to memory now I can't recall

by Etharei

Summary

While on a mission storming a HYDRA facility, James Buchanan Barnes touches one of the many strange alien devices collected by the Red Skull. He does this, in fact, twice—in the past, and in the future.

Next thing he knows, Bucky Barnes is opening his eyes in the 21st century, which is full of great gadgets and coffee, and at least includes his old pal Steve. (And, inexplicably, a different Stark.) Meanwhile, the Winter Soldier finds himself in the middle of World War Two, helping Captain America hunt down HYDRA (which is at least familiar), pretending to be Bucky Barnes (which is not), and figuring out the very noisy group of soldiers who call themselves the Howling Commandos.

Notes

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Title of the fic is from the song "The Parting Glass", my favorite version of which is by The Wailin' Jennys.

To see translations, please hover over the text.
[ PROLOGUE ]

As sad a face as I have ever seen, says the old woman softly. Hello, old soldier. Do you remember me?

He shakes his head in reply, No.

The two of them have been left alone, at her request. The acquiescence had been begrudging and accompanied with murmurs of this being a good day; her arched eyebrow had imparted that she is of a mind with him, about such things. It is unclear which of them had been the subject of discussion. Perhaps both.

They are so different and not, he thinks; one old and the other ancient, almost-ghosts in each their own way.

He helps her drink from the glass that has been left on her bedside. The water sloshes. Slosh, slosh, plink. He thinks of time as a river: the many crossing currents, the pull and the pounding, the violence inherent. He has been marked differently by the passage than her, yet they are all bodies borne down from the furore and falls and froth like so much driftwood, so near now to being washed out to sea.

She pats his metal hand. She has shown no fear of him, not once. Her bones and skin and breath are fragile, even to those parts of him which are still flesh. Her fearlessness does not demand respect but expects it.

He wonders if it comes of having seen enough of life to no longer fear it. Maybe this is why the hours and days and years have been taken from him, again and again.

A flash-memory:

—a bullet catches him in the side, and he turns about to find a grim-set grandmother on the other end of the barrel.

What little of his past that has come back piecemeal has so far been from the time of pain and death. Everything else remains a pretty story from the mouths of others.

As if able to guess the direction of his thoughts, she murmurs, I do keep a gun close at hand, you know. It's all very proper.

He suspects she is more likely to injure herself attempting to shoot an intruder, but he can appreciate the need to have the ability.

For all that she sought to be alone with him, she appears to be content with the quiet, and he finds her company unexpectedly restful. The room smells of powder and slowness, old things interspersed with new. Death is not a stranger in this house, yet it is a kinder death than the forms to which he is accustomed. It seems a miracle, suddenly, that she has made it here.

When she begins to drift off, he hears her say, If I ever hold a gun to your head, ask me to tell you about my grandmother's swan.

He frowns. He has no expectation of visiting her again. He does not know if she is still speaking to
him, or to some other ghost known only to her. He nods, even so, even though her eyes have already drifted close. He listens for a while longer, tells himself he is only checking that it is, indeed, sleep.

There cannot be many left, these fragile breaths in a fragile body.

Perhaps not even enough for Rogers to make this request of him a second time.

He salutes her, as befits a fellow soldier, and leaves her to whatever dreams swim through her well-deserved rest.

Blue eyes regard him gently when he pads into the living room. The television is on, muted; all other lights are off.

"Can't sleep?"

He shakes his head. Sits on the unoccupied end of the couch.

"Finished that book?"

He nods and places it on the coffee table. There are two more left on the bookshelf by the window he has not read. By the time he finishes them, there will be new ones waiting.

The two of them sit in silence for a while.

"You know you don't have to return them, right? If there's any particular one you like, you can keep it in your room."

He stares at the soundless television, not bothering to respond. He does not know why the physical location of the book matters.

There will be a mission this week, he knows. The exact date has yet to be decided, and until then he will not be formally invited. But he had performed well in the last mission, and all three specialists he meets with every week have confirmed him to be field-ready, if the field is where he wants to be.

It is.

"The brain is an incredibly complex organ," Dr. Banner had said, in the beginning before anybody had dared allow less indestructible civilians near him. "The processes and factors involved in memory-creation are still not fully understood today. Between needing to keep your semantic memory intact, and the risk of destroying your ability to form memories altogether, HYDRA probably interfered with your ability to access long-term memories, rather than destroyed the memories themselves.

"Chances are, the memories are still in there. And maybe one day, now that you're not being zapped over and over— sorry, I'm fine. I saw the chair they had you in. That's. No one should be put through that. And the thought of some people calling it science— The fact that you're functioning at all is a miracle. And there's every chance your brain will find the way back to those memories again. But, you know— it's all right of it doesn't."

Back in the comfortable dark, he leans back, consciously relaxing his posture. He likes this couch. The cushions are comfortable.
Some nights, he has the voice to ask, "Got another story for me, Rogers?"

Other nights, like this one, he puts his hand on his lap and taps his fingers twice. This is their general signal for, give me more.

"Gabe's birthday in '44," come the words, after a thoughtful pause. "We were in Landolfi, this little village in Italy. Jones and Monty got so drunk they couldn't walk. Dum Dum had lost a shoe, somehow, and Dernier was swearing the place blue. You ended up helping Monty while I helped Gabe. Dum Dum wouldn't shut up about his shoe, and Gabe ended up throwing his shoe at him. It was night-time, so of course there was no finding the shoe again. Now we've got two guys missing one shoe each. Then Monty started singing “God Save The King”, so of course Dernier started singing “La Marseillaise”. I was trying to keep them quiet so we wouldn't wake up the people in their homes, and then you got so fed up with the complaining that you took off your own shoes and made Dum Dum and Monty put them on so they had shoes on both feet again, and you just went without. Then Morita threw up in someone's flowers; he always insisted, after, that it was because of the smell of your socks." The story ends in wistful chuckles.

He shifts. It unsettles people when he stays still for too long, so he's taken to moving in small but noticeable ways approximately three times an hour. His body has learned the habit.

The body on the other end of the couch shifts as well. Movement in echo of movement.

"I don't remember," he says.

"It's okay."

He wonders what miracles are supposed to feel like.

He taps his fingers twice.

He had asked, once, "Were we lovers?"

Rogers had said, no, his tone definite despite the strange look of anxiety that follows.

He considers asking, then why do I know what you taste like? There are many ways of storing knowledge and his body recognizes Rogers in a way consistent with physical intimacy, with sexual contact.

But his memory is suspect, and Rogers had said, no.

He thinks pressing the issue would bring Rogers pain. He's done more than enough of that.

Grand Central Station. Park Avenue. US Postal Service trucks. Stark Avengers Tower. The streets are crowded and noisy, invasively real in a way that comforts him, a mess of cell phones and greasy paper and beady-eyed pigeons. Familiarity is almost a physical weight, push-filling his lungs.

Then somebody jostles him. On his left side.
Something is wrong. He knows because he *feels* the touch. Feels the scratch of cardigan and a faint hint of body heat; feels the fine details scraping over skin, the gentle impact on flesh and bone.

His arm. His arm. His left hand; pale, slightly pink, a mirror match of the other one. The palm has lines that fade when he stretches the hand back, and grow deeper when he curls his fingers in, crinkling skin. His nails are evenly trimmed, clean. Something about this is unusual. His back muscles release and contract, confused, because the distribution of weight is off; he's at once heavier and not.

Sounds go... distant. He walks until he sees a private, hidden space, some kind of unused service entrance; he tucks himself into a handy shadow and shuts his eyes tight. He breathes in and out, slow and deliberate. His head feels like it's made of liquid; he half-expects his brain to start dribbling out of his ears.

He does not blank out entirely, he knows how he feels after those episodes, but it takes him a while to open his eyes again. The immediate area remains empty of people, and steadily growing darker in the fading afternoon, which he's glad for (though light, on its own, is one thing that has never really bothered him). The dark is... comforting.

He looks down and his left arm is normal again. Metal and wires. He finds that he's leaned his back against the grimy wall. He imagines Rogers making a face at the dirt on his clothing. Though, in reality, Rogers generally refrains from commenting on the state of his clothes. The only times he's reacted strongly are when the damage had extended to flesh.

*My name is James Buchanan Barnes,* he recites silently. He follows it with, *Steve Rogers is my friend.* The latter is entirely his own addition, though he is aware the words themselves are merely a reverse of what Rogers often tells him. But 'Steve Rogers is my friend' feels more true than the first statement, and eminently more useful.

He does not know what it means, 'My name is James Buchanan Barnes.'

He repeats it, anyway. He has nothing else.
It starts, and ends, with a touch.

BUCKY BARNES

He comes to in the dark.

Under the crumbled remains of half a damn building, or so it feels like. Sadly, this isn't even the first time this has happened to him in recent months; he grimaces and takes a deep breath and has to stifle a groan. His head hurts something mean, and that's nothing to say of his torso, which feels like a bunch of HYDRA goons had just been whaling on him. Since this had, in fact, been the case before the building decided to make a closer acquaintance of his body, he is careful not to make a sound. The HYDRA soldiers who'd been close to him would be under the rubble, too, but some of them might have gotten clear, he has no idea how big the explosion—
There had been an explosion, hadn't there? Only way to explain the rubble. He doesn't remember setting anything off, he'd been too busy trying to get away—and that brings up a bit more detail: of somehow breaking free from his escort while they were taking him to wherever they were going to hold him, then a blind sprint down unfamiliar corridors, not having much of a plan beyond 'get away'.

Finding himself in a dead-end with only one door, so of course he'd gone in, and the soldiers had followed him. All his weapons and outer clothes had been taken when they were captured, of course, so he'd been hoping to find weapons, and all he'd seen were—boxes, filled with strange stuff, he'd scrambled through them and tipped a shelf over—

That must have been it. A live explosive in one of the boxes, maybe, and it had gone boom when it hit the ground. He's lucky he hadn't been eviscerated, he must have been standing pretty close.

No sound from outside, though he's not entirely confident his ears are working right. He wiggles around, biting his lip at the pain around his middle even as he's surprised to find himself able to move. He pushes at chunks of concrete until he works out the loose ones. Keeps pushing, while hoping the heap above him isn't about to come crashing down. There—a hint of cooler air. Not much light, but the explosion might have taken out all the fixtures.

He listens carefully. When he's pretty sure he can't hear any movement, he wiggles all the way out of the rubble pile. His body hurts and he's more than a little light-headed, but he doesn't want to be trapped in like that any longer than he has to be. It probably ain't safe to stay under the rubble, anyway. Dust and concrete roll down, dislodged by his movements. The sting of scraped skin is just icing on top. Still, he gets out and finds himself in one piece.

He stays lying down for a moment, on his side and resisting the urge to curl into a ball. There's some blood on his shirt —still damp— but he doesn't know where it's from. Not enough for him to be bleeding out, at least. More of a concern is the deeper pain around his ribs, his stomach. They'd bruised something important, at the very least. Breathing hurts enough that he suspects a fractured rib, too.

He grits his teeth and struggles to his feet. The nausea almost sends him down again, and he clings to larger chunks of rubble for support.

There's barely enough light to see anything. As he'd guessed, there's a good portion of the wall and roof missing. Instead of open air, it looks like rock on the other side of the concrete, which means he's in some part of the base that's underground or dug into the mountain. There's a lone strip of light near the door. He blinks and frowns.

The room seems... different. Not that he'd had much of a chance to look at it, before, what with trying to fend off a dozen grabby and punchy HYDRA goons. He has a strong feeling the door is not where it's supposed to be, unless he's somehow gotten completely turned around—but, no, he's sure the room itself is different.

Haltingly, he picks his way across the mess of concrete and spilled boxes and unidentifiable bits of metal. He tries to pay attention to where he's going, so naturally he ends up treading on a body.

Dead. And very solidly pinned under a large chunk of ceiling. He looks back at the pile of rubble. He has no idea how he's still alive, if he'd been near the centre of that. He picks up the gun still clutched in the soldier's hand. He doesn't recognize the model, which is not unusual when dealing with HYDRA.

He spots a dark shape nearby, at the very edge of the radius of exploded concrete. At first, he thinks
He pulls on the jacket.

He's contemplating the great expanse of floor between him and the door when he hears movement from behind him. Instinct has him twisting around, his body a bright explosion of pain, just as a gun goes off and he feels the bullet slice the top of his shoulder. The unfamiliar gun in his hands is large and unwieldy, but he undoes the safety easily enough and fires back.

Unfortunately, he'd braced the gun with his body; the recoil is harder than he'd expected, and the butt of the rifle punches him right where he's already hurting a lot.

"Fuck!"

He stumbles backward, gasping loudly and struggling to breathe. He manages to check that his shot had taken care of the HYDRA soldier— it had, he'd aimed more by instinct than anything else but the man had shot at him while still half-trapped under the rubble— then there's a dull thump and a distant sense of hitting something, and then he finds himself on the floor, staring up at the ceiling.

He's not sure how long he stays there for, keeping himself breathing evenly without moving his chest too much. There's a ringing in his ears, and the thought slow-creeps over him that he might have hit his head on the way down, which wouldn't have helped any.

It takes him far too long to realize that the buzzing and whining he's hearing also contains words. "—Soldier, tell me you're still in one piece—okay, two pieces—I looked away for one damn minute—still alive—next time Iron Man suggests making a distraction—not a damn challenge."

He tenses, prepared to fight. An unfamiliar head pops into view.

"Easy there," says the man. "How bad are you hurt? 'Cause I don't think even you can just shrug off explosions." Bucky's gotten used to hearing a whole range of accents in the front lines, not to mention languages, but the sweet echo of home in the man's voice puts him at ease, despite himself.

Bucky forces himself to smirk. "Nothing that'll slow me down. I just need a minute."

That gets a snort. "Like I haven't heard that before."

Probably not HYDRA, then. At least, he hasn't tried to shoot Bucky yet, which Bucky is willing to work with.

Sharp eyes look over Bucky carefully. "No earpiece, huh? I lost mine in the rush down. Because somebody couldn't wait five extra seconds to clear the upper catwalk."

Bucky hopes he doesn't look as confused as he feels. The man's talking to him like they know each other. Is he a prisoner? Intel had said the facility's a research outpost, not a factory that might be using POWs for labour, but Bucky knows better than anybody how POWs make good lab rats too. The guy isn't acting like a prisoner. The only other people around would be HYDRA. But if he's HYDRA, why isn't he taking Bucky in? There's a chance he doesn't realize who Bucky is, maybe assumes him to be a fellow HYDRA soldier, but just about every HYDRA operative Bucky's met has recognized the Howlies on sight. He wouldn't be surprised if the Red Skull's been spreading their pictures around.
"Ready to get up?" asks the man.

Bucky takes a careful, shaky breath, and nods, clasping the proffered hand tightly. His helper is unexpectedly strong, pulling Bucky up with relative ease and then steadying him while he gets his breath back.

Maybe HYDRA's trying to trick him. Lull him into a false sense of security. He remembers some of the hallucinations he'd gotten while he was on that table: his mother's hands on his face, gold hair under a flickering light bulb, the soothing scratch of a 2B pencil working just out of sight.

The drums in his head are slowly but determinedly picking up the pace. He blames all the pounding for only just now noticing the weapon strapped to the man's back. A bow? And a quiver of arrows to go with it.

*Thanks,* he wants to say, but ends up groaning, "Ribs," because he's fairly certain he's got worse than a fracture.

"They hurtin' like a sonuvabitch?" Bow-guy shakes his head sympathetically. "Maybe next time you'll try not to be where the explosions are. At least have more sense than Cap."

He brightens. "What about Cap?"

Bow-guy turns his head, frowning at Bucky irritably. "What? I don't have my comms in, remember? They're attached to my hearing aids." He glares when Bucky continues to stare at him uncomprehendingly, though it softens when a sudden flare of pain through Bucky's stomach has Bucky breaking out into sweat. "I'm deaf right now. I can't hear shit you say unless I'm looking at your mouth."

Oh. "Sorry," says Bucky, which seems to take Bow-guy aback. "You said something about Cap?"

"Yeah, passed Widow two levels back, she said he's clearing out the last room. The place stopped shaking five minutes ago, so I'm pretty sure they're done. No sign of those submersibles, I'm afraid." Bow-guy pulls Bucky's right arm over his shoulder. He seems to be avoiding Bucky's left side. The bullet-graze on his right shoulder smarts, but Bucky doesn't say anything. Bow-guy's left arm goes across Bucky's back, gripping his left hip, and his right hand draws out a pistol. "We'll just go meet them outside, seeing as neither of us has comms."

Bow-guy starts them towards the door. It doesn't escape Bucky's notice that Bow-guy is careful to not jostle his ribs more than necessary. Not the usual soldier, unless America's suddenly run out of guns. Another one of the SSR's specials? Despite the low temperatures, Bow-guy's arms are bare. Some part of Bucky's mind can't help noticing that they're really, really nice arms.

Bucky's glad he's probably not HYDRA; Bucky would be sorry to kill him.

The base is full of smoke, making it hard to see anything clearly. Also, dead bodies. A whole lot of dead bodies. Bucky's gotten used to them, since entering the war, but he still averts his eyes. Bow-guy doesn't seem perturbed. There are a lot more bodies than he remembers. How long had Bucky been under that rubble? Long enough for Cap to get free, evidently. And the other Howlies as well, from all the damage.

It's not until they get outside that the small suspicion that had been growing in his mind becomes
pretty hard to ignore.

The trees look weird. He's a city boy through and through, but even a city boy figures out how to tell trees apart from their shape and their leaves, how good each type is for cover. These are not the trees he'd scrambled past on their approach to the base. He's not even sure he's in the same part of the world.

In lieu of panicking, he tries to come up with plausible questions for Bow-guy that won't give him away. Maybe Bow-guy thinks Bucky is someone else. Maybe Bow-guy is HYDRA and thinks Bucky is another a fellow HYDRA operative; they like to wear those masks, covering up their people so no one knows who anyone is.

Thoughts rear from the ever-present thread of fear, inescapable no matter how well he knows they're illogical: they turned me into HYDRA I've been HYDRA all along oh God oh God they turned me into HYDRA like he promised he would oh God what have I done—

He clenches his fists when he feels his hands shaking. Focus. Bow-guy probably thinks it's from the pain. It's not not the pain. The wound on his shoulder is aching. He's suddenly glad the coat he'd picked up is black, so he doesn't have to see how much blood's soaked into it.

The world is confusing but if he keeps his thoughts out there instead of in his head, he'd be able to hold it together. For a little longer, anyway.


Well, what used to be a HYDRA base.

It quickly becomes apparent that Bucky hadn't been the only one to set off an explosion. Most of the base is underground and built into a mountain (and yeah, that doesn't look like the same mountain, either, what the fuck is going on) but the parts that are above-ground are now only so much rubble. There are a few places where the mountain-side has been blasted outward, and the ground has telling depressions that hint at collapsed structures down below. Bucky gets the urge to whistle, despite himself, imagining the amount of firepower it would have taken to cause that kind of damage.

Someone's still fighting the good fight, at least. Maybe the SSR had sent in a second unit while the Howlies were busy being captives.

The two of them pick their way across the concrete-strewn ground. Bucky is now glad for the support; his legs don't feel too steady under him, and the world doesn't seem to be cooperating, the ground tilting at unexpected moments. He notes how Bow-guy doesn't seem upset or angry about the destroyed base, which is another point towards his not being HYDRA.

Unless HYDRA agents really don't care about anything but their goals. They take their own lives when captured, why would they show any concern about one lost base?

Then Bow-guy waves his free arm and calls, "Over here!" and Bucky spots a group of people conferring on top of a shallow hillock. Bucky's vision narrows until all he can see is one person, the most important; the relief is so strong and sudden, he almost gasps from it.

Unable to help himself, Bucky tries to step towards the familiar figure in red, white, and blue. "Steve?"

Steve's head whips around to look at him, despite being in conversation with—is that a robot? He just stops talking, possibly mid-sentence, which seems sorta rude, but Bucky doesn't care because Steve is here. He can handle a world of strangeness so long as it's with Steve. And good timing, too,
finding Steve, because the drum-regiment inside his head has reached the back of the eyeballs.

The friendly expression on Steve's face is frozen, strange. He's staring at Bucky like—he doesn't recognize him. Bucky's heart kicks up, up his throat and out his chest, racing.

(what if Steve doesn't know who he is what if HYDRA got Steve—he's going to be sick—what if Bucky never got out what if they'd made him forget Bucky what if Bucky only dreamed about knowing Steve what if what if—)

A woman with bright red hair steps between him and Steve. "Who are you?"

"Bucky?" Steve's eyes, at least, are familiar. His body is still something Bucky's getting used to, but those eyes haven't changed at all. Bucky starts breathing again, rustling a fresh wave of protests from his ribs; Steve knows who he is, Steve will help stop the world from moving about so much. "Bucky—where are you, right now? What's the last thing you remember?"

How did Steve know Bucky is lost? And anyway, it's Steve who gets them lost all the time. If he focuses only on Steve, he might not throw up. Steve's voice has that commanding officer tone to it, and Bucky's been a soldier long enough to respond automatically.

"We were captured by HYDRA," he reports, "I got away, ran without knowing where I was going. They were running after me. I went into this room, looked like it was for storage. I was looking for a weapon, anything I could use. There was a crash. I pushed one of the shelves over, I think. And then a blast. Don't remember that part, I just woke up with parts of the wall and most of the ceiling on top of me."

"Yeah, we all felt the blast," says the robot. There's something strangely judgemental about its face, or maybe it's the glowing eyes. "It shook the whole building. Possibly the entire mountain."

"Oh man," says Bow-guy. "Uh, Bucky, can you take off that coat?" He steps to the side to give Bucky space to do so. Bucky's legs wobble, left all on their own with his whole weight.

"Why? It's cold." Not that low temperatures really bother him anymore. It's the principle of the thing. "Steve, I don't feel so good."

"I'm sorry, Buck," says Steve. Damn, he's working the puppy eyes. "It'll be just for a minute." Steve steps closer, at least, ignoring a sharp look from the woman.

Bucky shakes his head—and yikes, was that bad idea—and unbuttons the coat. He misses his blue coat, those HYDRA bastards better not have damaged it. Shrugs off the heavy black fabric and holds it in one hand. All of them, Steve included, stare at him, like they've never seen a beat-up guy in a threadbare shirt before. "What?"

"Sorry about this," says Bow-guy, right before he rips Bucky's sleeve off.

"What the hell?" yelps Bucky.

The silence grows morasses-thick. Steve's eyes look on the verge of bugging right out of his body.

Bucky looks down at himself, trying to see what they're all staring at. His left arm looks fine, though kicking up goose-bumps from the cold. His shirt is now stained dark. Bucky swallows. "Oh, that's a lot of blood."

"Right," says the woman, "try not to kill me for this." She’s next to him before he even registers her moving. There’s a faint sting, and all of a sudden he has a shallow cut down his left bicep.
"Oh my God," says Steve, under Bucky’s heartfelt, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what the hell is wrong with you people?"

A droplet of blood wells up at the end of the cut. They're all still staring.

Bucky's vision goes bendy and grey. The familiar Steve-spangled star bounces right towards him, and an unfamiliar electronic voice says, "So I'm guessing that wasn't just your regular garden-variety blast," and then he's out.

He wakes to Steve's worried face hovering anxiously over him.

"So I had this really crazy dream," he rasps, and watches Steve's expression rearrange itself, "but from your mug, I'm guessin' it's not a dream." His eyes want to slip close again. He stubbornly blinks them open. "What happened?"

Steve tells him.

Fifteen minutes later, he's sitting up and clutching a half-finished glass of water in one hand. He hadn't realized just how bad he'd been feeling earlier, until now, having been pumped full of liquids and the contents of one banana bag. At least he'd slept through having an IV put into and taken out of him. His chest and shoulder are wrapped tightly with bandages.

Steve leans forward, his elbows resting on the recliner; one hand is holding up the small orb they had apparently located in the exploded storage room.

"Let me get this straight. I touched some kind of alien device in that HYDRA base and it brought me temporarily to the future?"

Bucky gives Steve his best, you better not be jerking me around, pal. He hurts in a lot of places and he's not sure all of his words are coming out clear. But, he has to admit, the swank plane interior and the sleek medical devices beeping away on one side of his reclining-chair-turned-bed are making a pretty strong case for the truth.

"That's the gist of it," says Steve, before he waves over the red-haired woman. The woman, naturally, smiles at Steve and doesn't even glance at Bucky. She takes the orb and strides back to the front of the plane.

Bucky pokes at the bandage on his arm. "Was this from the explosion?"

Steve gives him a look. "No, this was from outside. After we asked you to take off the jacket. Um, Natasha," he nods in the direction of the woman, "apologizes for cutting you, by the way—"

"No, she doesn't!" says Natasha.

"But we had to check if you were, um, real."

"That a common problem?" asks Bucky bemusedly. He peels up a corner of the bandage. She must not have cut very deep; there's barely a line. He takes the bandage off completely.

