRA knows SHIELD has been plumbing me for information, since the suits were there when the sleeper was at the hospital.”

Steve sighed and stood up again. “I’ll see to the arrangements.”
“Oh and Rogers, I’m going to need a weapon for this,” he said.

“What, your sharp wits and razor tongue isn’t going to be good enough,” Steve asked.

Rumlow snorted and knew he’d get at least a knife to help himself out in this. He could work with that, and he didn’t say anything more as Rogers prepared to leave, full of the newest plan and information. He knew that the Avengers were about to get involved, but this was for the Soldier and nothing more than that. He was doing it for his Ase as always.

The Winter Soldier saw Steve out of the apartment with promises to hide the knives and to eat lunch. It was similar to watching a big guard dog follow around its master for petting. There was a smile for Steve, and he knew those were important because with his return to HYDRA, the going was about to get rough again.

When the Soldier returned, he pushed himself from the couch and stretch before he was caught in his lover’s arms. His Ase snuggled up against him tightly, and he combed his fingers through the Soldier’s dark hair, smoothing it back and nuzzling the assassin. “Will it work out?”

“With you and Rogers involved, impossible things tend to happen,” he assured his lover. “You’re not allowed to stash Skittles in my hospital room, just so you know.”

“But…!”

“I don’t care if it’s this strange little tradition that you’ve taken up,” Brock replied, still nuzzling his nose against the Soldier’s cheek. “I found your stash yesterday.”

The Soldier looked indignant. “I have more than one.”

“You are going to a dentist if that was just one of your stashes,” he remarked. “Though, why don’t I check your teeth myself first?”

His Ase gave him another one of those smiles and suddenly sent them both to the couch where he was given full reign to check those teeth with his tongue. And of course, that wasn’t the only part of his lover that he searched either.

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His hospital room was dimmed for the night time hours, though the progression of the night staff was evident given the number of patients in this ward. The low hum of machines allowed him to doze as it always seemed to now, his fingers twitching against the blanket that had fallen down to his waist. It was the perfect temperature for sleep, and even the bed was comfortable, though certainly not as good as the couch or the floor where the Soldier joined him.

His Ase was not allowed to join him in the hospital bed, though he was visited every day all the same. They held hands and he regaled his lover with tales of his times with HYDRA, funny stories like when Jack almost caused his legs to be blown off or when he and Jack had taken over STRIKE alpha as the team lead and second. There were many little stories, and of course, he embellished because he could. He never did when he spoke of their time together though, just of those other times when the truth was foggy anyway.

There were long hours when he was alone or in the company of nurses and doctors. He had waited another six days in the new room before he had been passed word that tonight was the night. He was going to be going back to HYDRA. STRIKE was coming, and he momentarily entertained the idea that they would be successful in that escape. He could get the scepter alone, keeping his lover free of the risks.
He wouldn’t coddle though. The Winter Soldier had long ago earned the right to dictate how freedom was going to go for the man. His lover was determined to have personal involvement in locating and retrieving the scepter of Loki.

Brock shifted into a new comfortable position, rolling to his side, though his left arm was forced backwards by the cuff that kept him chained to the bed railing. He pulled the blanket up higher on his chest and settled his head on the pillow, evening out his breathing to doze as his duty nurse slipped in to check on him. She left after adding a small note to his chart, and she wouldn’t be back for at least an hour.

There was an almost inaudible sound by the window sill first, then a soft bump of multiple feet touching down lightly. A noise that indicated that the glass of the window had been cut free of the frame and was being shifted for hauling up to the rooftop came next. There was then the soft scuff of booted feet settling on the floor. Two more pairs followed the first, one moving to the door and securing it, another eased closer to his bed while the third remained still at the window.

He listened to the sound of a heavier set man approaching the bed and then the jiggle of metal on metal as the cuff linking him to the bed railing was tampered with and opened. He feigned sleep even as the three indicated that all was clear and that time was on their side.

“Rumlow.” It was Rollins, right by his bed. He shifted slightly and turned his head, blinking sleepily. “Up and at ‘em, sunshine.”

He rolled over onto his back and allowed his eyes to flick around the room taking in the scene. “You… you came for me?”

“We couldn’t leave a bonehead like you to sing secrets,” Hunter said by the door. Ah, so that kid had gotten out too? That was going to work out well for them in the end.

“Call up to Wright and tell him to start lowering the window,” Rollins ordered to their third member by the escape route. “Come on, let’s get you up and out of here. The Soldier covered our entrance; he’s been working with us.”

“…shit!”

There were suddenly SHIELD agents at the windows and filling the hallway outside of his room, guns aimed inwards and laser sights pinning each member with at least three red dots each. Rumlow flipped down the blanket and held out his pistol at Jack who stared back at him with dawning realization of his betrayal.

“It’s nothing personal, but you’re going to help me,” he said smugly. “Don’t do anything stupid, shovel face, and we’ll be right as rain.”

“You asshole,” Rollins snarled. He let his second punch him in the face because it amused him. “You betrayed us.”

Rumlow laughed and dropped his pistol down onto his lap so that he could fold his hands behind his head, the cuffs remaining on the bed. They had never been properly attached to him in the first place. “No, Jack, I haven’t betrayed us. I require a specialized team for what I have to do, and we’ve always been the best.”

SHIELD was coming inside, ordering the STRIKE team down. Hunter was smart enough to comply. The third member, who he couldn’t identify in the darkness, didn’t have a chance as the Winter Soldier slipped down to fill the window and grabbed the man. Ah, it was like old times
already.

Rollins shot him a dirty look. “Easy, we’re in this together. Have I ever led us astray, Rollins?”

“I missed the part in your records that said you could talk. I was looking forward to the peace and quiet for once,” Rollins remarked before sinking to knees as SHIELD agents approached. “I see the murder boyfriend is still in fine form.”

“Oi, don’t strangle him,” Rumlow called when the Soldier manhandled their team member to the floor. “God, don’t let him have a mission and he gets all excited to see the team reforming again.”

Rollins was being cuffed, and he sat up in his bed. “Rumlow… Silvia was asking after you. I told her that you were still a piece of shit.”

He said nothing as his second was hauled up and escorted out with the other members of the STRIKE team, now completely incarcerated and out of action. The media was going to eat that up, and all those sniffers who bayed that SHIELD was now considered a terrorist organization would perhaps back off for a few minutes to consider the good that this could be done. HYDRA would also no doubt know that STRIKE had been removed from being an annoyance, and he wondered if whoever was now in charge was going to make a move to retrieve the team.

He was, unfortunately, counting on it. HYDRA had to retrieve them and it would only be then that they could do their work properly. How long would it take for HYDRA to mobilize? They’d be on that damn island, which was both good and bad.

Rumlow looked up when the Soldier approached his bed and suddenly leaned down to kiss him. He allowed his Ase to make out with him for a few moments before he pulled away and offered up his wrists to the Soldier.

“Me too,” he murmured. “You brought my pants, right?”

“I don’t… want you to go,” the Soldier murmured. “I’m going to miss you.”

He hummed softly and lifted a hand to cup his lover’s cheek. “I’m doing this for you, but we’ll see each other again. Once we’re transported, you can come and visit. However, you have your own work cut out for you.”

The Soldier nodded and reluctantly slipped the hand cuffs around his wrists and closed them. They had been together for twelve days, and now they would be parted again. It wasn’t nearly enough, but they would be together again soon he knew. HYDRA was going to want the Soldier back he suspected.

Rumlow slipped out of the bed, and he didn’t protest when the Soldier helped him into a pair of pants, those cold silver fingers caressing up his legs affectionately. When the zipper and button were done up, he steered in and mouthed along his lover’s jaw, and he was pressed back against the bed railing within a minute of his antics.

His cuffed hands caught and held the belt loops of the Soldier’s trousers, holding their hips together as he felt his head forced back with the intensity of his lover’s kissing. If it weren’t for the bed rail, he’d probably have already been dumped back on the mattress and possibly ravaged. Instead, the Soldier swayed those tempting hips from side-to-side, their groins meeting on each pass and earning a throaty groan from them both.

“Ahem,” came a call from the doorway. It was Rogers, always ruining his fun. “I hate to break this up… but we need Rumlow in the truck now.”
The Soldier was slow to part from him even with Steve standing there watching them nuzzle and sway against each other. However, they did eventually part, and he was flushed and aroused and even absently tried to arrange his hair just to keep his hands occupied. He was never going to live down climbing in the back of a FBI truck with an erection.

He shifted and tried to adjust himself in his trousers, but it was still plainly obvious. He slipped out from between the Soldier and the bed rail to walk towards Steve. He was caught about the waist by his lover not two steps away. “I’ve got to go, Ase.”

The Soldier slipped a roll of candy into his pocket. “In case you get lonely.”

Rumlow smirked and gave his lover one last kiss before pulling himself away and handing himself over to Steve’s custody. He noted the look that was passed to his pants pocket and glanced down, only to confirm that he had been given a roll of Sweet-Tarts.

“Ravasz, I’ll be waiting,” the Soldier murmured.

“I won’t fail you,” he replied and was lead away.

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It really was a damn vacation island, but the weather was poor since they had been dumped off. There were seven of them in total, the last of STRIKE alpha and all of them had worked together for years. Aside from Rollins, the men were surprised that he had healed so well from his severe burns and was so functional, though he was slower than them. His healing wasn’t finished it would seem, but he wasn’t about to allow it to limit him in how he interacted with the other six.

Jack Rollins was still considered the second, though he wondered if the man was bitter over losing the apparent Captain position with his return. Matt Hunter was their technology specialist with an interest in data mining and hacking information as a holiday activity. Jeremy Wright was a good soldier and good at following orders, and the guy was one of the few not hungry for power, just the thrill of missions. James Martinez was a man who thrived in order and appreciated both knives and guns as much as he did, especially when they could be put to use against someone else. Derek Riley was a man of habits, routine and was still a damn chronic chain smoker, but the guy could build a functional bomb out of pretty much anything, even apples and cigarette ash. Alice Jenson was the only surviving female member of the team, and she was as resourceful and was one of the best security personnel that had crawled out of Northern Russia. She automatically got the bathroom first too; it wasn’t that they were gentlemen, but she had threatened to knife them enough to not to challenge her claim.

The seven of them sat around the huge bamboo table that was apparently supposed to be small in Tony’s mind, but it easily had them settled. They only bumped their elbows when they made the effort to do so, and they had all silently agreed to nurse whatever drink happened to be in the fridge, most of which was mineral water and pineapple juice, no doubt both intended as a punishment.

“So the plan is actually to return to HYDRA?” Jenson asked, tapping a fingernail against her glass and eyeing him.

“That’s assuming HYDRA will take us back,” Wright pointed out.

Rollins grunted softly, casting him a look where he sat at a corner of the table. His second was suspicous as to why he hadn’t taken the head of it. “They need all the good agents they can get their hands on.”
Rumlow rubbed a hand through his hair, trying to get it into some semblance order now that he didn’t have gel to hold it the way that he liked. “HYDRA won’t be a problem. STRIKE has served for years as the attack dogs of the organization, cultivating a position of physical power that few, not even the underground movements can deny. We’ve been out risking our necks for years.”

Jenson sighed. “HYDRA owes nothing to no one,” she pointed out. “It’s an ideal, a way of life.”

“They’ll come,” Rumlow said with the utmost confidence. Everyone looked at him and seemed to settle in the face of his usual verbal swagger. “And we’ll serve as needed.”

Rollins set down the man’s glass louder than necessary, announcing himself. “So why did you really round us up?”

“HYDRA has an item in its possession that I’m looking to get close to temporarily,” Rumlow said, folding his scarred hands on the table in front of him. “The scepter wielded by Loki in the battle of New York. I need to get close enough to see how it works.”

“And then what?” Wright didn’t look entirely convinced as to the importance.

“Then he’s going to try to make the Winter Soldier a human being again,” Rollins muttered, sending him a knowing but still filthy look.

“The Soldier, huh?” Hunter seemed to be pondering the implications.

“Isn’t the asset with Captain America,” Martinez asked, glancing around the table for confirmation.

“Yeah, I hear they are buddy-buddy,” Jenson put in knowledgeably. She didn’t actually know shit about it.

“There’s a nasty team I’d never want to meet in combat,” Hunter said with the appropriate grimace for the thought alone. Everyone knew the reality would be much, much worse. “How come you’re helping the asset, Captain?”

Rumlow turned his glass in circles on the table, letting the silence weigh in around them and not caring about the impression that it might make. He would have to earn his place as the Captain of the team again in active duty, though all here still respected him. He had risked them and was about to do it again, all for HYDRA and a selfish love that he couldn’t wait to get back to, assuming that this mission didn’t go tits-up. He supposed after all this time that he owe them the truth.

He finally lifted his eyes from the glass and looked around the table to find six pairs of eyes watching him with varying level of curiosity. The corner of his lip twitched up. “Because I’ve been in love with him for the last nineteen years, and we’ve managed a relatively secret relationship for that same amount of time.”

There was dead silence at the table. Everyone was staring at him with varying levels of shock except for Rollin who simply sat back with a huff and a head shake. No one seemed to know what to say for a long few minutes, and he let the full impact of his statement settle in completely.

It was Riley who had been silent for the entirety of their previous conversation who was the first to come up with something. “Only the Captain would rub his balls on a primed grenade.”

Martinez and Wright snorted with amusement and even Jenson managed a rueful smile in response. They were still processing the sheer length of time of his relationship no doubt and looking back on all of their missions seeing the signs that might now seem obvious but back then hadn’t warranted even the batting of an eyelash at.
Rumlow shifted forward to rest his elbows on the table. “I don’t expect any of you to risk your necks for me and what I’m doing. All I need is to get in back with HYDRA, and I can do the rest on my own. I take full responsibility for the hole I’ve dug myself in with this, so no feelings of obligation here from any of you.” He shrugged his shoulders as if that would convince them that any and all of them could walk away at any time.

Rollins frowned deeply. “I gave the Soldier the information about the scepter, and I know you can’t keep your nose clean when the asset is involved. I’m in to see this through.”

He nodded his head in acceptance but gave his second a grateful smile. “I owe you since that previous debt with you almost blowing my legs off seems repaid with the Pierce stuff,” he said with a feigned sigh of exasperation.

“How about that vintage baseball card collection I know you have tucked away some place or another?” Rollins smirked and everyone else chuckled.

“Done,” Rumlow replied without a hint of hesitation.

Hunter whistled an appreciative sound. “Shit, Captain really is in love… I’m in. I’ve got to see how this ends so I can put it on my blog. Can I get a picture of you two together for verification?”

He shot Hunter a withering look. “Fine but no facial shots, but we’ll both sign the back of it.”

And then everyone else weighed in on what they would want to have out of him, though he refused Riley’s demand that he get a tattoo of the Winter Soldier’s lips on his ass. That was a bit too far even for him, but he did give in for getting Riley’s Captain America card set signed, something that had previously not come up in conversation with Coulson slobbering all over Cap and then dying. It seemed that everyone was involved rather good-naturedly for the mission, if only to see how far he was willing to go and to get something out of the deal. He didn’t mind.

Rollins finally rose and gathered up their now empty glasses, somehow bringing silence with a glance. “There’s only one thing that will guarantee this will work within HYDRA.”

“What’s that,” Hunter said with a raised eyebrow.

“The Winter Soldier comes with us,” Rollins remarked and looked at him. Everyone else did as well.

In reply, Rumlow shifted a hand to his pants and pulled out a package of Sweet-Tarts, rubbing his thumb over the smooth package. His thumb caught on the edge and he plied it slightly, opening it carefully from the silver foil beneath. The corner of his lip upturned as he set the wrapper label down, smoothing it flat with his hands. There was faint writing that everyone leaned forward to see.

‘‘Winter is coming. I love you.’’

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I hope that you enjoyed it! Any comments or kudos are appreciated!
Planning

Chapter Notes

So I fail at getting a chapter up before a month, but I actually had no idea what I was going to put in here, since this chapter was projecting all the stuff that's going to happen in future chapters. And there was that unexpected thing in the middle.

This is only marginally read over, since I admit to sleep-deprivation. I apologize in advance for any glaring errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I want to taste my own kind.
I want to be wrapped in cold wet sheets to see if it's different on this side.
I want you to come on strong.”

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Slowly, gingerly, he leaned over the table, having to flex his shoulders slightly to work out a kink that had knotted one up. His fingers pushed two pictures to one side, the subjects of them of no interest to him any longer. The one below those two had his fingers pausing as his dark eyes flicked over the blurred image, and he didn’t fight the rise at the corner of his lips as he normally would. Being alone had benefits after all.

The pad of his index finger brushed the blurry image with a fondness that he refuse to show in the company of anyone else. He, unlike so many others, was not so weak as to expose himself in such a way. No, he had long ago mastered what needed to be mastered to be the best at what he did.

Soon, he thought.

There was a gentle knock on the door to his small room, and he reached out and gathered up the small stack of photos and arranged them neatly and evenly. Their order was of no importance, and he set them down next to the stack of files to his right. The large map that covered the table was almost sizeable enough to eat off of, but that too had little interest to him.

Again, there was a soft knock at the door, and he lifted his head as if drawing on small reserves of patience. “Come in,” he ordered softly.

He heard the door open and then close a moment later, and it was only when the lock slid into place again that he deigned to turn and face the young woman who had called upon him. She didn’t look nervous; that was good as he had little time for such dramatics.

“There is word,” she said simply. She was a woman of facts; it was the only reason he hadn’t shot her brains out yet. “STRIKE is being moved from a secure location of unknown origin to Detroit for initial trials for terrorism charges.”

“When,” he asked without a pause.