"You'd be surprised. These days it's real easy to steal someone's identity. And I've seen robots that look exactly like people."
"Robots," repeats Bucky, shaking his head. The ensuing pain makes his eyes water. "Ow, fuck. I gotta stop doing that."

Steve gives him a sympathetic look and fusses with his blanket. "I'd offer you aspirin for the headache, but Bruce says if it's better not to put stuff into your system until we're sure it won't interact with the time-travel, um, energies. Well, he said 'magic', but Tony has imposed a ban on the word, and it is his plane."

"Damn right it is!" calls a male voice from the front. 

"'s fine," says Bucky.

"What do you remember? Since waking up?"

"Guy with a bow. Seeing you." Bucky frowns. "Uh. A robot? There was talking, but I don't know what I said to whom."

(It's all muddled up inside his skull, like the days right after Steve got them out of the factory.)

He'd passed out on Steve, he knows that. He thinks he slipped in and out of consciousness for a while, because there are snatches of hearing the other people talking about him to Steve.

He thinks he should be panicking, at least a little.

Only, if he's to be honest with himself—he's tired. He's been tired for what feels like a lifetime, going from one mission to another. Right now he's warm and comfortable and Steve's right there, so he's content to... be still, until he's given a good reason to come up swinging again.

"The robot is actually, um, Stark. Tony. He's Howard's son. And the guy with the bow is Clint."

The idea of Howard having a son sparks up some interest, but there's something more immediate nagging at him. He stares intently at Steve's face for a full minute before he narrows his eyes. "What's wrong?"

He shifts up a little, or tries to—Steve's giant paw is on his shoulder, anticipating. Hard to believe there had been a time when Steve sitting on him couldn't have stopped Bucky from moving.

"Nothing's wrong," says Steve with a small smile. "Well, other than you being pulled out of time."

But Bucky's seen Steve in all his moods, has seen him quietly proud and exhausted by illness and sarcastic and stoic and spitting bloody in some back alley. Knows every iteration of Steve's face.

Steve only smiles this way when his heart is breaking.

A few neurons fire feebly in Bucky's brain. He wants to smack himself for not thinking it earlier, but he's amazed he'd been able to string full sentences together, before. He really hadn't realized how badly off he'd been. "So—the alien tech got you too? You touched it?"

Considering the sheer insanity of some of their plans, using weird and unknown alien tech to escape HYDRA feels like a natural progression, really. But—he hasn't seen any of the other Howlies, none of whom would miss the chance to rib him about passing out in Captain America's arms, and Steve looked pretty chummy with these other folks—

"No, Bucky." Steve's hand and gaze drop away, the latter shifting to the nearest window. The sunlight is almost painfully bright off the sea of thick fluffy clouds. Sky's no match for those baby
Bucky looks at Steve's hand, now resting on top of the clean white blanket. There are fading bruises over the fingers and knuckles. Of all the things to stick in his otherwise slippery memory, he has a flash of the back of Steve's hands when Steve had caught him: a scattering of cuts and abrasions, bleeding still at the time. Now all he can make out are a few places where the skin is pink and new.

Steve's miracle of a body, which no one had tested or knew the full effects of before sending Steve to figure it out on his own. Steve doesn't look much older, except in his eyes. But that doesn't really mean anything.

He grabs Steve's hand. Ignores the way Steve practically jumps out of his skin. "Tell me."

Steve sighs. His posture softens at Bucky's touch, like he's forgotten what it's like to have Bucky's fingers curling around his. If his friends weren't sitting at the front of the fancy airplane, letting them have what privacy can be had in a flying metal tube, he'd get Steve to lie down next to him.

He remembers, suddenly, the conversation he'd had with Steve just two missions—a week?—ago. He pushes those memories down. He's made his peace with— that. Nothing's changed between them, and nothing ever will. Nothing can change, because neither of them will let it.

It seems like Steve is quiet for hours, thinking, though it can't be more than a few minutes. Bucky doesn't push. He rubs circles over Steve's healed knuckles instead, the familiar motions helping with his own headache.

"Schmidt had a master plan," says Steve. Bucky snorts, because of course. "A fleet of planes, full of bombs for major cities. He himself was going to pilot the one for New York. I went after him. We fought, and I won, but the plane got damaged. It was on autopilot, flying at full speed, and if it reached New York, a lot of people were going to die. So. I crashed it."

"You crashed it?" repeats Bucky. The headache creeps back up. "You crashed it. Steve. Tell me this means you pointed it at the ground and parachuted out?"

Steve ducks his head, his face flushing. "I couldn't risk it going back to autopilot. The plane had to go down, Buck."

"Don't." Bucky covers his eyes with his free hand. "Just. Steve." He makes himself take deep breaths.

"It worked," says Steve, as if that's the part Bucky's concerned about. The rest of the words rush out, like Steve thinks if he says it fast enough Bucky might miss what he's actually saying. "So, uh, I crashed it into the Arctic, and the plane froze over. I was frozen along with it. They couldn't find the wreck for a long time. Seventy years. When they did, they thawed me out, and somehow I was still alive. This was, um, about three years ago. So. That's how I'm in the future."

"I'm still at the part where you crashed a damn plane," says Bucky. "Where the hell was I during this absolute genius of a plan?" Sure, he has a bad habit of letting Steve get away with his harebrained ideas, but even he has a limit.

Is Bucky old now? Is that why Steve looks at him like it hurts to look away? Well, Bucky gets that; but he thinks if he can keep this knowledge when he goes back, the reassurance that Steve would be all right in the end, he can begrudge the years their passing.

Steve's fingers twitch hard against his palm. Steve's face can occasionally manage to remain impassive when he's lying; it's a real pity he has about two dozen other tells.
Bucky stares at him. Steve practically flinches, at the same time as his grip on Bucky's hand tightens to the point of pain. Bucky feels like something is carving a chunk out of his insides.

"I died," he says, quietly. "Oh, Stevie. I died on you, didn't I? In the war?"

Now he gets why Steve's been looking at him the way he has, why Steve has barely taken his eyes off him.

Steve swallows, a muscle working in his jaw. "Bucky. Bucky." The bones of Bucky's fingers are practically grinding together, but Bucky can't bring himself to care, and the physical pain is almost comforting next to the void yawning open in his chest. "I'm so sorry. It was my fault, I should have saved you. I tried, but it happened so fast—"

"Steve." His voice when he's trying to sound stern always comes out sounding a lot like his Pa's.

"And there's—I should tell you—"

"Stop. Just—give me a second, okay?"

He stares at the shiny ceiling curving above him. The plane's engines are a quiet hum in the background, so unlike the groaning beasts that have been spitting them out over remote locations all over Western Europe. He thinks he can see the other people, Steve's friends in the future, watching television. And isn't that a fine thing, watching television on a plane flight?

"How long am I here for?" he finally asks.

Steve starts. "What?"

"You said the thing that brought me here, it's only temporary. How long?"

"Thor—he's the one in the cape—isn't sure, just that the, uh, energy is still there and doesn't feel permanent. He'll know once he takes a closer look back home." Steve bites his lower lip. "At least a few days. He said—there's time, you're not going to disappear at any moment."

It sounds like something Steve had asked specifically. He's aware of Steve staring at him, eyes big and desperate, and earlier he'd wanted to warn Steve about giving his future-friends the wrong impression. But, well, if they know Steve is reuniting with his long-lost best friend, then they probably think it's understandable.

He should be scared, he thinks. He's mostly numb.

It'll sink in later, he's sure.

Actually, he might even be a little bit relieved. He's done his best not to think about it, but a part of him has always known, maybe, that he wouldn't be walking out of the war.

"Don't tell me how it happens," he pushes out, before he can think better of it.

Steve looks at him in surprise. "Really? I mean, Thor's going to find out what the rules are, so maybe it's okay for you to know—"

"I don't want to," says Bucky determinedly. "Look, there's only so many ways this can go. All that science fiction stuff I read? I can guess. Do you have any memory from back then of, you know, listening to me talk about a surprise trip to the future?"

Steve gives him an exasperated look. "Of course not."
"Figured. Because you would be handling this a lot better if you had." Bucky shifts a little on the bed, ignoring Steve's sputtering. "So. You didn't know about this—until now, obviously. Which means I never told you, or I don't remember it when I go back. So maybe my memory gets wiped."

A small wince passes Steve's face, for some reason. Bucky forges ahead, hands gesturing in the air as he talked. "In which case, it doesn't matter what I find out, and I still don't wanna know. But until your friend tells us more, we have to consider the chance that I'll remember. And if I know what happens to me, I might end up changing it, even if I don't mean to. Which—okay, this is giving me a worse headache than a collapsing building did, but I'm not about to go changing the past, least without a damn good reason. So we have to keep to the past that you remember, okay? Since you're the, what'sit, the commonality in both points of time."

Steve frowns at him, and another voice chimes in, "You never said he was a smart cookie, Rogers. Odes to his sense of humour and big blue eyes and ability to shoot a man from over three hundred paces, sure, but nada about his brains."


"Thanks," says Bucky dryly. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Stark. I should probably tell you that you look like your old man, but actually, aside from the hair, you don't look much like him at all."

For some reason this seems to cheer Stark up a lot. "Thanks. You're the first person in years who's said that. Here, have a lollipop."

Bucky doesn't expect to be tossed an actual lollipop, which lands on his chest. He's surprised Steve hasn't let go of his hand despite the arrival of his friend—teammate?—but he's not about to let go first, especially since Steve's warm (if crushing) grip is the only thing convincing him he's awake. He peels the wrapper off the lollipop single-handed and pops it into his mouth.

Stark blinks at him, face curious, then continues with, "Yes, time travel is always tricky, because even the smallest difference can have unforeseen consequences. Or there would be, if we assume that the past can even be changed. Until we know more, I second the good Sergeant's decision to not give him any critical timestream-altering intel. Thor's gonna try talking to the, uh, alien device, when we get back to New York."

"'S always New York, huh," says Bucky. The lollipop is cherry, familiar in a way he hadn't been expecting. The sugar helps a little with his headache.

"The device is sentient?" asks Steve.

"I don't say this often, but I'm going to hand that question to the highly advanced multi-dimensional life form in a cape," says Stark.

Bucky drifts off a little, staring outside one of the round windows and sucking lightly on his free candy. Stark and Steve chat about taking Bucky off the medical devices, a tower, something or someone called Fury.

Stark has gone back to the front of the plane, Steve quiet and holding Bucky's hand between both of his, when Bucky remembers the important thing he should've already said.

"Wasn't finished, earlier," he mumbles, sleepy again now his head isn't being stabbed by glass shards. "Meant to say—whatever happened to me, Steve, it wasn't your fault."

Steve chuckles, sharp and unhappy. "How do you know?"
"Because just last night, I was sitting in the rain freezing my ass off and listening to my stomach rumblin' with the thunder. The war's been awful and horrific, the worst thing I've ever gone through since the moment I got shipped out. I've never blamed you for any of it. The only thing that's stopped me losing my mind is having you there with me. So, stop beating yourself up, 'cause I know you have."

"If it had been anybody else, asking you to get back in the fight after what you'd already gone through, you would have said no," Steve points out.

Bucky sighs tiredly. "Pal, if it hadn't been you in that place to begin with, all of us would have been too dead to be asked anything." It occurs to him that Steve might still not get it. "No one was coming for us, Steve. Least not until the war was over, and most of us wouldn't have made it that long. And whatever happened to me —will happen to me—I have no doubt in my mind that you did your best to save me."

"Wasn't enough," whispers Steve. There's a terrible blankness on his face that Bucky's never seen before. Bucky brings his other hand around, bracketing Steve's hand between his palms.

"Well. That's war for you," he says quietly.

"Yeah," says Steve, ducking his head. "Yeah, that's what it is."

Bow-guy stands up and walks over when Bucky, bored, asks Steve if he has a deck of cards. The pack Bow-guy produces looks a little battered, but the cards themselves are in good shape. Bucky knows because he checks them carefully; he doesn't feel any distinctive differences between the cards. Doesn't mean they don't have other marks, of course.

Steve agrees to gin rummy, and Bow-Guy sticks around to watch.

"Y'know, you're taking this whole thing real calmly," says Bow-guy. "Also, call me Clint. Bow-guy sounds like I wear a bow-tie."

Bucky shrugs and knocks his cards. "We're fighting against weapons that vaporize people into nothing. My best friend was a hundred pounds soaking wet when I got shipped out, and the next time I see him he's six feet tall with arms bigger than my head. At this point, I ain't really ruling anything out."

Steve gives him an amused look and lays off a deadwood. "When you put it that way."

He falls asleep again at some point and wakes up when Steve slings one of Bucky's arms over his huge shoulders and half-walks, half-carries him out of the plane and into a car. He protests a little, but seeing as all that comes out are annoyed little grunts instead of words, he's not surprised Steve ignores him. He tries to get a good look at the plane and gets an impression of something big and sleek and shiny. Stark Industries.

The car is black and unassuming in the way that immediately identifies something as important but pretending not to be. He's surprised to find that he and Steve have been given their own car. Surely
the team—he's pretty sure Steve's friends are, in fact, his team, he recognizes that sort of camaraderie— is supposed to be split evenly between the two cars, but the rest of them pile into the other one.

Steve greets the driver by name—at least, Bucky hopes "Happy" is the man's name—and confirms that they're going to "the Tower".

Bucky wiggles out of Steve's hold in order to slump against the seat by the window. Steve doesn't say anything, just scoots closer and rests a hand on Bucky's back. The inside of the car is nice, if a bit heavy on the leather, but Bucky is more interested in everything outside.

The area around the airport is full of trees, the asphalt of the runways clean and smooth. Steve tells him it's a private place, mainly used by Stark Industries, and the commercial airports are on a completely different scale of huge. The car glides over wide roads, roads built over other roads, encountering traffic a few times and going through a few perilous turns as if determined to keep things exciting.

Bucky drifts in and out. His body wants him to rest but he clings to wakefulness through the cotton-soft wall between him and the rest of the world. Thus his first view of New York City in the future: a half-vision of metal giants growing out of grey fog; will-o-wisps of headlights on horsepower marking mysterious, fleeting routes; pictures captured in light and words winking in mid-air; a deep pervasive hum as of a sleeping machine under and within the multitude of concrete skins. Then there is the heat from his plush seat and the press of Steve's hand, slowly easing the ache in his body.

The dream-like quality to the world makes it strangely easier to take in. There's a part of him that remembers, or rather never forgets, the things he'd seen when he'd been HYDRA's science experiment, and despite his efforts to ignore it, he harbours a deep, deep fear, maybe permanent, that they've caught him again and he's trapped in a dream. Those dreams had never felt like dreams, though, because of course they'd wanted him to think they're real, only they're always wrong. So it stands to reason that something that feels like a dream is either actually a dream or at least not HYDRA, which is just as good.

Sometimes he thinks he should tell Steve. There was a time when he wouldn't have hesitated, when Steve had known the ins and outs of every nightmare, every shadow Bucky saw in the night.

But. Steve has more than enough to worry about. And there's always the chance he'll decide Bucky is too damaged, and send him home to keep the others safe from him or, more likely, for his own good. And Bucky's not leaving the war until Steve does, he's not.

And. There's that shred of doubt, the worst of what HYDRA did, that leaves him always wondering if he's still back there, really, on that table, and everything since then has just been a really good hallucination; if they're listening to everything that comes out of his mouth, and it's not really Steve he's talking to but some HYDRA scientist. He'd given them ammunition against him before he'd figured out how good they are at playing with people's heads. When he's busy and active and talking to people, he feels less this way, choked and tangled by doubt. But the other times—he both hates silence and craves it, now.

So he fights HYDRA in spite of what they are, because of what they are: the enemy that never goes away. They say it themselves- there will always be another head. He doesn't think Steve's realized this yet. Well, his Steve. Maybe this older one has. He has the look.

Bucky can't forget what they did, and he can't stop fighting, because fighting feels like all he has. He can't tell Steve about the things inside his head, just in case, just in case, the briar HYDRA left behind, but he can fight beside him, fight and hopefully take his demons with him when he goes down.
Well, if this really is the future, it seems like he already has.

"We're here, Buck," says Steve quietly. Bucky pulls his eyelids open, not realizing he'd closed them. He gives Steve a look in case Steve tries to carry him again, and stumbles out of the car under his own power.

"Whoa," he gasps, looking up. And up.

'Tower' is right, he thinks dazedly. He'd seen the skyscrapers going up, every time he'd gone into the city, steel and concrete fingers looking to give Heaven a good earthly poke, so it doesn't surprise him to see how many more of them there are now. It's still a sight, though.

He does a full turn. Steve doesn't hurry him, quietly thanking their driver and waving the car off. There aren't many people out. He looks at the sky and realizes it's only morning. There are a lot of cars, though. A lot. And bikes. Buses. He's not sure how all of them can fit on the roads, never mind where they'd park. No one's paying them any attention.

He sniffs. "Air's smokier."

"Yeah," says Steve. "There isn't even much traffic today."

Bucky looks at the Tower again. Frowns a little. "What's the big 'A' for?"

"Well, you know how sometimes you get given a name and it sticks?" Steve flashes his cheesiest Captain America smile. "Some stuff happened- long story, I'll tell you later, you'll enjoy it- and we, my team whom you've met, are now called the Avengers. This is Avengers Tower. Though officially it's still Stark Tower."

"Stark, huh?" says Bucky. "Guess Howard did pretty good for himself."

"He did. But most of this is Tony. Howard set the game but Tony—he didn't so much win the season as take over the entire league."

Bucky slants him an amused look. "Sore spot, huh? You have that look when you've said something stupid and you're really regretting it."

"Yeah. Tony and I didn't get along well, at first. But we're good now." Steve nods at the Tower. "What d'you think?"

"s not bad. Reserving judgement until I see it from further out, in the middle of all the other buildings." He glances sideways at Steve. "I'm gonna guess that you hate it, though."

Steve winces, though it's with a grin. "It's grown on me."

"No need to pretend, Rogers. Don't forget who had to listen to hours of you talking about the Empire State Building when it was going up."

The fresh air —well, free-flowing air, anyway— has revived him a little, but his body reminds him that he's been moved through seventy years and at least one load of concrete in the last twelve hours. He takes one more deep breath, disproportionately in love with every note of smoke and garbage and dust after months of European forests, and says to Steve, "I'm ready to go in."

After the plane, it's not surprising that the lobby would look like a fancy hotel, too. Bucky's eyes, practised now, pick out the security guards standing unobtrusively at strategic points.
Basic hadn't taught him that; clearing out HYDRA bases with Captain America had.

There's a gorgeous dame in a suit sitting behind a big desk. She smiles when Steve greets her — by name, naturally — and responds in kind. Her eyes glance at Bucky, and visibly widen when Bucky throws in his own “Good morning”, leaving out the ma'am because Steve had, and smiling instead.

"Good morning, Mr. Barnes," she responds. But of course, Stark must have gotten here ahead of them. "Please, go on up."

"Thank you." Steve leads the way to the elevators. "There's actually a private entrance that lets you bypass the reception completely, if you have the authorization, and we usually take that. But I wanted you to see it from the front." He gestures at the first half dozen of closed elevator doors. One of them opens with a cheery ding and lets out a handful of people. A few glance at Steve and Bucky, but they mainly ignore them. "Oh, I should have explained. Most of the Tower is offices and labs for Stark Industries. The residences and Avengers-related stuff are at the very top. Only the last two elevators go up to the private floors.

"Good morning, Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes," says a cool, electronic-sounding voice when they enter one of the elevators.

"Hey, Jarvis," says Steve. "My floor, please."

"Of course, Captain." The doors close and there's a faint whirring sound, even quieter than the fancy plane's engines. Bucky can only barely feel them moving. "Sir has asked me to inform you that the team has convened in the communal living room. They welcome your presence once you have settled in Sergeant Barnes."

"Right." Steve looks at Bucky apologetically.

"It's fine," says Bucky. "Your best friend just time-travelled in from the past, of course you need to have a meeting. I'm guessing this isn't a military gig, unless the military's gotten way more flush since our time." There's something mesmerizing about watching the floor numbers shoot up. Double digits now. He'd only been in a skyscraper twice before, and he's sure it had taken twice this time to go up one floor. "I know you'll tell me what I need to know later. Stop worrying, you'll give yourself wrinkles. I'll sit quietly in your apartment until you get back. Maybe leave me a book or the radio or something, if you're gonna be a while."

When he looks back at Steve, Steve is smiling at him in that soft, helpless way that unfailingly kicks up a storm of insects in Bucky's stomach. "I think I can do better than that, Buck."

The elevator chimes softly before opening. Bucky steps out, expecting a hallway lined with doors, and finds himself walking into—a large living room?

"Not exactly an apartment," says Steve. "More like each of us has our own floor."

"Damn," whistles Bucky. "How the hell did you swing this?"

"Stark," says Steve, like that explains everything. "I tried to get him to let me pay rent, but he said he owns the building, so he can decide who gets to live in it, and also it's not lost revenue when he built the floor specifically for me to live in—which, um, he apparently did—but I got him to at least let me pay for my own utilities."

At this point, Bucky's reached the couch, and he stares down at it because, between the plane and all the people in suits and the look of the reception downstairs, he'd half-expected some plush, classy affair, with leather or fur or solid gold armrests or something. But the couch is—not exactly like their
old couch, from their old apartment, it's bigger and has thicker cushions and is probably not in danger of falling apart if someone sneezes too hard. Yet he can tell, right away, that Steve had been the one to pick it out, and why Steve had gotten it. He swallows and kicks off his shoes, sprawls himself over it, barely remembering the once-habitual motion from home.

God, he can't remember the last time he'd sat on that couch. Can't remember the last time he'd sat on any couch, come to think of it. Probably in one of the abandoned homes the Howlies had temporarily requisitioned for the war effort, and they were never in those longer than a night or two.

There's no spring poking his ass, no ominous creak behind his head. But his back welcomes the gentle contours of the cushions, the cloth is soft to the touch, and best of all, it smells of Steve, comforting steadying and warming him down to his bones.

"Bucky." There's something tremulous in Steve's voice. He gently shifts Bucky's legs so he can sit down, and as always Bucky tucks his feet under Steve's thighs. Maybe Bucky has to bend his legs further and there's a lot more thigh to burrow under, but it's good. This, too, is another piece of home.

God, he misses home. Misses a damn lot of things from before.

"Forget the future—I'm happy enough to be out of the muck," sighs Bucky. If his voice has a telling thickness to it, he knows Steve won't pay any mind. "Speaking of which, I should have taken a shower before I got on your furniture. Bet I smell awful."

Steve pats him on the knee. "I'll show you where the shower is. But you know I don't care. I'm just —" Steve clears his throat. "I'm really happy to see you, Buck."

Right. He keeps forgetting. How would he feel, he thinks, if he'd lost Steve, and then unexpectedly got him back?

Well, he'd be pissed it's only temporary, for one. Steve's stoic calm is a stark reminder that Steve's got plenty of practice at putting up with the unfairnesses of life. As for Bucky—fear of loss, fear of losing Steve, is familiar, as old as their friendship, but Bucky figures there's still a difference between scared of losing and really lost.

"Shower," he says into the silence, before the weight of their unspoken thoughts can steep for too long. "Now that I'm thinking about it, I really want to get clean."

"I'll show you where the bathroom and closet are, and sort out food while you're showering."

"If you prefer, Captain Rogers, I can have something delivered," says the electronic voice he'd heard in the elevator.

Bucky blinks up at the ceiling. "Robot?"

"I think Jarvis prefers Artificial Intelligence," says Steve. "And it's JARVIS, all capitals."

"Indeed," agrees JARVIS, sounding pleased. "I do not have a physical form of my own, as such, but I am present in all areas of the Tower, and run the environmental controls, general infrastructure, and security for the private residences. Along with addressing Mr. Stark's every whim and need, of course."

Bucky blinks. "Did you just sass Stark?"

"I like to consider it an employment benefit. A perk, one might say."
Bucky beams at Steve, delighted. "Looks like you fit right in here."

Once he's focused on the goal of shower, shower, shower, Bucky doesn't let himself be distracted by the guest bedroom Steve leads him to—

"Steve, this room is huge," he says, staring at it from the door. "Are you sure you're not trying to stick me in the master bedroom?"

"You're welcome to look at my room, if you want to check," says Steve dryly. "But I asked Tony to build all the bedrooms on my floor close to the same size. Technically, the largest room belongs to Sam. Uh, Sam's a friend of mine. He used to be a soldier, too, now he helps veterans get back on their feet after they get home. Officially, he's not one of the Avengers, but he helps out sometimes. He splits his time between here and Washington DC, where he is right now for work, but he'll probably be here tomorrow once he hears about you."

Bucky feels a pang at the realization that Steve must be pretty close to the guy to be sharing a home with him. Resentment rises up, and Bucky hates himself for it; Steve deserves to have all the friends he can get, and it's not as though Bucky wants him to be alone. Steve should never be alone. Steve hasn't made any effort to hide how much he's missed Bucky, or how hard he's taken Bucky's loss. Bucky should be glad Steve has friends in the future; he needs looking after, and he especially needs people who won't put up with his crap.