“According to our informant, they will arrive in Detroit either in three days time for seven days
time,” she drawled, standing so close to attention that he almost smiled. Almost.

He pushed off of the table and prowled towards her. “Why the discrepancy in dates?”

She shifted with his approach. “I am unaware of the reasoning.”

“What do you suspect?”

“The legal system is making accommodations where they can to keep this as low profile as possible,” she said, her gaze lingering on his face as if able to read what he might be thinking. “Beyond that, travel may be a problem.”

He nodded his head, his right fist clenching at his side for a moment before he practiced restrained and eased the tension from the limb. He was aware that she noticed. “I require that STRIKE team.”

“Yes sir,” she said with a small bow forward. “I will arrange a team to bring them in.”

Again, he offered her a nod, allowing himself to feel a brief relaxation. It hadn’t gone according to plan before, but he was back on track. That was what mattered more than anything, and soon enough, there would be nothing to stand in his way. So little time left, so few in his way. All in good time, he knew, but he had never particularly been a patient man. As long as he got what he wanted, that was all that concerned him right now.

He stepped away and walked to his chair, sinking into it with a soft noise of pleasure. “Bring me the six living members of that STRIKE team.”

“Seven, sir.”

His head snapped up, and his lips pulled into a feral snarl. “Seven? You told me six.”

“STRIKE Captain Rumlow has rejoined the group according to intelligence,” she said, a faint tremble in her voice now.

He hissed through clenched teeth and his hands reflexively grasped the arms of the chair. There was a stirring in his blood that was not altogether unexpected. “Has he now? So STRIKE has enough leadership and members to be completely useful to us?” He wasn’t thinking of usefulness anymore, not yet anyway.

“Their production is impressive,” the woman said, relieved that he hadn’t overreacted. “Shall I arrange for them to be brought to you once they are in our possession?”

“Yes, see that I meet with them promptly,” he agreed, rubbing his chin with his knuckles. “I have much to discuss with the Captain in particular.”

She nodded again, and the reflexive action was starting to annoy him. “Yes sir.”

“Good, now get out and see to our plans,” he said coldly.

It didn’t take more than that to drive her from the room, and only after the door clicked shut in her passage did he stretch out his legs gingerly and settle more into his chair. He drank in a deep breath and held it, his right hand leaving the arm of the chair so he could rub the tenting of his drawers with his palm. Suddenly, things were better than he had planned. He sighed out the breath that he had been holding and leaned his head back onto the rest, rubbing a sense of bliss through his body. Finally.
There was deep-seated apprehension that had nestled somewhere between the bottom of his ribs and his navel, though he did what he could to ignore its very existence. He knew that it was not misplaced, but it certainly wouldn’t help with the situation that was rapidly coming to the forefront of the fight against HYDRA. The situation was supposed to be in complete control, and yet he felt like it was far from it.

Some of his apprehension must have shown on his face because Natasha had been eyeing them for the last few minutes alone. He pretended to be examining the strange blue prints that were apparently Tony’s next big project, something about a Mark XXVII. It looked as impressive and confusing as any other blue print designs on Iron Man suits, but he wasn’t really looking too hard either. His mind was elsewhere.

“Why did you agree to this if you’re so uptight about it,” Natasha asked him pointedly. He was clearly being obvious.

“He made the decision for himself, and I’m not going to stand in the way of that,” he said. He had been telling himself that more often as the day drew closer to move STRIKE back to the United States. “I just don’t want him anywhere near HYDRA anymore.”

Natasha nodded and then folded her arms over her chest, still watching him. “He technically has allies going in with him.”

Steve shifted his shoulders and smoothed his fingers over the blue print. “Yeah, technically.”

“You don’t believe that Rumlow is sincere?”

“I don’t know what I believe about that man,” he admitted quietly. “Your opinion?”

Natasha quirked a smile at him, and she was clearly reading something more into his question than he was willing to admit. He trusted her judgment. “You’ve moved on from asking Sam every day and now you’re asking me?”

He gave a small winced and rubbed the back of his neck with a hand. “You were duped by him and STRIKE as much as I was. It’s not that I think you’re compromised in regards to him, but…” he trailed off lamely, not certain where he was going with it.

“No offense taken,” Natasha said dryly. “You have a point given our history with STRIKE and Rumlow in particular.”

“So,” Steve prompted her.

Natasha took her time to consider, mulling over everything that she had seen and heard and no doubt spied upon. She looked at him square in the eye. “I do believe he genuinely loves Barnes, but let’s be honest, their entire relationship was based on captivity and now twelve days of being together. That’s not a lot of time to know a person,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders. “I do think our Soldier is safe enough with Rumlow and by extension STRIKE.”

He nodded, wondering if he was disappointed by her answer or if he was relieved. He couldn’t quite decide, not when he had watched the pair together in the limited time that they had spent with one another. “He might be safe with them, but the rest of HYDRA…..”

“Rumlow claims he’s in a unique position within HYDRA, personally chosen by the Soldier to serve and command,” Natasha pointed out. “If that’s true, he had some dictation on what goes on. If it's
false, Barnes isn’t stupid and will act to save himself.”

Steve wasn’t so certain of that, but he couldn’t exactly say something and not come across as petty. He liked to believe that Bucky had control and could reasonably disassociate when necessary, but emotions blinded people. He knew it sometimes blinded him, but he fought that battle internally. It had no place anywhere else right now.

“I agree that they seem very fond of each other,” he murmured softly. “But HYDRA complicates things.”

“All they need to do is locate the scepter within HYDRA and then get out,” Natasha assured him. “It’s going to be far tougher to get to the scepter and use it.”

They would not speak on what would happen if it didn’t work or worse, if it did to Bucky what had been down to Clint by mistake. His best friend was stubborn on the point that the scepter was the single chance to correct years of mental torture all in one go, which Steve had his own apprehension about as well. That was a lot of damage to undo and worse, it was a lot of potential memories to return all at once. All that assured him was that Bucky was one of the strongest men mentally, physically and emotionally that Steve knew. Nothing was going to stop the Soldier, but he hoped that the after effects weren’t going to be too much to handle.

“Steve, we are going to know where he is and how he is coping,” Natasha added into the silence. “You have your part to play, and he has his.”

Steve nodded. “I won’t fail him.”

“You never do. I suspect your hard head and stubbornness contributes to your success,” she replied with a coy smile.

“And let’s not forget the dashing good looks,” Tony piped in as the door to the workshop opened to allow the billionaire to join them in the room. He immediately noticed the dark bloom of bruising on Tony’s right arm and on the right cheek.

“Did you and Barnes have a disagreement,” Natasha asked with a raised eyebrow, clearly asking after the source of the bruising. “You didn’t try to put a flamethrower in that arm, did you?”

“Please, flamethrowers are all 1950s era,” Tony said with a roll of the eyes. “Though I admit that I could upgrade that arm if only he’d…”

“Tony, what happened to your face and arm,” Steve cut in, not particularly comfortable with the notion that Bucky had purposefully brought harm to the other Avenger.

Tony, though, seemed unconcerned with the damage. “Oh just HYDRA booby-traps,” the billionaire said airily. “It is interesting how they defend their tech like that. I’m reasonably certain it would have been a lot worse if your pal had been unconscious.”

“So, the arm gave you a love tap,” Natasha managed to get in.

“No, but apparently if you remove the plates in the wrong order, ball bearings will fire out at high velocity for the technician’s face,” Tony mused. “Barnes has reflexes that could rival yours, Cap.”

Steve nodded, fully aware that Bucky was capable of many of the same things that he was, though his friend was far more specialized in quick silence movements. He had been apprehensive about Tony being involved in this as more than a distant consultant, but the apparent lure of technology on par with what Stark could do was too great to ignore. He was afraid to ask Tony about the arm
because the day might be over by the time the other Avenger stopped talking about upgrades and all
the little inner workings.

He turned his head when the door to the workshop opened again and the Soldier emerged fully
dressed and no worse for wear by his measure. Bucky prowled over to him, still holding a piece of
gauze against the spot where he knew a microchip had been inserted under the skin.

“Not so bad,” he asked softly at his friend came to settle next to him.

“He almost died,” the Soldier replied without preamble.

Steve smiled and gave Bucky’s left wrist a squeeze hard enough that he knew the sensors would
pick it up. “That’s pretty typical for Tony.”

Tony had apparently finished telling Natasha about some technological do-dad and track program
that JARVIS was capable of running for the operation and eyed the pair of them. “Hey, Ice Cubes,
are you certain that you don’t want STRIKE chipped?”

“No, too much low-frequency monitoring in one place can tip HYDRA off,” the Soldier said
blandly. “HYDRA has no reason to believe that they would be untrustworthy.”

“Yeah because they are oh so trustworthy,” Tony remarked with biting sarcasm.

Steve sighed. “All seven members have agreed to help.” He kept his voice carefully neutral,
assuaging his own anxiety on how badly this mission could go because Bucky had told him time and
again to trust the mission to his friend.

The only thing that kept him from losing his entire nerve was that Rumlow had, so far, kept truthful
any information provided and shuffled STRIKE into order on the island in that last few days. They
all knew the team had fallen easily under Rumlow’s strict but fair control, duties for eating, cleaning
and relaxation divided evenly with no preference for even Rollins and Rumlow. Everyone worked
their fair share, and in Steve’s mind, it was like watching an army unit who had been together for a
lot of missions and knew one another very well.

His only complaint was that they needed to stop punching each other. Sparring was happening more
and more with little else to do. Their monitoring had not deterred the team either who seemed to take
great pains and joy in driving one another into the floor under the eye of their fellows. They hadn’t
broken anything, not even furniture. The worst was bruising, shallow cuts and scuffed floorboards.

It was also his first personal look on how Rumlow was going to cope being the least physical of the
bunch. The man had been forced to go soft in the hospital, but the STRIKE team gave little regard
for going easy on their Captain and it was clear that Rumlow wanted no quarter given. Rollins in
particular seemed to take extra pleasure in laying into Rumlow, and the two often ended the night
with a scuffle.

Bucky explained that it was HYDRA politics in play. Rank and respect was acquired through both
merit of one’s physical attributes but also one’s survivability. Even though Rumlow more often than
not lost physical contests, the fact the Captain engaged viciously in the first place earned respect from
the members. Right now, Rollins picked on Rumlow not as an attempt to poach the Captaincy but as
a showing of brotherhood and giving Rumlow opportunity to exercise and improve before they were
all thrown into the snake pit that was HYDRA.

Steve didn’t understand that kind of politics, and he didn’t agree with it. He watched the antics when
it was his turn. His concern was what was going to happen when the Winter Soldier was added to
the mix. Bucky would, of course, always be his main priority.

“...Earth to Rogers, calling all Capsicles.”

Tony’s voice jarred his attention external again, and he looked around to find all three other people in the room watching him. He gave a sheepish shrug before flicking his gaze over when Bucky’s metal fingers caressed up the inside of his arm in an attempt to comfort him and offer inquiry as to his inattention. “Sorry, just considering elements of the mission.”

“Did you miss all of my highly informative discussion about how the chips work?”

His look clearly stated that he had missed all of it. “Give me the run down...?"

“Stop your mooning,” Tony said with a sigh and then launched into the two chips that were present on Bucky’s body. This time he made certain to pay attention. “Two chips, one hidden in that arm of his, though I expect if they do any heavy duty maintenance, they will find it. The other chip is inserted under his scalp and hidden in hair. Given they like to have the Soldier unseen, it shouldn’t be detected.”

Steve frowned and considered that. “How couldn’t they find it? If we can read the frequency, can’t HYDRA?”

Tony gave him a patient look as if he were a simpleton. “They’ll check him alright, but they won’t find it because it is actually going to be activate by HYDRA when the check him. The scan uses a low-frequency wavelength that reacts to certain metals and tracking devices that emit them. My device is activated after it comes in contact with the scanning wavelength, with a delay of course.”

He was pleased that even Bucky seemed a little confused over the explanation, though he knew that his friend was far more up-to-date with certain types of technology, mainly weapons, vehicles and equipment used on the job. Bucky was unfortunately untrained with simple technology like the fact that sticking a knife into a toaster when the bread was stuck was a bad idea. The poor toaster never saw it coming, but the flames announced his friend well enough.

“Once the trackers are active, we’ll be able to know Barnes’ location in longitude and latitude as well as elevation against sea level. It’s rudimentary, but I wasn’t going to risk any more than that,” Tony confided with a shrug. There was also the unspoken point that they hadn’t given Stark time to come up with anything small and flashy.

Natasha tossed him a watch. “That will give you access to keeping track of his location. I’ll show you how it works when we get out of here.”

Steve fiddled with the various buttons, puzzle-solving which of the four buttons did what. It didn’t take him long to note which extra screen would do what. “What’s the alarm for, Tony?”

“One is if the arm goes dead,” Tony murmured, eyeing him as if his ability to work out the watch was surprising. It was nothing more than a mocking poke at the age in which he had come from and hopefully not done maliciously. “The second alarm is if Barnes goes unconscious forcibly.”

Bucky was examining the healing spot where the microchip had been inserted. “How will it tell the difference between sleep-based unconsciousness and traumatic-based unconsciousness?”

“Brain waves,” Tony replied soberly. “They drug you or knock you out, your brain waves will give off a certain signal. You’re sleeping and part of your mind is still active enough to not alert the sensor.”
“Did Bruce help you with that?” Natasha was clearly wondering if the doctor was in the building and just not coming out to greet them.

Tony still soured regardless of innocence. “Really, I’m offended. I’m smart enough to create a chip so basic without input, you know.”

“So he contributed then,” the red headed woman pressed.

“He… might have made a few suggestions,” Tony admitted with a smirk. “Once we patent it, I’ll give him sixteen percent credit for it.”

Steve sighed and rubbed his forehead with a hand. Tony and Bruce were close, so this was actually just poking fun at the rest of them rather than at Doctor Banner. It certainly didn’t make Tony any easier to deal with at times, but he had learned to just let that sort of stuff go rather than spend a huge amount of time considering if it was worth getting affronted over or on behalf of someone else. Tony was going to be Tony regardless.

“Is there anything else you need to gloat about,” Steve asked dryly.

“Well, now that you ask Cap, I did improve Barnes’ arm.”

“Stark…” Bucky hissed softly, suddenly staring daggers at the billionaire. His friend had specifically refused any ‘improvements’.

“Buck, it’s okay,” Steve soothed.

“Yikes, the Titanic-sinker has even less of a sense of humour than you do,” Tony intoned, clearly unaware or uncaring about the potential danger of crossing Bucky.

“Shouldn’t you be a good host and get us something to drink,” Natasha said, cutting off any potential argument smoothly. She was perhaps one of the few who had lived through an encounter with the Soldier when Bucky was fully combat ready and willing to kill. “I’ll take a vodka.”

“Typical,” Tony mocked but clearly considered the benefit of drinking a one in the afternoon.

All three of them stayed near the workshop entrance as Tony walked off to get them all drinks, no doubt determining what he and Bucky would drink. He knew it would involve a lot of ice and an inappropriate joke about being frozen. He wouldn’t be surprised if Stark had some kind of hard alcohol from the year that he was born or something.

“You two can make a break for it and I’ll distract him,” Natasha said, gesturing for the elevator. “Just remember to keep scarce, alright? And Barnes, look like you’re pining or something if you are seen.”

Steve didn’t need to be told twice. They had plenty to organize for the next few days, and there was an unspoken tension in his friend when Stark had been brought in. It was better if they took their leave with a positive note rather than the usual potential antagonism that Tony seemed to bring out in people, and for his part, he wanted to spend some time with Bucky before this all went down. There was no telling what condition his friend was going to be in once it began to go off.

“Come on, Buck,” he intoned and turned away. The Soldier followed without question.

***

It was Bucky’s last night of potential freedom for awhile, and they had taken a break from sparring and packing and talking about the details that were known. The STRIKE team was being packed up
as well and they would be in the air to return States-side by the early morning hours. The Soldier was going to meet with them at the airport with a brave team of volunteers dressed in FBI outfits who understood that on this mission their lives weren’t assured.

HYDRA was no doubt keeping track of planes, and while the court date was scheduled under different names. However, he had been assured that HYDRA had intelligence in most of the large organizations, including the penal system. He was also assured that HYDRA would be looking for any sign that the STRIKE team was coming to town to either eliminate them or capture them. Bucky was there to make the temptation of capture overwhelm any idea of mass murder in the airport or outside of it.

There were a lot of unknowns, which made him very nervous. He comforted himself with the fact that Bucky seemed to take all of this in stride. If anything, his friend seemed to be determined to use this opportunity to succeed in many things, including acquiring and coping with all those stolen memories.

Steve sighed and shifted to settle himself more into the couch cushion that he was currently taking up. He licked the spoon gamely and reached out to take the tub of strawberry ice cream from Bucky’s metal hand. He dug out some, though it was getting to the bottom by now, meaning he’d have to get up to get the other four liter tub from the freezer soon.

He thoughtfully chewed on his spoonful of ice cream and his eyes were fixed on the television. They were at the tail end of Casablanca, though neither of them were entirely paying attention anymore. “We should do a roadtrip when you get back.”

“Where?”

Steve shrugged. “I don’t know. We never got to travel much before the war, and I’d like to see more of the United States. It seems like all I did with SHIELD was travel outside of the country, but aside from the Eastern seaboard, I haven’t seen much else.”

He glanced over to see his friend considering the information, and the corners of his lips quirked at the way that Bucky sucked on the end of the spoon thoughtfully. It was such a human gesture and reminded him so much of childhood antics that his chest felt painful. Those little signs drew him more than anything, the knowledge that his friend would never be the same as before but was coming back here and there, melding the two lives together.

These were the little moments that he lived for right now. Steve needed nothing else from his time with his best friend.

“Is the Western seaboard nice?”

“I’ve seen pictures, and yeah, it’s really nice. There’s a lot of good hiking trails and landmarks to see,” he said between licking the melting ice cream on his spoon. “Lots of wildlife over there too.” Not that there wasn’t here, but it was different and new to them both.

“I think we should find a bear,” Bucky said suddenly.

Steve had to laugh and swallowed the last of the melting mess on his spoon. “Why a bear?”

“Why not a bear? Have you ever wrestled one before?” That was such an odd question, and yet so Bucky that he could just shake his head a little. “Brown bears are bigger.”

“Yeah, but black bears can climb trees,” he pointed out.
The Soldier eyed him before scooping out some ice cream from the tub. “Well yes, wrestling a bear in a tree would increase the difficulty.”

That hadn’t been his point at all, but he was still chuckling at the imagery all the same. He flopped his head down against the back of the couch. “There are other animals you can wrestle. I hear moose and badgers are pretty nasty to go up against.”

His friend shifted next to him and proceeded to finish off the little left in the tub of ice cream and set it down on the coffee table. Bucky was clearly considering his words, and he cracked a smile at the contemplative look. He was about to suggest going to look up a picture of each of those animals when his friend just huffed noisily.

“Moose are bigger, but badgers are predators with bad tempers. I’d just take the legs out on a moose and the battle is mine,” the Soldier said知识ably. “I figure if I had a sack, I could get the badger in and then beat it against a tree.”

Steve grabbed the small square pillow from behind him and swung it at Bucky’s head in a great imitation of a badger in a sack. He laughed when it hit. “That’s animal cruelty either way, and I’d put you in a sack and beat you like any good activist.”

The expected happened when the Soldier grabbed the other small pillow, and they childishly descended into smacking each other s hard as they could. The pillows didn’t last more than ten blows before exploding in a shower of feathers and fluff, covering them both.

“Having feather pillows is animal cruelty,” Bucky said triumphantly. “What did those ducks and geese do to you?”

“They put food on the table,” Steve countered with as he picked a few stray feathers out of his hair. “And feathers in pillows apparently.”

The Soldier gave him a wolfish look, which was far more efficient because his friend had a feather caught against that lower lip. He reached out and plucked it off, earning a nip of teeth for his efforts and freezing in response to it. The feather fluttered in his grip, trying to escape, but his eyes were fixed on Bucky’s.

They were a world apart until metal fingers curled around his wrist and drew him away from where he had been lounging. He went like in some sort of dream, meeting his friend in the middle and dislodging yet more feathers barely clinging to his skin. He slipped an arm across the back of Bucky’s shoulders, applying each pressure to press their chests together.

The Soldier’s nose bumped against his, teasing as they applied pressure to each other in order to try to force the other to lay back on the couch. He nudged his nose back against Bucky’s, unable to keep the smile from his face at their antics.

“I think I should call you my little badger from now on,” Steve murmured teasingly.

“Only if I get to call you moose,” Bucky replied with a predatory grin. For some reason, it looked good on his friend.


The Soldier pressed harder against him, and he momentarily tipped but recovered a moment afterwards. He waged more strength to even their odds, but he let out a surprised noise when his friend relented completely and they both tipped to one side. Bucky hit back on the cushion and
awkwardly on the arm of the couch, forcing him to try to abandon his press.

Unfortunately, the Soldier clearly knew what he would do and grabbed him hard around the shoulders and rolled them both right off the couch. A loud thump sounded when they met with the floor. “Took you out the knees, didn’t I moose?”

He snorted and shoved at Bucky to dislodge his friend from laying on him, but that formidable metal arm settled across the top of his chest and held him down. He shifted in an attempt to roll but was unable, forcing him to set his hands on the Soldier’s hips and would have pried Bucky off of him if his friend didn’t suddenly lean down and kiss him.

Steve froze physically and his brain jammed with the sheer notion of the embrace. His first thought was how nice Bucky’s mouth was against his own, but the second that quickly followed was that those kind of gestures were for Rumlow. Yet, he responded with a disturbing lack of self control, thinking this was a trick but willing to go with it for that single chance to be this close.

Bucky didn’t pull away as he expected, but their kiss turned from a simple press of lips to nudging and a gentle exploration before his friend’s tongue tentatively nudged the space between his lips. He inhaled sharply, allowing that muscle into his mouth and moaning softly at the taste and feel of Bucky in control like this, so close to him and yet so far away. It was bittersweet.

It didn’t last as long as he liked, but it was longer than he expected. It ended as it began, just a withdrawal with no particular attention paid to the details.

He found himself staring up at the Soldier, aware that his face was burning, and his eyes darted down to regard Bucky’s lips. They were pulled up in a faint smile.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” he reasonably said.

“No, we shouldn’t have,” his friend agreed and then kissed him again, just a quick peck on the lips. “But we did.”

Steve drew in a deep breath and suddenly raised a hand to press against the Soldier’s lips as they came back for another sweet kiss. He shook his head, hating to refuse but aware it was for the best. They couldn’t do this; Bucky and Rumlow were together. It was a betrayal regardless of how much he didn’t trust the HYDRA agent; he agreed that the man genuinely loved Bucky.

“Please don’t make this harder,” he whispered softly. “You and Rumlow are together, not us.”

Bucky nodded slowly and curled arms across his chest and lay quiet and thoughtful. He dropped his hand from his friend’s lips onto that metal hand, stroking the smooth cool surface with his thumb.

They stayed like that for a long time, just watching each other. In the dim light, he couldn’t say that he had ever felt closer to Bucky than he did now, even as the credits began to roll on their movie with no idea of the ending. This silence and those eyes were enough to hold him where he was, wondering silently how much of the Soldier and how much of Bucky was going to come back from this mission once it was over.

“May I sleep in your bed tonight?”

“That seems… risky,” Steve confided softly. A part of him leapt at the idea of saying yes though, to be able to share in something that he knew that Rumlow experienced and he had been denied.

A part of him needed to experience that pain, the silence in the night that would lead them both down the road of just some of the coping that Bucky was forced to do in the night. A part of him, small and
hidden, was jealous but he kept it so clamped down that he generally refused to acknowledge it, especially after he had seen the pair together in some of those quiet moments when neither thought he was looking. It reminded him of those times when Bucky would come home from a particularly good date with a smile, a sigh, and the smell of perfume on whatever clothing his friend had been wearing that night.

“Moose,” Bucky said softly, earning a snort from him. Those names were not going to stick.

“Yeah Badger?” Just for one night, it was okay. It was just them having a bit of fun and mischief.

“May I sleep with you tonight?”

Steve dropped his eyes from staring at the ceiling to regard Bucky’s face. He knew the answer that he was supposed to say, and his fingers lifted and caressed the pads of his fingers along his friend’s chin and jaw. The corner of his lip lifted slightly at the flutter that half-closed the Soldier’s eyes.

He didn’t put up much of a fight when Bucky leaned down to kiss him, fingers curling against the curve of his friend’s jaw as he kissed back. It was a sweet little thing, less about passion and more about seeking the comfort of one another. Perhaps Bucky recognized that it could and would go no further than this and just needed that affection before the mission that might change everything.

It was easy to lose track of time while they were kissing, his hand finally curling around to stroke his fingers up and down the Soldier’s neck. It took no time at all for fingers to creep along his neck and then come up to stroke his cheeks in return. They parted for a moment and then kissed once, twice, three times in quick succession, lazy little things that brought a wistful smile to his lips.

By mutual consent, they broke apart and settled down where they had fallen. He didn’t even insist on bed clothes, just lay quiet and comfortable. He only moved an arm to search out first the remote for the television to turn it off and then a blanket that Rumlow had used for sleeping on the couch. He pulled it over them both and arranged it haphazardly over them both.

He fell asleep with his best friend nestled down on his chest, a careless and solid of a presence. It was one of the best sleeps he had had since waking up from the ice.

When the apparent inevitable occurred in the form of warm wetness spreading between them, he sighed and rubbed his hands up and down his friend’s back. It was a privilege to be trusted to that degree, nothing that he found shameful about. This was all HYDRA, all the abuse suffered but hopefully soon to be corrected.

Steve smiled, finding it all very bittersweet. He had finally found Bucky again, and his friend would be gone within a few hours. It was better to be productive with his end of things rather than consider what he might lose in the process of this.

He wanted to consider what he might gain.

He stroked his fingers up into Bucky’s hair, giving the locks a gentle tug. “Rise and shine, Badger.”

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“Did you see the feed?”

“Yeah,” Steve said simply, his hands deep into his kit-bag organizing his gear. “Everything went better than expected. No one lost their life anyway.”

Sam made a noncommittal noise, clearly trying to judge his reaction rather than have an opinion on
the matter. He listened to his friend packing up the supplies that had not yet made it into a kit-bag, and he was well aware that he was being watched. “You’re allowed to miss him. This isn’t exactly a conventional mission.”

Steve sighed and shrugged his shoulders a little. “I know, but he can handle himself.”

“In a HYDRA base?” Sam didn’t often sound skeptical.

“With a team of agents who have pledged to do all they can to help him,” Steve said. He might be able to believe slightly (very slightly indeed) that Rumlow was trustworthy enough on this mission. “If I think about what could go wrong, I won’t be able to help make things go right.”

Sam relented and returned to packing quietly. They had to suit up and be in position within two hours, and they weren’t going to do that standing around worrying.

Their plan of action, for all that could go wrong, had gone well. The STRIKE team had been escorted off the plane in cuffs and chains, a team of specialized agents dressed as regular police escort. The small airbase was supposed to be secure, but reports had said HYDRA was probably watching it and all the others with at least one agent. He had suspected that the manifest had been compromised though because the action had come very quickly.

Before being loaded in a secure police tactical truck, the Winter Soldier had appeared and, as planned, made a very convincing and high-priority target. Even in disguise, Bucky had hugged and clung to Rumlow while the agent had crowed and made an excellent show of their connection to one another. The rest of STRIKE had played along, cat-calling and jeering the guards, distracting enough that when the hit came, it was clean and crisp.

And it had been. The agents disguised as officers had been taken out with some sort of chemical dart and Rumlow had ordered the Soldier to stand down immediately. HYDRA had come to retrieve the team, but it was the STRIKE captain who had made such a good show of calling down the Soldier that made it believable.

It made Steve momentarily doubt. He had thought he had lost Bucky.

Natasha had been the one to point out the way that Rumlow’s eyes had found Bucky’s as they had been loaded into the truck. It had been a brief look, the distance from the camera watching the scene too grainy to tell what the look was about, but it was telling. The Soldier had relaxed with absolute trust and gone quietly enough, though making a clear threat that no one but Rumlow could even consider touching the Soldier.

SHIELD technology had lost track of the van after an hour of travel, and it was later found abandoned in a police vehicle depot. There were no signs of where the team had gone, but everyone knew that it was overseas. There were too many airports, small and large, to keep track of, though they had a few pegged as suspicious.

They simply had to wait for HYDRA to scan the team and activate the low-frequency chip under Bucky’s scalp. That would give them a location to go on, but there was no telling when they would happen, though Stark had assured him after this mission had gone down that it was HYDRA and thus would do whatever they could to be suspicious and snake-like.

“Right, everything is packed up,” Sam said from behind him. “You going to cover your shield or just go in all obvious-like?”

Steve smiled and pushed the last few items into his kit-pack and zipped it up. “I was thinking that
obvious would be the best policy for this.”

“Well, you do know how to make an entrance,” Sam agreed with a toothy smile. “I think there’s an American flag around here that we can tie to your harness so you have a cape, man.”

“Excuse me? You realize that it’s illegal to damage a national flag?” And there was a big chance that he was going to get damaged in this. A part of him was hoping for it; he wanted the distraction.

Sam t’sked softly. “I guess that’s why so many of the terrorist organizations burn them, huh? Why don’t we arrest those people?” His friend’s voice was particularly lofty, but the smile was all teasing.

“Volatile international borders,” Steve replied, faking deep seriousness, his expression grave.

“Come on, America should just annex them all to us. Where has the good old melting pot theory gone? Probably the good old days,” Sam replied as his friend lifted and hitched the heavy kit-pack up onto a shoulder. “No international borders if we own everyone anyway.”

Steve had to roll his eyes, mostly because he was aware that such a theory wasn’t all that theoretical in some places. That kind of arrogance degraded the American values, but he knew better than to comment. Sam knew how he felt on the matter, the live-and-let-live manner that he knew his friend also believed in. The jesting helped to ease some of his tension all the same.

He hauled up his kit-pack and settled it on his shoulders. He gave too hops to settle it comfortably on his back and then strapped it to his body. He was forcing his mind to focus on the mission at hand, not the one that was happening where his help was limited and distant. He was to perform his part, and Bucky would make a go for the scepter. That was the goal along with bringing down HYDRA.

He paused in tightening the last strap around his belly when Sam held out a bag of Skittles to him. He looked up in surprise. “That’s not mine.”

“I found it between the couch cushions,” Sam said with a smile and pushed the red package into his hand. “You’re allowed to miss him.”

“Am I allowed to love him?”

Sam stilled in front of him and then smiled. “Yeah, there’s no harm in that. He’s like a brother to you.”

Steve nodded his head slowly. “We kissed last night.”

“Is that all you two did?” Sam raised an eyebrow of serious inquiry.

“Yeah, just… a couple of kisses,” he admitted softly. A part of him didn’t want to tell because that had been a moment between just himself and Bucky.

“So… are you any better at it? Nat said you needed practice,” Sam replied with a teasing smile. “Was it like kissing frozen metal?”

Steve flushed bright red and felt like his uniform was suddenly all too warm to be in. “Well…. we had just finished eating ice cream…”

Sam laughed and wacked him on the arm affectionately. He watched his friend give him an amused look and just let the topic go, clearly expecting that he knew what he was doing. He actually didn’t, compromised when it came to his best friend. Just like Rumlow.
He sighed and grabbed his shield from leaning against the couch, pausing at the feather that was clinging to one of the handles. He smiled as he plucked it off of his shield and held it aloft, letting it drift off of his fingers in the movements of air that Sam created walking passed him to head for the door. The little feather drifted and fluttered about, teasing and attractive.

Maybe that was the Winter Soldier too. The man was dangerous, skilled and alluring, a small taste of better things amid all the violence and chaos of the world. Bucky was an attracting force like a magnet, pulling the most unexpected people in, people like Rumlow and STRIKE who were deadly efficient at their jobs but had may never before known that kind of love coming in out of the cold.

Steve decided that Bucky would be as safe with that team as his friend would have been with the Avengers. His best friend would come home, and he’d help this time to bring both the Soldier and James Barnes back.

***

He was standing at the window looking out at the movement of materials into the base, his hands clasped behind his back and ignored the way that they clenched and unclenched each half minute. He was expecting word any time now, whether success or failure. It had better be good news or he almost considered pitying the individual sent to give him the news. He would not be gentle on them. Gentleness was for the weak. It left a man open for exploitation. One must be hard a steel, as unmovable as stone, but malleable to situations to exploit the weaknesses of others.

He turned his head when there was a knock on the door to his office, his shoulders tensing. The blond woman entered and her expression was all that he needed to know that the retrieval operation was a success. Finally, after so long…

“We got them, sir,” she said, smiling at the corner of her lips as if she deserved praise.

“ETA?”

“Sixteen hours,” she replied promptly. “They will go through two relays first before arrival and exchange vehicles four times.”

He nodded his head to accept the information, and it was the way that he would have done it had the operation been entirely in his hands. It wasn’t, but he had a personal stake in the matter and his superior understood that. That was good because he wanted so few things aside from the serve well and to pay back the debt that he had accumulated over the years. This single goal was his, something he would be a part of and no one would stand in his way for it.

Slowly, he turned away from the window and regarded the blond woman with a scowl. “Are you still here?”

She knew better than to express her distaste at his tone. “Yes sir. The team has told me that they recovered HYDRA equipment.”

Had they now? That was interesting. “What kind of equipment? It seems impossible that SHIELD would leave anything worthwhile on a group of terrorist traitors.”

“All I was told was that it was the kind of equipment that would need to be cooled,” she murmured, clearly not understanding the reference.

He did. He understood perfectly.
His breath caught in his throat for a single moment, warmth suffusing his body and a tingle that he quickly stamped out from giving him away at all. Within that single moment, he considered thanking the captain for the good work, but that team would be of better use without any praise.

Then he felt shrewd suspicion set in. Wasn’t all this too perfect? First STRIKE, then adding Rumlow back to the roster, and now this? He didn’t believe in coincidences, and he had only underestimated one thing in his life. It was not a mistake that he planned on doing again, but the problem was that HYDRA would be overjoyed with this return of powerful resources. There may be little he could do, but he dig for pertinent information once they arrived.

“Inform me when they are within half an hour of arriving,” he ordered coldly, brushing his assistant off with a wave of his hand. “And make certain my chair is operational. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir.”

He returned to staring out the window, but he was no longer seeing the work being done. His mind was elsewhere. Instead, his expression softened slightly. A trap, but a very, very tempting one, he decided.

If that pair was still close, he’d have the advantage. If they weren’t, he’d still have the pleasure of their company all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who have taken the time to read my work! I hope you enjoy it. Comments and kudos are always appreciated!
Negotiations

Chapter Notes

Ah ha, success at getting a chapter up before the deadline that I set for myself. Okay, I admit it was easier to write than some of them because I just love writing conflict. It's a bad habit, but entirely necessary for fics of this nature. I mean, who wants cute and cuddly all the time anyway?

Anyway, as usual, this fic is not beta read, and it's slightly longer than the previous ones. All mistakes found come with apologies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I want to leave you out in the cold.
I want the exact same thing but different.
I want some soft drugs...some soft, soft drugs.”