"Sam has to share his bathroom, though," continues Steve, "while you and I have our own en-suite." Steve finally gets Bucky to enter the bedroom by looming behind him until he steps over the threshold.

—or the closet stuffed full of clean fluffy towels—

"How many people do you have living here?"

Steve gives him a bemused look. "Three, including you, but all the bathrooms have their own closets."

Steve pushes two thick towels into his arms, and after a moment Bucky concedes it's probably a good idea, considering how many months of muck must have built up on his body.

"Put anything you need cleaned into the hamper. And that's a heated towel rack," says Steve, pointing at a column of metal bars curving out of the wall. "Dries towels real quick. I know, heated towels don't sound like much, but once you use one you'll see why it's one of the great inventions of the modern world."

—or the ridiculous array of options for soap, shampoo, aftershave—

"Steve, I don't even remember the last time I saw a mango, and now I can make myself smell like one?"

"Mango for your body and apricot for your hair, if that's what you feel like."

"You're not planning on eating me, are you?" He opens a drawer and finds a razor in a plastic package, next to an old-fashioned razor that looks brand new. Another drawer contains a hair dryer.
"This aftershave is, um, really good."

The strange note in Steve's voice has him looking up from the drawer of combs. "Wait, are you blushing?"

"No!"

—or the bathroom itself, which may be bigger than their old apartment in Brooklyn.

There's a bathtub against the far wall, looking like one of those claw-foot tubs except with pipes for easy filling and draining. The shower is inside a cube of rippled glass jutting out of the wall. Steve slides the glass door open and shows Bucky how to detach the showerhead, how to change the options for water, the additional towels for his hair and face and hands.

It's how he's imagined luxury hotels to be like. Not the kind of place he'd ever expect to call home.

Steve leans against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets. "If you're unsure about anything, just shout. Or call for JARVIS and he'll answer your questions."

"Wait, he's in the bathroom too?" asks Bucky.

"I'm afraid I am everywhere, Sergeant Barnes," says JARVIS. "If it helps, I only take notice of the private quarters when specifically called upon, or in the event of an emergency."

"Huh." Bucky shrugs. "Good thing I'm used to the army, then."

Steve hovers at the door as Bucky picks out a plain white bar of soap and the least potent-smelling shampoo he can find. Bucky understands, really; Steve must be coasting on the same sense of disbelief Bucky is, like if he looks away too long the last few hours will suddenly become untrue.

He walks into the shower and sets down the toiletries, checks that the towels are within easy reach outside. Strips off the stolen jacket, then winces when he tries to take off the shirt. He'd forgotten about his ribs.

Bucky looks over at Steve. "A bit of help, Rogers?"

"Right," says Steve, visibly shaking his head. "Of course."

He gently peels off Bucky's shirt, and then helps him take off the bandages. Bucky takes a deep breath and decides it doesn't hurt nearly as much as before. Probably just bruising, after all.

Steve is still lingering by the door. Bucky throws him a wink and a smirk. "You're welcome to watch, Rogers. Maybe you can help me scrub my back."

He looks down to undo his belt and unceremoniously drops his trousers. He hears a strangled, "Right, sorry," followed by the door shutting close. He laughs and shakes his head.

It's not until he's working in his second round of shampoo, the water streaming across the floor still yellow-brownish, that he admits to feeling a slight whinge of disappointment.

His hands are shaking. It's the cold, he thinks, and turns the heat up until the steam stops him from seeing his reflection in the glass.
Damp and feeling the cleanest he’s been in a long, long time, possibly ever, Bucky throws his old clothes and everything he’s used into the hamper, then grabs a fresh towel to wrap around himself before going into the bedroom. (Steve turns out to be right about the heated towels.) He has a vague plan to roll around in the bed for a minute, because the damn thing looks like a cloud that’s been coaxed into a cuboid shape. But he ends up standing stock-still, in the middle of the room, staring at nothing.

It's too quiet.

He breathes in and out, glad suddenly for the lingering pain in his ribs. He feels the absence of the dirt on his skin more than he'd ever felt the dirt itself. The calluses on his hands and feet have been softened by the water.

He looks around him. Everything is so clean. He can see the city out of the wide windows, he can even hear the distant traffic below and at least one helicopter above.

But it's too quiet.

It becomes imperative, suddenly, that he lay eyes on Steve right this minute. A set of clothing has been left for him at the edge of the bed. He quickly pulls them on.

(If he'd had room to feel anything other than the itchy, urgent need to see Steve, he'd be surprised at how well the boxers, pants, and shirt fit.)

From the way Steve practically leaps up from the kitchen stool when Bucky opens the door, Bucky's not the only one affected by the brief separation. They look at each other. No words needed to reach an understanding: mildly embarrassed, mainly relieved, no reason to make a big thing out of it. Carry on as normal.

Steve shows him the rest of the floor- an entire floor- then sits him down in the kitchen and pulls out more pans than the both of them have ever owned. Bucky expects Steve to be getting irritated by now at the number of times Bucky's made him confirm that his apartment is an entire floor but Steve just smiles each time and says it again. He also keeps glancing at Bucky every ten seconds.

Bucky can appreciate the feeling, but, "You're gonna burn those eggs if you don't pay 'em more attention, Steve."

Grinning sheepishly, Steve transfers the two eggs onto a plate and cracks another two into the pan. He plucks a couple of pieces of toast out of a very shiny toaster, adds them to the plate, and slides the plate over to Bucky. There are already a couple different kinds of jam on the counter-thing that Steve had called an island, but Steve pulls open a tall metal door—

"Holy crapper, is that your icebox?"

"Sort of. Refrigerators these days have a separate section for freezing stuff- no, Bucky, you can look at it later. Eat your food while it's still hot."

"Yes, Ma."

—and pulls out a bright yellow tub of butter, which he places next to Bucky's plate. Bucky glances at the second pan on the stove, which is sputtering promisingly and filling the kitchen with the smell of bacon. Steve grabs a pair of bright blue tongs and shuffles the bacon around. Bucky wonders if Steve is used to feeding lots of people, now, because he moves like someone used to multi-tasking. Back home, Steve had done more of the cooking, between the two of them, just because Bucky had worked longer hours, but it's not like they ever had people visiting.
It had always been just the two of them.

Bucky is halfway through his first egg, the yolk exactly as runny as he likes, when Steve dumps a rasher of bacon on his plate and another egg. The bacon is as crunchy and salty as he can wish for; he maybe has to blink and breathe deeply for a few seconds, and also stuff half a toast into his mouth because he's getting that ache in his jaw from all the saliva flooding out. He doesn't even complain that Steve's served him orange juice because orange juice, sweet and sharp and cold going down his throat.

He doesn't really pay much attention after that, focused on wolfing down the food like they're still in an army mess. Steve mutters, "Slow down," a couple of times, but doesn't really stop Bucky, and once all the food's served he joins Bucky at the island with his own plate.

By the time Bucky resurfaces, there's nothing left on the plates but crumbs. "Wow, we ate a lot."

He'd stopped counting the bacon, but he's pretty sure he's had half a dozen eggs and as many slices of toast. Since most of it had been served to him piecemeal, he hadn't really paid attention to the quantities. He half-expects his stomach to hurt, at least, if not eject the food entirely, but he actually feels... satisfied, in a way he hasn't felt in a long, long time. He tells Steve so.

"Yeah, enhanced metabolisms are a pain," says Steve.

"No, I knew that," says Bucky, "I've spent months forcing you to eat extra rations. Or have you forgotten the time you passed out in the middle of a swamp? I was talking about me."

"Oh." Steve blinks at him. "Well, you did just come from active duty and military rations. Not surprising you'd be hungry."

Bucky shifts on his stool, mildly embarrassed. "Just don’t let me eat you outta house and home, pal," he jokes weakly. He tells himself that Steve's refrigerator had looked full.

“I don’t think the two of us plus all the Howlies could manage it, Buck,” says Steve with a smile. “Besides, there are bigger eaters living in this building.”

“I bet. That big guy in the red cape can probably finish off two of me.” Bucky spins himself on the stool. “C’mon, Rogers. Tell me more about this new friends of yours.”
"Sir, Captain Rogers is on his way."

Sir, in the middle of a conversation with Dr. Banner, breaks off mid-sentence to exclaim, "Finally!"

"It's terrible, isn't it, when one person is holding everybody up," says Agent Romanoff, turning a page of her book. [Vocal pattern analysis. Comparison with historical data. Tone identified: sarcasm.]

"Any changes to the thing, JARVIS?"

JARVIS would have immediately alerted Sir of any changes, and Sir has a window in the corner of his tablet showing the sensor data, but Sir does like to be redundant. "All radiation and power readings from Artifact AL-49-CA-3 remain the same as when it was initially recovered."

AL-49-CA3 has been set in the middle of the conference table. There is a red and gold cushion under it. [Reference FIELD NOTE: Looks like an oversized marble, but I bet it's not made of glass. Dark surface. Under direct light, it appears as though there is a film of oil over it, but it's dry to the touch. Faint streaks of color inside. (TS)]

"How are they doing downstairs?" asks Dr. Banner.

Question ambiguous. [Reference: personality traits, relationship with Rogers.] Likely a qualitative evaluation is desired. "Neither Captain Rogers nor Sergeant Barnes have exhibited signs of undue distress. They consumed a sizable meal. Sergeant Barnes is presently investigating the television."

"Just stop him from finding the porn," says Sir distractedly. "No, wait, what am I saying? He's a soldier fresh from the front lines. Isn't it my patriotic duty to provide him with porn? Jay-Jay, offer the good man some porn."

[Vocal and contextual analysis. Tag directive as to be ignored.]

"Please don't offer Bucky porn, JARVIS," says Captain Rogers, exiting the elevator.

[Tag counter directive as accepted.]

Captain Rogers promptly takes a seat at the table, covering his face with his hands. "I don't know how much longer I can keep—he's still in shock, I think, but sooner or later he's going to wise up. I've never been able to lie to him."

The room is quiet, until Sir says, "It's not exactly a lie, you know."

"The Winter Soldier would probably say it's the truth," says Agent Barton.

Agent Romanoff sits down next to Captain Rogers. Her voice is low and soft. "It'd be the kinder thing to do."

Captain Rogers rests his hands on the table-top. "Lying is the worst sort of kindness." He winces even before he has finished vocalizing the words. "Sorry. I didn't mean—that was unfair of me, when I haven't been through half of what he has. What some of you have."
"I know well the cost of concealing the truth, especially from those whose trust we have been given," says Thor. "Yet this knowledge is a terrible burden indeed."

"It's up to you, Cap," says Dr. Banner.

"You won't even have to say anything," says Agent Romanoff. "Every history text book, documentary, website will confirm it. And you did lose him."

JARVIS assays a cursory check on all the flags Sir has set for any new data about the Winter Soldier or James Buchanan Barnes. The Winter Soldier project had not been amongst the SHIELD-slash-HYDRA information that Agent Romanoff had uploaded to the internet; the only files the team has ever found have been in physical copy. As far as JARVIS can determine, very few in either SHIELD or HYDRA had even known about the Winter Soldier beyond hearsay, and only the ones who'd worked in the project directly would be able to connect him to Captain Rogers's friend.

As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes is still dead, these seventy-plus years and counting.

He receives a message from Sir, via Sir's StarkPad: any developments on FBS?

JARVIS [ Reference Project FIND BUCKY’S SUBS ] replies in the same manner: I am still processing the data retrieved from the most recent HYDRA base Sir investigated, but it does not seem promising. The base was mostly abandoned by the 1963, and has not been in contact with the wider organization since. Its most recent occupants only arrived after the failure of Project Insight.

"More cheerful news," says Sir [ tone: sarcasm ]. "Doesn't seem like there's any data about those subs in the base we just hit."

If it weren't so ridiculous and undignified for a fully digital entity to do so, JARVIS would have sighed. "There is no data about the present whereabouts of the single-pilot submersibles, also known as HYDRA's Fieser Dorsch, that Agent Barnes has been searching for. However, there was one note alluding to the recovery of at least one unit by a different base in 1946." To Sir's StarkPad, he adds: as I was in the process of telling you, Sir, because Ms. Potts believes one must be clear with Sir about such things, or else Sir would never learn.

"Confirms Barnes's intel, at least," says Agent Romanoff.

Sir turns to Captain Rogers. "Before he got whisked back into the bygone days, did present-Bucky remember anything more about why it's so important to find those subs?"

"No," says Captain Rogers [ tone: irritation ]. "He was trying, but he doesn't have any control over how his memories come back, or which ones."

"We know, Steve. Nobody's blaming Barnes for that," says Dr. Banner. [ tone: sympathy ]

Captain Rogers bows his head. "Sorry."

The room is quiet again. Then Dr. Banner asks, "What's your side of this, Steve? What do you remember about, well, the point when Barnes and Bucky apparently switched places?"

"From what he's described, I'm pretty sure it was this one mission... some HYDRA soldiers hiding in a covered dugout got the drop on a couple of the Howlies," says Captain Rogers slowly. "The others tried to free them and got captured too. The officer in charge of the base was ready to shoot them one by one if I didn't surrender. So I surrendered." He ducks his head. "We weren't in there for very long, though. Only a few hours, and then we busted out. It didn't seem all that different from dozens
of other missions."

"What I'm getting from this," says Agent Barton, tipping his chair back. "Is that a highly trained assassin from the future replaced your best friend, and you didn't notice?"

Agent Romanoff, Thor, and Dr. Banner send looks towards Agent Barton [ facial analysis: tense ]. Captain Rogers winces. "We may have been fighting at the time. Sort of."

"Wait, really?" exclaims Sir, looking up. "Cap and Bucky fighting. Like, are we talking, 'I can't believe you drank all the orange juice and didn't replace it' fighting, or all-out fists to the face kind of fighting?"

"Neither," says Captain Rogers [ tone: complicated ]. "Look, we were in the middle of a war. There was a lot going on all the time. Bucky and the Howlies had been in the war longer than me. They'd been captured and Bucky had been tortured. Experimented on. So if Bucky was a little distant sometimes, if he was quieter than I remembered, well, the war changed everyone. Men broke down every day, or went AWOL. He was never cruel, he didn't attack prisoners. He's always been real good around guns. So no, Clint, it did not occur to me that my best friend had been replaced with his brainwashed future self."

"HYDRA excels in infiltration," says Agent Romanoff [ tone: distant ]. "They would have trained the Winter Soldier to fit in anywhere, even on limited intel. You couldn't have known, Steve."

If JARVIS hadn't had extensive experience in Sir's tendency to use one set of emotion-coded speech in conjunction with an entirely different set of emotion-coded behaviour, Agent Romanoff's ability to do the same would have confused him.

"Aye, such movements through time do not seem to be common on Midgard," says Thor. "There is no shame in being deceived by the best, especially when you could not have been aware of the possibility. At least our Barnes's deception was not out of malice, but for protection."

"Protection?"

Thor gives the Captain a look that JARVIS can only categorize as kind. "What would you have done, Captain, if you had known you were treating with your friend from the future? If you'd known what would become of him?"

Captain Rogers stares off into the distance, quiet.

"Well, we knew that Schmidt collected all sorts of stuff," says Sir, drawing the room's attention to AL-49-CA-3. "For a while there he was single-handedly feeding Hitler's mania for magic and power. Care to tell us more about Exhibit A, Thor?"

"This device is not of Asgardian make, but I recognize the style of seiðr used for its holding-shell." Thor reaches for the orb.

"Don't." Sir blinks. "Actually, what am I saying? You're a nearly indestructible god of thunder. And that hammer of yours seems to like you, so I'm pretty sure it- she?- will step in if another mythical object tries to sink its claws into you. Please, go right ahead. Unless you make it explode. Please don't make it explode."

Thor has already touched the object before Sir finishes speaking. Thor prods it gently, waves his hand over it. There's no discernible change, but a slight shift in Thor's expression suggests he'd felt something.
"All is well," he says. "I am Thor, of Asgard, and these are my friends of Midgard. We mean you no harm. We are just curious as to your purpose."

"So it is sentient?" asks Natasha.

Thor frowns, as if unsure how to answer. "Ze is aware in the way that Mjolnir is aware. I am almost certain ze is the work of the Light Elves. From before my time, I think. Much of the prized works from Álfheimr carry this spark, which they call the sung-echo of Yggdrasil."

Thor's voice seems to reassure the device further. The surface of the orb shifts color from dark not-quite-black to metallic grey, streaked with bright swirls.

"Ah. It is as I suspected. They made a tale for hir, such as the Elves liked to do before the long wars." At their interested but clearly uncomprehending faces, Thor elaborates, "The tale is hir purpose. The words by which ze knows hirself." He huffs, looking contemplative. "It is difficult to explain the world-thinking of one realm into another. Ze is the Little Tale Of Lost Time."

"Is this similar to your thing?" asks Clint. He seems to have decided that there's no threat, or at least no fighting to be done in the immediate future: he's sprawled himself along the length of the couch, munching on a Pop-Tart. "You know, when your people came down here during the time of the Vikings and threw lightning around and ended up being worshipped as gods?"

"There are some tales of Elves in Midgard, but they bear little resemblance to the people of Álfheimr."

"Well, it's not like the stories of you and—other Asgardians are completely accurate," says Sir, making a face. Unfortunately, JARVIS is quite certain everybody present has correctly guessed the near-slip.

Thor smiles sadly. "This is true." If he casts a quick glance at Clint, no one has the wherewithal to notice, the least of all JARVIS. "It is not unthinkable that a few of them may have visited some small Midgardian settlements and given such works for barter. Or left them behind for some other purpose."

"So what does ze do, exactly?" asks Steve.

Thor expression shifts to one of intense concentration. He folds the orb between his clasped hands for a few seconds. A faint glow shines out between his fingers. His lips are moving but Steve can't hear anything, though there's a faint pressure in his ears, not unlike the feeling from sudden shifts in altitude. Then Thor pulls his hands apart, leaving the orb floating in mid-air.

The orb is no longer an orb. It appears as though it had been in the process of splitting into two but stopped before the moment of separation; a cell arrested in meiosis. Also, upon closer inspection one half doesn't appear to be entirely there. It's more like a shadow of the other, except it looks flat and two-dimensional from all sides. JARVIS reviews the visual recordings and notes that the shadow-half only appears in brief flickers, as if they cannot be recorded correctly.

After a few more minutes of voiceless communication, Thor finally says, "This Little Tale was composed for the fostering of... wisdom. Ze meets a person at two points in their life... and if ze judges them able to benefit from hir gift... ze exchanges them across their own timestream, for a short while."

"How long?" asks Steve, voice tight. [ tone: anxious ]

"One cycle of Midgard's moon. Then ze will switch them back." Thor scratches at his beard. "Ze
says ze has been on Midgard for many generations of your people. I believe we were correct to think the Elves came here and deliberately left some of their works. Ze has been on Midgard long enough that this world's energies have been grafted into hir own." Clearly reading his companions' uncomprehending faces, he adds, "Hir core-magic has more the feel of Midgard than of Álfheimr."

JARVIS initiates a countdown, based on the phase of the moon during which the switch had occurred.

Steve breathes out audibly. "And what happens when they switch back? Do they— do they remember what happened?"

"How else will they grow wisdom?" Thor blinks. "I was translating directly, then. Ah, ze says... that the past is not for changing—forgive me, I think it is more... ze is not for changing the past?"

Steve swallows. "What happens if—if one of them tries to change the past?"

"They will not be able to." Thor frowns. "The way ze says it implies the Mother Tree will not let them. Oh, ze is telling me to mind my manners. The specifics of the Tale is between hir and hir Tale-takers, not any business of ours."

Stark clears his throat. "What about the explosion? Just concerned, since it took out a good chunk of the HYDRA base. If something similar is going to happen in the switch-back, we can prepare a secure site. Or at least get him down to ground level."

This seems to require some calculation, for Thor frowns and clearly looks to be working something out in his head. "The explosion was... energy displacement from moving two living objects through time. I expect there was usually some ceremony to this event, or at least it would take place in a better-enforced structure. Perhaps it is also proportionate to the biological life duration of the person being moved; seventy years is barely a blink to an Elf, but it is a long time for your kind." Thor scratches at his beard. "Ze says the return journey ought not to have any external release of energy at all, as the two instances of the Tale-taker are simply returning to when they belong on the timestream. In fact, ze is the one maintaining their present situation, and at the end of the Tale ze simply releases them; the natural forces of Yggdrasil will see them restored."

"Does Barnes need hir close to him?" asks Dr. Banner.

This pulls a slight frown from Thor when he relays the question. "Ze says ze is already close to them. Oh. No, hir vessel—that is, this object—does not need to be near the Tale-taker. Ze is already locked to them; meaning, of course, hir magic, but ze is hir magic, this casing is merely hir vessel for when ze sleeps."

"I think we understand, Thor, thank you," says Dr. Banner [ tone: kind ]. It occurs to JARVIS that Sir and his friends often take Thor’s Allspeak for granted, not considering the complexities inherent in communicating across differing knowledge systems.

That appears to be the extent of the knowledge the Little Tale is willing to share with them, for Thor is unable to elicit any more.

"JARVIS, tell me you got more from that than I did," says Sir.

"Sir is viewing the same raw sensor readings as I am," says JARVIS. None of the sensors had registered any change in physical and environmental variables surrounding the Little Tale.

Captain Rogers suddenly makes a distressed sound, covering his face with his hands. Then he drops his hands, a wide-eyed expression dawning on his face. "Oh God," he says [ tone: alarm ], "We
haven’t thought about Barnes.”
Chapter 3

To see translations, please hover over the text.

WINTER SOLDIER

He comes to in the dark.

The ringing in his ears and the pile of rubble around him are consistent with his most recent memory: a small explosion in close proximity. Less consistent: the absence of any burns or injuries more critical than bruises, these clearly being from falling debris.

He feels around until he determines the best direction for removing himself from under the rubble. He hears the pile shifting ominously when he begins pushing through fragments of concrete, but it does not fall down and crush him. If he is fortunate, there are no heavy pieces at the top.

He eventually emerges, half-falling and half-rolling, into a dark room. He stifles the urge to cough. Flattens himself against the rubble.

Something is off.

Review. They had been storming a HYDRA base located in central Russia. Captain America had been leading the team called the Avengers. It had only been the second time the Winter Soldier had been invited on a mission. His presence makes them uneasy, he knows, though Captain America pretends otherwise.

He is used to this.

His presence is tolerated because Captain America requested it. This, too, is not unfamiliar.

Widow had entered first to disable perimeter security. The rest of them then moved in on three fronts, while Widow used the chaos as cover to retrieve data from the computers.

Skirmishing in the narrow corridors. He had been separated from Hawkeye, though it was easy to track the entire team's various positions through the comms.

(The team is very noisy. He is not used to this.)

Heavy fire had caused him to duck into a storage room. The room had been locked, but the facility is low priority and has not been updated in decades; what had been considered a sophisticated lock in the 1960s did not stand up to his arm punching through the interface.

The memories are clear, cogent; each piece fits with the ones before and after, a continuous string leading back to waking up that morning, going to sleep the night before. (It has become habit, to check. Again and again.) The storage room had turned out to be larger than expected, though mostly empty.

He looks around. The light is dim and sporadic, the main source being a naked bulb near the door,
but his eyes do not need much to see clearly. He sees the metal shelves pushed up against the wall, stacked with metal boxes. One shelf in the middle of the room has fallen over, now lying half-buried under the rubble, presumably because it had been right under the spot where the ceiling collapsed.

He'd pulled off his outer coat when he first entered the room, in order to free his arm. He does not see the coat anywhere.

Three sets of footsteps thunder down the hallway outside. He has a moment to wonder if his hearing is compromised, because the sounds do not match the direction the hallway had travelled in, and then there are HYDRA operatives inside the room.

He reacts to the threat without thinking; a backward step and slide down the rubble, crouching to pick up the pistol he'd espied (likely belonging to the half-buried body nearby), firing three precise shots into the dark.

He starts for the door even before he hears the third body drop. It is highly likely there will be more operatives coming, and he needs a secure location in order to regroup.

He picks up another rifle from the floor. Pauses to rummage through the bodies. Another pistol, two knives, a compass. No earpieces, which is odd, until he finds a radio, of an old design. Strange. Perhaps the facility had equipment that is sensitive to electromagnetism or signals from newer technologies.

And then he finds the grenade.

He stares at it for several seconds, frozen in place. No time. This close to the door, he can hear an alarm going off outside. He tucks the grenade into one of the pockets of his trousers. Takes one grenade each from the two other guards. Just in case.

There are more guards running around outside, though none in the immediate corridor. He hesitates, because the corridor looks different, he is sure now. There are no bodies in it, for one, and he clearly remembers picking off attackers as they followed him down the corridor—a much narrower corridor than this, to limit the enemy’s advantage in numbers. He takes a deep breath. Closes the door to the storage room, in the chance it delays the discovery of the dead soldiers and the destroyed ceiling.