*****

It was hot enough and the wind brought up enough sand for him to identify that they were at some sort of desert base. He had been blindfolded and placed back into his half-mask muzzle, which removed most of his ability to sense what sort of environment that they were in. Still, he knew the brush of sand against his forehead before that too disappeared as they entered into a much cooler cavern. It was obviously stone based on the sound generated from their footfalls and how it echoed.

The STRIKE team was marched in ahead of him, the main bulk of the salvage team walking a semi-circle around him. While he was deemed the most dangerous of the group, he was also the most prized possession and no one was willing to lose him.

None of them could know that he wanted to be here.

He was keenly aware of Rumlow walking ahead of him, the man’s swagger different because of the scarring but still confident. They were one step closer to the true mission objective, even if he knew that they were walking into some of the most dangerous territory. The rustle and jingle of chains indicated that they were as much prisoners as contributing members of HYDRA.

The STRIKE team would have the hardest time of all, balancing between loyal members and traitors. All he had to do was settle down and act the part of the Winter Soldier again, which he was more than willing to do if it allowed him access to his memories. Rumlow had to keep him out of the chair, which might be the most difficult of all because he couldn’t risk losing what he had now.

The Soldier stopped with the pull of the chain that emanated from the cuffs around his wrists. He remained still and unmoving when there was a pounding on a large metal door in a set sequence of sound. He memorized it, listening to the words that indicated that their party had arrived safely and without incident.

The door that separated the cave with the rest of the facility opened with fully-functioning locks moving and then the gliding whisper of the heavy door itself. There were the rattle of chains ahead of
him as the team was moved in and a moment later, a tug on his own chain to indicate that he was to walk forward, and he felt a prickle of energy along his skin as he passed the threshold to come to stand into a wide amphitheater.

They were drawn to a stop, and he could tell how big the room was by the sound of footfalls moving away from him, the shift of men lining the walls. The STRIKE team remained stationary and apparently unimpressed with the show of whatever power was being displayed. HYDRA, now more than ever, felt the need to flex their muscles to impress their own then?

“Home sweet home,” Rollins muttered ahead of him.

“Like having your balls in a vice,” Rumlow drawled, clearly unimpressed.

“You’d know all about that, captain,” Rollins replied with a shift of chains. He suspect some kind of lewd gesture was happening with the way that his Ravasz chuckled. “Vice-grips…”

“Hey now, I’ve told you before, I’m the catcher, not the pitcher,” Rumlow said maliciously. Rollins sounded a noise of disgust as a way of reply. “Now that I think about it… kind of like sitting on a baseball bat sometimes…”

“Why am I on your team again?”

“Why are any of us on his team,” Hunter piped up closer to the front of the group. Clearly everyone had been listening in.

The Soldier shifted his weight, purposefully sounding the chains around him and there was a stillness that came to the room that went even beyond the STRIKE team. He lifted his head and while he couldn’t see, he purposefully blew a loud breath out of the mesh of his mask, sounding very much like a bull setting up for charge.

He could hear at least two men at the walls swallowing hard and perhaps a pin drop in the silence. It had made his point clear enough even if he felt the weight of an appreciative gaze and knew instantly that Rumlow had turned to look at him. He shuffled his shoulders in response, settling down into a more leisurely stance, smiling behind the muzzle that caged his nose and mouth.

Rumlow softly chuckled.

Rollins muttered a very soft, “goddamn murder boyfriend.”

Any other quick and easy banter stopped at the sound of many booted feet moving entering into their space, filling the room with marching soldiers, and he felt the STRIKE team ahead of him come to attention by the way that, in unison, their boot heels connected even in the sound of their welcoming party having arrived.

The Soldier shifted his weight to be as close to attention as he would allow himself when surrounded by the potential threat. He tilted his head one way and then the other to locate the soldier’s settling close to him, but they would take at least two full steps to get to. He assessed the number of soldiers in the room to be about fifty to sixty, though he couldn’t tell what they were armed with. He knew this showing required an obvious impression of guns.

Suddenly the shuffle of soldiers went still as a loud clapping of hands sounded, and his head turned towards the sound. There was a low deep-voice chuckling that following, not one that he recognized and by the stillness in front of him, the STRIKE team might not either.

“Excellent,” a deep baritone said, the source of the clapping. “Excellent, look at you all. Returned to
the bosom of your true beginning.” The man’s voice sounded mature with age, and it carried an undertone of steel to it. “Your track record is not unknown to me, not even with the shadow of Pierce’s failure hanging over you all.”

There was a distinct silence that followed, clearly no one daring to consider speaking up against the ex-Secretary at this point. That placed this man closer to the top in the ranks of HYDRA. Heads of the organization were both companionable and rivals.

“And there is our prize.”

The Soldier knew that the man was referring to him, and he remained passive as heavy feet walked around to the left of the STRIKE team to approach him directly. There was a brush against the blindfold of a finger, and he bowed his head down until there were fingers tugging the mechanism open and the material was lifted from his head, returning his sight to him.

The man next to him was clearly in charge, the expectant hungry look one that he somehow remembered when Pierce occasionally brought him to HYDRA gatherings as a warning and a gift. The buzz cut showed just enough greying hair to place the man’s age around the sixth decade, but his strong box-like body was all strength and authority. The man was shorter than he was by a few inches, giving the appearance of a very stocky bulldog, but the brown eyes that looked him over were cunning and fierce, alight with intelligence.

“One of the Schmidt’s stolen treasures,” the man said, reaching out to touch the cool metal of his prosthetic. “Not all relics of the war came away whole, but it doesn’t seem to have tarnished you. You will be put to work again. You have no problem with this?”

He blinked his eyes slowly, lazily as it wasn’t the Winter Soldier’s place to decide when and how he would be put to use. His reaction - or rather lack of one - pleased the aged man in front of him. He watched as those cunning eyes swept from him to the back of Rumlow’s head, clearly aware of the circumstances of his ‘capture.’

“You,” the older man said, pointing at one of their escorts. “Get this team settled in the barracks and see they are fed, watered and given appropriate attire.”

There was a brief shift of soldiers, a lackness of the guard to a quiet brotherly acceptance of the STRIKE team. People were arranged now that the show was over and it seemed that they would be moved. He keenly watched the way that things were so entirely ordered, not just as a show but a firm ease of discipline that had long ago reached every single member of this facility. That meant it was well-run, which made the man who had greeted them not a person to trifle with lightly.

“You, my prize, shall be debriefed immediately,” the aged man said in the general shuffle. “HYDRA needs all of its resources in play right now, but there is also an issue of your previous freedom. We shall take care of that promptly.”

His nostrils flared behind the mask even if the rest of his face remained passive. His eyes flicked to Rumlow who, at the same moment, turned to glance back at him. Their gazes met, and he was certain that the shift of his head indicated his alarm towards his lover.

“Sir…” Rumlow took a huge risk interrupting, and he felt a swell of appreciation.

“I know you,” came the reply, amusement laying over disapproval. “Pierce spoke highly of you, thought you might have what it takes to go far. You’re the reason our prize stood down, are you not?”
Rumlow was all soldierly steel and order. “Yes sir, I’ve been a handler of the Soldier for nineteen years.”

“Have you?” There was something off, though he couldn’t tell what it was.

“Yes sir, the Soldier and I are a packaged deal,” Brock said, the set of shoulders the only deference of rank. “We participate in missions together.”

There was a moment when the pair of them was considered together and then separately, and in that time of scrutiny, many of the lines of soldiers had been marched out to return to their stations. It was all order as well as showing.

The STRIKE team was also about to be moved, but the man in charge suddenly pointed at Rollins. “You, can you verify the claim?”

Rollins gave him a flat look. “Yes sir, I’ve known Rumlow since before he was handler, and during his tenure as well. Pierce relied on him to keep missions involving the Soldier in line and running smoothly.” All professionalism despite that he knew that Rollins could make it clear that he and Rumlow were more than handler and weapon. If their capture had been seen, it would have been obvious though.

“Dismissed but you two,” the old man said, waving a hand to send Rollins after the rest of STRIKE. “Agent Dallins, take our prize and his keeper to the basement debriefing room.”

The cuffs around their wrists were not removed, a fact that passed between himself and Rumlow as they were gestured and guided away from the entrance rom to travel deeper into the facility. It was all cold steel with rock as the walls, doors placed here and there with a guard generally posted outside of them. For a secure facility, it seemed to be either making a good show of the personnel or not as secure as one would have liked to believe.

The ease in which the soldiers carried out their duties made him think it was all show, and he followed behind Rumlow down the long wide hallway, bypassing at least two elevators and arriving at the end at a third. His lover stepped into the elevator, and he made a slight show of lingering outside of it, eyeing the doors and the small confined space with suspicion.

Rumlow, sensing his coy game, chuckled even as their escort looked slightly apprehensive. “Come on inside,” his lover said, gesturing with a cuffed hand for him to enter. When he hesitated, Rumlow’s expression hardened. “In, Soldier.” The words brooked no-nonsense.

He walked into the elevator and stepped up to Rumlow, leaning down slightly to rest his forehead on his handler’s shoulder. He breathed through the mask without trouble, but he whispered the word Ravasz to Rumlow, feeling the gentle caress to his belly from bound hands. He stepped in more, but his lover’s hands rose to press against his chest to stop him from sealing their bodies together.

“Easy now,” Brock rumbled softly to him. “This is our home now, but I’m with you.”

It was all a pre-arranged act to show his reliance on Rumlow, to impress on those watching that weapon and handler went together. He might have previously had his freedom with Steve, but he had come back to Rumlow and that meant that he had gone back to HYDRA. It had be made that way to keep him from the chair, to make Brock’s importance to him such that the man could dictate where he went and what sort of maintenance he required.

Their escort remained silent but was passing little glances their way, and he only issued a single wordless rumbling to Rumlow, still crowding his lover purposefully. He was easily pushed away
when the elevator door opened to show them to a very different hallway, one that was more stone than steel sheeting on the walls. The floor was smooth though and the lighting was brighter than it had to be. It gave off a hum that was distracting to his sensitive ears.

“This way, sir,” the soldier escort said.

He fell in line with Rumlow’s elbow, sensing his lover’s tension at how isolated this area was. The doors in this hallway were evenly set into the very stone, all closed and no guards posted whatsoever. Even branches of hallways that they crossed had no one, as if they were the only ones down here. It made the sounds of their footsteps echo, though he very specifically set his feet so that his would not make much sound. The emptiness was gaping the further they went, and his nostrils flared behind his mask but the air down here was well circulated and clean with the illusion of freshness.

They were escorted down an impossibly long hallway, only to be directed into a room with a set of double doors. He noted that it was the only set of double doors, no guards, no locks, no security whatsoever. A sense of apprehension had him sticking close to Rumlow as his Ravasz led the way confidently into the room.

He glanced around at the relatively empty space that opened up before them, only a desk covered in various sized boxes to the right and folded tables and chairs lining the walls. He made an estimate that at least two hundred men could be seated in the room given its proportions. A projector hung from the steel ceiling. There were framed pictures all along the wall, all evenly spaced with care and he numbered them at about thirty-five.

“Wait here,” their escort, Dallins, said simply. “And don’t touch anything.”

“What, with our bound hands?” Rumlow shook the chain so that it made an obvious sound. “Are we still prisoners here or HYDRA agents?”

“Just wait here,” the soldier said and snapped the door shut with a resounding noise given the empty neat room.

He turned his head to regard Rumlow, stepping over to nuzzle the half mask on his lover, but he was pushed away with impatient hands. He made a soft sound, ignoring the hard look that he was given and sidling over anyway. This time Rumlow let him and he set his hands on his lover’s waist and butted his masked face against the back of Brock’s head.

He followed in step as Rumlow made a circle of the desk to check it for anything unsavoury, but it was clearly just piled with old files and cases based on the numbers. The drawers were locked of course, but it was him who drifted away from the desk to look at the picture closest to the desk. It was a facial shot of a twenty-five year old dark-haired soldier. It caused a small smile at the sight of the small one that the young man was wearing, and he lifted his fingers to brush against the glass.

He knew this face. He didn’t remember that youth, but he knew those angles, that cock-sure smile.

“It’s you,” he murmured softly, his first words since their capture.

“What?”

He turned from where he was admiring the handsome face of Brock Rumlow to the far older, scarred but no less impressive man by the desk. He gestured at the photo. “They have a picture of you on the wall. You’re very handsome.”

Rumlow was drawn over to peer at the photo, though the frown that took on his lover’s features
seemed misplaced. He felt nothing but a eching fondness for that image. “I think that was taken just before I was shipped to Russia for specialized training. Why the hell is it here?”

“You’re famous,” he said softly, leaning down to butt his caged nosed against Rumlow’s temple. This room felt very warm to him despite having never been in it before; it was welcoming in a similar way that Steve’s apartment was welcoming. It clouded his head with warmth, disarming his normal suspicion and making him breathe deeply.

He stepped up to the picture and admired every angle of those young features. He couldn’t remember ever seeing his lover this young, though he knew that it had to have happened. The wipes removed any of those memories, though Rumlow had the information stored away, of course. It wasn’t the same as seeing an old reality. He thought this must have been around the age that Rumlow had joined the ranks of the handler program, causing his lips to curl up in pleasure.

So handsome.

“...this is Ruger,” Rumlow said a few photos down. “I recognized that scar on his nose and down his cheek. I didn’t know he had gotten it so young.”

Blinking, he was drawn down the line, admiring the fresh faces of so many good men, so much warmth slowing his pulse when he looked at each one that he passed. He didn’t know their names, but looking at their solemn or serious or smiling faces made him think of better times, if there were any. Crisp clean orders, a laugh at his expense, taking the time to teach him some silly little skill that he had retained…

He stared at the face of the man Rumlow was looking at. Indeed, there was a scar down the left side of the twenty-year-old’s nose and dipping into the muscle of the cheek. It didn’t detract from the hard line of the chestnut haired youth’s face. There was a twinge inside of him, like he had forgotten something important.

“What happened to him?”

“K.I.A,” Brock said simply. “He fell off a roof and you stuffed his corpse in a sewer. The report I read was his neck was broken and his skull cracked open.”

He didn’t remember that, and not for the first time, he had to take a deep breath to control the impulsive reaction to growl in frustration. He wanted to remember these men especially. It seemed so important now that he knew what they all were, yet those memories were stolen from him. Even looking at their pictures only gave him the impression that he knew them like they were some distant long-lost friend whose name escaped him even when he looked at their face.

He stepped around Rumlow to look at the next picture along and again, he had the sense that he knew the young brunette that stared back at him solemnly. Like duty was the only thing that mattered.

“That’s Gromer,” Brock said. “He was my mentor.”

“What happened to him?”

Rumlow snorted softly and sighed as if reliving a very pleasant memory. Those kinds of signs normally only happened when Brock thought of him. “He tried to kill me on a mission, but you threw him through a wall and severed his spine.” There was a pause as he examined the photo, but the brush of Brock’s fingers against his own drew his attention. “That was the first mission we kissed too. We admitted to each other we were attracted, and we started our love affair.”
He made a pleased noise at the back of his throat because he had nothing but fondness for their love affair, especially now that he was capable of remembering all that they did together. Maybe it hadn’t been that long compared to most people, but these days had been very special for him to know and remember and have memories of pictures, sound, taste and touch to refer to rather than the endless words of Rumlow telling him all that they had done.

The Soldier sighed and pulled away from Rumlow to slowly walk the line of photos. There were little things about each man that struck him, startling blue eyes here, the combed hair there, the stubborn set of a chin. The closer he got to the far end, the more the trend became more and more obvious, and his stomach clenched in an uncomfortable way that he had only experienced in that instinctual fear of the chair’s activation and the hot burn of electricity through his brain.

He was breathing harder through his mask by the time he reached the last three photos. All of them were blond haired and blue eyed, the first one being a short gangly youth of no more than sixteen, all knobby shoulders and gaunt features. Next to the first handler was the next blond young man, the stubborn cast of the chin so like someone he knew that it forced his hand to clench.

Steve.

“Ravasz,” he sounded, his voice thick with pain and realization. He didn’t need memories for this; if anything, not having them impacted the reality of the men that lined the walls.

Rumlow was almost immediately at his side, curling an arm around his waist and looking at the last photos and no doubt completely aware of what had disquieted him. There was a hand in his hair a moment later, an attempt to soothe him, even if the rattle of the chain between the cuffs reminded them both that they were still prisoners.

“So you noticed, have you?”

They jumped apart at the doors opened silently and an aged man in a motorized wheelchair came into the room. His eyes were drawn to the grizzled man, a twinge of familiarity that only occurred when he was with Rumlow singing along his mind. He immediately moved to step in front of his lover protectively despite the growl from Brock that was aggrieved.

The man was in a good condition, strong of limb and with an air of control. The grey hair was in a crew-cut, the uniform that of a rifleman, but the picture was all marred by the green blanket that covered the man’s legs and hips, a sure sign of poor circulation to the legs requiring extra warmth. However, those dark eyes moved between himself and Brock with two very contrasting emotions: for him, it was respect, but for Brock, it was the utmost loathing.

“...Striker,” Rumlow growled and stepped around his arm.

“Rookie,” William “Striker” Gromer said with a sardonic twist of lips. “It’s been a long time.” Then the aged handler inclined a head to him, expression smoothing. “Soldier. You are as fit as the last day I saw you.”

There was something utterly pleasing about the praise, and he couldn’t remember when there had been two handlers in the room with him. Those memories had been wiped clean from him, but he knew that it had happened. He was left to wonder if full-fledged handlers were ever in his presence at the same time, since he felt the tugging draw between both men, though it was greatly stronger to Rumlow.

The motorized wheelchair moved further into the room on near-silent wheels, and it was parked next to the desk. Their escort, Agent Dallins, was back, standing at the closed doors with gun hanging
down with an ease that was meant to be comforting. He had no doubt that he could move and take the weapon if necessary.

“How are you still alive, sir,” he asked neutrally. Two handlers… two still lived, one his lover and the other his lover’s enemy and rival.

Gromer seemed more amused than angry over his question, which felt wrong to him. Wasn’t it all quick strikes and confident orders? “When your knife severed my spinal cord, you ended my career as your handler. I was shipped to the Hive to be of what use I could be.”

The name of the facility was not entirely familiar, but that wasn’t usual. HYDRA facilities were as uniquely named as the ones that SHIELD had, no doubt a mockery to the government organization that HYDRA had eaten from the inside out. There many facilities scattered across the globe, some of them known only by numbers and letters, but the bigger ones given a unique name. He had a feeling that Hive was not a place that many men wanted to be transferred to.

“Come here, Soldier, let me have a good long look at you,” Striker invited with a hand. “It’s going to be twenty years soon since I last laid eyes on you. I’ve followed your work nonetheless.”

He stepped forward, only to be caught by Rumlow’s hands on his belt loops. “Don’t,” his lover hissed at him. He turned his head and butted his masked nose against Rumlow’s cheek and then stepped away. “Ase…” he ignored the hint of surprised betrayal in Brock’s tone.

“Ah… still playing the faggot, are you rookie?”

“That’s a fine thing to say, you washed out cripple,” Rumlow replied with a snarl.

The Soldier still crossed the distance to stand in front of Gromer’s motorized wheelchair, studying the grizzled old soldier closely. There was a certain level of trust for this man despite himself, aware that he could and might even obey a command if it was reasonable enough. He still hadn’t forgotten the real reason that he was here in HYDRA’s hands. They stared at each other a long moment, more than words passing between them, and he nodded his head slowly at Gromer.

“Ah look at you… you haven’t aged a day,” Striker said with a hint of amusement. “Not a day goes by that I don’t miss being the hand that guided you into bloodshed. I’ve mellowed over the years, I’m afraid, softened up with this chair.”

He glanced to the agent by the door and then bowed his head at the same time that Gromer reached up and calloused fingers caught the edge of the half-mask on the bridge of his nose. There was a momentary tension and then he backed his face away, separating himself from the mask and leaving it in old handler’s hand.

His nostrils picked up the scent of gun oil, leather and pen ink. He noted that none of those were apparent on Gromer’s fingers as he pulled back to stand again. His gazed flicked down to the right side, looking for a particular sign that a weapon was concealed in the blankets, just waiting to be pulled and eliminate his lover.

Gromer seemed to sense it and smirked. “Don’t think I’ll trust you a second time, Soldier.”

“Don’t think I won’t severe your spine higher up next time,” he replied coldly.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Striker replied before eyes flicked to the pictures on the wall. “However, with all your strength and all of your dedication, you come with an unfortunate flaw. It took me a long time to understand it, but well… I had plenty of time on my hands. I doubt you’ve even figured it out.”
“Soldier,” Rumlow said, still poised in the spot where he had walked away from his lover. “We’re here for a debriefing, not a walk down memory lane.”

Gromer glared at his *Ravasz*, and he felt the weight of that look even if it wasn’t directed at him. He noted that Rumlow leveled a glare just as impressive. “You never knew when to keep your ugly mouth shut,” the older handler growled. “If you weren’t important to our future plans, I would take great pleasure murdering you, rookie.”

For him, the feud between the pair went around him. He had been their weapon so long that this sort of quarreling gave him the impression that he could slip into the shadow and neither would notice. He also knew that assumption was false. For all that they were sniping at each other, he knew himself to be the prize they were perhaps willing to wage war over.

“You can’t command me anymore. I’m not your ‘rookie’ to shove around,” Rumlow barked at Striker.

“And Pierce isn’t here to save your miserable hide anymore,” Gromer growled. “I would love to string you up and beat some discipline into you.”


“No, but watching your back open up under my belt was pretty close…”

The Soldier suddenly shifted, catching both men in mid-snarl at each other. Their eyes tracked him as he padded over to the pictures lining the wall, and he reached up and picked the one of Rumlow off. He held it to his chest and walked over to his lover, who wore a look of complete triumph. He knew that if their wrists weren’t in cuffs that his *Ravasz* would slide arms around his waist, but that was impossible.

“The pictures on the wall,” he started softly. “I chose those men.”

Gromer growled a noise but then the attitude subsided with a dismissive hand. “Surely you know of your own project. Your file is in a few select places, and I have no doubt your… ah, contacts could have possibly gotten ahold of it.”

“Yes, I read it,” he agreed and shifted back to lean against Rumlow’s chest pointedly. “It was about how they made me.”

“There was a sample of blood that HYDRA managed to get its hands on during the collapse of Nazi Germany. That sample was one of eleven vials of blood taken from Steve Rogers,” Gromer said simply, giving up the information more readily than he would have thought. Something was wrong, though he didn’t know what. “The Russians were building you, but you were… unstable. Even with mental damage and training and techniques, there was no way to trust you, not on missions.”

Rumlow shifted behind him. “The Soviets tried?”

Gromer threw Rumlow a dirty look but again relented easier than he would have expected. “A small village near Stalingrad, yes. There the Soldier malfunctioned as they expected, but what they didn’t expect was how all attacks came to a halt when the Soldier entered a farm house and found a starving boy.”

He turned his head to look over Rumlow’s shoulder at the first picture on the wall. There was the sickly blond boy staring back at him, not smiling and certainly not happy.

“Part of the serum from Rogers was used on that boy, and he became the first handler. Protocols
were built from it as the Soldier stabilized gradually,” Gromer said gravely. “Three months after Vasily, there was found, the Soldier attached himself to another blond boy in the Soviet country. He was the second.”

The weight of the words and the realization that he had, even back then, been looking for some part of Steve hit him hard. As the Soldier, he had been damaged beyond repair, body, mind and soul. What was left of him had been suppressed aside from key parts of his personality: loyalty, his skill for violence, cold logic on the battlefield. His past life, what little of it remained, had been removed to leave him free to be trained and sent on missions.

He shivered and hugged the picture in his arms tighter to his chest, feeling the frame bending slightly. “The others…”

“I have a theory about that,” Gromer gloated softly, but the man’s eyes were intent on Rumlow and not him now. “The longer you were kept, the more wipes, the increased training, you left behind more of whatever impressions came with you. You started picking handlers on little things other than appearance or bearing. Soon enough it was a stubborn streak, the ability to command well, a single way a man smiled… even survival against impossible odds. However, the more time passed, the fewer handlers you chose, like what you were looking for in one was fading.”

Rumlow stiffened at the implication, and the hands on his belt tightened. “Are you saying that the entire handler program was based on us having some characteristic of Rogers?”

Striker hummed a content sound, like the man had been waiting to say something like this for a very long time. “The Soldier was always looking for Rogers in each of us. How it worked with the serum we were given not even I know, but two things are clear.”

His eyes lifted to stare at Gromer seated comfortably in the motorized wheelchair. “Sir?”

“One, you can’t kill Rogers, which means you can’t personally murder your handlers,” Gromer said, voice all silk over steel. “And two, your ‘love affair’ is a lie. You love the rookie’s ability to survive, but what you have is a sham attempt to recreate a love between you and Rogers.”

His arms tightened and the frame buckled under the pressure, the glass shattering against his chest. None of it made it through his uniform, but he slowly pulled the picture away all the same. Rumlow’s cock-sure young smile was distorted with the cracked glass, and his fingers loosened on the ruined frame, watching it fall away from his grip.

Suddenly hands caught it before it could hit the floor. Rumlow grumbled softly, shaking off the broken glass and smoothing the old photo before shoving it against his chest again. He blinked, looking at his Ravasz as if through a long tunnel. It was difficult to breathe, like he had shards of glass in his throat, but his hands still lifted to lightly hold the bent frame.

“He’s fucking with you,” Rumlow said gruffly, reaching up to pick a strand of hair from falling into his eyes and set it aside. “And he’s jealous he was never man enough to love you. He’s alone and a cripple and a wash out.”

“Ravasz…” He swallowed and glanced at Gromer who was watching them intently and with a burn of something he couldn’t identify. “I… kissed…”

Brock’s bound wrists lifted and fingers pressed on his lips. “I could give two-shits who you kiss. We’re not here for that, and I love you regardless of whatever subconscious truth you were searching for back then. Remember why we’re here: to be apart of the HYDRA great cause for freedom.”
The Soldier stared at Rumlow for a long time, gathering himself despite the fact that a key piece of his world that he had never completely understood had been rocked. However, like all things, Rumlow was a focused man, able to see beyond emotion to the big picture, the real mission end. He tightened his grip on the photo again.

His lover nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned back to the two other men in the room. “Alright, you lousy cripple, since I’m the only physically functional handler alive, I want that mission debriefing.”

“Ah… about that,” Gromer said and suddenly gripped the arms of the motorized chair, making a show of struggling to rise. And that was all it was: a show, a mockery of Rumlow’s comment.

Striker rose from the chair and stepped away from it with the ease of a man who had been walking for years. There was not a look of triumph on the grizzled man’s features but plain hatred and cold calculation on. The older handler walked smooth and quietly forward, closing the distance between them until the man could stand over Rumlow, who seemed no more cowed now than when Gromer was seated.

“You’re not the only one who can heal from grievous injuries,” Gromer said coldly. “I am very curious how you survived the fall of the Triskelion. Even for a handler, it is a feat I’ll give you due respect for.”

Rumlow stood still and ready, but it was he that stepped in and reached up with metal fingers to touch Gromer’s face, ignoring the glide of a knife blade against the plates. His fingers slid across those aged features, realizing now that he had seen the pictures on the wall how many years had been lost with his tenure as ‘asset’ for HYDRA. These men all either dead and gone or aged to look double or more what he was.

“How old are you,” he asked softly.

“That’s none of your fucking business, Soldier,” Gromer hissed, trying and failing to knock his hand away. There was a clear conflict as the man didn’t want to be touched but didn’t want to step away either.

Yet, he persisted as he never would have before. “How old were you when we met?”

“Back. Off.” Striker flicked the knife towards his throat, but Rumlow’s hand lashed out and caught Gromer’s wrist tightly from over his shoulder. He made no motion to stop stroking his metal fingers over the older handler’s nose and down the other cheek. It was clear when Gromer’s track changed.

“You let the Soldier malfunction like this?”

“I encourage it,” Rumlow drawled. “He’s far more effective like this, pushing his luck, using his skills to get exactly what he wants.” There was a pause as his lover’s free hand strained in the cuffs to brush against the side of his chest a clear show of their connection while Gromer sneered in disgust. “Do you think any soldier around here could stop him?”

Finally, it seemed to push Gromer too far and Striker stepped back from his touch and twisting the wrist caught in Rumlow’s grip free. He noted that neither of his questions had been answered, and he surveyed the older handler and now could easily note the cold scrutiny in his direction. It was a look that plainly said that he was not the Soldier Gromer wanted to work with or even be present for.

“Our mission debriefing,” he intoned softly.

“Unless there isn’t actually a mission and you were hoping for something more to your favour,”
Rumlow drawled behind him, arms now secure awkwardly across his chest.

Striker recovered and smirked back at the pair of them, covering whatever thoughts the older handler might have on the situation at hand. He knew that this wasn’t over, that their little confrontation had only begun. He couldn’t and wouldn’t indicate to Brock now how shaken he was by the revelation of the handlers, despite that he refused to let go of the picture in his hand.

“STRIKE has always been the attack dogs of SHIELD, and it’s idiotic to not use the skills within your unit,” Gromer said with a hint of arrogance, though he didn’t think the man had acted as a STRIKE member but had been somewhere very different in a military capacity. “However, your unit has always proven it can do more than attack. HYDRA had a lot of resources thrown into the wind with the American Insight failure.”

Rumlow shifted away from him, clearly engaged for the start of the debriefing even if it was led by Gromer. “So you’re sending us out to collect missing tech and people then?”

“Few simple missions on low-grade tech first and if your team produces, one very specific piece of equipment and all notes on it,” Gromer said, giving Rumlow a clearly skeptical look. “Assuming you can even keep up.”

“Your concern is well-noted, Striker,” Rumlow snarled. “I want more details.”

The pair of handlers eyed one another, and it seemed to him that they might come to blows. He purposefully stepped in and butted his muzzled nose against Rumlow’s ear and broke up the tension with one look of triumph and fondness and one look of disgust. It didn’t take long for his lover’s fingers to press into his hair pointedly, and it was clearly the first time that Rumlow had felt so in control of a situation involving Gromer.

“Moving on…” Striker snapped and turned away to continue the debriefing.

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The seven members of STRIKE were geared up and standing together eyeing the five military people who were also in combat tactical gear getting final instructions from Gromer. The two sides would be put together in order to make a full twelve member STRIKE-like team, though that title had been removed now that SHIELD was gone. There was no need for formality, but the two sides of the team were clearly eyeing one another subtly.

He wouldn’t be going on this mission as it was deemed too low-grade for his skills. He was present because he had insisted on following Rumlow to the hangar with the quinjets, aware he could handle himself alone. His instructions were already laid out to him: keep close to Gromer, refuse recalibration, and stay out of the chair. He knew that all three of those would be difficult to do, since Gromer was likely to order the other two and when he refused, might attempt force in which case he knew he would ‘malfunction’ and ruin what little chance of trying for information about the scepter. He kept reminding himself that was most important.

“Right, you all have your instructions, and this is as much a team building exercise as it is reclamation of secret goods,” Gromer said, clearly the officer in command. He hadn’t asked what rank Striker currently held, but everyone but Rumlow easily settled. “Get in, get what you need and get out without getting caught tampering. We don’t exist, and we will keep it that way as long as possible.”

Everyone nodded and the two teams met in the middle of the room. Rumlow and Jenson were the smallest he noted as he watched them pass around maps and check the communication channels.
There was little talking and simply grunting and glaring at one another.

He folded his arms across his chest as Gromer came to stand next to him. He looked at the older handler, who was observing the team with an expectant hard look. His keen hearing picked up the soft numbers counting down, and he turned his attention back to the team, both STRIKE and not.

It was Derek Riley who broke the rising tension with the sudden snap of bringing a match to life and lighting up a cigarette. “Well, you assholes, get in line behind us where you belong and watch real masters at work,” the man said, blowing out both a lungful of smoke and the match at the same time.

One of Gromer’s female agents sneered. Jenson curled a lip in return.

It was Brock Rumlow who finally just crossed the distance between the two teams and poked the biggest member of Gromer’s team right in the middle of the chest. The STRIKE captain was six inches shorter but seemed not to notice it. “You’re Agent Jackson, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Good, you’re with me at point when we go in,” Brock ordered simply like it was bestowing a great honour. Jackson seemed to lose some tension anyway.

“Fine. You know I’m the best shot then?”

It was Rollins who smirked. “No, he just wants the biggest, ugliest and dumbest body shield in the door first.” The second stepped up to Rumlow’s shoulder and continued to smirk. “And you’re it. Congratulations, you’re a fleshbag distraction, Agent Jackson.”

Agent Jackson’s face had gone an interesting shade of magenta and clearly couldn’t decide who to hit first. It was Jenson who simply just bypassed the whole thing to walk towards the quinjet. “Don’t worry, boyo, Rumlow is the best shot on the team. He’ll save your pretty face.”

The rest of STRIKE laughed like a group of rowdy boys, but he was more interested in the fact that Gromer did nothing to break up the impending shoving match. No, he found himself watching the handler size up the situation and was clearly more interested in the dynamics than breaking up any fight that might be about to break out. Perhaps Gromer wanted to see how the team would work?

Striker caught him watching and smirked at him. “Bunch of fucking kids, like always. If I ordered you to shove them all on the quinjet, would you?”

The Soldier considered the question from all angles and then nodded his head. “Yes, I would.” If only for an opportunity to touch Rumlow again.

Gromer seemed to read something in his plain reply. “We’ll set you rights again, Soldier. That I can promise you.”

“I know,” he replied neutrally. He wouldn’t let on that setting him ‘right’ was the entire plan and reason that he was here. The less he said, the less that anyone but STRIKE could be suspicious of.

The only problem was that he wasn’t certain if STRIKE being gone from the base of operations here would help or hinder his search. While they currently looked to be on the verge of fighting with the aggressive body language, he had to play a very specific role to keep out of the chair. He couldn’t risk rampaging through the facility in search of a terminal with the appropriate information, and he was suspicious that Gromer was keeping him here for a very specific reason.

He was also certain that whatever the reason that he was staying was not going to be one that he was
going to particularly enjoy. He rolled over different scenarios in his mind from being forced to be wiped to beaten to forced to endure interrogation on what information he had stored in his mind from the last eleven months of relative freedom. He could also possibly be deployed on a separate mission. He was relegated back to the asset, a being that only was given information as and when it was required.

His attention returned to the mixing STRIKE team. By this point, Riley had moved on to puff on the rest of the cigarette to the left of the team, but big Wright had taken up the spot vacated. However, it was James Martinez that stepped in and seized the second largest man of the other group and there was no question of the aggressive intent.

Martinez was punched in the side of the head in reply. Wright barked a laugh and nabbed one of the two women of the team and had a knife pressing against her jugular before she could snarl indignantly. Rollins, having moved to the right of the group was the first to level a gun. Jenson, Riley and Rumlow were not far behind and while it was inappropriate to shoot with the potential of harming one’s teammates, STRIKE considered themselves too good of shots to miss.