He taps at the very small earpiece that had been provided to him and all the Avengers. It does not surprise him to hear nothing, not even static. (He thinks he might even welcome the chatter, now, incessant though it had been.) He takes off the earpiece and tucks it into another pocket.

Regroup. Adjust to new parameters. He buries his confusion. Dismisses previous recon as incorrect and approaches his surroundings as a completely new environment.

No cameras in the corridor outside the storage room, but there is one in the broader corridor just beyond. He shoots it right through the lens. No time for more finesse, and his instinct is to remain unseen for as long as possible.

He finds a grille into the ventilation system in the next turn. It's bolted shut, but the lock gives way after one hard twist of his arm. He carefully puts it back in place behind him. It will not hold up to an investigative prod, but no one may think to check if it looks undisturbed.

After a moment's thought, he opts to follow the sounds of activity, and creeps along the shaft in search of more HYDRA guards. He pats the pocket containing the grenades. They are there, solid shapes under the cloth. He does not remember ever using one, yet he knows them, can recite the specs and capabilities and how to use them to best effect.
He also knows HYDRA used the last of them in the 1950s. Any units found, functional or not, are to be returned to HYDRA with a full report of where they’d come from. It is possible that this particular bunker had kept a cache of them, but.

The uniforms had looked odd, too. An old design, as far as he can determine from piecing together the flotsam of data that has washed up since his last reset. Subtly different from the ones worn by the guards he’d been fighting before the explosion.

The explosion...

Insufficient data for an accurate assessment. Further intel necessary.

He elects to follow one of the main corridors, which are distinguishable by their additional width and degree of use. The soldiers appear on alert. Knots of them are walking about in distinct sweep patterns; it is hardly a leap of logic to conclude they are searching for him.

The main corridor is full of soldiers, but the soldiers are on duty. He wanders down branches of smaller corridors until he finds what he's looking for.

A pair of soldiers on break, conversing in German.

"Du solltest sehen, was die mit Captain America gemacht haben."

He freezes. His hand comes to rest over his stolen pistol without his meaning to.

He notes that the guards' heads are clearly visible through the vent grating. The German words travel well and clearly.

"I do not understand what the excitement is about. We caught him easily enough."

"We caught some of his men, you mean. Of course he came easily."

"Well, they are saying one of his men has now escaped."

"These Americans. He won't be out for long. He will either head for the exits or for the cells to free his friends. Personally, I'm betting on the cells."

"Is that where they've stationed everyone? I wondered; five units are barely enough to search this maze."

The other guard laughs. "Are you afraid of one half-starved American? It would be a commendation for us if we get him, true, but they are not expecting us to. He will go to them."

"I hear he is Captain America's right-hand man."

"Then I'm sure Captain America will be very sad if we end up killing him."

His fingers tighten around the gun for a moment. But it will be more difficult to gather data if he alerts them to his movements.

The information that most of the guards have been stationed at the exits and cells is useful. It is increasingly clear that the schematics he'd reviewed before the mission are no longer relevant, so he will have to do his own mapping, and perhaps gauge the distribution of security to determine where these critical locations are.

He actually passes the corridor leading to the exit, first. Or at least one exit; it is likely for the bunker
to have more. There are three separate patrols in the corridors connecting to it, and small units stationed at different points. Some enterprising officer had even thought to cover the vent ducts. No fortifications, though, or any guns bigger than a rifle.

This time it does not surprise him to see antiquated energy rifles in the hands of some of the soldiers. His brain helpfully supplies that these, too, had not been in use since the 1950s, the reason recorded being: *Total depletion of charge and absence of viable alternative power source.*

He considers the situation. Estimates distances. It would be a loud firefight, but hardly insurmountable for the Winter Soldier, or even Captain America. But the force is more than enough for, say, an average human soldier. The conversation he had overheard had indicated they are looking for someone, an American associated with Captain America. It is possible there is another American loose in the bunker, but there are only so many coincidences that can reasonably fit in one scenario.

Old weapons, old technology.

He stares down at his left hand. Clenches and relaxes his fist, watches the plates shift and shiver up his arm. He would think this an old, vivid memory—a reliving more than a dream—but for the arm. Evidence of a future already lived.

For a moment, he considers simply... leaving. Fighting his way out and—he does not know what can come after that. He might find out he truly is mad, his sanity irredeemable; no longer able to distinguish between past and future, memory and reality.

But the soldiers had said Captain America is here, somewhere. If this is some fever-dream, some symptom of madness, no matter, no action of his will make a difference, but if there is even the slightest chance that that part of it is true—that they have Captain America—

*HYDRA has Captain America.*

Clarity sears through him, not unlike the shocking bright burn of electricity.

There is so much he no longer knows, and more he is not sure about. He is well aware that his primary adversary, most days, is his own mind. But this, every part of him can agree on: Captain America is Steve Rogers, and *HYDRA cannot have Steve Rogers.*

He leaves the exit passage and moves deeper into the facility. Twice he has to descend from the vents when the shaft diverges from the main passages or he needs a better look at his surroundings at floor-level. Most of the soldiers he passes over are silent, standing or patrolling without speaking, but there are pockets of conversations, which he takes the time to listen in on. The men have come from different places, and not all of them recruited for the same purpose even if they ended up in the same uniform. The majority are German, but he passes a pair conversing in Italian, and one mumbling to himself in French.

Captain America is being kept in the most secure part of the bunker, separate from the others. The Soldier is not surprised to find that the section has a separate vent system. Similar to the exit passage, there are guards stationed along the corridor and periodically sweeping the area. He notes that the guards nearest the big reinforced door keep glancing at it nervously, as if they half-expect the threat to come from the other direction. Good, the slightest measure of distraction will be to his advantage.

His first look at said reinforced door causes something at the back of his mind to stir unpleasantly. A memory not remembered but also never entirely forgotten.
This is an extraction, he reminds himself. He is in there, they have him, you must free him from them.

He licks his lips. "Mission: Retrieve Captain America." Hearing it aloud is both helpful and strange. He does not think he has ever given himself a mission before. Pulling Steve Rogers out of the river had felt more like a reaction to circumstances than a decision.

He exits out through a duct three corridor-turns away from the secure cell. He chooses that one because it puts him behind the security camera for that corridor; he jumps up, hard, holds onto the lighting fixture for the second it takes to crush the protective casing around the wires at the back of the device. He drops down and waits. He has timed the patrol sweeps, though he can hear their movements well enough, and he only has to wait a few minutes before a three-man unit crosses the intersection.

He dispatches them quickly. He rifles through their pockets, picking up more knives as well as a well-hidden tin of cigars. The guns he leaves, but after a moment's hesitation he grabs the rifle. A regular G41, not one of the energy types.

One of the guards is close to his build. He glances at his arm, the metal gleaming under the light, and pulls the guard's outer coat off. He bounds up his hair using a hair-tie from one of his pockets. Puts on the guard's helmet, leaving off the cumbersome eye protectors.

The second patrol goes down with a bit more struggle but nearly as quietly; he's delaying using the guns as long as possible, to conserve both ammunition and the element of surprise.

He visualizes the layout of the area: the big door, likely to be reinforced, the wide hallway, the turns at equidistant points on either end. It is not difficult to guess how the guards will position themselves in response to different forms of attack. The variable of highest concern would be the door. He does not know what security measures have been placed upon it. He is reasonably certain this facility has only mid-level security, at most, but HYDRA does like to hide surprises.

(He has been one of them, a few times.)

Well. As Rogers is fond of saying: only one way to find out.

He puts down the very visible rifles and loosens his posture. It takes extra effort to move his left arm and shoulder with the same fluidity, so instead he holds his left arm close to his body, as if it's injured. He stomps and scuffs the floor, making a little noise. As expected, the first unit of guards have their guns trained on him by the time he turns the corner. They do not shoot him, though, and he hears one of them speaking urgently into one of the radio devices.

One of the guards barks, "Stop!" but he ignores him, trusting that the guards would be ordered to not shoot him if he is unarmed and injured.

He is actually surprised to get all the way to the door; he'd expected them to attempt to apprehend him before he gets there. Careless, careless. Tactically, it does put him right in the crosshairs of two lines of fire. But they've let him get to where he wants to go, allowing him to dictate where the fight will happen, and furthermore he doubts they have been trained specifically for fighting indoors, in such close-quarters.

Then he sees why they may have been ordered to let him get that far. There is a man standing in front of the big door, waiting for him with an amused smile. He is wearing the insignia of a Sturmbannführer: a Major in the Wehrmacht.
"I do not wish to kill you, Sergeant Barnes," says the Major. "Captain America is the main prize, but I'm sure Herr Schmidt will find uses for the rest of you."

The Soldier comes to a halt, with the man standing between him and the door. He aims a flat, unmoving gaze at the Major. He has been told it makes others uncomfortable.

The man's expression shifts. "That door is triple-enforced steel. Captain America himself would have a hard time getting through. But we have taken special measures to avoid any attempts. For his own safety, of course."

The Soldier remembers a tall metal tank, large enough to fit a man. Restraints so cold they burned his skin. Frost creeping over the glass window. It is unlikely to be the same thing, but he cannot help imagining it, not when it is something that taunts him in his sleep: Captain America being frozen in his place.

His head goes quiet; his body settles into stillness.

(It is a relief to let himself be exactly what he is. What he had been created to be.)

"No witty retort? You Americans can never pass up the chance to babble whatever inanity enters your empty heads." The Major waves his hand dismissively. The Soldier can see that he is unsettled by the lack of response. "Legt ihm Handschellen an, wenn er keinen Widerstand leistet. Aber zögert nicht, ihn zu erschießen, wenn er Schwierigkeiten macht."

It is almost easy. The Soldier only has to wait for two of the guards to approach him, putting down their guns in favour of restraints; these men, at least, seem to possess some measure of sense, for they step towards him apprehensively, in that moment just young boys facing an old dangerous beast.

If his suspicions are correct, none here would know who he is, what he is.

They are not prepared for the Winter Soldier.

He would feel sorry for them, if they were not keeping him from his mission.

The two guards come within reach.

He seizes them both, pulls them in to be body shields; he'd spotted the way one of the other soldiers had been twitching, finger tense on the trigger, and guessed correctly that that one would get a shot off at the first sudden move; the early shot hits the agent in the Soldier's left grip. The rest of the agents start firing; not enough discipline, he notes, they're firing more in reaction than in actual readiness for a shot. He drops one body to free up his right hand, snatching up the dead agent's rifle in the process.

Four precise shots in a smooth sweep, moving fast enough that his body shield isn't even hit; one unit is helpful enough to cluster together, letting him take out two pairs with one bullet each, and the rest with barely an adjustment; drop the rifle and pick up another; one bullet gets close enough to graze his neck, so he rewards the shooter with a quick, clean head-shot; another cluster down; he drops the body shield, now just a rag of blood and bullets; he has the room to simply avoid the shots, now, turning and side-stepping, and either fear has exponentially worsened the remaining agents' shooting or his training had instinctively left the lower-priority threats for last.

Six more shots, none going to waste; his blood is singing, a rare treat these days; then the only one left is the Major.

He's gaping as the Soldier advances on him. Produces a pistol like he's just remembered it. His hands
are shaking so much that the Soldier barely has to move to avoid the shots.

The pistol is dropped. The Major pulls out a knife from his belt and slashes at him. The Soldier snatches the knife mid-movement. Wraps his right hand around the man's throat and lifts him up. He spots the tell-tale stretching of the jaw; his left hand snakes up and yanks the poison tooth out before it can be crushed.

The Major yelps in pain. "You can kill me, but I am not letting you through that door!"

The Soldier considers what Bucky Barnes would do, in this situation. He pulls one corner of his lips up, a look he has seen in movies. "Don't really need you to, pal."

He strides to the big, reinforced door. Raps his knuckles against it, using the sound to estimate the thickness. Draws his left arm back and punches.

The metal of the door crumples. Gives way to slightly colder air. Somewhere, something is beeping in distress. He grips at the edge of the hole he'd made and just rips. The Major jerks at the screech of tearing metal.

Once he has made an opening big enough, he steps through. His ears pick out the sound of a gun being cocked, and his arm brings his captive around in time to take the shot in his stead. The Major shouts in pain. Non-vital hit.

There are half a dozen people in lab coats huddled against the far wall of the room. He shoots the one with the gun, first. He considers letting the rest run. But then he sees Steve Rogers in the adjoining room, visible through a wide window, unconscious and strapped to a table, the upper half of his uniform lying on a tray by the wall.

He marches over to the dead scientist and picks up his gun. Five shots. He is not sure they deserve such clean deaths, but he has chosen the path of efficiency. There's a trail of blood behind him and he wonders if he has missed an injury. Then he remembers he's still holding the Major. The man has stopped struggling, is now staring at him with wide eyes.

The Soldier drops him. The Major lands with a groan, gasping through his abused throat and clutching at his wound; the scientist's shot had hit him in the thigh.

There is a large control panel facing the test room that Rogers is in, the labels indicating temperature control and various gases that can be pumped into the room. He destroys it as best as he can, and also punches the keypad next to the door. The sealed door itself presents little difficulty. (This facility, then, has not been built to hold super-soldiers.)

Rogers, on the table, begins to stir before the Soldier even reaches him. The relief the Soldier feels is startling. He had not been conscious of any anxiety on his part.

This happens often; he would not be aware of a feeling until there is a sudden absence of it.

"Rogers," he says. Frowns. "Steve."

He would not have thought Rogers aware enough yet to be able to hear, but he seems to respond to his name. His head turns towards the Soldier, and his body twitches, little movements defying biochemical bonds. The leather restraints creak.

The Soldier shakes his head and rips off the straps, one by one. He frees Rogers' feet right before Rogers opens his eyes.
"Bucky?"

"Here," he says gruffly. He must be Bucky Barnes, now, while Rogers is still within reach of HYDRA. He pats Rogers's shoulder. "Get up, Steve. We have to get out of here."

"'m up," mumbles Rogers. His eyes drift close again, for a moment, but then he does move himself, rolling to his side and nearly tumbling off the table. He seems to take for granted that Barnes would catch him, though he also rasps out his thanks.

The Soldier picks up the Captain's uniform and locates his boots in the corner. He puts them on the table next to Rogers. "Get dressed. I'll be right back."

"'Kay, Buck. Nice hat." Rogers is sitting now, legs dangling down the side of the bed. He does not even look up, as though it is never a question that Bucky Barnes will come back for him. He does not seem surprised to be rescued by Barnes, either.

The Soldier stalks out of the room, thoughts racing. He is as sure as he can be now—there are only so many possible explanations, even if the circumstances make no logical sense. He has to—maintain cover, yes, he must be Bucky Barnes until he can find out what has happened to the real Bucky Barnes. He runs a hand through his hair. Is it a coincidence that he'd finally consented to get it cut the day previous? It is still a little longer than Bucky had preferred it, or so he's been informed, but battlefield conditions might allow for variability.

A shot rings out. The Major, still on the floor, has gotten a gun from somewhere.

By luck, the bullet hits the Soldier in the left arm. Bounces off the left arm, anyway.

Angry, suddenly, he marches over to the Major, stripping off his stolen coat as he moves. The man manages another shot. The arm instinctively whips over his torso to deflect it. The man's eyes widen when he takes in the gleaming metal, the bright red star.

"What are you?" he whispers, as the Soldier bears down on him.

"A ghost," says the Soldier. "Hail HYDRA."

He pulls the trigger.
Chapter 4

BUCKY BARNES

Bucky means to watch Steve's ridiculously oversized television, if not figure out the contraption he'd called the "remote", but he's not exactly surprised when he blinks his eyes open and finds himself stretched lengthwise on the couch, Steve leaning over the back of it and watching Bucky with a smile.

"Put that face away, you sap," mutters Bucky, yawning hugely and rubbing a hand over his face. The sun outside the huge windows is distinctly lower on the horizon than it had been before. A glance at the wall clock reveals he's napped for a whole two hours. "You can at least pretend to be sketching, like you always did."

"I was never pretending," protests Steve. "And I figured you would have said something years ago, if you'd minded." He ruffles Bucky's hair, causing Bucky to squawk, and then pads over to the kitchen, which is emitting the promising scent of coffee.

Bucky tries to look annoyed, but it's a losing battle. "Guess I don't mind, then." He pushes himself up, and shakes his head when he realizes Steve had put a light blanket over him, and a pillow under his head. Sap. "How'd the meeting go?"

"Good. Turns out only Thor could even hear the device. Orb? So we had to communicate through him." Steve likes to drop important news in the middle of less important tasks, so Bucky's not entirely surprised he waits until he's in the middle of pouring Bucky coffee to say, "According to the orb, you'll be here for one cycle of the moon. About 29 days."

"Huh." Bucky chews on his bottom lip. "Anything else? Wait, sit down first, I feel like I'm yelling up a tree."

Steve rolls his eyes, but makes his own coffee and sits at the other end of the sofa. Bucky happily tucks his feet under him. "You'll remember everything that happens to you here. The orb was made by this ancient race, as old as Thor's people, apparently for 'teaching wisdom'." Steve explains about the Elves and Álfheimr, about the Little Tale of Lost Time; how they thought the Tale had been abandoned or forgotten on Earth to be eventually found by Schmidt; about Bucky having the Tale's magic in him, keeping him here until the time's up.

"So this is some kind of vacation," says Bucky.

Steve gives him his usual, why do I put up with you? face. "Yes, Bucky, advanced alien technology propelled you through time and space to give you the vacation you always wanted."

"But it is the vacation I always wanted," insists Bucky. He wiggles his toes until Steve swats at his shin with his free hand. "Steve, I get to visit the future. If somebody had asked me, even before the war, if I don't know, a month in some tropical paradise or a month in the future, I'd have chosen the future." He stretches, wincing at the pull on his bruises. "I get to see what the future looks like. I get to see what the hell we've been fighting so hard for. I get to see what happens after I'm gone. How many people get to do that, huh? And best of all," he nudges at Steve and gives him his most winning smile, "I get to see it with you."

Steve's arm moves as if to swat him again, but instead Steve's hand curls around his calf and squeezes. Steve is staring at the television, jaw tense and eyes wide.
Bucky swallows, feels like kicking himself. *Damn it.* Casting about for something to say, he comes up with, "I don't know how you can stand to watch anything on the television. I tried to figure out where I was supposed to put my eyes, but my head started hurting again, so I turned it off." The remote has a helpful 'on/off' label on the button at the top right corner, at least.

Steve huffs and shakes his head. At least the helpless cant to his eyes is gone. "Was it the high definition picture quality?"

"No, that was good," says Bucky, waving his arm. "I could see bits of grass flying in the air, clearer than if I'd been standing right in the field. It was all the... extra stuff. There was a part where they, y'know, showed a run that just happened, and this smaller box popped up in the corner with someone talking to a bunch of mics, and then another box appeared with the league scores. And then some kind of news headlines started running across the bottom. And then the whole thing switched over to a bunch of people sitting around a table, talking about the game."

"Yeah, it can be pretty overwhelming. I guess people are used to it now." Steve nods at the television. "Some call this the Information Age. I don't think there's that much more information, necessarily, even if it seems like it, but it's more that it's become so much easier for everyone to access the information that is out there." He pulls something out of his pocket and holds it out to Bucky.

The object is a slim, flat rectangle with rounded edges, fitting comfortably in his palm. "What is it?"

"That's a phone. A telephone."

"It's tiny," marvels Bucky. "So—people just carry telephones around in their pockets now?"

"Yeah. They're called cell phones, or mobile phones. But these days they're not even just phones anymore." Steve reaches over and presses the lone button at the bottom of the flat surface.

The previously dark screen lights up, showing a picture of- "Steve, why is there a picture of a teddy bear on your gadget?" He looks closer. "And why is the teddy bear wearing something that looks a lot like my coat?"

Steve lets out a strangled sound and tugs the device down to look at the screen, though he doesn't take it from Bucky. "*Tony.* He keeps changing it when I'm not looking." There's a faint blush on his face that Bucky can't help staring at. He ignores the fluttering in his stomach, tells himself it's a belated reaction to the heavy meal from earlier. "And, uh, the bear is a Bucky Bear."

"What?"

"A Bucky Bear," says Steve, grinning widely. "No one knows for sure when they started making it, but probably around the comics became really popular right after the war. There's a Cap Bear, too."

Bucky stares at him. "You're saying we're... teddy bears."

"Yup."

Steve nudges Bucky's legs off the couch, prompting Bucky to sit up properly with his back against the backrest, and Steve shuffles in until they're pressed together side-to-side, the device cradled in Bucky's hand between them. Steve drags a finger across the picture and a different screen pops up, with a bunch of smaller pictures arranged in a grid.

"These phones are called smartphones, and you can do all sorts of things on them," explains Steve. "You can send text messages, like telegrams between phones, if you don't feel like talking—" Steve
taps at one of the pictures, bringing up a list of names, "—or go on the Internet, which, uh, I'll explain to you later? You can also listen to music. And take pictures."

He's imagining the phone having tiny, tiny vinyl records, maybe, so it takes him a moment to register, "Pictures?"

"Yup. There's a camera at the back and the front." Steve tilts it to show the very, very small camera lens at the back. He taps away at the screen a bunch of times, and then—

"Holy cow."

That's him and Steve, right there on the little screen small enough to fit in his hand. There's a weird shadow that he doesn't realize is his finger until he moves it away from the even smaller dot that must be another lens. He stares at the dot. The him on the screen stares back.

Steve taps the screen, and there's a loud clicking sound.

Bucky frowns. "Did you just take a picture?"

"Had to show you how it works, obviously," says Steve, a little too gleefully. Tap, tap, tap, and Bucky's looking at a picture of himself gaping unattractively, hair too long and in sore need of a comb, plus three-quarters of Steve's face poking in from the side.

"That is terrible. I look like a ghost," complains Bucky.

"Got you on a good day, then," says Steve, with only the softest catch in his voice. Bucky swallows, wonders if he has any control over what's coming out of his mouth today. Steve's next tap brings up a box with a list of words. His finger hovers high above 'Delete'. "I can get rid of it, if you want."

Bucky sighs. "It's fine. You should keep it." He's careful to keep his voice light and casual, though in the next moment he musters up a mild glare. "You gotta get me one of these phones, though."

"Already did." Steve hops up and goes to the kitchen island, coming back with a sleek box that has StarkPhone printed on it. "Present from Stark." He chuckles at Bucky's gimme gimme hands and passes the box. "I'll show you how to make calls and send texts and all of that. But JARVIS has disabled the internet access until after I've explained the future more."

"If it's anything like the television, I'm fine putting it off for a bit." Bucky has no idea why the StarkPhone would need a box at least four times the size of the actual phone, but he has to admit it looks real nice and classy sitting in the middle of the box. There's a manual and a few wires hidden under the piece holding the phone.

"I figure we'd start tomorrow, with the future stuff," says Steve, in between showing him how to turn the phone on and how to charge it. "Tonight we'll just stay in and have dinner, maybe watch a movie on the television."

"What movie?" asks Bucky distractedly. He bats away Steve's hand; he thinks he remembers how to get to the camera part himself. The little picture looks a bit like a camera seen from the front, but even if it hadn't, the label under it spelling out 'camera' is a pretty big clue.

"Um. Any movie? Tony apparently has them all, we just have to ask JARVIS for it."

And that's- how do people in the future ever get anything done? Bucky shakes his head. "What about that last movie we saw together? The Disney one, with the poison apple and the dwarves."
"Snow White." There's that look on Steve's face again. Bucky doesn't feel bad about it, this time. "Sure, Buck, we can watch Snow White."

He tosses and turns for a solid hour before giving up and staring at the ceiling awhile. Figures, he thinks; he's been dropping off without meaning to all day, but the minute he tells his body to sleep, it's like his brain has forgotten how.

It's the damned quiet.

He stares dully at the ceiling until he hears movement outside. The clink of glass suggests Steve is in the kitchen, probably getting some water. The Steve-steps don't go back to the bedroom, though. The living room? That couch is mighty comfortable.

Well, what kind of friend would he be to let his best pal sit in the dark all alone? Bucky rolls out of the bed with a breathless grimace; he hates how muscles get more sore after they've rested a bit.

Steve is, indeed, in the living room, though he hasn't turned any of the lights on. Or the television. He's just... sitting there. The view out the windows is beautiful, with the apartment dark, but Steve isn't even looking that way.

He'd have thought Steve would have heard his bedroom door opening, but it's not until he takes a few steps into the living room that Steve's head whips around. "Bucky?"

"Hey." After months of dark forests, the New York City lights are more than enough to see by, so when Steve reaches for the table lamp, he says, "No, keep it off."

He's unsure, suddenly, of how to approach this Steve. There's a bubble around him that Bucky has never felt around his childhood friend. They'd been living out of each other's pockets for years; the time between getting shipped out and Steve pulling him out of a HYDRA lab had been the longest they'd gone without seeing each other every day.

Steve is Steve is Steve; Steve knows who he is and what's right from wrong and refuses to flinch from any kind of danger, especially if that danger's just to himself. Bucky's the one who's quiet and cautious, the one who gets lost in his head too easily when left to his own devices.

But that's the kicker, ain't it—he'd gone and left Steve alone.

Rather than deal with the couch and the sad golden stranger sitting still as a statue on it, Bucky pads over to the windows. His breath leaves him at the sight.

"Look at that, Steve," he whispers, even though he'd meant to keep quiet. But then, there's never been a good thing in his life he hadn't wanted to share with Steve. Time and space be damned, he thinks.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. It's quite a sight." The couch creaks a little from Steve getting up. Bucky doesn't turn around, just listens to Steve coming closer.

There's a faint reflection of the two of them on the glass. For one sharp, heart-stopping moment, Bucky thinks he's seeing the Steve from before, that somehow Steve's gone back to how he used to be. But no—he looks directly and the illusion shatters, bittersweet. Steve only looks smaller because of how far behind Bucky he's standing. All the decades between Bucky's yesterday and now can fit
inside that distance.

Bucky swallows, blinks a few times. He's happy Steve is healthy. He's happy Steve is so healthy he's survived to the new century.

Bucky just... misses him, is all.

"They look like stars," says Bucky into the silence, nodding at the sprawl of lights. "I guess it's been a while for you, but a week or so ago, we were far enough away from any towns that the sky looked like this. Before the smoke from the bombings came up, anyway."

"That's." He hears Steve swallowing. Drifting closer. "You know, a lot of people these days complain that they don't get to see the 'real' sky anymore," says Steve. Finally, finally, he's there with Bucky, standing just to the side, close enough for Bucky to feel the heat from him, human furnace that he is now. "But you're right. These are stars, too; each light a world of its own, even if they seem very far away from each other. We're just so used to seeing it that we forget how amazing it is."

Bucky meets Steve's eyes in their reflections. "Are you all right, Steve?"

Steve lets out a long breath, lightly fogging the glass. "Actually, Buck, I don't think I am."

He lets the admission hover in the air for a moment. Then, "Seventy years later, you still don't know how to ask for help, huh?"

"I was asleep for most of it, you jerk." Steve makes a face at him. "And I do ask for help. Talk to Sam, when he gets here. He got pulled into all this because I needed his help, and he gave it."

"Sounds like a good guy," concedes Bucky. "But I should specify—have you learned to ask for help when it's just for you? Without other people's safety or, you know, the fate of the world hanging in the balance?"

The silence is as good an answer as any.

"Steve," sighs Bucky.

"Speaking of sleep," says Steve, smooth talker that he is. "I'm guessing you're having a disagreement with your bed? Seeing as you're out here."

"I've been sleeping all day," says Bucky grumpily, though he actually agrees about the bed. "What's your excuse?"

"Thinking you might have a disagreement with the bed." Steve tilts his head. "Too soft?"

"I used to be able to sleep anywhere," complains Bucky. "Remember when you wouldn't believe I could sleep up a tree?"

He worries that it's been too long ago, for Steve; surely a lot more interesting things have happened to him since the war. Seventy years. He's not sure he'll ever get his head around it. But Steve smiles easily for the first time that night. "You were just too lazy to come down from your nest. And I was more concerned about you being struck by lightning, thank you very much."

"Yeah, well, bark and branches are fine, but apparently clean sheets and a cloud pretending to be a mattress is too much." Bucky sticks a hand through his hair. It's getting pretty long; he'll have to get Steve to cut it, soon.
"It's not uncommon for soldiers who'd just come back, or so I'm told. I had to make sure Stark got the firmest mattress he could find for my room."

"Bet you had a great time explaining that."

Steve hums thoughtfully. "Actually, he was really good about it. There's—he's had some stuff happen to him, too. I'd explain, some of it's public, but it's still his story to tell."

"It's fine," says Bucky. "Like I'm not used to how much of a stickler you are for respectin' people's privacy."

"Believe me, that's a bigger deal these days than you'd think. But—tomorrow. After we've both gotten some sleep." Bucky nods. Tomorrow: Learn About The Future Day.

Then, the strangest thing. Steve's eyes glance away, and he's sort of making himself smaller without actually slouching. If Bucky didn't know any better, he'd think Steve's acting shy.

Steve clears his throat. "I thought, you know, we could put pillows and couch cushions on the floor?"

Bucky beams. "Like when we were kids. You still remember that?"

"It hasn't been that long for me, in terms of time I've actually spent awake," says Steve. His expression is mildly amused, except for his eyes, which are full of things Bucky has no idea how to read. "And I remember everything to do with you, Buck, or as close as don't make a difference."

Bucky feels his pulse pick up. He doesn't know how to read this Steve. Some things are the same but there's enough different that he can't be sure. Steve is the brave one, of the two of them. Bucky's used up all the nerve he has, all the bravery he can muster, and he'd gotten an answer. He doesn't have it in him to try again.

If Steve remembers, then keeping quiet about it is message enough. And if he's forgotten- it'd be better, really. Kinder.

"I seem to recall there's a closet full of towels we can repurpose," he says softly. "Two, if your bathroom has the same."

Steve laughs. "We're already on carpet, you spoiled brat. But yeah, why not- everything that's not in Sam's room is fair game."

Bucky cheers and makes a beeline for his room. He's pretty sure his towels and pillows are more than enough, and he's not about to disturb the room of a man he hasn't even met; if he's surprised to find the door next to Sam's locked, he assumes it to be something like Sam's office, and doesn't think further on it.

Stretching out over the nest they'd built on the floor, Bucky feels the most comfortable he's been in a long, long time. He falls asleep within minutes, Steve warm and breathing easy beside him, the room dark but for the constellations of city-lights twinkling over a glass sky.

Dear Steve

Found a pen and paper by the bed, it got me thinking. Don't know how long it's been since I last wrote a letter. A few days before we were captured at Azzano, maybe. Of course, the only person I was writing to was you, and after the factory you were right
there next to me, so there wasn't any point—

Maybe I'll leave this for you to find, later.

Steve, I—

Yeah this was why I couldn't write no more, once you were right there where I could just tell you what I want to tell you. Except I don't think I'm very good at telling you the important things. One thing, anyway, and I don't even know if you remember. Maybe you don't. It'd be kinder if you don't.

This is fucking awful I don't know

It's my first night in the future and I can't sleep.

---

WINTER SOLDIER

The shot uses the last bullet in the pistol. The Soldier drops the weapon.

He looks at his arm. Considers his clothes. Glances at the window to the other room to check that Rogers is still out of sight. The stolen coat would hide the Kevlar vest until he can find a more appropriate shirt, and the reinforced combat trousers don't look too out of place at a glance. Perhaps he can claim he'd damaged his clothes and had to steal these off a HYDRA agent.

The arm is the most glaring anomaly, of course. The Soldier reaches into one of the pockets in his trousers and removes a small metallic cylinder. Coincidence again? Stark had presented it to him not two weeks ago, and Director Coulson had requested he have it on his person whenever he's on a mission.

"Believe me when I say that you can never anticipate everything that happens in the field," the Director had soberly informed him. The Soldier has witnessed Coulson sabotaging a hostage situation by allowing himself to be taken for an office worker and then summarily incapacitating the entire gang. He knows to take the Director's advice seriously.

He lets the scanner at the top of the cylinder verify his thumbprint, followed by the composition of his metal thumb. A seam appears down the length of the cylinder. Breaks open into halves on a hidden hinge. The Soldier removes the roll of silicone tucked inside.

The silicone sleeve matches his flesh tones so exactly it is a little disconcerting, as if he is holding a lump of his own skin. He'd practiced pulling it on until he can do it in seconds, which helps him now, as he expects Rogers to come looking for him at any moment. The silicone stretches around his shoulder joint, and the upper end seals itself to the more permanent artificial skin overlaying half the metal on his shoulder. It looks thin, at first, but grows opaque as it reacts and sticks to the metal. The small grooves between the plates disappear, and then he's looking down at an arm that is a mirror match of his flesh one. The nails even feel hard.

He pulls the stolen HYDRA jacket back on just before Rogers stumbles into view through the window. Rogers is dressed and using the table to support himself. The Soldier goes back into the testing room.

"All clear out there?" asks Rogers. Of course, he'd heard the gunshots.

"Yes," says the Soldier. He finds himself subjected to a quick visual inspection and feels compelled to add, unnecessarily, "Their shots missed."
"Uh-huh," says Rogers, clearly intent on confirming for himself, though at least he does not take too long to nod in confirmation.

It unnerves the Soldier a little, for this is something Future-Rogers does, this constant check of his wellbeing. He had assumed it is because the Soldier does not always inform Rogers when he is in pain or hungry or unwell, but that in turn is because the Soldier only notices such factors when they interfere with operational efficiency. Rogers’s current behaviour suggests this may have been a pre-existing habit. At this point, Barnes would still exhibit conventional responses to pain and discomfort, unlike the Soldier; perhaps he is prone to misrepresenting his physical state in a similar fashion?

"Buck?"

The Soldier blinks. "Yes?"

Rogers gives him a concerned look but says, "I asked if you knew where the other guys are."

"I..." The Soldier shakes his head. He is not sure who these other guys are. "Don't remember."

"Hey, that's fine. You found me, right? Guess it's my turn to find the others." The concern on Rogers's face only grows more pronounced, however, and he peers closely at the Soldier. "Are you sure you're not hurt? You're looking a little pale."

He must be Bucky Barnes now.

"I'm fine," the Soldier grits out.

"Fine." Rogers nods, clearly accepting the answer for now for lack of any other options. He straightens and heads for the door. He stumbles a few steps out, and the Soldier automatically grabs his arm. Rogers frowns but doesn't actually pull away. That sharp blue gaze takes in the room, pausing at the pile of dead scientists and glancing at the Soldier. The Soldier meets his eyes steadily. The line of Rogers's mouth tightens. He doesn't say anything, though, and his gaze moves on to the file cabinets and desks standing against the walls.

"I bet they have a map of this facility somewhere in there."

The map they find not only tells them where the holding cells are, but also reveals a set of private corridors that will take them there without having to traverse through half the base. A search through the Major's uniform reveals a set of keys with the desired gate numbers.

The Soldier suspects there will be HYDRA soldiers are waiting for them the moment they step out of the lab area. The Captain does not have his vibranium shield. Normally this means the Soldier will take point, using his arm to deflect bullets, but Rogers is not aware of the metal arm.

Instead, the Soldier picks up the bulkiest of the dead scientists and holds the body out in front of him. The moment the body is visible from the hallway, four shots hit it in succession. The Soldier privately chides the lack of discipline, the waste of ammunition on an unconfirmed target.

Also, the shooters have given away their positions.

The Soldier mentally reviews the layout of the hallway, the distance to the first turning and the
corridor they need to take. He has to assume all the units patrolling in this section have been called to stop them, though he doubts there are so many. It is likely that the dead Major had been the commanding officer of the facility— it is not large enough to warrant a higher rank—and HYDRA tends to have difficulty reorganizing when the more important heads get chopped off.

Rogers, he is pleased to see, has picked up a pistol, but the Soldier is not confident Rogers's body has fully burned through whatever sedatives they'd given him, which means his reaction time may not be reliable.

(There is also the chance Rogers will attempt to take a bullet for the Soldier, believing the Soldier to have the constitution of an average human adult.)

He signals Rogers to step back. Rogers complies instinctively. The Soldier knows it is only a matter of seconds before Rogers will realize what the Soldier is going to do and voice a protest, so he launches himself through the doorway without further thought, throwing the dead body in front of him as a distraction.

He fires two shots to the left; spin-jumping on one foot to dodge the bullets from behind; he'd counted three guns so he shoots three times, bang, bang, bang. Movement out of the corner of his eye; he pivots and fires at the same time, tilting his head so that the bullet breezes over the curve of his stolen helmet.

He presses himself against the far wall and switches the pistol to his left hand; takes aim even as a bullet ricochets off the floor by his foot; then a new gun enters the fray, two quick shots. Captain America is crouched by the doorway. He is firing around a corner but his aim is good. Two bodies hit the ground, followed quickly by two more. This leaves the right corridor, the one they need to take, clear of the enemy.

The Soldier hears more than sees the man coming up to his right; his gun is in his left hand, and rather than wasting a second to switch, he simply slips out the knife in his sleeve and sends it flying. The soldier gets off a shot even with a knife-hilt buried in his chest; the bullet ricochets off the wall where the Soldier had just been leaning. The Soldier slips past the body even as it crumples to the ground.

There are only five HYDRA left. The Soldier shoots them one after another, twisting and side-stepping fast enough to avoid their bullets. The last one falls to Rogers's shot.

Just in time; the Soldier has only two bullets left. He abandons the pistol and picks up another from one of the bodies strewn all over the floor.

"Bucky!" says Rogers, leaving the shadow of the doorway. "What the hell were you doing? You could have been killed!"

The Soldier blinks at him. Rogers is exhibiting signs of distress. This is not surprising, nor unfamiliar. What would Bucky Barnes do?

"Relax, Rogers," says the Soldier. He holds his arms out by his sides. "See? Not even a scratch."

The concern in Rogers's eyes doesn't abate. "I have no idea how! You were damn lucky. And just because you got off without getting hit doesn't mean it was the best plan."

"Oh yeah?" He is a little taken aback by the Captain's vehemence. The Rogers he knows is always so careful, always so controlled, especially towards the Soldier. "So it's all right as long as you're the one running straight into a firefight."
You would get so mad at me about it, Rogers had said to him once. Always insisted you could feel grey hairs growin' even though I kept telling you all your hair's still dark.

"That's different," says Rogers. "I heal fast now. And, oh right, I usually have a shield."

"But you don't have a shield now," the Soldier points out. He rubs at his forehead. "Look, it's done, all right? We can keep yappin' here until more HYDRA show up, in which case I'm gonna test my luck again, or we can go and get the guys out."

Rogers glares at him but has to concede to the urgency of leaving the area. He pointedly leads the way to the corridor that connects to the short-cut. A few more HYDRA intercept them along the way; the Soldier doesn't even get to fire, because Rogers shoots them the moment he sees them well enough to be sure they're the enemy. He suspects Rogers is making sure he doesn't get a chance to "test his luck" again.

The short-cut is narrow and lit red. They are forced to jog single file, and the Soldier is wary of traps or gates that might lock them in. They do not encounter anybody, though, and the key to the door at the other end is included in the set they'd taken from the Major.

The Soldier hears the guards on the other side before he sees them. Fortunately, Rogers chooses then to exhibit some measure of self-preservation and pulls the door mostly closed again. The bullets punch bumps all over the heavy metal. The Soldier hunches in close and exchanges a look with Rogers.

Rogers's hearing is sharp enough for him to pin-point the position of the shooters. So is the Soldier's, but Rogers wouldn't know that, yet he does not question when the Soldier indicates which guard he will aim for. Perhaps Bucky Barnes had been so skilled; perhaps the fight earlier had convinced Rogers to trust his ability. The moment there is a pause, they rush through, taking out the two HYDRA guards with one bullet each.

A moment of quiet, then, "What took you so long?" shouts one of the occupants of the cells.

"Wanted to give you guys a chance to nap," responds Rogers. He crouches by the bodies and carefully searches their belts and pockets, until he's holding two sets of keys from one guard and one set from the other. He tosses one to the Soldier.

The Soldier hesitates for a moment before approaching a cell at random and trying one of the keys. The man on the other side of the bars is of East Asian origin, most likely Japanese, and he arches one eyebrow at the Soldier. The expression would be classed as annoyed, the Soldier thinks, but for the faintest upward curve of the man's lips. It casts his face into reluctant amusement.

The keys turn out to be on one of the sets Rogers is holding. HYDRA had placed one man per cell, so it took a while to get all of them out.

The Howling Commandos

The Soldier remembers reading about them. Future-Rogers had shown him their files, from both the Army and SSR (and SHIELD, for a few of them). He mentally recites their names as they stumble out of their cells.

James Morita ("Jim"); Timothy Dugan ("Dum Dum"); Gabriel Jones ("Gabe"); Montgomery Falsworth ("Monty"); Jacques Dernier ("Frenchy").

"Havin' a bad day, Barnes?" asks Dugan. "That face of yours can curdle milk."
The Soldier shakes his head. He recognizes that the task of maintaining his cover has increased in complexity with the addition of the team, all of whom are familiar with Bucky.

"I think they dumped our stuff in the cell at the end," says Jones.

HYDRA had, indeed, stored the packs belonging to the Howling Commandos in the end cell, as well as a very distinctive shield. The Soldier allows the others to reclaim their packs first, since he will only find Bucky's by process of elimination. To cover his delay, he glances at Captain America standing guard out in the hallway and picks up the shield. He is startled at the familiarity of its weight; he has handled it before, has thrown it at Rogers, but he had not thought to expect this to be the same artefact.

(It is possible that they had made an exact replica, of course. He doubts it. Rogers is sentimental about the shield. Rogers does not discard tools when he is done with them.)

It hits him, right then: he has never seen anybody else use the shield. He himself had never really thought twice about it, has thrown and held and carried the shield as circumstances demanded. He casts a look around- no one seems perturbed to see him handling the shield, least of all Rogers. No one is even paying him any attention.

"Cap," he calls, not bothering to raise his voice because he knows Rogers's enhanced hearing will pick it up. Rogers looks his way and catches the shield easily when it is tossed to him. Again, no reaction. Conclusion: this falls within the normal range of behaviour for Bucky.

As he had hoped, there are two packs left once the others have taken theirs and left the cell. It is an easy guess that the larger one is Rogers's. The Soldier picks up the other pack and discovers that there is a lump of fabric under it. He recognizes the blue colour, the grimy wing sewn onto one sleeve. He spreads it out.

Bucky Barnes's coat. He remembers seeing it in black-and-white photographs, at attention in the background of official war footage. There's a similar one in the Smithsonian. He does not remember wearing it, yet he knows what he looks like in it.

He pulls it on before his hesitation can be marked. It is tight, particularly around his arms and chest. This is only to be expected: he has more muscle mass than Bucky Barnes. It must have been comfortably roomy for its original owner. The smell makes him wrinkle his nose.

(He would hardly have noticed, once, used to worse than mud and gunpowder and dried sweat.)

He investigates the inside of Bucky's pack. As he'd hoped, there's a change of clothing, though an investigative sniff informs him it hasn't been washed since its last use. Possibly several last uses.

First aid kit. Extra rolls of bandages. Compass. K Rations. Cigarettes. A small notebook. Eating utensils, but no meat plate. Bayonet. Two canteens. One canteen is empty, the second is partially filled with some form of alcohol, of a fairly respectable strength if the smell is anything to go by. He considers emptying it, being unnecessary weight, but he has a vague awareness of the value soldiers place on alcohol. Best not to risk behaving out of character and gaining attention for it, in any case.

"Now what?" asks Dugan.

Rogers spreads the map of the facility over the scuffed and dirty floor. The Soldier recalls the route he'd taken earlier and taps at the corresponding section of the map.

"I saw this passage out, on my way to you," he says, nodding at Rogers. "They'd stationed most of the guards around the exits when I got loose," he wipes at his nose, pretending an itch to cover his
brief stumble. "They must be waiting for us now."

"How were they organized?" asks the Captain.

The Soldier details the arrangement of the fire-teams, the patrol sweeps, the types of guns he'd spotted. Rogers nods and clasps him warmly on the shoulder- a gesture of camaraderie, gratitude. The Soldier reminds himself not to tense up at the contact, but he does not think he is successful. For once, the contact itself concerns him less than the fact it is his left shoulder, and it is only luck he is wearing his backpack, as well as the coat, so there is a fairly substantial layer between metal-fused bone and Rogers's hand. If Rogers notices anything, he does not react, instead looking questioningly at Dernier and Falsworth, who glance at one another in turn.

"Shouldn't be a problem," says Falsworth, at the same time as Dernier says the same in French.

Ten minutes later, the Soldier is covering the rear of the group as they jog in the wake of a string of staggered explosions. Somewhere ahead, he knows, Rogers is throwing himself head-on into the path of a dozen waiting guns, obscured by smoke and bright shield held aloft.

The Soldier does not question his handlers, does not question his orders. If Rogers had known of his enhancements and skill set, the Soldier would assume Rogers sees the value in positioning the two supersoldiers on the two ends of the team. Yet Rogers does not know. Rather, the Soldier suspects this is Rogers paying him back for facing the soldiers outside the labs on his own.

He thinks, My name is James Buchanan Barnes. He thinks, Steve Rogers is my friend, and is surprised by the strange tone to the thought, resigned and long-suffering and gently exasperated, his and not his at all.

(He thinks the word for it may be fond.)

Here is a secret he has been keeping from Steve Rogers.

(The future one, of course. The past and its ghosts do not know any different.)

He knows how to be Bucky Barnes.

It is not memory, not a recollection of being him; memory is unreliable, sporadic, supremely unhelpful exactly when he has need of it.

Bucky Barnes is

— a face— photographs— facts— field reports— test results— schematics— textbook entries— comic books— documentary subject— data— data— data—

A cluster of data inside his head, organized by relevance and reliability. The very first piece being: Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. He has been adding to it diligently since he'd permitted, Steve Rogers is my friend, and given into gentle hands and soft words and a quiet room in the sky. There have been anecdotes. Drawings. Video. One static-strewn audio recording made for radio.

Logical, to learn about the man whose face he wears. It had been lifeline at a time when he had had no mission, no purpose, no handlers. Illogical, to feel like he's been stealing, though most of the data was widely available to the public. If anything, he had encountered too much information. (He has
never had to curate material for his own covers before.)

With Rogers had come shelter and food and rest. Rogers, of course, needs little prompting to provide more data on James Buchanan Barnes, whether deliberately or otherwise. The Soldier needed only be attentive.

At one point, the Soldier had entertained the possibility of one day simply declaring his memories returned, it's a miracle, and proceeding from there on out as if he'd regained his old self. Eventually, he'd come to realize that it would never work. Not even Rogers, who yearns for his old friend so very much, really believes such a thing to be possible.

*My name is Bucky Barnes.*

*My name is Bucky.*

He shivers. Some ghosts, after all, are stronger than others.

*Barnes,* he thinks. Better. It is what Rogers and his friends call him, in the future. He is not Bucky but he thinks he can be Barnes.

Their small, improvised camp is silent. The night forest, less so, but it is only the normal soundings of native life, which is its own kind of quiet. He volunteers for the middle watch, aware it is the shift no one wants because it means a too-brief sleep followed by trying to stay awake and another too-brief sleep. The others are too grateful to question. Or perhaps this is not unusual, either. He needs less sleep and so does the Captain. Perhaps Bucky and the Captain had traded off on this, united in sparing their men a small hardship.

He cannot help stealing glances at the figure sleeping soundly, flat on his back, at the edge of the heap. The men shift and scratch and occasionally snore, but Rogers appears as comfortable as if he were on a bed. Not deep sleep. The Soldier Barnes can sense that Rogers will wake, alert, at the slightest wrong sound- yet strangely settled. The Rogers in the future had seemed far less peaceful. When they first began living under the same roof, Barnes had had a habit of looking in on him at least once during the night.

(At least the nights Rogers hadn't been as restlessly awake as him.)

He doubts HYDRA are pursuing them. He is reasonably confident he can detect the approach of any threats. He is no longer under observation.

His thoughts spill all over themselves, a sliding pool of sparking threads. Barnes is accustomed to commands: clear and concise. Such are the methods by which he is directed; such are the methods by which he directs himself.

Bucky had been a soldier. He had known this. Yet there is a difference between a data point and a reality; between information learned and memories lived.

Future-Rogers often talked about Bucky in Brooklyn, Bucky the best friend, Bucky the Howling Commando. Maybe he'd thought the Soldier Barnes knows more than enough about fighting, about war.

He runs a hand over Bucky Barnes's rifle. Presses his elbow in until he feels the shape of Bucky
Barnes's knife in its sheath. Bucky had had good, sturdy equipment. He does not know if Barnes had been supplied well, or if experience had developed in him a good judge of quality. The weapons feel right where the coat is too tight and his men's gazes are too trusting.

The artefacts of war. He understands this better than the objectives impressed upon him in the future; the overarching goal being to "get better", which he can appreciate as a desirable objective. He just doesn't know what it means.

He is the Winter Soldier, and this is a war.

The breeze grows stronger, whispering of a storm that will pass near them, and he takes advantage of the rustling of leaves to change clothing. He is sure none of the men are close to waking, yet he still keeps himself in the deepest shadow of the tree, and his left side firmly obscured by the trunk. The silicone sleeve is good but it does not entirely hide the scars around the joining of his body and the metal arm.

He pulls off the stolen HYDRA helmet. He doesn't have a mirror now but he's done this once before: over the sink in a bathroom decades in the future, a photograph purloined from Rogers taped to the mirror. He pulls out a knife, uses the hair-tie to pull back most of his hair for the big first cut. Then it is a matter of trimming the sides, using guesswork and memory to deal with the back. It is still longer than Bucky's, probably, but the difference would be overlooked in the middle of a chaotic war.

Bucky's clothing is not as tight as he'd expected, which suggests Bucky been wearing at least a size too large. Curious. Still, the fit is still close enough that he considers removing the ceramic knives he always carries under his clothes. He compromises by relocating the sheathes on his arms, which are the most noticeable.