There was dead silence aside from the grinding of Gromer’s teeth, and it was clear the handler was having a severe time restraining himself.

Suddenly there was a sound of a camera clicking. “Okay guys, time to smile so we can keep the prosperity of this teamwork moment,” Hunter said. “Because Jesus Christ, you five just got fucking baptized by fire.”

Rollins snorted a sound and looked to Rumlow who was smirking arrogantly. “Amateurs. Next time don’t clump up like that or Riley there will just blow you apart with one of his special apple bombs.” It was the STRIKE captain that lowered his weapon first and everyone else followed suit, though he noted Wright gave a sloppy kiss to the victim of his knife and shoved her off to rejoin the team.

“STRIKE, gear up,” Rollins growled.

“Hey, that’s my line, shovel-face,” Rumlow snarled back.

“And when you stop giving the Soldier boner-eyes, you can have the captaincy back,” Jack said before turning and marching smartly towards the quinjet.

Rumlow glanced at him, offered a salute and prowled after Rollins, the tension clearly having dissipated in the clear show of unity and teamwork with the STRIKE team. He hummed softly from beside Gromer, but the older handler ignored him to watch the assembled team make their way to the quinjet and settle in for the mission.

The team was now running behind schedule.

Gromer was still standing at parade rest, face impassive watching the load door close and the quinjet’s engines engage. They stood like perfect statues next to one another, watching the door to the hangar open slowly and then the quinjet the the STRIKE team were gone to retrieve pertinent information lost in one of many hidden but now exposed HYDRA bunkers.

He idly wondered what Steve was doing, but his friend was well aware of the mission. Everyone was no doubt doing their part. What was Steve going to say when the revelation of his handlers came about? He hadn’t decided if and when he would tell his best friend. Rumlow had seemed to take the information in stride and seemed no more concerned about it than when it wasn’t even known. No, it was for him that Gromer had brought that to light, not to Rumlow.
Was it for revenge? Or something else?

Striker finally turned away from the now closed hangar bay door and turned to face him. His blue eyes fixed on the older handler. “I’m sixty-four,” Gromer said simply. “We met when I was twenty-seven.”

He stiffened across the shoulders at the information, having left behind the idea that Gromer would ever answer him. He nodded his head slowly, peering at the aged man in front of him, still strong of limb but it was the steel of this man that had no doubt attracted his attention those years ago. “We were… close?”

“No,” Gromer replied coldly. “You are a weapon, and I handled you expertly. To think of yourself as anything but is a lie and an illusion, but I can see how you might think otherwise.” His handler stepped forward, closing the space between them without a hint of fear. “When you robbed me of my legs back then, I knew something had gone wrong with you.”

The Soldier remained silent, but he allowed his expression to harden.

“Pierce didn’t believe me, didn’t believe a mere rookie could change your programming. I saw it right away,” Gromer hissed, sounding mean and frustrated. This must have been things the man had wanted to say for a long time.

“There was nothing to see,” he replied, though he had no idea if that was true. He had no memories of his time with Rumlow way back then. He knew there was a knife that Rumlow kept close since the day they had met.

Striker laughed and it was like having razorblades caress his skin. “I know why you chose him. He, like Rogers, has that indomitable will that allows them to just plain not die when they’re supposed to.” Gromer took another step closer. “He was a reckless punk. You saw that in him, didn’t you?”

Again, he said nothing. He shifted his weight on his feet, uncertain why he felt so defensive. These were nothing but words thrown at him. They shouldn’t hold any weight against him as nothing in those words constituted an order. It was simply the older handler snarling off at him. Yet, he felt defensive but unable to avoid this strange attack that wasn’t supposed to move him at all.

“I spent a long time in a wheelchair asking myself ‘why that kid’? Why would you choose him over me when I was the far better handler?” Gromer leaned down slightly so that they were eye-to-eye. “He looked nothing like Rogers, but he was so much like him that you couldn’t resist. He took a risk for you, so you, instinctively, took a risk for him.”

The Soldier shifted, wanting to deny. He didn’t remember that, and he felt his frustration build with the continued needling. “You tried to kill him.”


He narrowed his eyes as his frustration began to flood into his expression. “I won’t let you…”

And then Gromer said a word that cut into his potential tirade, and his mind went like a still pond, not a ripple on the surface. His thoughts still occurred, but they never seemed to just come to the point where he could grasp them and analyze them. He too was aware of his surroundings, was fully and completely operational to react, but he found himself standing still and lax as Gromer’s eyes crawled over him. His frustration too froze and bled away, leaving him open and quiet.

Strike reached up and grasped his chin, turning his head from one side and then the other. Apparently satisfied with the results, Gromer slapped him hard across the face, forcing him to rock
with the blow but hold his ground. He returned to his original position.

“What are your orders, Soldier?” There was something compelling about the tone, something there seemed no reason to resist.

“No orders at present,” he replied softly.

Gromer considered him for a long moment and then punched him hard in the gut. He gasped for air and bent over, but again, he returned to his original position with only a small shift of his feet as he righted himself. He felt the sting of the back of Gromer’s hand across his cheek again, and a part of him fought to retaliate. Rumlow had never treated him this way, but he was held compliant and quiet. Ready to serve.

“What is your mission objective?”

“To locate and acquire Loki’s staff,” he replied promptly.

Striker frowned slightly. “And once it’s acquired, who will you give it to?”

“No one.”

“You are seeking the staff for yourself, Soldier,” Gromer asked.

“Yes. I will acquire the staff for myself,” he agreed simply.

He was considered for another few moments, and he ignored the sting to his cheeks or the throb to his gut. All of those were settling as he ignored them as best as he could. Gromer raised a foot and slammed it down on his left thigh, and his leg momentarily buckled but righted itself soon after and he stood.

“What’s your need of that Asgardian staff?”

“I will reverse HYDRA mind condition to regain my memories,” he said.

“And then?” Gromer stepped up and slid a hand into his hair, forcing his head back. “You think you live a happily ever after life?”

“The mission parameters are met,” he replied, gritting his teeth as his hair was twisted in the older handler’s grip. “Mission complete. No further objectives developed.”

Striker jerked on his hair painfully, almost pulling a chunk from the roots. Something clicked inside of him, like a pebble being thrown into the water to send ripples across the surface. He blinked twice and then his left hand clenched to a fist and darted up to punch Gromer in the head.

The handler barked the word again. He didn’t even catch or clarify what it was, couldn’t wrap his mind around it to repeat it or even know what language it was from. It entered his ears and shut down parts of his brain and then erased itself.

“Do you have a tracker in your arm?”

“Yes,” he said promptly.

“Who implanted it?”

“Tony Stark.”
“Kneel,” Gromer ordered him, not releasing his hair and forcing him to knees painfully so he lost more than a healthy amount of what Striker was holding to follow the order.

The Soldier settled there and railed against the glassy effects of what was happening to him as Gromer proceeded to beat him with fist and feet. Bruises blossomed on his skin from arm, his legs, across his back and chest and his cheeks bore their own marks. Nothing was broken and no skin tore to seep blood of any kind. He was sore and when he was hauled up by Striker, he wobbled for a moment.

“He want his memories, I’ll get him his memories. Isn’t that right, hmm? A handlers priority is the safety, health and productivity of the weapon.”

He got his feet working properly and managed to walk without limping, his eyes flicking to Gromer who was hauling him along. Did that mean that Gromer was going to help him get the scepter? He couldn’t ask as he hadn’t been given leave to speak, and his mouth wouldn’t open with that command still in place.

He was shoved into a padded chair, nothing like the chair used for wiping. His right arm, chest and legs were still strapped down, and he inhaled in both confusion and straining against the familiarity of this treatment. He twitched in the chair and this time Gromer did not call him to attention, but let the situation swell in his mind. There was nothing he could do against the technicians as they began to work on his prosthetic with a handler standing right there. He knew better than to fight.

Striker came around to his right ear, gripping his bicep tightly. He jerked his arm in response, but the restraints held him from pulling it away entirely. It seemed to be a signal that Gromer was looking for. “You need the scepter, and I can get it to you. For a price.”

“I get the scepter to you, and in exchange, you never touch Rumlow again. You give him up entirely, and he gives you up. Deal?” Striker tilted that aged head curiously.

He opened his mouth to reply and then shut it again. “Why?”

“Found it,” the technician at his arm announced.

The Soldier didn’t need Gromer to answer his question though, having already puzzled it out himself as the tracker was removed with a pair of forceps and shown to the senior handler. If he gave up Rumlow and Rumlow was forced to give up him, they would be unhappy. After so long sacrificing for each other, working situations to be together, he knew that just letting go and being separated would hurt considerably. He had been promised fifteen years. Was he willing to give that up?

He closed his eyes, remembering the somber and unhappy blond Soviet in the picture. He still had Steve, and with the scepter, he would also have all the memories of him and his best friend. He would have those, and if he escaped, he would have Steve himself as well, since… wasn’t that who he had always been looking for?

He shifted in the chair, feeling Gromer’s eyes on him. He remembered so clearly the young cock-
sure smiling face from a different picture. So handsome. So reckless. So willing to make any sacrifice necessary for him.

The Winter Soldier was a weapon that made the impossible possible. His actions, while under order, had shaped the world by throwing it into chaos. He was a ghost story. He was a weapon, but he was free to decide whose finger would be on his trigger.

His blue eyes lifted to find Gromer watching him. He pursed his lips and then rolled the saliva in his mouth before spitting at the senior handler, wiping the contemplative look off of Striker’s face. “I’d rather gargle bleach,” he growled, picking one of Rumlow’s favourite phases.

“Good,” Gromer purred. “I never wanted you to make this easy.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading my work, and I hope you all enjoyed it. Thanks for any kudos or comments received! They are always appreciated!
First and foremost, this chapter is basically Gromer being the biggest jerkwad that I could think of. There is reason and there is purpose for it, but this is mostly him being a sadistic bastard to everyone that he can. I tried to keep the detail of violence down, but there certainly is violence in this chapter.

This fic will be wrapped up in two more chapters. The meat of which will be next one.

As always, no one has beta-read my work, so I apologize for any glaring mistakes found.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I want to throw you.
I want you to know I know.
I want to know if you read me.”

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Brock was sore and tired, rubbing a hand through his sweat-stiff hair as he plodded down the hallway where his team was stationed in small barracks made for twelve member teams. His rifle swung against his ass as he walked, wondering if he was even going to be able to remove his boots with how swollen his feet felt. The way that his uniform clung to him made him glad that he had free access to the showers now that he had sent Jenson and Martinez with their amateurs to hand in the acquired intelligence and equipment.

All he wanted was to get clean, get in bed, and get a damn long kiss from the Soldier. That sounded like the best thing in the world in his mind.

It wasn’t even that the mission had been particularly difficult, just that they were on their feet a lot, moving fast and hard and slyly to enter the facility. His body was simply soft from so much inactivity, and he had pushed himself hard to keep up with the rest of the team. He had done it, had led in and out without hesitation, and he knew that he had earned his place at the helm without question.

He needed time and opportunity to tighten up again, to reach the level of physical fitness that he had maintained before half of a building fell on top of him. Even Rollins, who showed him no mercy, had sat closer than necessary for the ride back, like he, Rumlow, might just lean over and die on the floor of the quinjet. What an asshole.

He stepped into their assigned quarters after Riley, stepping beyond the man and snatching the cigarette the other agent had been about to take a drag from. He took a long drag himself and handed it back, breathing smoke from his nostrils.

“Hey now, captain, these aren’t called ‘coffin nails’ for no reason. They’ll kill you,” Riley said, jamming the butt between lips and grinning at him.
“You first,” he replied tiredly. “If I can survive bench-pressing half the Triskelion, I think a few puffs from your ‘coffin nail’ won’t do me in too soon.”

“How about the herpes we know he’s got from kissing too many goats,” Wright said with a feigned mean look at Riley. “Think the Soldier can get herpes?”

Rumlow shook his head and began to strip out of his gear, folding what he could neatly and hanging the rest. “I’ll let you know if he starts developing open sores in odd places on his anatomy,” he replied dryly, though he had no intention of letting the group of jerks in on his private time with the Soldier. That was solely his, and he had taken enough ribbing for it since he’d be stuck with all these assholes in Stark’s private island resort prison.

It was all good natured of course. Right now, he was just irritable enough to snap at anything with how heavy his body felt. Once he showered and had a lay down for an hour or two, he’d be right as rain again.

Rollins took his rifle from the bed to unload it and set it down with the rest of their weaponry. He made no fuss about it, about to assign someone to do that anyway. He watched his second as he bent down to open the laces of his combat boots, and his scrutiny wasn’t missed by Jack for more than a few seconds.

“What?”

“I just realized it’s been like ten minutes since I remembered how ugly you are,” Rumlow said, much to the amusement of the other men. “And your fly is open.”

“Ha ha, you dickbag,” Rollins replied sardonically, setting his rifle with the others.

“Actually…” Wright said, pointing at their second’s trousers.

Rollins looked down and everyone else announced the end of the joke with a sudden ”Ohhh!” which earned them all a scowl and a middle finger. It was good times all around, which was necessary given how much strain they were all under.

He smirked and tugged off his one boot, setting it aside so that he could pull off the other, hating that it was such a task. He set the other with the first and stood, stretching his shoulders and looking to Hunter who was busily working on a commandeered laptop. He could tell the kid was making progress because Hunter’s tongue stuck out slightly from the corner of the kid’s mouth. He slowly sank down to his bunk.

He grumbled for show when Rollins came to sit next to him, which might have seemed odd if his second hadn’t been hovering previously. He glanced at Jack, finding his second pretending to ignore him to tug off boots instead. He stretched out his legs and a few minutes later, Rollins did the same, though his second had longer ones than he.

“Shouldn’t the Soldier be here?” He knew it had nothing to do with concern. It was more that the faster they got this job done, the faster STRIKE could go back to being just that.

“He’s probably keeping an eye on Gromer or combing for information,” he replied tiredly, again rubbing his hand through his hair which was sticking up at odd angles. “He’s not likely to stop until he has information.”

“I still would have thought he’d be there to make sure you dragged your scarred ass out of the quinjet,” Rollins said simply. “If there’s anything more important than the mission, it’s you.”
Rumlow cast a sidelong look at Rollins next to him, silent communication passing between them. He huffed and shook his head. “Ah Jackie, I think this is the first time you’ve outright approved of my relationship. We grew on you that much?”

Rollins sneered at him. “As if,” his second in command snarled. “I just don’t want to be the one who has to explain to his small freezer-burnt brain why you’re back in a wooden box.”

“But I’m not,” he replied slyly.

“Not this time,” Rollins pointed out brutally. “I watched you struggle to keep up at points.”

His eyes narrowed in response, though there was no denial to the observation. “A few more missions and I’ll be back on my game. The skills are all there, but it’s been almost eleven months since I was free of a hospital bed.”

“I clearly should have thrown you into the floor more often while we were in vacation prison,” Jack said thoughtfully, rubbing a hand through slicked down hair, though it was now more with sweat than gel. “I was worried all that slamming on your back would have gotten you too excited.”

Rumlow snorted a sound of amusement, since this was the first time his second in command had ever broached on that kind of lewd joke. He slapped Rollins on the back of the shoulder and shook his head. “Awww, you are warming to us. Wanna be the best man at my wedding?”

“Only if it’s you in the dress and we get pictures to immortalize your official downfall,” Rollins said, elbowing him sharply in the ribs as he bent to stretch his back. The blow knocked him to the side.

They took the next few minutes to shove each other on the bed and then descended into rough-housing with hard glancing punches and kicks before he managed to wedge himself in against the wall and just shove Jack right off the bunk to the floor below.

“Hey Rollins, when are you gonna stop letting Rumlow knock you on your ass?” Wright had been watching the show and was grinning maliciously. “You owe me five bucks, Riley.”

“What’s my debt at now?” Riley replied, head in immersed in a cloud of blue cigarette smoke.

“Last count…” Wright started.

“Wait, when did you learn to count?” That was Rollins getting back at the bigger man for the previous comment.

Rumlow let the three banter and rolled to his feet from the bed, padding across their barracks to where Hunter had been paying little to no attention to their antics. He leaned on the side of the kid’s bunk, watching as Matt’s fingers flew over the keyboard, tongue still jabbed slightly out in concentration. He didn’t say anything, awaiting progress with an air of neutrality despite the stakes being high. The faster they knew where the scepter was, the faster they could formulate a plan to get the Soldier there.

He crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the want to sit down again. His feet ached and there was a heavy fatigue from going beyond his current limits. He was guaranteed to be sore tomorrow, but he couldn’t grimace at the idea nor could he let it show either. Gromer would eat him alive if the man smelled even the hint of weakness.

He sighed and hoped that the Soldier had maneuvered well around the other handler. He had been given the impression that the asset was still very much an object that Striker would covet, though perhaps not in the same degree as he did. Clearly all the handlers were different, but Gromer had
been softer towards the Soldier, if that were even possible.

Rollins appeared to the lean on the other bedpost, looking in on Hunter. They shared a single look and waited in silence.

Thankfully they didn’t have to wait more than twenty minutes before the kid tapping away at the console finally looked up. Hunter blinked at their expectant looks, realized that the kid had his tongue out and sucked it back in.

“News?”

“There’s a lot of noise, but I think I know where it’s being kept. I don’t have a visual, but there’s a project listed in here that’s performing human experiments with an object that was obtained during the fall of SHIELD.” Hunter looked between them all. “Von Strucker’s name is attached to the project.”

“ Damn, I hate the guy,” Rumlow muttered.

“I want to punch his monocle right into his smug face,” Wright added vehemently.