He does not think he can sleep, and he considers taking the third and final watch himself. But he does not know yet if it would arouse suspicion. In any case, a non-enhanced human would be exhausted by now, after all the fighting and running Barnes had had to do, so it is necessary for him to demonstrate the effects of the exertions. He picks his way over the sleeping bodies and gently shakes Falsworth. Falsworth blinks and glares and mutters aspersions at his character and parentage around big, gulping yawns, before shaking himself awake. The Soldier stares after him and then takes the vacated spot on the ground.

"Greetings, young one."

He sits up, ready for a fight. He had not heard anything moving in his immediate vicinity, much less another person approaching him. He looks around and sees the dark shapes of the others in the unit around him. Falsworth is an unmovng shadow at the edge of the camp.

"Be at ease. I do not mean you harm. I am not in your present, in fact, though if you look down at your hand, you may see traces of the magics that have brought you here."

He looks. Both his hands appear normal, flesh and metal-disguised-as-flesh. He opens and closes his fingers. He peers closer. There. A very faint glow, just for a moment, around the tips of his fingers and the centre of his palm. On both hands.

A flash-memory:
"The son of Asgard has explained that you would not understand what has taken place, and has beseeched me to reassure you." A pause. "I will do my best to clarify matters, so that you are not alarmed."

He nods. This is when he realizes he's dreaming; the forest is still around him, and the shapes of the others are splayed across the ground, but none of them stir at the noise or at his restless moving about.

"I am told it is the custom in your locality for a stranger to introduce herself upon meeting. We have already met, of course, but as that meeting has been taken from you, we have become strangers again. I am named the Little Tale of Lost Time, and my singer-weavers were the Elves of Álfheim."

"You have exchanged places with your self from this earlier time. Past into future and future into past. This will last for one cycle of your Midgardian moon. At the end of that time, you who are the future will return to the future, and the one who is your past will return to the past. Such is the ritual to which my song-weavers submitted the most honoured among their people, in the ages before long wars silenced the Wooded Words. The ritual-journey holds different meanings for all who embark upon it. For some, it is an opportunity for wisdom and reflection; for others, peace and the closing of old wounds."

Well. He had suspected, hadn't he? It is a relief, nonetheless, to have it confirmed, to have some sort of explanation to cling to other than madness and hallucinations. He rubs at his palm. He discovers that if he cups his hands together, the very faintest glow can be seen over the skin, as if there are lights under all the layers of tissue and metal.

It takes another moment for his brain to start processing the data.

He's in the past.

He's in the past.

"Be warned," continues the Little Tale, "that the Mother Tree is diligent in the protection of her branches. You are here, and for such to be true, the path that has brought you here must remain whole."

For, of course, the Soldier's mind has already leapt down one particular course.

If he—if he hunted him, if he makes sure [Target: Zola, Armin] does not live longer than it takes for the Winter Soldier to travel to his present location—

"The Mother Tree bends and spreads and roots; her bark has a measure of... flex. Small variations are acceptable. However, the general course must remain the same. You do not have the training that Tale-Takers are meant to have, nor the seiðr to listen to the Mother Tree, so I shall assist you in understanding in what small ways I am allowed."

He feels it first behind his eyes, a touchless shiver, and it's not unlike hearing a song that starts familiar but turns out to be something entirely different. A vision of ghosts and a memory that will never be.

(—Zola dead; the SSR never finds the last base; the Red Skull launches the planes without opposition; millions die as the bombs fell; the unstoppable rise of HYDRA—)

It would be easier, he thinks, if the flashes of this potential future are accompanied by pain. Pain, he
expects and understands. Instead there is... calm, and a strange sort of regret.

It occurs to him that the real Bucky Barnes, then, is in the future. It is a relief, of sorts, as he had not considered him in the egress from the bunker, and it would be a hassle to have to go back and look for him. The "son of Asgard" must be Thor, which suggests Bucky Barnes is with the Avengers.

Rogers has finally gotten his best friend back.

Well, the Soldier decides, he is welcome to him.

He feels a tingle where he should not be feeling anything at all. He looks down at his left hand and sees a small orb atop the palm, glowing faintly. The light does not seem to touch any part of the forest around him. He thinks he remembers seeing something like, in the second before the explosion in the HYDRA bunker. The orb begins to split into two, then pauses, the two sections still connected in the middle. The solid surface dissolves into threads, delicate and numerous, and now he sees it: the twisting, never-ending double loop, used as a symbol for infinity.

*Past into future and future into past.*

He closes his eyes. The not-future is still there, and he wonders if it feels so real because he doesn't have much of a true history to compare it to. It is as much a story, after all, as most of what he has learned from others. From Rogers.

He blinks. *Is this a test?*

"Very good," says the Tale approvingly. "It is as I am: a tale. Perhaps, at the end of it, we will both learn what manner of tale it is."

His hands curl into fists. The orb floats up and out of his metal hand, unperturbed. He thinks about doing it anyway, thinks about hunting down Zola and showing him every trick he'd learned under HYDRA, thinks about carving out a pound of flesh for every adult and child who'd been sacrificed to Zola's perversion of science; maybe, maybe, the nightmares will stop once he's visited a tenth of them upon the man who'd made him into all that he is.

"Think it as much as you like. Thoughts are as winds upon the Mother Tree; it is action that grows and shapes the branches. But bend the branch far enough to break, and the Mother Tree will force me to release you from the Tale."

What does that mean?

"You will return to the moment you touched my vessel. The past remains in the past, the future remains in the future. You will not remember this, any of it. You will not even know anything had taken place."

His inwardly recoils at the prospect of losing more memories. He does not know if it matters that, in this case, it would be because the events never happened; he has lost so many already, some part of him resists voluntarily giving up more.

He thinks, suddenly, of Rogers. No doubt the Rogers in the future is enjoying his time with his best friend, instead of being made uncomfortable in his own home and running interference with everybody else and constantly repairing broken items. He hates Rogers sometimes because it's easier than being afraid for him.

He owes Rogers this. He can't give him Bucky Barnes for good, but one month is better than nothing.
Then maybe Rogers will finally give up on him.

_Time is not kind_, he thinks.

The touch of the Tale tastes of regret. But there is understanding, too, as from one old soul to another.

_No_, agrees the Tale. _Time only_ is.

It's not until after the Tale has gone silent, the glow fading and the very discreet sense of the Tale's presence has dissipated, that the thought comes, _'s all useless, anyway_, and he knows the thought is not entirely his thought. _The reason is even simpler than the possibilities this thing showed you._

"Paradox," he whispers. He knows the word and does not know it. It belongs to someone else, lifted from spine-cracked books, from a time when words and words could be devoured with unabashed delight.

_The Winter Soldier cannot eliminate the man who will make the Winter Soldier._ A bitter laugh, and he cannot tell which of them it comes from.

This he remembers: Rogers had believed him dead, right until he'd seen the Winter Soldier's face. Rogers would not think so if he'd met the Winter Soldier, Bucky's future, right now in World War Two. Would he have acted differently, if he'd known Bucky would survive the fall from the train?

(—Rogers dives after him; the both of them are captured by HYDRA; the SSR are decimated in the assault on the secret base; the Howling Commandos die attempting to stop the planes but the Red Skull escapes with a handful; bombs hit New York and London and Berlin—)

He wakes, and he _wakes_. He blinks up at Dugan's face and feels Dugan's boot nudging him in the buttocks.

"Sorry to break your beauty sleep, Sarge," says the man. The tone is mostly teasing, yet there is a note of genuine regret that the Soldier wonders about. "Time to go."

He is on his feet in a matter of seconds, of course, and he can't help the rush of relief when he sees Morita and Dernier still picking themselves up from the ground.

He hadn't expected to sleep at all. Or he should have woken at the first stirring of the camp. He can only assume that the... non-terrestrial element had induced a deeper sleep state for their interaction. It is no fault of his, and logically he knows that there are none here who would take him to task over the lapse. But his training is too ingrained. His training lives inside his body, regardless of what his mind does or does not know.

Well, it has some advantages too.

Initiate new mission.

**Primary Objective:** maintain cover as Sgt. James Buchanan Barnes.
BUCKY BARNES

Bucky meets Sam when he cracks his eyes open and finds a black man sitting on the armrest of the couch, holding a mug of coffee and smiling down at them.

"Good morning," says the newcomer, when he sees Bucky blinking.

Bucky extracts his arm from the tangle of blankets and Steve, wincing at the sore muscles all down his back and shoulders, and holds it out. "Bucky Barnes. You must be Sam."

"Yup. Nice to meet you." Sam's hand-shake is firm and warm from the hot mug. After a moment, Sam's amused smile breaks into a grin that's more sheepish than anything. "Oh man. Okay, I gotta get this out first—I was a real big fan of yours growing up, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky blinks some more. "Me?"

"Yeah. You were my favourite Howling Commando—well, after Gabe Jones, because it would've been a crime in my family not to love a brother first."

"Can't fault you on Jones." Bucky attempts to sit up, but finds himself being tugged back down by a pale muscled arm. "Oof. But are you sure you ain't mistakin' me for Captain Cuddles here?"

"Ssshhh," mumbles Steve. "'m sleep'n Buck."

"Oh, Captain America is a whole other thing," says Sam. "Like, he's the guy you'd follow to the ends of the earth, the guy you know will always do the right thing, you know? But the Howlies were who you wanted to be."

Bucky rubs a hand over his face. Army life has trained him to wake when he has to and go from dead sleep to geared up in a matter of seconds. Plus, he has a feeling he hasn't managed proper sleep since before being captured by HYDRA, until last night. He doesn't even remember dreaming, and that by itself is a rare treat.

On the down side, his body seems to think he's back in the pre-army days, and is not impressed at being forced to wake when there's no immediate threat to life and limb.

"Does being your childhood hero get me a cup of coffee?" asks Bucky wryly.

Sam chuckles. "Just this once, and only 'cause Cap has clearly commandeered you for more important duties." He walks off in the direction of the kitchen. "What do you want in yours?"

"Two sugars," answers Bucky around a yawn.

He shifts around, prompting Steve to hold onto him tighter. He considers closing his eyes again but he's actually awake now, and he thinks he's finally shaken off the fogginess that had clung to him most of the previous day despite all the napping. He winces a little; he's used to Steve clinging to him, especially in winter, but the squeezing grip that had been comforting when Steve was less than a hundred pounds of skin and bones feels more than capable of breaking his ribs now.

Then Steve somehow manages to wriggle even closer, and—another reason Bucky should probably get up soon is greeting him good morning, quite incessantly, against his hip.
He brushes a hand over Steve's hair. This isn't new, either, just another part of waking up after sharing a bed. He doesn't think about it, beyond realizing it's been a while since he's been in this position. He and Steve had huddled up a few times on missions, but not this close, and anyhow it's completely different when there are a bunch of other men pressing in around them.

He's pretty sure the trick of getting out without fully waking Steve is still the same. He cards his fingers through Steve's hair, unexpectedly pleased to find that the soft blonde strands feel as he remembers them, and scratches him lightly over the scalp.

Steve lets out a pleased noise; Bucky resolutely ignores any —movements— under the blanket. After a moment, Steve's arms slowly relax their hold. Bucky keeps petting Steve's head as he half-rolls, half-lifts himself sideways, then tucks the blanket back over Steve. He suspects Steve will over-heat before too long, but habit has him securing the edges of the blanket under the cushions to trap the heat inside.

He straightens up slowly and goes to join Sam. Accepts his coffee with a heartfelt, "Thanks," as the two of them take seats around the kitchen island. Sam, he is pleased to find, is not the type who feels compelled to fill the morning quiet with noise.

Bucky is halfway through his mug before he feels like saying, "So, I take it Captain America was still a big thing when you were growing up?"

"Oh yeah," says Sam. "He's still a big thing today. Bigger since he woke up. He's a national icon. So are you, for that matter, and the rest of the Commandos."

"Yeah? I'm trying to imagine that. I mean we'd get letters from people back home, sometimes, and Steve does— did some stuff with camera crews, radio folks. Pictures. Keeping up the morale, or so they tell us. Told us. He's made me go with him a couple of times. As if I know what to do in front of a camera." Bucky scratches at his neck. "Is- they teach you about everyone? Including Gabe and Jim?"

Sam nods. "The other Commandos insisted. They refused to do anything that didn't have a special piece on Jones and Morita." Sam ducks his head. "It meant a lot to a lot of people, you know. Especially when things got hard for people of colour here. Hell, things are still hard."

"Yeah? Damn." Bucky shakes his head. "I was kinda hoping it'd be better in the future."

"Some things are," Sam grins. "We got a black President."

"No shit," says Bucky, beaming. "Next thing you know, there'll be a Catholic."

"Oh, we had one too."

"You're kidding."

By the time Steve climbs out of their improvised cushion-bed, still not entirely awake, Sam is showing Bucky a list of words that are okay to say now, and an even longer list of words that are not okay. There's a third list of words that have changed in meaning.

"Glad I got to read these first," says Bucky sincerely. He watches Sam draining the last of his coffee, just as Steve walks past on his way to the coffee machine. "Otherwise, you know, I might have made a huge boner in public."

An unexpected shower of coffee, it turns out, works pretty well at waking up Steve. Steve sighs down at his spattered shirt. Bucky falls off the stool laughing at Sam's look of mortification and
While Steve is in the shower, JARVIS announces, "Thor Odinson would like to visit with you briefly, Sergeant Barnes, if you are amenable."

"Uh, yeah. Sure," says Bucky. He glances at Sam, who doesn't look up from his phone. Evidently Sam doesn't find anything odd about Bucky getting visitors. "Sam, Thor is the alien prince, right?" The name, at least, is helpful. He just has to remember: *Asgard—visited Earth centuries ago—advanced technology led to being worshipped as a god—don't ask about his family.*

Wilson blinks. "That's him. I thought you've met the team already?"

"I was unconscious for a lot of it. And so far they've mostly left me and Steve alone."

"Greetings and good morn, friend Barnes!" announces a large, large man striding out from the direction of the elevators. Thor catches sight of Sam. "And son of Wil! I had not heard of your arrival."

"Hi, Thor," says Sam, beaming. Bucky can understand; there's something infectious about Thor's unforced cheer. "Only got in a couple of hours ago. Decided to hang out with the old people first while it's early enough for them to be awake." Bucky makes a face at him. Sam frowns. "You know, that's not as funny when there's a thousand-year-old extra-terrestrial in the room."

"It is not easy to be the youngest one in the room," says Thor somberly, but with just the smallest hint of a grin. Bucky decides he likes him immediately. "I hope you have settled in well, Sergeant Barnes, and recovered from your journey. Such potent magics strain both body and mind, even in those who have the benefit of training and long exposure."

"Explains why I slept so much yesterday, then," says Bucky. "I feel lots better now, thanks. Steve's gonna start easing me into all the things I need to know."

Thor nods approvingly. "That is excellent! I, too, still learn new things of Midgard daily." The sound of sudden lightning bursts out, startling enough that Bucky jumps.

Thor pulls out a cell phone from somewhere. His clothes look sturdy and comfortable, dark except for a red coat on top. He should look like a regular guy and yet he doesn't, some indefinable quality marking him out as someone to pay attention to. Being huge probably doesn't hurt.

"I have frequently attempted to change the music," says Thor apologetically, waving his phone, "but the Lady Darcy always returns it to the lightning. And I'm afraid I forget to lower the volume when I am indoors." He pokes at the phone a few times. "Ah, my Jane sent a message reminding me to acquire your contact."

"He means your phone number," says Sam. "It's probably easier if you just call Thor from your phone. His number should be in your contacts already." To Thor, Sam says, "I'm surprised Tony didn't just give Bucky's number out to everyone."

"Oh, he wished to, but Captain Rogers, on the advice of Agent Romanoff, explained that polite etiquette on Midgard is to request a friend's number in person, so that they may know who has their information," says Thor. Bucky hunts around for a bit until he finds his phone under the coffee table; they'd put away their makeshift cushion-bed, but the table is still pushed up against the cabinet.
holding the television.

He only taps the wrong thing twice before he finds the list with all the names and numbers. Thor is, indeed, already on there. He taps at the little picture of a cordless phone handset. A moment later, Thor's phone vibrates, and a voice cries out "Grease lightning!" on what seems like the start of some musical number; Thor cuts it off with a tap and holds the phone up. "We are now in a call."

"Usually, if you're just giving your number to somebody, you hang up before the other person answers, so you don't get charged for the call," explains Sam. "But Stark is footing the bill, so neither of you have to worry about that."

Bucky ends the call, anyway, because Thor is right in front of him, it's ridiculous to be on the telephone with him. "So whenever someone calls you, you can see their number?"

"That is correct," says Thor, without looking up from his phone's screen. Bucky wonders if his large hands and proportionally sized fingers have trouble hitting the small pictures. A closer look at Thor's phone reveals that it is actually larger than Bucky's, which leaves him wondering if Stark had built it specially for him. "This is called Caller ID. If they are in your contacts, you will see their name instead of the number. If they are not in your contacts, the device invites you to add them."

"Neat," says Bucky. "Wait, what's this little grey box next to the name?"

Thor eventually leaves him them with a jovial, "May you enjoy renewing your acquaintance with your fair city!"

"Huh," says Bucky, staring after him. "So he really was here just to see me? I figured he had something to talk to Steve about."

"Maybe he wanted to check that you're not— what's the time-travel equivalent for jetlag? Plus anything to do with alien tech usually becomes his area." Sam gives him a searching look. "Do you get that often? People making nice with you to get to Steve?"

Bucky smiles at him wryly. "Sometimes. Mostly politicians and journalists. The really green replacements who've been pumped full of propaganda." He shrugs. "Doesn't bother me, if that's what you're thinking. It was the other way around when we were in school, and Steve put up with it for years."

The door of Steve's bedroom opens. Steve, hair still damp, tosses Bucky a pile of folded clothes. "Here, Bucky, you can change into these."

Bucky does so, and wanders out of his bedroom a few minutes later. "The shirt fits all right, but why these pants?"

"Jeans. Most people wear them now." Steve grins at Bucky's dubious look. "You'll see when we go out. Sam and I are wearing them too, look. You'll get to pick your own clothes later."

"These aren't yours, are they? You'd bust the buttons if you breathed in too hard."

"Oh, there's always spare clothing around," says Steve, shrugging. "Advantage of living with a bunch of spies."

"What do you think, Sam?" Bucky spreads his arms.

Sam grins at him. "You'll fit right in."
"Good. I trust Steve with my life, but he's not so good about clothes. He's all right when it's just for work or walking the neighbourhood. But any time he had to look nice, I ended up just telling him what to wear." He eyes his friend's present get-up. Beige pants, blue jacket, blue shirt. "Seems to me like not much has changed in that regard."

Sam shakes his head. "I can't decide if this is comforting or depressing."

Steve takes him to the Smithsonian, first.

"The exhibition used to be in DC," explains Sam. "But when Steve moved here, it followed him over. I like to pretend it's because it's good for tourism, since a lot of people come to New York for superhero-spotting anyway, instead of the Smithsonian feeling sorry for their most regular visitor."

They'd seen some of the propaganda being spread around back home. Posters and comics and news footage from the front. At first it'd been just about Steve, which Bucky had dutifully ribbed him about to no end, but then Steve kept insisting that the Howling Commandos get some of the credit, too, trying to hide behind them like he didn't tower over everyone else, and either the public took a liking to them or the media people didn't want to disappoint Captain America, so now they all got pounced on the moment they trudged back into base, to sign something or record something for the folks back home.

Bucky keeps pressing too close to the display cases, like he can touch the stuff inside with his gaze alone. Twice a young girl in a uniform with the museum's logo tells him to step back, but then either gives up or Steve had had a quiet word with her without Bucky noticing. Or maybe she recognizes Captain America; not exactly a challenge when they're only a few feet below a giant painting of Steve's face. There's hardly anybody else in the exhibition, anyway.

"Roasted cashews?" says Sam, shaking a paper bag at Bucky.

Bucky grabs a handful, constitutionally incapable of passing up free food, and nods at the glass casing in front of him. "I'm almost positive I signed that thing less than a month ago."

It's one of the posters promoting war bonds, an illustration with Cap in the foreground and the Howling Commandos arrayed behind him. Bucky's signature, a careless streak above his head, is faded but still legible. The paper has yellowed a little, two of the corners showing fold marks. Other than that, no obvious damage. Whoever had owned the poster must have taken good care of it.

"That's... kind of wild, to wrap your mind around," says Sam. "But at this point nothing even surprises me anymore. Oh, do you know where Steve's gone?"

"Saw him go into that door," says Bucky, pointing absently.

He's not surprised to find that the information on their missions is fairly general, mentioning some dramatic events—especially rescues of POWs—but never going into too much detail. The SSR, not to mention the military of any country, like to keep things close the chest. Same old, same old.

There's a section focused on the Howling Commandos specifically, and he spots his panels first. Hard to miss, really; it's got pride of place in the centre of room, with the panels of the rest of the Howlies arranged around him, like all the times he's taken point. Usually in order to chase after Steve, who's sprinted ahead of everyone else.
He swallows and diverts to the closest panel. Gabe. He takes his time reading the text, listening to the audio. Sam swings by again, and shows him how the little television is actually a touch screen, and he can choose what to watch and watch it over again and even change the language. Bucky has to take a deep breath because this is—it's not so much that these things exist, because he's always loved science fiction and it's actually not all that surprising, the various paths technology has taken. But it's not something he'd thought he'd actually see, within his lifetime and, also, in a public place he can just walk into. Well, Steve had paid for tickets, but he remembers seeing the same little televisions outside, in the free exhibits. He'd also noticed a sign listing discounted rates for class trips. Little kids—like he and Steve had been little kids—using touchscreens like it's nothing.

The future sure is something.

Sam had drifted away again while Bucky had been absorbed in the screen. Bucky has a vague thought that he's the one keeping Sam and Steve there, and the two of them had clearly been to the exhibition before. But Steve's never been shy about hurrying him along when he gets bored, and in any case, they were the ones who'd brought him here. They're perfectly free to go somewhere else and meet up with him later.

Eventually, eventually, he works through Gabe, and Dernier, and Dugan, and Morita, and Monty; his insides twist each time he gets to the "Later Life" sections, even though the stories are mostly good. Morita never stopped being outraged about the internment of Japanese-Americans, becoming a political writer and an activist; Gabe went back to school to finish the PhD he once confessed to wanting, all hushed embarrassment for something he's not sure he's allowed; Dugan went through several cycles of marriage and divorce with the same girl, and the picture matches the one Bucky remembers being shown over the campfire; Monty worked in government for a while, before immigrating to the United States; Dernier stuck with Americans and SHIELD and Stark Industries, unexpectedly- or not, given the man's love for exploding things.

Bucky reminds himself he'll see them again soon enough. The vice in his chest passes, replaced with a sort of... peace.

There's a collection of pictures on the far wall, of the Howling Commandos at various ages and eating establishments, gradually including family; it's clear that they all stayed in touch, maybe even stayed close. Bucky is sorry to miss it but, he figures, if his one measly life is somehow the price for this future, it's more than worth it. He'd sign the bill without hesitation.

I'm ready, he thinks, and marches himself to his panel.

"Sergeant Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service to his country."

For all his trepidation, reading his panel turns out to be far less harrowing than he'd expected. Nothing in it is new, except for the date range under his name: 1916-1944. He stares at that for a long minute.

There are no details on how it happens, just that it was during a mission. There isn't even a precise date, which feels like a very careful omission. Is the whole thing still classified? There's a quote from Steve, presumably from a report:

"A HYDRA agent appeared and began shooting at us. I was hit, so Sergeant Barnes returned fire and drew the agent's attention away from me. [...] I did my best to rescue
him, but I was not fast enough. [...] Sergeant Barnes was beloved by his men, by all who served with him, and he was a credit to the SSR and America's presence in the Allied forces. In addition, he's been my best friend since we were kids. I owe him my life, and it is a debt I will never be able to repay."

Bucky almost stops reading a couple of times; he's made his feelings on this clear and he trusts Steve would have warned him if the information here gives anything away. It's a little more detail than he wanted — seeing as he'd wanted none at all — but ultimately it doesn't tell him anything that would let him to change things. Protecting Steve is nothing special, it's been his job long before the army made it official.

"This must feel strange, even for one of you people," says Sam quietly.

Bucky huffs. "Steve is the special one. The rest of us are— were regular guys, chasing after him so he doesn't get himself killed."

Sam makes a vague sound of disagreement. Bucky glances over his shoulder and catches a strange expression on Sam's face, just for a second, but then he spots Steve approaching. Steve keeps glancing between Bucky and the giant picture of Bucky's face, which, yeah.

"You know, the last time I saw my own face, it was half covered in mud," says Bucky contemplatively.

Sam chuckles. "Everything looks too clean, right? They do it now, too. I know it's supposed to be for keeping up morale, but every time I see a picture from when I was in the service, all I can think is that other people who look at it have no idea how bad I smelled at the time, how itchy I was from all the sand. And sand, let me tell you, gets everywhere."

"I honestly have no idea if fighting in the desert would be better or worse than what we got," says Bucky with a sympathetic grimace.

Sam shrugs. "I don't like the cold, so I was okay with the desert. But two words, my friend: camel spiders. Which aren't actually spiders. Let's just say meat-eating insects in a war zone can lead to really nasty surprises."

"We'll show you videos later," says Steve. His smile at Bucky is strained, and he looks tired, like the ninety-year-old man he now apparently is.

It hits Bucky like a sledgehammer to the gut: Steve will have to deal with losing him again, after this little trip is over. He reaches out and squeezes Steve's shoulder. He feels Steve swaying towards him, his way of thanking Bucky for the show of comfort, but his expression gets even more strained, the smile faltering at the corners.

But what can Bucky say? Sorry I died on you? If he hadn't been there on that last mission, Steve might have been the one who'd died instead.

That's a trade Bucky would never make.

"The next bit is what happened to Steve, if you're looking to even the playing field a little," says Sam. His tone is mild but the look he sends Bucky is a pointed, please don't make Captain America cry in public.

Bucky is... a bit raw around the edges, but otherwise fine. It happened, it's gonna happen, nothing he can do about it. More accurately, as far as he can understand the explanation provided by Thor, he can try to change things but he won't be able to, because it's already happened, and something about
time looping and historical causality and... he's happy to stick with nothing he can do about it.

He's fine. So what if he knows it's going to happen? The idea is terrifying but he's been terrified for most of this damn war, at least it's not his nightmares of HYDRA getting their hands on him again—

And then they're walking past a sign warning "Potentially disturbing imagery; no children under 15 unless accompanied by a guardian", and he sees the pictures of the crashed plane, the crumpled insides.

It's like a fist grabbing his insides. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

Shots of Steve, pale and rigid, ghost-like in the solid ice. Not even all of Steve; one picture shows only the top of his head, a hint of blood in his hair, the label declaring it "The first new picture of Captain America in 70 years"; another picture of his hands, close to his sides; another of his upper body, a thick layer of ice enclosing him as if the people excavating him had been worried about getting too close and risking damage to his body. The damn shield that was supposed to protect him, stuck frozen in a completely different part of the plane. Finally, a full body shot, the ice block encasing Captain America lying on the tarp-covered ground outside under a grey sky.

The sign explains that, at this point, the joint SHIELD and Stark Industries recovery crew had been working under the sensible assumption that Captain America was deceased. Just reading the words makes him feel sick.

He follows the very helpful timeline. Captain America returns home to New York. Successive pictures of the ice gradually shrinking. A gap in the date labels. Then, a picture of Steve holding his shield, his white shirt bearing a logo that Bucky thinks he's seen back at the Tower. There's a big sign declaring "The Hero Returns" and a change in the exhibit's background colour to mark a new section.

Bucky stops. Goes back and looks at a picture of Steve on some medical table. He is still in the block of ice, but there's not a whole lot of ice left, and Bucky can clearly see the way he's lying inside the ice. The way the ice had frozen him.

The faded and yellowing reports state that, as far as the SSR had known, Steve had been piloting the plane right to the crash. That was the whole point of Steve staying with the plane. Steve had probably gotten thrown back when the plane hit the ice—Bucky doesn't have to wonder if he'd bothered putting belts on- otherwise he'd have been frozen in the chair. He'd been injured, and it's possible he was unconscious on impact. But.

Bucky knows the way Steve sleeps. Knows that lying on his back had once been the easiest on his breathing, so that is the position Steve tends to gravitate to in his sleep, even when breathing was no longer an issue. He can see, now, Steve cold and bleeding and alone in the sinking plane, his body still not knowing when to quit, laying himself down and waiting. Then sleeping and sleeping and sleeping, for decades.

If Bucky had been there—well, he might have found a different way than crashing a plane with a bomb inside. But even if he hadn't, he would have gone down with Steve.

Of course, he wouldn't have woken up with Steve, mere mortal that he is. But at least Steve wouldn't have gone into the dark alone.

He hears Sam muttering, some distance back, "I could have told you he'd take your death harder than his own."
It's Bucky's turn to keep glancing at Steve, as he wanders over to a free-standing booth dedicated to the decades between the crash and the recovery. He looks at displays of comic books and novelizations and history textbooks, watches clips from movies and TV shows. Looks over at Steve and reassures himself that Steve is here, Steve had made it. The placard says that this is only a small sampling of the Captain America-related material out there. Apparently there is a lot.

At some point, Steve sidles close but doesn't touch him, as if they hadn't spent their entire lives grabbing and punching and embracing one another. Maybe it's a future thing? Well, Bucky has no patience for that; he slings an arm around Steve and pulls him in. It's possible he takes a great big whiff of Steve from that warm place between his neck and shoulder, his scent unchanged since the two of them had hit puberty, even when said shoulders thickened out like a patriotic eagle spreading its wings, but he's pretty sure Steve is doing the same to him, so it's all right.

An age later, Bucky draws back a little and says, "Do they have all those movies you made while you were on tour?"

Steve chuckles. "Yeah, they show them all in a loop in that room over there."

"Maybe after, then. I wanna finish catching up here." He glances at Sam. "Not bored yet, Sam?"

Sam shakes his head and gives him an amused look. "I'm good. Not gonna lie, I may be waiting for you to get to the part about the aliens."

He gets to the part about the aliens.

There's a lot of shouting, and the fact that none of the staff come running convinces Bucky that Steve had had a quiet word with them all, forward-thinking strategist that he is. Sam laughs so hard he has to excuse himself to the restroom to pee.

He stares at the little stage with the uniforms in display. Steve's has a sign on it that says Authorized Replica, which Steve seems strangely embarrassed about. The rest of the uniforms are authentic, though.

"God," whispers Bucky, sharing a look with Steve. "I just saw these yesterday. The guys were wearing them. Look, Dum Dum's pocket, he fixed that rip just last week."

The coat on the Bucky mannequin is his spare. It makes sense; he'd probably been wearing his main one when he died. He frowns at the bottom hem. "Aw, they fixed the rip around the bottom." He glances at Sam. "There was this bit of cloth around the bottom that kept flapping open. Drove me nuts. I kept forgetting to fix it, and after a while I figured it'd feel weirder to not have it there. It made it easier to keep track of which coat was which, anyway." The stitching is neat, at least, and indistinguishable from his own repairs in other parts of the coat.

"They probably didn't want people to think a national hero couldn't look after his own gear," says Sam with a grin.
"Is that the worst of it?" asks Bucky, when they're back in the car and Sam's driving them somewhere for a late lunch. He's staring out the window, gaping at all the tall buildings, but he feels as though a part of his mind hasn't come back all the way yet. Still haunting the Smithsonian somewhere.

He pretends not to notice the meaningful look that Steve and Sam exchange across the front seats. Steve has that pinched look he gets whenever he has to deliver bad news to someone. Bucky braces himself.

"The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles," Steve tells him mournfully.

"What."

Right before they walk into the diner Sam had picked, Steve pauses and says, "The prices are a lot higher than they were in our day."

Bucky shrugs. "Figured they would be." He flashes Steve a grin. "I'll try not to get my blood up."

He doesn't entirely succeed, but he deals with it by refusing to look at any number with a dollar sign in front of it. He orders the same burger Steve does, and raises his eyebrows when Steve orders every side and appetizer on the menu.

Sam asks for a salad, "cause someone on this table isn't on active duty anymore." Steve shakes his head and assures Bucky that Sam will end up eating half the sides anyway.

When the food arrives, Bucky catches Steve's eyes over the fleet of plates taking over every available space on their table. He can't help but beam at his best friend, delighted, and Steve smiles back in response; they've never had this much food in front of them in one sitting. It had been a treat just to be able to go to a diner and order the cheapest thing on the menu.

There’s a group of young teenagers three tables away, and Bucky notices one of them taking a photo of their plate on their phone. It seems like a fine idea to Bucky, so he takes out his own phone.

“You gonna put that on Instagram?” asks Sam distractedly, in the middle of piling fries onto his plate.

Bucky has to stand to get the whole table inside the frame. “What’s Instagram?”

“We haven’t covered the internet yet,” says Steve with a wince. “Though maybe apps are actually the easiest way to get into it.” He gives Sam a look. “The one who brings it up gets to explain it.”

I like a lot of things about the future, but I think my favorite part might be the gadgets. Before, I didn't know what the point of having a camera on my cell was. They have cameras about the same size, Sam pointed out a bunch of tourists using them. Then Sam made the funniest face when he saw the different things Steve and me were mixing into the mashed potatoes, and I got a picture of it because my phone was already in my hand. So I guess that's why.

The food ain't bad, either.
Bucky recalls Steve saying something that morning about going to the store to get clothes for Bucky, but when they back into the car, Steve says, "Hey, do you mind if we do the clothes shopping tomorrow? Then we can make a full day of it, with a fresh start in the morning so you'll have plenty of time to look around."

He meets Steve's eyes in the rear-view mirror. He hadn't really felt worn out, and the big lunch was restorative, but the thought of going back to the Tower and its cozy quiet is greatly appealing. He has to bite his lower lip to keep from smiling at Steve faked enthusiasm; Steve hates shopping for clothes.

After the hubub of the city, the quiet of Tower is blissful. He follows Steve to the couch and the two of them collapse with near-identical groans of relief. He hears Sam laughing at them and muttering about old men, but then there's the beep of the coffee machine being put to use, so he's automatically forgiven.

"I guess it's a good thing I didn't realize how loud everything was until we got back here," says Bucky.

"I'm gonna have to ease you into the rush hour commuter madness, then," says Steve.

Bucky wrinkles his nose. His fingers twitch. It's been over a day since he last had a smoke, he realizes. He's not craving it as much as he should. He scratches at his stubble. "Hey, you said there's hot water all the time now, right?"

"Yeah. Well, I guess people who could afford it got hot water all the time too, back in our day..." Steve turns to look at him. "If you want a shower, go right ahead." To Bucky's surprise, Steve leans over and brushes the back of one finger up the line of Bucky's jaw. Bucky suppresses a shiver. "You could stand to have a shave, too." Steve backs off some, looking embarrassed, as if he hadn't meant to do it.

Bucky clears his throat. "Yes, Ma."

Bucky's drying off in his room when he hears JARVIS telling Steve, "Sir would like to know if Sergeant Barnes and yourself would be amenable to dining with the team tonight."

A few moments later, there's a knock on Bucky's door. "Bucky, Tony's asking us to dinner."

"I heard the nice artificial intelligence, Steve," replies Bucky.

"Well? We going or what?"

If he ignores how squeaky clean he feels and how nice the room around him is, Bucky can believe they're both back home. "Sure, why not?"
They have dinner on what is apparently a communal floor for all the Tower residents, which has a large dining area and living room. Bucky pelts Steve with questions about his new team-mates all the way up, more to settle his nerves than any willingness to rely entirely on Steve’s opinions. While Sam has turned out to be as great a person as promised, Steve is still far more forgiving than Bucky is. Bucky would rather form his own assessment of people, thanks.

Dinner is two different kinds of pasta, two different kinds of pizzas, and an enormous pan of lasagne; heavy Italian foods that remind Bucky of Steve’s earlier comment about big eaters. He doesn’t expect to be so hungry after their big lunch, but he finds himself piling food on his plate like he might not get any more tomorrow. He would be embarrassed except Steve seems to take a lot of pleasure in watching Bucky eat; the sad thing is he can understand, after half a lifetime of trying to feed Steve up.

Everyone starts out eating at the round dining table—which has Bucky amusedly envisioning Steve as King Arthur—but it only lasts as long as Tony suddenly leaping to his feet to show Dr. Banner something. Then Sam and Miss Romanoff move to the living room to watch a television show they both follow, and there’s a general outward drift of people chatting in small groups and swinging back to the table to refill their plates.

Bucky doesn’t say much, conscious of how much he’s an outsider here. He knows he’s normally more sociable, and he’s pleasantly surprised to see Steve letting him get away with being quiet.

Then again, he at least talks to whomever talks to him. One man who’s only introduced to him as Nick Fury—if anyone asks he’s dead doesn’t say a word the entire time. Bucky never catches him looking his way but he’s certain the man is scrutinizing him carefully. Mr. Fury leaves before dessert; Bucky doesn’t even see him go, just sees his chair is empty and senses he’s no longer on the floor the next time he thinks to look for him.

“Must be kind of strange, to be in a familiar place but in a totally different time.”

The woman seated next to him smiles when he turns to look at her, and he instinctively smiles back. Dr. Foster—astrophysicist—dating Thor. “I guess. But Steve tells me you’ve travelled to Thor’s home. Asgard? And a whole other world must be even stranger.”

“It was beautiful,” agrees Dr. Foster. She tells him about the palace of Odin and the rainbow bridge, the advanced technology that looks like magic to someone from Earth. She’s in the middle of describing some kind of chariot when she stops. “I’m sorry. Normally people excuse themselves when I start to ramble, or at least get a glazed look in their eyes.”

“It’s fine, I love this kind of stuff,” says Bucky. At her dubious look, he chuckles and adds, “okay, maybe some of the math words don’t mean anything to me. But it’s great to see somebody who loves their job. And I’ve always been interested in space. Used to read anything I could get that was science fiction.”

“Which some say is a precursor to science fact,” says Dr. Foster with a smile. “Looks like you’re actually living it now, though.”

He shrugs. “Didn’t mean to. It’s all Steve, really. I’m just along for the ride.”

“I don’t know if I buy that.” She shifts, hesitant. “I can feel it a little bit, you know. The energy that’s keeping you here. Thor thinks it’s because I’ve been exposed to the Aether—this really ancient power source, used by the Dark Elves. Not the same Elves as the ones behind your time travelling.”

“That’s good.” His lips twitch. “So, different Elves.”
She laughs, and he’s ridiculously relieved to see someone else appreciate the absurdity of the world they’ve been thrust into. “Yeah, different Elves.”

An hour later, nearly everyone’s moved to the living room. Bucky finds himself on the couch with a plate of dessert pie. Stark is on the other end of the couch, fiddling with some kind of metallic device. Steve is by the big balcony windows, speaking to Miss Potts. *Miss Potts—CEO of Stark Industries—dating Tony Stark—offer tea rather than coffee if she visits.*

Seeing Steve ducking his head at Miss Potts’s smile takes Bucky right back to Brooklyn, across the river and seventy years back, to diners and dance halls where Steve would do his best to talk to dames. He’s gotten a little better after the USO tour, but he still always looks surprise when dames want to talk to him instead of Bucky.

Bucky doesn’t mean to listen in. But he’s finished his pie and it’s not as if they’re trying to keep the conversation secret. He’s willing to bet Stark is eavesdropping, too, no matter how deeply engrossed the man looks in the delicate wires inside his gadget; he might be counting them, for all Bucky can tell.

“—have things ready if it gets out. But there’s a surprisingly good chance it won’t. The Winter Soldier was skilled in evading surveillance and recording equipment. And only his handlers knew who he was. There’s not a single clear shot of his face in DC, thanks to all the smoke and civilians who were more interested in running for their lives. Fingers crossed, the most we’ll get is speculation over you having a type—”

*Natasha Romanoff—former SHIELD—call her Agent rather than Miss—underestimate at your own peril* sidles into the conversation. Miss Potts smiles at her brightly. “Good news, Nat. We may not need to borrow your facial disguise tech after all.”

“Oh good, I hate recalibrating it after someone else has used it,” says Agent Romanoff.

“Did I hear you promise Sam you’ll be here until the season finale of *The Walking Dead*?” asks Steve.

Romanoff rolls her eyes. “Yes, Steve, I’m sticking around this month.”

“Good, because Maria and I missed you last Saturday,” says Potts.

Romanoff winces. “Sorry. I should have called.”

“You’re buying next time, then.” Potts smiles gently. “I wouldn’t have mentioned it, but you did say you wanted—”

“Yeah. I do. Thanks.” Romanoff grins ruefully. “You two are the only ones who’ll actually chase me up. But, you know—old habits. I’ll remember to let you know, next time.”

Steve sways in and nudges her, shoulder to shoulder. “Your old covers had a lot of similarities in the base traits. It’s great that you’re trying something new.”

That’s when Bucky realizes Steve doesn’t act the same around Natasha as he normally does around dames. He seems real comfortable with her, for one thing, more than Bucky’s ever seen him with a woman. He’s noticed the two of them sending each other looks during dinner, when they think the others aren’t looking; it doesn’t seem like it’s anything romantic, more like a pair of kids up to no good.

It occurs to him that one disadvantage of Steve not having had much luck with women in the past is
that Bucky doesn't know how to tell if Steve is in love, or in a relationship. Especially if Steve's trying to be discreet about it. There's Agent Carter, of course, but that's been pretty obvious to everyone. This doesn't look the same. But it's possible Steve's just gotten better at talking to women.

Steve, Miss Potts, and Agent Romanoff move closer to the couch. Miss Potts is distracted by Dr. Banner offering to make her tea. Steve sits between Bucky and Stark, and Romanoff takes a nearby armchair.

"Hey Steve," says Romanoff, grinning mischievously. "Don't forget to give Sharon a call."

"Nat," says Steve warningly.

"Sharon?" Bucky gives Steve a curious look, ignoring the heavy feeling in his gut.

"Nat keeps trying to set me up with people," explains Steve, glaring at Natasha. "And I did as you asked- I gave her a call and we had a very nice dinner. But that was it."

"One dinner and you're giving up?" Natasha raises an eyebrow. "Look, I think you and Sharon really suit one another. She knows who you are, she knows your file, so no surprises there. And you won't have to worry about her being put into danger because of you." She turns to look at Bucky, as if she fully expects Bucky to side with her.

He swallows past the tightness in his chest. Pasting on an easy-going smile when it's the last thing he wants to do is second nature, by this point. "She's right, Steve. You gotta put a little effort into it. Sometimes these things take time."

The look Steve gives him is hard to read and impossible to stand, so Bucky gets up to put his crumb-littered plate away.

So. Natasha is really just a friend, then. The relief of that knowledge, just when he'd braced himself to accept her as Steve's girl, is balanced out by the weight in his chest at the mention of another woman. Well. Of course there would be a woman, somewhere. He doesn't even have it in him to be annoyed at Natasha for setting Steve up; that's been Bucky's job for a long time, after all, and he's glad there's someone to do it now he's no longer around.

Drifting back into the living room, Bucky picks up on an unfamiliar voice saying, "You need to sign these." He sees a dark-haired woman in a black business suit dumping a thin folder on the couch seat next to Stark. One of the elevators is just closing, so she must have just come up.

"Paper, really?" says Stark. He's swapped the previous device with a different one made of metal tubes and wires, which he is poking with a small screwdriver. "We're still using those?"

"You keep ignoring the digital copies on the server. It's almost like you want me to come up here and stand over you until you sign the damn things," grumbles Stark. He exchanges the screwdriver for the pen, absently telling Bucky, "I don't like to be handed things."

The woman takes up the folder and flips it to a page that needs his signature, and then another, and then another, each time holding it only precisely as long as his scrawl takes to form on the paper. Their efficiency hints at long practice. Bucky finds it a little mesmerizing.
"That's very kind of you to say, Mr. Stark," says the woman, smiling at him in an exaggeratedly demure way.

"Yeah, that's actually more terrifying than your murder-face, please stop doing that." Stark lets out a sigh of relief when she closes the file. He notices Bucky watching. "Sergeant Barnes, have you met Agent Hill yet? Agent, this is Cap's best buddy Bucky, taking a short break from World War Two to visit us here in the humble future. Because that is a thing that happens."

"The guy who flew a nuclear bomb into a space portal doesn't really have a leg to stand on. Sergeant Barnes." Agent Hill holds out her hand for Bucky to shake. "And it's Maria Hill, actually. Formerly an agent of SHIELD, now working at Stark Industries. For Ms. Potts." The last is directed, with a mild glare, at Stark.

"We're still pretending SHIELD is disbanded? I thought we were over that."

Hill shakes her head and makes for the elevator, reminding Stark about some meeting or other. Stark makes a vague affirmative noise, clearly no longer paying attention, and digs out his screwdriver from under him. Bucky watches him poking at the metal contraption again.

"So how are you liking the future, Sergeant?" asks Stark, eyes still on whatever it is he's doing.

"It's good. Interesting." It occurs to Bucky that he should think up better answers, at least for the kinds of questions he can expect to be asked over and over again. "Been learning a lot, trying to catch up." He hesitates, but in the end asks, "Is that for your robot?"

Stark blinks and glances at him. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Though, you know—it's not a robot, it's a suit."

"Steve showed me pictures. You built a bunch of them, right? They look amazing."

"Thanks." Stark's dark eyes study him, as if he suspects Bucky of meaning something else. "You have a thing for tech? Or is it weapons that get you going?"

The question makes him a little nervous, though he doesn't know why. Or maybe it's the look on Stark's face. "I'm a soldier," he says, forcing himself to think over his words before saying them. "I know what to do with a gun. I don't know if I like weapons; I know I'm glad to have them, because they let me take down the enemy and keep my men safe."

"I used to make weapons," says Stark softly. "Family legacy. I didn't really think about it, growing up. Just saw it as continuing dear old dad's work."

"Howard loved his work," says Bucky.

Stark meets his eyes squarely for the first time. He nods, and Bucky nods, and there's a strange kind of understanding between them.

"I want to see it," blurts out Bucky. "The device I touched, that brought me here."

He's not sure what he expects. It's definitely not Stark nodding, putting down his contraption, then casting an evaluating look over everybody else, none of whom seem to be paying them any attention. Stark pointedly tilts his head towards the elevators, his expression telling Bucky to follow without drawing attention.

Steve is caught up in conversation with Banner, and seems to have also been gifted with tea. Bucky trots after Stark.
"Secure Lab 5, JARVIS," says Stark, once the doors whoosh close behind Bucky.

"Of course, Sir."

Bucky finds himself glancing at the back of Stark's head. If Stark notices, he either doesn't mind or he's used to it. It has not escaped Bucky's notice that this is the first time he's been out of Steve's floor without Steve.

"I wanted to become a mechanic, at one point," says Bucky, the words stumbling out of him seemingly on their own. "I was always the one fixin' things around the house. Don't know if I'd have been any good at it. But then, I didn't expect to be a good soldier, either."

He doesn't know why he says it; he doesn't even expect Stark to care, doesn't particularly want any response from Stark. The door slides open as soon as he finishes talking, and he thinks the both of them let out a sigh of relief.

Secure Lab 5 has a main circular walkway that lights up at their arrival. Smaller walkways branch off it, some heading to closed rooms and some to open areas with tables and equipment. Most of these remain dark as they pass. Bucky's night vision has gotten pretty good over the course of the war, and he can see emergency blast doors around some of the rooms, the outline of labs behind unlit glass windows.

One of the side walkways lights up, anticipating Stark stepping off onto it, and the lights precede them down to the end, where there is a single elevated stand in the middle of the clear space.

Both Bucky and Stark jump a little at movement from one of the shadows in the corners. It's Thor. Bucky wouldn't have thought someone that big could lurk in the dark effectively. Thor looks strangely smaller, here.

"I apologize for startling you, my friends," says Thor sincerely. He nods at the stand. "I sought to commune with the Tale further, but ze will not speak to me."

"You get points for trying, buddy," says Stark. He brings Bucky to the stand and waves his arms in a grandiose gesture. "Voilà. The Little Tale of Lost Time. Simultaneously poetic and ominous, as names go."

It looks like an oversized marble, dark except where there are faint streaks of colour. From certain angles, its shape seems to change; or rather it looks, for brief moments until he blinks again, as if there is a second orb emerging from the first.

He expects to feel some kind of energy, or some sign of connection. The Tale shows no change, appearing as inert as the bright red and gold cushion it is inexplicably resting on.

"Hello," he says, for lack of anything better.

Greetings, Tale-taker.

He jerks. Looks back over at Thor to confirm that the Asgardian had also heard it.

"It said something, didn't it?" says Tony. "JARVIS?"

"No change in the readings, Sir, as in the previous interaction."

Stark huffs, clearly aggrieved. "Fine, fine, it's not like it's the first time I'm left out of things. I'll just stand back there and look pretty." He ambles down the walk and has to squeeze past Thor, who
comes to stand behind Bucky.

Bucky looks questioningly at Thor. Thor gives him an encouraging nod.

"Um. So. I just wanted to say thank you for bringing me here. Seeing Steve and the future and everything that happens after, you know. It helps, to see that all the fighting is for something."

*You are welcome.*

Bucky chews on his lower lip. "Is there something I'm supposed to do? As part of your... tale. Thing."

*The tale is for you to take; its paths are yours to determine.*

There is a clang of metal behind them. Bucky and Thor both look over their shoulders, to see Stark hunched down, arms-deep in circuitry in an opened panel of the floor. If he listens closely, he can hear faint mutterings about "incompatible sensors" and "not built for this inter-dimensional shit".