“Too bad it sounds like we are going to have to play nice with him now,” Riley piped in from the back of the room. “Put your lipstick on, Jack. I think Von Strucker liked you best out of all of us.”

“That’s because Rollins didn’t say anything,” Rumlow mused.

Hunter smiled and then turned serious, typing a few more lines of whatever the hell the kid needed to data-mine in the system. “Sokovia.”

They all whistled softly as the country name came up, though he had only been there once on a mission. It was a European nation that was plagued with civil wars, government unrest and even public uprisings of protest. It was the right size and mixture of upheaval to allow a secret HYDRA base to operate and for people to disappear without arising much question.

Of course, getting there was going to be a problem. He couldn’t imagine either Agent Gromer or the Colonel allowing him to take the Soldier for a jaunt over the countryside. It had to appear like they were allowed to be there, and they couldn’t use force, not in a base of this size. It was all cunning and acting.

“Right, find me everything you can about Von Strucker’s current project, Hunter,” Rumlow ordered. “Wright, Riley, you two rub some elbows with the grunts around here and maybe a pilot in case we need a quinjet fast.” The pair nodded easily. “Rollins, find me someone who has worked with Von Strucker in this place.”

They all turned when the door to their barracks opened and Jenson and Martinez strolled in, their debriefing and delivery clearly done. He nodded at them and raised an eyebrow when Jenson, who had about as much maternal instinct as a stressed lab mouse, turned back to the door.

“Come on, he’s here,” she said, gesturing with stiff arm motions that couldn’t lure a child anywhere close to coming in her direction. Yet, her voice softened. “I told you we’d bring you to the captain, so come in, Soldier.”

Martinez strolled over as if nothing was out of the ordinary. “Found him lurking the hallways on our way back, and you know our girl, can’t help pick up the vulnerable strays.”

Rumlow moved away from leaning on the bedpost to stand in plain view of the doorway, spying the
Soldier staring suspiciously at Jenson. Those blue eyes pinned him a moment before softening and stalking into the room around their female agent and came directly over to him. No one was surprised, and some of his fatigue just eased away, though he wondered why the Soldier was wearing the muzzle-like mask again.

He caught what he thought might be a hint of a bruise on the Soldier’s cheek, but he decided it was the lighting as his Ase came in close and nestled that face into his neck. He lifted his hands, stroking the back of the Soldier’s head and receiving all manner of high pitched mocking ‘awww’s from his team.

He leered at them as he nudged the Soldier away and tugged his lover over to his chosen bunk where there was still next to no privacy. Everyone else turned away to give the illusion all the same. He reached up and tugged the mask free, his eyebrows drawing together at the guarded look that his lover gave him. He discarded the mask down on top of his kit-pack.

Rumlow stroked his hands down the Soldier’s neck affectionately. “We found it, Ase. As soon as I can get a way in, we’re going,” he murmured softly, affection tainting his tone.

The Winter Soldier stared at him, jaw working slightly before butting their foreheads together gently. It seemed like a supreme effort for his lover to swallow, a look that he knew very well by now, though it seemed completely unreasonable. He had expected a little more than this bleak silence from his Ase.

“What’s the matter with you?” His fingers caressed over the shadow cast by the Soldier’s jaw.

Slowly, his lover leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips, and he smiled into the gesture as he held the Soldier close and allowed his tongue to trace the commissure of the other man’s lips, meeting reluctance for a moment. Slowly, the Soldier’s lips parted, and his tongue darted in teasingly, encouraging a response until his senses were assaulted harshly.

An acrid taste settled on his tongue, tinged heavily with blood. It was on the Soldier’s breath too, and the effort to swallow had returned. He realized that was because his Ase was hyper salivating as it was quick to coat his lips now that the Soldier’s were parted.

He jerked away with a hiss, wiping his tongue on the back of his hand. It confirmed what he had partially tasted. There was red saliva but the acrid taste was difficult to abate now that it was on the tip of his tongue.

“What the hell happened to you?” His outburst drew the attention of his team even as the Soldier was disinclined to answer. If swallowing looked that difficult, talking was probably not in order. “Open your mouth.”

His Ase obviously hesitated, but he grabbed a towel that he would have used if rough-housing hadn’t delayed him in a shower. He pressed it to the Soldier’s chin and nodded, and it was only then that his lover complied, bloody spittle quick to emerge even as he tipped the Soldier’s open mouth towards the main lights of the room. The acrid smell was worse.

“Jack, get your flashlight and get over here,” he barked. His eyes studied the Soldier as it felt like rocks had filled his stomach.

The entire team gathered even as Rollins flicked on the small flashlight and illuminated the Soldier’s mouth. There were ulcerated sores throughout, not just the cheeks, tongue and roof, but he caught a few at the back of the Soldier’s throat. They were obviously healing.
“One of you gawkers get some ice cubes here now,” Rollins snarled in the man’s ‘medical’ voice. Martinez was the closest to the door and left.

He mopped up the bloody saliva as Jack studied the inside of the Soldier’s mouth like all the answers of the universe were stored there. He barely kept still in the same way that he could hardly keep himself from demanding answers. All thought of exhaustion was gone from him.

Slowly Jack turned off the flashlight and tucked it away before purposefully shutting the Soldier’s mouth. He was left wiping the escaped mess as his lover’s eyes stared at him, showing only a small amount of the pain that the man had to be experiencing. He leaned up and kissed the Soldier’s closed mouth, rubbing their noses together.

Rumlow turned his head to stare at Rollins next to him. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

“Acid burns,” Jack said simply. “It smells and looks like it, though I’ve never seen it in the mouth before.”

He flared with indignation and turned on the Soldier, staring into those blue eyes which tried to communicate with him. “Gromer,” he growled and his lover nodded. “What did he do to you? Answer me so I know just want I’m murdering him for.”

The Winter Soldier stared for a long time, swallowing hard and rapidly, and his hands desperately stroked his Ase’s hair as if that might encourage a faster response. It didn’t, not even with the entire STRIKE team watching their exchange apprehensively.

“…Ase…”

“Don’t force him to talk,” Rollins muttered. “I don’t know how far the damage goes down his esophagus.”

Rumlow reluctantly subsided, resting his forehead against the Soldier’s and just stroking his lover’s neck. He knew that Martinez should be back with ice soon and that would be relief for those ulcerated burn sores.

“…Bl…each…” the Soldier gagged out.


“Did you drink it,” he demanded roughly. Was it eating through the entirety of the Soldier?

There was a rough head shake.

“What the hell were you doing with…” Rumlow trailed off as Martinez slammed through the door at top speed with a plastic cup.

“They made him fucking gargle bleach,” Martinez announced aggressively. The big man handed over the glass to Rollins immediately. “I heard it in the hallways.”

“No doubt on purpose,” Jenson said coldly.

“But… you said no one does that kind of damage to the Soldier,” Hunter said, addressing him.

He had underestimated the depth of Gromer’s loathing, assuming that it would only be directed at him, which was what he had expected. He was prepared to take the full brunt of the senior handler’s
wrath, ever since he had realized that Striker was involved. A handler was held to higher standards with the Soldier, keeping the weapon in prime condition at all times.

That was their job, why they were chosen. They were not only the stabilizing agent on missions, debriefings and training, but the handler program was designed to be the on-site finger on the trigger, to be there so that they could troubleshoot when problems arose. Yes, they were often involved in discipline, and he understood that a lesson learned required someone with pull to do it. He had done it himself, but this… if Gromer really had done this, the line between handler and sadist vengeful asshole had been crossed.

Rollins stepped in and wordlessly pushed an ice cube into the Soldier’s mouth. “Move it around and spit the contents.” An empty cup was handed over roughly.

Rumlow stared at the Soldier, his mind working in the silence of his team. “Jack…”

“Don’t even fucking ask,” Rollins snapped. “He finishes his ice cubes and you two lay down for a few hours. Wright and Martinez will damn well sit on you if you even hedge towards the door. No one is going half-cocked.”

He turned to look at the team which watched him in return, and he inclined his head slightly. “If this goes south,” he started, not indicating that he expected it to, “you guys get him to the scepter and whack him in the head if you have to. He has to have his memories.”

Riley puffed away on a cigarette. “And you?”

“Gromer wants us to suffer. That much is obvious, but he’s a prime sadist. He’ll want it to last, want to savour everything that he can,” Rumlow said simply, shrugging his shoulders like it was no big deal. “He’ll do us pain, but he won’t kill us, not yet anyway. The Soldier is apparently incapable of murdering a handler, but I suspect that might go both ways. The Soldier can be killed by a senior head of HYDRA, must present a weapon to them when on active mission.”

“So Pierce, Garrett and Von Strucker,” Jenson said coldly, again curling a lip. “To name a few.”

He nodded his head, ignoring the sound of the Soldier spitting into the cup. He couldn’t mention any other external factors where there was a guarantee that someone was listening to them, especially in light of this development, but he was keeping his temper aware that it wouldn’t help him or their situation any. He was just going to have to put a bigger target on his back for Gromer and get the Soldier out. The mission was and always would be more important, and he wasn’t going to deny his those memories.

“We’re STRIKE, so we’ll do what is necessary to get the job done,” he said coldly. “We, above all others, have the muscle, the skill and the drive to do that. The mission is the ultimate goal. Forget it, and we’re just a bunch of HYDRA agents with a gun. We’re not. We’re superior to that.”

“STRIKE come, STRIKE go, STRIKE trump, STRIKE front,” Wright crowed loudly.

Jenson set her hands on her hips. “STRIKE stick together.”

“To death do us part,” Riley interjected, earning glares all around. “What? We’re practically married to our jobs.”

“You’re married to whatever pack of cigarettes you have open,” Rollins replied.

“Well, someone has to pave the way early for you assholes on the way to Hell,” Riley said with a sniff of indignation. “May as well be someone with directional skills.”
Rumlow was drawn out of the conversation when the Soldier shifted, his hand taking the cup of bloody spit and water to set on the table. The other cup was empty of ice now, and he set that with the other and while the Soldier didn’t look uncomfortable, he pressed his Ase to his bunk. “Boots, gloves and vest off,” he ordered simply. “Lay facing the wall when you’re done.”

He turned back to the team and looked at Jack. “It’s your mission if Gromer makes a go for me.”

“Fine, but try not to let him cut up your pretty face again,” Rollins replied, the serious set of his second’s face indicating that Jack was ready and willing to command if he was removed from the team. “I guess I should call Cheryl to let her know that I have a promotion again.”

Brock snorted and rolled his eyes, but he wasn’t going to question that. He waved the team away and seated himself on his bunk with the Soldier, who had taken the discarded bloody towel and set it under the Soldier’s mouth to catch any spillage. He drew his legs up and spooned up against his Ase’s back, one arm finding its way around his lover’s waist. He was immediately snuggled into, which was tedious given that the bunks were not designed to have anything other than a small soldier in them.

He bumped his nose into the warm skin at the base of the Soldier’s neck. “We’ll see this through like always.” He sighed and settled in as comfortably as he could. “Then we’ll share some Skittles, just like every job well done.”

*****

Brock was still rubbing sleep from his eyes and yawning when he was shown to the vast exercise room, trailing Agent Dallins slower than necessary on purpose. He trudged, his body sore and stiff from both sleeping in the same position the last handful of hours and because of the mission that he had completed two days ago.

He’d left the Soldier in Rollins’ care, expecting that his second could handle that given that the pair had worked together before he had come back into the picture. He now expected them to do it again.

He pushed open the door and was completely unsurprised to find that it was empty save for a unit of keeners on the weights to the far left of the room. There was exercise equipment spread all around the first half of the room, a fighting ring to the right and a running track at the far end. There were plenty of places and the entire layout of the room was eerily similar to the kind of place that he had been trained in. The only thing missing was the table and chair with the Soldier sitting disassembling and reassembling weapons.

Also not surprising, Agent Gromer was waiting for him in the middle of the track field on the usual artificial grass. He walked like he was half asleep just to test the other handler’s mood, but Gromer had learned to keep a few things nipped and tucked in the last twenty years.

Agent Dallins walked over to Gromer and made a whispering report, and it was too quiet for him to hear, so he didn’t bother. Instead, he stretched his shoulders and squatted a few times to loosen up his legs, ending his impromptu session with yet another showy yawn.

Finally, they were left relatively alone, the other younger agent withdrawing and taking a sidearm with him. That was a shame, but he wasn’t going to need a gun to kill Gromer. It would probably be far better and entertaining for it to be with his bare hands anyway, and he admitted that it had been a long time coming. He’d try not to enjoy it too much when it happened.

“Rookie,” Gromer intoned with a sneer.
“Sir,” he replied as the corner of his lip rose in the beginnings of a smirk. He’d done enough lip service in his lifetime to know how to do it even with a man he despised. “You summoned me from my bed?”

“I did,” Striker said, a hint of graveness in the man’s voice. “I admit that I didn’t think that you were quite as stupid as I first thought when we met all those years ago. As usual, you’ve proven to me that the bar has always been set too high for you.”

Rumlow snorted softly, folding his hands behind his back in classic parade rest. “I guarantee I can always lower the bar for you,” he replied smartly. “But my service record speaks for itself. You and I are on equal handler rights, so I’ll only say this once: you discipline the Winter Soldier like that again, and I’ll see you drinking bleach until you’re nothing more than a smoking puddle on the floor. Am I clear?”

Gromer offered him only a toothy grin. “He made his choice. I gave him what he requested.”

“Am I clear,” he growled, ignoring the pull of stiff muscles as he straightened his shoulders. Striker considered him – actually considered him for once – in silence for a few moments and then nodded slowly. “You really think you’re something else,” the other handler said, mocking him. “You’re not, Agent Rumlow. You’re a good agent, a good soldier, but your record with the Soldier is marred with your blindness.”

Rumlow almost stepped over to smack Gromer in the face. He had better self-control though and held his peace on the matter, but the tension was rising expectedly between them. He needed it higher though, needed to stoke that fire in the man, and he would do what was necessary to do just that. With him as the bait, the Soldier and the team could do what was required for the mission.

“I performed my duties well. It’s you who’s blind,” he drawled lazily. “You never saw anything good in me from day one. You hated me more than you hated anyone, and I respect that. It’s the kind of situation that I personally thrive in, Agent Gromer. Do you know why?”

Gromer clearly didn’t want to bite, didn’t want him to direct any part of their conversation. However, it was a mistake not to know one’s enemy when they were willingly offering up information as to their motivations. It was HYDRA manipulation one-oh-one, and in the end, they were both HYDRA agents currently trying to get the upper hand of each other. They could beat on each other all they liked, but to destroy each other, they had to know what buttons to push and in what order.

“Go on,” Striker slowly relented.

“Because I believe in a cause, not people. You want something done, you’ve got to do it yourself with the skills you have,” he said coldly. “People fail you. A cause can’t be failed by anything other than the people who believe in it when their strength fails or their arrogance gets in the way.”

He paused, waiting for the other handler to interrupt him. Gromer remained silent, but the other handler was glaring at him.

“Then the Soldier tried to punch my head off,” he said simply. “And I changed because if someone like that can make even more of a sacrifice than I did, they deserved my respect. They even deserved a small handful of original flavor Skittles.”

“You son of a bitch…” Gromer snarled, the mask of calmness breaking instantly. “I knew that was you. You goddamn coloured the Soldier’s fucking mouth like he was a child!!”

Rumlow laughed and set his hands on his hips. “Yeah, and he tasted great too. He tasted better after
I gave him Sweet tarts and snuck in ecstasy with the package.”

Like a dam breaking, Striker advanced on him, closing the distance as smoothly as he always remembered the other handler moving. He let Gromer come to him, not about to waste the energy motivating his stiff muscles into motion over something like this. He instead shifted his weight to avoid the punch that was aimed at him, sliding to the side.

He lifted his knee toward Gromer’s gut, but the other handler’s hand slammed down on his thigh and shoved him. His balance off-set, he simply dropped to the mat under their feet and rolled away, narrowly avoided getting kicked in the head. The bottom of Gromer’s boot whizzed mere millimeters away from his nose and cheek on his first rotation away.

Rumlow shoved his hands out on his decided final rotation and shoved them into the mat to force his momentum to raise his weight so he could get his feet under him. He rose to a crouch before he was tackled back to the mat, but this sort of street scuffling was his bread and butter. He had been doing it for years.

He planted his feet and forced their momentum over so he landed on top of Gromer, getting the first blow with a glancing punch to the senior handler’s shoulder. He ignored the shout from Dallins as he leaned away from a hard swing towards his chin, clamping his legs against Gromer’s hips to retain his position.

He blocked the next punch for his face and replied in kind with one of his own, snapping Striker’s head to the side. The senior handler seemed both surprised and angry at his impudence, perhaps because he had never raised a hand in violence to Gromer before. They were no longer mentor and student; the rules of their game were all just that of soldiers.

Striker spat a wad of saliva remarkably close to his eye, and he twisted his head aside to wipe at it as his other hand went for the senior handler’s throat to keep Gromer from shoving him off. Instead, he missed and was punched in the middle of his chest, forcing his balance backwards. Gromer then dumped him onto his side and twisted away from his legs.

He rolled again, stopping when he hit Dallins’ legs and pushed himself to his feet. He ignored the sidearm that pressed to the back of his neck. He smirked at Gromer who was still a man twenty years his senior and was glaring at both himself and Dallins, who reluctantly pulled the sidearm away and stopped interrupting their fight.

Of course, Rumlow had no such qualms as he turned on the other agent, punching Dallins in the nose as he raised a knee into taller man’s groin. When the agent was too shocked to fall over despite being bloody and red-faced, he slammed his forehead into Dallins’ forehead and knocked the kid down to the floor and made to steal the sidearm for his own. He was awful tired of being weaponless around Gromer after all.

He turned and found Gromer holding a sidearm at him in return, and he had never doubted Striker’s aim. He made a show of cocking the gun all the same, willing to take the risk of priming it as Gromer dared him to go further wordlessly. It wasn’t so much of a stand-off as a risk assessment and judging just when the other was going to shoot.

“So are you going to tell me what it is that you actually want,” Brock said finally. “Because I’m getting tired of guessing at what game you’re playing here.”

“You have improved,” Gromer replied, eyeing injured Dallins of the floor. “Ruthless too.”

The compliment threw him far more than he would have thought, and he tilted his head as he tried to
guess what this was about. Gromer had met him with fists and feet always, had never had anything good to say about him. He certainly didn’t think that it was a trend that would start now.

“Put your gun on the ground and kick it over to me,” Gromer said coldly.

“I think I’d rather take the bullet than give you two guns,” he replied, twitching his finger on the trigger.

“Gun down, rookie,” Striker snarled. “And I’m going to offer you a deal because the Colonel thinks you deserve one. I happen to know better, but we all must follow the chain of command.”

Rumlow regarded the senior handler for a few moments before he lowered the gun to his side but didn’t drop it. He refused to go that far, despite the fact that the odds were plainly against him with the team that had wandered over just waiting for word to jump in.

“What are the conditions,” he asked gruffly.

“I get the Soldier the scepter of Loki for a limited amount of time,” Gromer started, studying his reaction. He managed to stay in bored indifference even as his mind raced on how Striker would know about it; the Soldier wouldn’t talk. “In return, you and the Soldier will stop seeing each other.”

Rumlow narrowed his eyes, but it wasn’t the worst deal. It wasn’t even completely unexpected. He was still completely capable of seeing the bigger picture here. “And how can I guarantee that you’re going to do what you say?”

“The Colonel has already sent a message to Von Strucker,” Gromer said simply. “Of course, he didn’t say why he was inquiring as to the projects progress. Not yet anyway. Do we have a deal?”

Brock gritted his teeth, shifting his weight even as Gromer began to approach him. He held his ground even as the barrel of the gun settled against his forehead, and he stared balefully at the other handler. “I want more information.”

“What more could you possibly want, rookie? Your mission is to get the Soldier the scepter, and I can provide that,” Gromer drawled, an undertone of malice creeping into the man’s tone. “My only stipulation to helping the Soldier in this is that you and he never cross paths again.”

“And if I’m not a handler, what will my designation be? Just another foot soldier for HYDRA?” He certainly didn’t mind the change in title, since he and the Soldier were far more than handler and weapon now. It would be a step down from his acquired rank all the same.

“You’re a good soldier, so you’ll do what you’re good at,” Gromer said, though there was an undertone that had him raising an eyebrow. “You will stay with your team. The Colonel agrees that you work well with them… once you’re in shape again.”

So the deal was that he had to give up all rights, all interaction, all knowledge of the Winter Soldier, and in exchange for his doing so, his Ase would have the scepter and be able to regain everything that had been lost? It sounded so simple, just an exchange, just a return to work as little more than a soldier. That meant that there were more strings attached to this deal than he had the time or inclination to sort out. It meant that Gromer had unrestricted access to the Soldier, and he had seen how well that had gone now.

The cool end of the gun was still against his forehead, a reminder that denying this deal could end with his early retirement from life. He watched Gromer in the same way that the senior handler was watching him, both of them clearly trying to decide how this conversation was going to end. His fingers twitched on the trigger of the sidearm as their staring contest continued for many minutes.
“I would like to put forward a different motion,” he finally said slowly. “You get the Soldier the scepter and limited time with it, and neither of us cross paths with him again.” He watched Gromer’s eyes narrow in dislike. “The Soldier goes free, and I remain here to serve any order that you may have. Anything.”

He had the senior handler’s attention, and while he was mostly aware of the ultimate outcome of this conversation, the resolution clearly tickled something in Striker. He was aware that his humiliation and his overall downfall was something that Gromer was invested in seeing, no doubt had been craving since the man had been shipped off to the Hive. Hate like Striker’s went a long way to motivate a man, and here he was gift-wrapping himself and losing the Soldier all in one.

It had to be a tempting offer. He saw that it was a tempting offer in the considerable pause that Striker took to think it over.

“The Soldier will agree to these terms,” Striker asked carefully but not without interest.

“No, he’ll put up a fight, but between the two of us, he will,” he drawled. He felt the minor change in the pressure of the gun barrel against his forehead.

“Only if he stands and is allowed to experience the fate that awaits a miserable piece of shit like you,” Gromer growled, slowly lowering the sidearm from his head. “He’ll stand and listen to you whimper and then he’ll be dismissed to return to cryostasis.”

That was not an unexpected term, but he had to control it all the same. “Agreed so long as Agent Rollins accompanies the Soldier to the tank. That’s the only guy I’ll trust to know it was done right and our deal is in motion.”

“STRIKE had proven effective with or without you,” Gromer said, more to mull over the complete terms of their agreement. He had no doubt that he would be double-crossed, but that was just fine. This was all show, but it had to be a believable one. “It will have to be cleared with the Colonel.”

He inclined his head in agreement at the same time that he shifted his sidearm. Gromer was in motion as well, and he shoved off to his right just as both weapons discharged simultaneously with a resounding noise.

Pain flared in his left thigh just above his knee, but he had the pleasure of Striker hissing and stumbling backwards with a bullet to the foot. His momentum forced him to take a step, which crumpled his now injured leg. He couldn’t even crow-hop well enough to get weight back to his right because three men from the initial training team tackled him over to strip his sidearm from him and pin him to the artificial grass.

He almost got a mouthful as he raged and struggled to get his limbs free, but his left arm was trapped under his chest, and there was a heavy-set man on his back and another across his legs, holding the right down and putting a painful amount of pressure on the left. He shouted curses even as the third got his sidearm away from him and punched him in the face.

He managed to look up at Gromer limped heavily over to him, waving away an underlings concern for the bullet taken. He sneered and Striker returned the expression without hesitation, making them both appear very much like feral dogs.

“I remember fondly a situation where you hung from chains from the ceiling, but I’m getting on in years, rookie,” Gromer hissed. “I think I need a refresher. I suspect you need one too. Nothing brought out your obstinance better than letting you swing and swear.”
Rumlow was hauled to his feet and took the punch that Striker landed on his face, splitting his lip so that blood dribbled down his chin. He struggled to get his arms free, but the two guys actually knew what they were doing. He breathed hard through the pain in his leg and the discomfort at the way his arms were bent back just enough to strain his shoulders and the excitement of a plan falling into place.

And right on time Striker looked him over with open hate, an officer entered and called to Gromer. The senior handler was drawn away reluctantly, and the third of the group moved in to examine the bullet wound to his leg. He paid little attention to that as his ears strained to pick up on the conversation twenty feet away.

It was punctuated after a few minutes by a loud and disbelieving, “what?!?”

Excellent, everything was in place. He’d have to give Wright and Martinez a raise, and he might even step off of the STRIKE team to let Rollins just lead for the rest of the time. Of course, he had to uphold his end of the bargain first, which was by far the most difficult. He was relying only on Gromer’s capacity and want to draw things out, but either way, it was a sacrifice he would willingly make.

He would do anything for his Ase. STRIKE would perform for the mission. They were better than average soldiers after all.

Striker backhanded the subordinate, and Rumlow had to chuckle. He winced when a bandage was applied to his leg tightly to limit the bleeding and bruising. He didn’t care for that as Striker whirled to look at him accusingly, and he managed to keep the smirk off of his face as the senior handler limped back over to him.

“The Colonel is indisposed to agree to our deal,” Striker snarled at him, biting each other like a wolf tears meat from a carcass. “So I will consider this a disciplinary matter until he returns.”

“T ook a ride, did he?” He could only imagine what the stout stocky man thought of all of this. No doubt very unhappy and very much contained.

“Curious that the Colonel accepts Von Strucker’s invitation for progress and takes the Soldier and half of your STRIKE team with him,” Gromer said with a cutting tone.

Rumlow just inclined his head. “You never were one to believe in coincidences, and that’s just one of your many limitations.” He accepted the backhand with a grin. “Perhaps your good Colonel realized how good my STRIKE team is as bodyguards. And maybe Von Strucker and the Colonel are showing off their prizes to each other. You know how high-ups in HYDRA are… can’t help but wave around their shiny things when together.”

He groaned unintentionally when Gromer’s punch took him high in the solar plexus, and if he wasn’t being held up, he would have dropped to the floor. He gasped for air, missing most of the command for him to be dragged off and hung in some deep, dark, damp pit that Gromer no doubt had been cultivating for a few years.

He only knew he was going because he was literally hauled off out of the training room. None of this was unexpected. He hoped that Jenson, Riley and Wright wouldn’t get interrogated too much for this. Even if they did, he knew they were on board to see this through up until the moment that the Soldier was full of memory again.

Until then, they all just had to survive under Gromer’s wrath.
Rumlow woke to both freezing cold and fiery heat, but overlaid on that was complete darkness. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn’t that he was physically blinded like he actually expected, but there was a tight layered soft material wound around his head. It pressed hard enough against his closed eyelids that he wasn’t certain if the headache that he was currently sporting was because of that or as a result of other injuries.

He didn’t remember a blow to the head, but that certainly didn’t mean that it hadn’t happened. There wasn’t any distinct ringing in his ears or a sore spot in particular on his skull or face. In fact, aside from the punches he knew that he had taken, his head and neck had been left entirely untouched.

The rest of him… well, he couldn’t make sense of much of it. He knew that he lay stomach down on metal, perhaps a gurney or prison-like bed. While he had no sense of time, he suspected based on the renewed stiffening of his muscles that he had been laying on the metal for some time, possibly a few hours. Yet, the bare skin of his chest, belly, hips, thighs and shins all indicated that his skin had not successfully warmed the surface at all. He was just cold.

However, the opposite side of him was a roaring mat of heat and pain. It was mostly his back, but because of the severity of it, the pain and heat radiated down his limbs as well. He wondered dully if his back had literally been set on fire and put out, but he knew all too well what that actually felt like and this sensation was too sharp to be burns. There was a razor edge to his pain that flared when he shifted even slightly, and he abandoned the notion of turning his head from laying against one cheek to the other. His left thigh had similar razor sharpness with his motions, which allowed him to somehow compare the two types of pain.

They were quite similar. He remembered bits and pieces of the time where he had hung by his wrists (so damn unoriginal) and his body seemed to automatically remember the soft jingle of metal on metal from years ago. Those scars had long since faded and replaced with burn scars which had also faded and now bore the open wounds of his lashing. A part of him thought that Gromer remembered where to land each one on his back, a complete replay of that previous time save that Pierce wasn’t here this time.

His ears picked up the hushed sounds of conversation. He couldn’t make out the words, but it didn’t matter because even if he could, there was nothing he could do with the information. However, the sound of voices allowed him to focus his mind away from the hot pain of his back, and that was helpful.

Rumlow savoured that focus for as limited as it was. There was a fuzziness to his head that had nothing to do with a headache, and he wondered if he had been drugged. Pain medication? That seemed far too novel to have occurred.

“...as ag...d...”

“We... ve... en...”

He worked his throat and issued a soft groan to announce his wakefulness, just to gauge the reaction that occurred. The voices stopped immediately, and he thought for a moment that someone moved closer, but his ability to discern and make sense of that kind of auditory information was currently flawed. He couldn’t lift his head for how it pulled at his back, so he lay quiet and waited.

Time was an interesting concept when in pain and blinded. It might have only been minutes or it could have been as long as hours when something wet and cold was lay over his back from shoulders to hip. It instantly roused him out of his pain-dulled state with a shout and a curse, but there
were instantly hands on his head and his legs to keep him from thrashing. Sharp pain dulled to something that might have been close to relief as the heat was drawn from his flesh.

One of the hands gently patted his upper arm. He took that to mean something like 'it's okay'. He stilled as much as he could, his eyelids fluttering behind the the blindfold.

He tried to sleep, but it was impossible with the difference in temperature, and he passed time through the wet cloth on his back. It was laid there very cold, but it would heat up and then be taken away again. It was replaced three more times before he must have passed out for some time, but he woke again when it was replaced again even as his ears were displeased with the sudden bark of harsh words. He didn’t catch many, but the tone was enough to give him an idea that said person was not someone he wanted a visitation from.

“Out, both of you,” Gromer snarled. He knew it was Striker without having to see.

Rumlow was defenseless, and he was more than aware that was exactly how the senior handler wanted to deal with him. There was someone else in the room, probably someone who had come with Gromer and had not been either of the two apparently excused. He wanted to tense and shift and protect his injured back, but even turning his head was a massive effort of stubborn will.

“Check him,” Striker said gruffly.

The cloth on his back was removed, which was for the best as it was at the stage of being hot and needing replacement anyway. His fingers twitched at his sides as a bead of either water or blood or something else slipped down his side, and he couldn’t stop the hiss of pain as fingers (gentle or no) explored the extent of his injuries. Apparently they were many based on how it all flared to the point where his mind swam in pain.

“He’ll live, assuming infection doesn’t take root. He’ll definitely scar.”

“Oh you needn’t worry about his scarring. He’s very good at healing himself,” Gromer said, clearly taking pleasure in the sheer notion. “When will he be ready?”

“Ready for what? To be moved?” He didn’t recognize the current speaking voice. He suspected it was probably a doctor or medical officer of some kind. “I could have him moved to the medical ward…”

Striker issued a growl of displeasure. “He’s not going anywhere,” came the hard reply. “How long until I can string him up again for another session?”

“Another session will probably kill him,” the medical officer said simply, not bothering to mince words and certainly having no particular pity for his plight. “You’d be better to give him a week at least for scabs to form and I can have him on proper antibiotics.”

“And after a day?”

Of course, Striker was impatient, Rumlow thought. The asshole had by now realized that the Soldier was out of reach, but there might not be any telling when and if the HYDRA weapon would return with the rest of the STRIKE team. Since he had no idea how much time had passed since his punishment had begun or at least hit a pause, he had no idea where the rest of the team was in their mission parameters. Rollins would handle things he knew, and the Soldier was driven to get what they wanted, which meant that the other factors had to fall into place.

He groaned loud and sharp as he tried to shift, and he couldn’t even more his arms to shift the way that his arms were laying at his sides. He really, really wanted to.
“Give him two, but I make no guarantees,” the medical officer stated after a time. “Shall I send the other two back in?”

“No, I’d like to be alone with my wayward student,” Gromer said. He would have shivered in revulsion had it been possible.

The door opened and closed, and he picked up a soft inquiry as the door was swung shut. It sounded like Jenson, but he couldn’t be certain. If it was two of his three of his remaining team members, then they couldn’t have been roughed up too badly. That was good; he was going to need their eyes and ears.

Suddenly there was the brush of fingers against the heat of his neck, more of a caress which stopped to check his pulse point. He could tell that his pulse was being measured for both quality and quantity, but once whatever had satisfied Gromer, the fingers drifted away.

“You awake, rookie?”

He grunted an acknowledgement, aware that not doing so would earn him something worse than a prod. He was not in the mood to have his back slapped to force his wakefulness.

Gromer again seemed satisfied, and he was aware of the gentle tugging of a knot at the back of his head before the blindfold loosened so there was finally no pressure on his eyes. He sighed and managed to relax a little, even if he was still incapable of seeing. It didn’t matter because he could feel hot breath on the back of his neck.

“Can you talk?”

He grunted twice softly, an indication of a ‘no’.

“Can you… scream?”

He paused, his flesh tightening despite the pain of doing so. That was not a response he could control after all, but he eventually issued a single grunt for ‘yes’. He waited for pain and received instead a gentle bump of a nose against the side of his ear, and it stilled him more than anything else could.

“You’re going to be very quiet now, rookie,” Striker whispered in his ear. “This is of the utmost importance alright? Do you understand?”

He grunted once.

“Good, good,” Gromer whispered, fingers gripping the back of his neck carefully so as not to pull at his skin much. “I know what you’re doing. I know you’re here being taken apart for the Soldier, to give your little attempt at love time to work the scepter. I also know that you expect him to come back for you. Am I right so far?”

He made no sound, just remained very still and very aware of Gromer leaning over him. He inhaled a sharp breath when a finger pressed dangerously close to one of his open lash wounds. He still made no other sound to agree or disagree.

“You’re going to stay alive, rookie,” Gromer whispered. “Do you know why?” He didn’t move, but it was clear that he was listening. “Because when he gets back, I’m going to let the Soldier come and find you, to see what I’ve reduced you to. Then… I’m going to order him to kill you.”

Rumlow hissed in reply, baring his teeth even at this expected answer. The Soldier would not attack him unless he had ordered it first. His Ase was not capable of killing handlers, so the threat seemed
moot. He still reacted as if it wasn’t, just in case.

Striker chuckled cruelly. “I know what you’re thinking, but there is something you don’t know, rookie. I never taught you the override command.”

He froze, which flared pain down his back. It was then made worse when Gromer’s teeth nipped at his earlobe then the side of his neck and then he groaned but didn’t scream when most of Striker’s dentition became a bloody imprint on his left shoulder.

Brock suddenly knew how Gromer knew what they were after. He also knew how Striker had forced the Soldier to gargle bleach.

“And the best part, little Rumlow, my little rookie, is that I know the Soldier is skilled and fast enough to remove your heart and hold it in his hands long enough for you both to share that final moment together before the rest of you catches up with the fact that you’re dead,” Striker whispered, smearing his own blood on his earlobe. “It’s why I left your chest intact.”

He was going to kill that bastard!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and any and all comments and kudos are always appreciated!

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