Bucky turns back to the orb. "Look, you've probably figured out I don't really know how this is supposed to go. Thor is the only one who's used to this kind of thing. So, you know, if I do something wrong or accidentally mess up the future, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. Please."

*The past who is in the future has no need of a guide, young soldier.* There's a pause, long enough for Bucky to think it's done. Then, *However. For you, young soldier. At moon's end, at the closing of the tale, I will offer you a boon.*

"What boon?"

*The choice to forget.*

I thought it would be harder. But it doesn't really surprise me, I guess. Get shot at enough and you get okay with dying. You just... hope you do it right, in the end. Hope you go out doing something good, or at least doing your job. Dying to protect Steve—that's the way I'd choose to go in any case, if I had any choice in it. No doubt in my mind then that it's the right thing to do.

Don't know how many nights I've spent worrying myself to death that he'd get himself killed, get hurt in a way he can't heal from.

So, I guess what I'm saying is... I'm kind of glad, really.

Steve gets to live. Steve gets to live in the future, in a world we helped to make better.

That's a happy ending, in my book.
Chapter 6

WINTER SOLDIER

The Allied camp that Rogers leads them to is loud and crowded, a makeshift village of temporary shelters and vehicles and stockpiles. Nowhere near the scale of twenty-first century New York or Washington DC, but it is still a considerable change from the quiet of the woods. Barnes trails after Rogers and mentally goes through the relaxation techniques Dr. Banner had taught him. He scans the rows of tents, the piles of supplies, gauges the overall atmosphere of the camp. There is a sense of industrious purpose, particularly amongst the large number of non-combatants, but no edge of alarm.

To his surprise, the SSR leadership come out to meet them rather than wait for them to reach the big heavy tent that is presumably the command center. He recognizes General Philips and Agent Carter, notable figures within the SSR contingent in the war and eventual founders of SHIELD. He knows a little more about Agent Carter than Philips, by way of Rogers. Future-Rogers.

The General looks over them for a moment, seems satisfied by the headcount, and turns his full attention to Captain Rogers, who is giving his initial report of the mission's overall success.

"Good work, gentlemen," says Philips. "Come inside and give us the details, Rogers. The rest of you are dismissed."

There is a round of salutes, and the men walk away. Barnes lets them go a little ahead, intending to follow- he does not know how the camp works, or where they are expected to bunk. He feels the weight of someone's attention on him. He looks towards Rogers, finds him already walking after Philips, and only then notices Agent Carter frowning slightly at him.

Floundering a little, he settles for the most harmless-seeming response, which is to tilt his head and ask, "Ma'am?"

She blinks, coming out of whatever she had been contemplating, and nods back at him. "Sergeant Barnes. Forgive me, you look a little different than usual and I was wondering what it was."

He assays a shrug. "Maybe it's the hair?"

"Maybe." She does not seem entirely convinced, but she shakes her head. "I shan't keep you." She pauses mid-turn. "You know, we do have these pesky things called regulations. You should look into it."

"I'll do that," promises Barnes. She nods and walks after Rogers.

"Boys," says Jones.

His rich baritone travels so well he does not need to raise his voice to be heard, but it is his tone which stops all conversation inside the tent. Barnes follows his line of vision to Falsworth standing at the entrance. His face is ashen.

"What is it?" asks Jones. Dugan stands and wordlessly ushers Falsworth into a chair.
There’s a piece of paper in Falsworth’s hand. He holds it up, staring at it rather than offering it. From
the back, Barnes can ascertain that it is a list.

"My brother," says Falsworth, and has to clear his throat a few times. If he ducks his head to do it,
hand brushing over his face, nobody elects to notice. "My younger brother, George. Killed in the line
of duty in Falaise. Artillery fire, as far as anyone could tell."

Morita pulls a tin cup out of his own pack. Catches Barnes’ eye and shakes the empty cup
meaningfully.

It takes Barnes a few seconds to work it out; their unhurried walk through the camp had revealed the
soldiers’ favourite past-time, above cards and pornography. He hadn't thought about where the men
were getting the alcohol. Morita clearly expects him to have some, though.

Bucky was good at getting his hands on what people needed. And he took pride in taking care of his
men.

He pulls out the second flask in his pack. He'd nearly thrown it away, he remembers. He belatedly
realizes that Barnes might not have been affected by alcohol at this point, either, yet he'd still kept
some on his person. Perhaps for the treating of wounds.

Well, not all wounds need be in the flesh.

He sniffs to confirm it is the flask with alcohol, and pours a generous amount into Morita's cup. The
cup is pushed into Falsworth's hand. Falsworth does not look surprised, only making a face when he
brings it close to his nose. He drinks it in one go.

"Oh, that is vile, did you brew this shit in your boots?" groans Falsworth. He holds up the cup.
"More, please, there's a good chap."

"My father was in the Great War," mumbles Falsworth some time later. His head has tipped to the
side, resting partly on Dernier's shoulder. Dernier scowls at him but doesn't move away. "I was born
only after he returned, so I don't remember how he was before. But Mother always said the war
changed him. She says he hasn't come back, really, not all the way."

Barnes feels a quiet chill. Falsworth does not so much as look at him, yet Barnes is certain that the
words are also meant for him, somehow.

"How'd she take you marching off yourself?" asks Dugan.

"With enough tears and arguments to fill the Channel," says Falsworth, "though she was mainly
concerned that it was something I truly wished to do, and not just an obligation to the family legacy.
You see, each generation of my father's line has seen at least one son off to fight for King and
country. All the way back to the damned Crusades."

"So was it something you wanted to do?" asks Jones.

Falsworth huffs. "Of course not. But I understood the importance of it, and needs must. Besides, if
anything I do helps to end this war sooner, it'd be well worth it." He pauses. "Too late for poor
George, it seems. But maybe Christopher. He's fourteen." He sniffs. "If there's any justice in this
world, at least one of us ought to escape this mess."
"War gets everybody, my friend," says Jones. "Your brother's already been hurt by it, if he cares about you or George at all."

"You're a ray of sunshine, Gabe," mumbles Morita.

The Winter Soldier, when on the field with a team, is accustomed to standing guard while the team is on downtime. He remembers hours spent patrolling camp perimeters, stationing himself on crumbled rooftops. Standing with his back to the light ignoring the faint chatter and occasional laughter.

He had not thought anything of it. He was following protocol. He did not speak to the teams unless required by the mission. The teams always went quiet when he approached; his presence made them uneasy.

He knows Bucky Barnes would stay with his men, especially in the wake of bad news.

The guys would call you Mama Bear Barnes sometimes. As a joke! In case that wasn't clear.

I killed a bear, once.

... Was that you making a joke?

No.

It's really hard to tell, sometimes.

I do not joke.

"Anyway, my eldest sister Maria marches right up to the guy and threatens to rip out his balls if he didn't marry Tessie. They're on the porch, and Mrs. Leon, the guy's mama and the local church organizer, is right inside the door, right, and of course she hears the whole thing. I was terrified she was gonna shout at Tessie and Maria, and probably me as well, 'cause she's real keen on denouncing town sinners every Sunday, but instead she pulls her son's ear hard enough for him to scream a little bit, and she damn well nearly shouts it off him too." Jones smiles wide and bright. "One month later, he and Tessie were married at church. They've been living with Mrs. Leon ever since, since she has the room and the time to look after the baby. She loves Tessie, says she's been wanting a daughter forever, and she's kind of adopted the rest of us."

A soft noise pulls Barnes's attention away. He stares into the dark and listens intently, until he determines it's somebody knocking something over inside one of the nearby tents.

"What about you, Bucky? Bet you've had to run from an angry daddy or two."

Barnes blinks. Jones had been relaying a story of his sister having relations that her family had not approved of. It takes him a moment to make sense of Dugan's question to him.

You were always popular with the ladies. But you weren't the kind to get either you or them in trouble. You were a good guy.

He has a flash of insight that it had probably been the threat of Steve Rogers's disapproval, more feared than any angry date or relative, that had kept Bucky Barnes in line. He shakes his head. Scans his data on Bucky for anything that might be relevant. "I've got three baby sisters."
The Commandos wince and laugh, muttering variations of "fair enough" and "man, that's even tougher".

Morita launches into his own story. Barnes breathes out in relief at feeling the attention shifting from him, and looks around the camp. Night has fallen fully, and Rogers has yet to make an appearance. It is possible, of course, that as an officer Rogers occupies his down-time with activities that do not involve engaging with his men. But what little Barnes knows of Rogers in the future, coupled with his unit's fondness for him, makes him certain that such is not the case. More likely he has been detained by the leadership on some matter or other.

Rogers joins them an hour later, sidling in without interrupting the flow of conversation. The men acknowledge him with small nods, none of the usual salutations for an officer. The Captain looks worn, but stays and chats with the group. Barnes can see the effect it has on the men: easier smiles, looser postures, a subtle sort of restoration even as they admonish Rogers to get some rest.

He has a private word with each man except for Barnes, and Barnes wonders at this, until Rogers claps a hand on Falsworth's shoulder and says, "I'd love to stay but I've got several hours of paperwork waiting for me. Bucky, I'll see you back in the tent."

Barnes nods. It is fortunate Rogers had provided that information, for he had been under the impression he'd been quartered with the rest of the men.

In hindsight, it shouldn't surprise him that the two of them had shared quarters. He can imagine Rogers insisting on it, the moment he'd been given his own quarters as due an officer. He can imagine it so well that he wonders if it's a real memory; Rogers setting his jaw and declaring, "There's no reason to crowd the men when there's more than enough space for Sergeant Barnes and myself, and we're used to living with each other anyhow."

(It might be a memory. But it's a fairly logical assumption, hardly a challenge for his mind to come up with on its own. Sometimes these maybe-memories are more infuriating than the clear absences.)

The men call out variations of "Goodnight" and wave their Captain off. It's not until Rogers has gone down the row of tents and ducked into the one that is presumably his- Barnes notes that the Commandos seem to have some idea of the range of his enhanced hearing- that Dernier says, dryly and in French, "It is good that you will still sleep in the same place even when you're fighting."

Jones translates, and the rest of them chuckle. Barnes ignores the very mild euphemism; he is more interested in the latter part. "We're fighting?"

"O-ho, is that how you're gonna to play it?" chuckles Jones.

"You're always welcome to bunk here with us, Sarge, if Cap gives you trouble," says Dugan.

They are speaking lightly, still caught in their amusement, but there is something intent in Dugan's expression that tells Barnes the offer is genuine.

Barnes says, "Thanks, I'll keep it in mind," and hopes his surprise is not apparent.

He remembers the exhibition in the Smithsonian, the interviews with the Howling Commandos. He'd observed the way they'd spoken about Rogers, the care and reverence for his memory implicit in every word and expression. They'd spoken about Bucky, too, but mostly in relation to Rogers.

But—he blinks. The exhibition had been about Captain America. Of course the material would be skewed around Rogers.
"I think I'll turn in, boys," announces Dugan, stretching one arm and scratching his stomach with the other hand.

"Me too," says Barnes, the words slipping out before he'd fully thought through the intent. He hesitates. But he'll have to go to the tent eventually, and Rogers is likely still occupied with paperwork. Better to go now so he can conceivably be asleep by the time Rogers is unoccupied.

He nods at the round of goodnights, grabs his jacket, grabs his pack from the men's tent, and slowly picks his way to the tent Rogers had gone into. The light is on inside, and Rogers is seated behind a desk that seems barely capable of bearing the weight of all the papers and files that have been heaped upon it.

What would the Rogers he knows in the future do? Barnes crosses to the cot that doesn't have Rogers's pack and sits down on the edge. "Are we fighting?"

The Rogers of the past sighs and puts down his pen. "I don't want to be." He gestures towards the tent entrance. "There's more than enough fighting going on out there."

The last time the Winter Soldier had been assigned an infiltration, at least officially, had been at the height of America's first Iraq War. Twenty years ago and fifty years ahead.

(This feels like cheating, stealing, though he doesn't know if the word applies when he is taking from himself.)

He scratches the back of his neck, slumps his shoulders slightly. "I don't even remember what we were fighting about." Truth makes the best bullets, and he's fairly skilled at sending those where he wants.

Rogers stares at him for a long moment. "Guess I don't, either." He ducks his head. "You know I—I didn't mean to hurt you. If I had. You're one of the most important people in my life. You know that, right?"

"Course," he says. The look on Rogers's face makes him wonder if it sounds too flippant, so he adds, "I do know that." It is true. He knows Rogers has no intent to hurt him. He knows Rogers considers him important.

"Okay. Good." Rogers rubs a hand over his face. He gives Barnes a faint smile, and it makes something in Barnes feel wronged. He does not understand why: smiles are positive responses. "We'll figure it out. When we get a bit of breathing room."

"Fine."

He suspects Rogers had been hoping for more. Barnes is aware it would vastly benefit his mission to resolve whatever conflict has taken place between Rogers and Bucky—a concerned Rogers is a solicitous Rogers—but even he cannot engineer a solution to a problem he knows nothing about.

He gets the idea when he climbs into his cot and finds he cannot sleep. Rogers has returned to his paperwork, the lamp on his table giving ample light for the small space. Barnes digs a hand into Bucky's pack and feels around for the small notebook he'd seen in there.

The first dozen or so pages have short notes on them, as well as a few beginnings for letters. Letters addressed to the very man sitting a few feet away, unsurprisingly. He knows Bucky and Rogers had exchanged a few letters, prior to the capture at Azzano; he'd read some of the surviving pages in the Smithsonian. Had they come from this notebook? There are some pages ripped out, but they could well have been for some other purpose.
He ponders it for a while. Little Tale had not provided much detail about the process of swapping back, but it is only logical to assume that the two of them will be returned to their designated points on their shared timeline one month from when they had been plucked from it. It is less of a concern for Barnes, as he has every confidence his Rogers will debrief him on the missing time.

(When had he started thinking of future Rogers as his Rogers?)

Bucky, however, is in the middle of a war zone. It is only fair for Barnes to leave some information for him. There is a chance his Rogers will see to that as well, making use of his very accurate visual and eidetic memory.

But Rogers will be remembering from his perspective. And Rogers can only know things which happen while he is present.

He has to acknowledge that, all this time, he has assumed Rogers’s experiences during the war to be close to Bucky’s, if not identical. His memories are Bucky’s memories. All the sources had said, inseparable, including Rogers himself, and so Barnes had believed. And yet he has had ample proof, in only a day, that Rogers is not always with him, does not always see what he sees.

No, Barnes needs to leave his own account of events.

Mission reports. He can think of them as mission reports. His handlers generally preferred verbal reports, but he has had to write them down, on occasion.

A flash-memory:

conditions of utmost secrecy the handler cannot be connected to the asset in any way notes must be left in two dead drops—

Another flash-memory:

throat too damaged to speak it would take another day to heal so a keyboard is slid under his sole functioning hand—

He digs up a pencil from the bottom of his pack and turns to the empty pages of the notebook. He is aware that this notebook might be read by anyone; better to disguise the reports as notes for his own use.

"What's the date?" he asks aloud. Scribbles down the date Rogers distractedly gives him.

Arrived at SSR base camp. No notable injuries. Tension w/ SR from prior disagreement.

He pauses. Bucky would know about the disagreement, of course. A frisson of annoyance, that he is the one who has to deal with the situation when it is not of his own making, and he has no way of finding out what had happened, short of asking Rogers directly.

Falsworth's brother George reported dead.

No further pertinent information comes to mind. He puts down the pencil and idly thumbs back to the beginning of the notebook. He has seen Bucky's handwriting before, but he'd not thought to compare it to his own. Certain letters and characteristics are the same, the small a's and r's in particular, while others are wholly different. He does not know if the differences are enough to distinguish them as different people.

One particular page catches his eye, the lines of text on it distinctly denser than on the others.
to know why i’m doing this, but i know why. he runs right into the worst of it and all i can do is watch.
story of him and me. they went and made him tougher but every man breaks. don’t know what can make
him break but don’t want either of us finding out. nightmares of him dying aren’t new but now there’s a
lot more colour than before. war kills you quick or kills you slow. war kills you out here or years into
home. i said to mrs rogers once, in sickness and in health, and i think she knew i wasn’t really kidding.
before i was too scared to write any of this but each day i care less and fucking less. they ain’t gonna
touch captain america and he has a girl now finally. so they can do what they like to me.

He averts his eyes and closes the notebook, the slap of paper sounding almost too loud in the small
space. Peeks over at Rogers; the sound makes Rogers shift slightly, but evidently does not alarm him
enough to pull his attention from his own piles of paper.

Barnes swallows and slips the notebook into the pocket of Bucky’s trousers. Scans his memory. He
has not seen this artefact in any of the public exhibitions and collections from this era. Either the
notebook will be lost, or it is in some private collector’s possession. He suspects the former. Bucky
likely keeps it close to him, might have even been on his person when he goes on that fateful last
mission.

And that’s when he registers the day’s date.

He calculates. It takes twenty-eight days for the moon to complete a full cycle back to the same phase
as the switch had occurred on. Flips back to his own entry to be sure.

The day after Bucky returns is the day they go after a train in the Alps.
Chapter 7

BUCKY BARNES

Things I want to do in the future

eat
coney island
grand canyon
movies

Sam has other business while he's in New York, so it's only Steve who goes with Bucky to get new clothes. Bucky's still appalled at the prices, especially when Steve explains that most of the big brands don't even make the clothes in America.

"Can you even buy union anymore?" asks Bucky, shaking his head.

"There are a few places," says Steve. "But you have to know where to look."

It dampens his enthusiasm some, but the fact of the matter is he still needs clothes. Steve actually has a good idea of the kind of things that are fashionable now, because he's pretty observant of people; he's just terrible when it comes to choosing for himself.

They go to the biggest store Bucky's ever seen—

"Steve, how is this a store, it's the size of a warehouse. A big warehouse."

"Wait 'til you walk into a superstore."

—and Bucky picks out a few packs of shirts in different styles, underwear, singlets, a few pyjamas, a couple of hooded jackets that look comfortable. He keeps getting side-tracked by the vast array of stuff. Also, there are more pictures of scantily-clad women than he's used to, on advertisements and on packaging, and that's fine, except the stuff they're selling doesn't always make sense to be scantily-clad in.

"Steve, why does she need to be nearly naked to wash her car?"

He gets Steve to pick the place for lunch, something he likes here in the future. Even in the small slice of the city he's seen so far, he's noticed dozens of little eating places with signs from other languages and other countries. Bucky's aware that Steve has been sticking to foods he'd be familiar with, but he wants to try other things. Even the Chinese and Greek and Irish places, which he's tried before, look different.

They end up in a Japanese restaurant.

Steve makes a face at how quickly Bucky masters the chopsticks, and Bucky gamely tries everything Steve orders for them both. He narrowly avoids putting a whole load of ginger into his mouth, mainly because he'd smelled it but also because he's long been able to recognize the gleam of mischief on Steve's face.

"It's good," pronounces Bucky, stealing a sashimi from Steve's plate. "The raw fish takes some getting used to. It tastes fine once I get over the feel of it in my mouth. It may be my stomach's just
glad to be getting so much food, but I like it."

It makes him think of Morita, and he tells Steve so, though he adds, "I feel like it shouldn't. He's never talked about it outright but I get the feeling his family wanted him to be as American as he can be, you know?"

"Can't really blame them," says Steve. "Remember when my mom got mad at you for copying her accent? She'd spent years making sure I didn't pick it up from her."

Bucky chuckles. "You remember that? Heh. Mrs. Rogers always thought I was a bad influence."

"Bucky." Steve leans over the table. "I don't know why you keep thinking I've forgotten everything, it's only been a couple of years since I woke up. And even if it's been seventy years—I don't think I can ever forget. Not when it comes to you." He pauses. "Anyway. Mom adored you, and you know it."

Bucky plays with a bit rice that had fallen onto his plate. "Families, huh?"

"Remember when Morita had me write a message to his parents," says Steve. "'Cause his family was worried about him."

Bucky grins. "You pulled some strings and managed to make a call to the internment camp where they were assigned. Made sure they were getting his letters. All the while heavily implying how much you disagreed with the policy," chuckles Bucky. He'd listened to one of Steve's rants just a week ago, right before their 'fight'.

"And how disappointed Captain America would be about Americans mistreating fellow Americans." Steve beams for a moment, then ducks his head.

"What's the face for?"

Steve's eyes are blue and startlingly bright. "It's just been a while since I've gotten to talk to someone about the Howlies, is all. Someone who also knew them, I mean."

There's not much Bucky can say to that. He holds up his little cup of green tea. "To old friends, then."

Steve clinks their cups. "Old friends."

Full yet not feeling as heavy as he'd had after the previous day's diner food, they stroll around the block for a while. Steve keeps checking the map app in his phone—

"Do you know how useful this app would have been back in the war?"

"It would have saved us from Dum Dum's sense of direction, that's for sure."

"The man can navigate a forest blindfolded without a map, but stick him in a city and you'd get better directions tossing a leaf into the wind."

— until Bucky caves and asks, "Are we going somewhere?"

"Yup." Steve flashes him a smile. "You'll like this, don't worry."

He leads them to a shop that doesn't even have a sign outside, but the tasteful window display gives a clue: mannequins wearing sharp, elegant suits. They enter a cozy parlour of dark woods and rich carpet; the kind of place Bucky had dreamed about someday being able to walk into but never
"Steve," he whispers. "This place is real fancy. Can we afford this? What if they kick us out?"

Steve gives him a pained expression. "Bucky, I know we weren't paid a whole lot back then, but my bank account accrued interest for over seventy years. I'm living practically rent-free in a building owned by Stark, who won't stop trying to set everyone up with expense accounts and limitless credit cards. Yes, we can buy you a damn suit or two."

Stark apparently also provides referrals, because they're barely in there a full minute before a man comes out to greet them. "Captain Rogers! Mr. Stark sent word that you might be coming by. I am Abel Marolt."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Marolt," says Steve.

Marolt turns intent grey eyes on Bucky. "Is this the gentleman to whom the measurements belong?"

"Yes." Steve nudges Bucky in the arm.

What measurements? Bucky wants to ask. But then he remembers he's living in a building controlled by an artificial intelligence—and he's still not entirely sure what that means—and he remembers JARVIS talking about taking readings of the Little Tale. Stark can probably find out how much coffee Bucky’s drunk so far, if he wants.

"James Barnes, sir," says Bucky, reaching out to shake the man’s hand.

If the man recognizes the name, or makes any connection between it and Rogers, he gives no sign, only returning the handshake with a professional, "A pleasure. Come this way, please."

Bucky glances at Steve, unsure, but Steve's glare is all don't bring up the money again or so help me.

"The order was for one formal suit and one for more casual wear," says Marolt. "The shirts and slacks, you may take with you today. Normally I would request two fittings, but Mr. Stark explained that you are on a limited time schedule, so we will make do with the one."

Bucky is interrogated on his preferences on colour, then handed a binder with fabric swatches.

He gets a break when the man putters away for a moment, quietly calling for somebody at the back of the shop. "Steve. I'm only here for a month. There's no point getting me fitted for clothes I won't be wearing that much." He's noticed no one wears them anymore outside of people heading to work and some fancy events on the television.

"Yes, there is," says Steve. "You like wearing nice clothes, and I can finally afford to get you whatever you want. You're the one who bought me my first suit. It's only fair I get to return the favour." He turns his big eyes on Bucky. "Please?"

Bucky narrows his eyes. "I don't know what you're getting out of this, pal, but fine."

Marolt comes back with a pair of women who look alike enough to be mother and daughter, and they have Bucky stand on a stool while wearing a couple of incomplete suits. Steve takes a seat and watches the process with a strange level of interest; he'd expected Steve to be bored, is surprised Steve hadn't brought a book to read. People could keep books on their phones these days, right? Or some paper and pencils.

Actually, he hasn't seen Steve sketch since he got here. Maybe he doesn't like doing that anymore?
The thought makes Bucky sad. It'd been one of the few things that could get Steve to stay still while his body healed.

Marolt and the two women flutter around him, adjusting the suits and drawing lines on the cloth. Then Marolt sends him to change into a completed suit, explaining it won’t fit him as well as his suits will but it’ll give them an idea of how the style and fabrics look on him.

The formal suit is a three-piece, with a waistcoat and a white shirt he can take home. It’s been so long since he last wore proper clothes, he almost doesn't recognize himself in it. It makes him look older, closer to his father than the guy who'd first put on the uniform.

Or maybe the war had done that.

He saunters out and does a half-turn for Steve. "Not bad, huh?"

He's not prepared for the greedy way Steve's eyes take him in, or the almost rough, deeper edge to his voice when he says, "Beautiful."

Bucky swallows, too-familiar feelings rising; good thing he has a lifetime's worth of practice pushing them down. There's a flare of anger, too, because Steve shouldn't get to do that, not after—but he's been doing his best to remember that a few days ago, for him, translates to years ago, for Steve. Maybe he hasn't forgotten anything, as he insists, but it's not necessarily the same as remembering.

Bucky turns and fiddles with the cuffs, then the waistcoat. He can feel the weight of Steve's gaze on his back.

Steve misses his friend, he reminds himself. It's natural, practically expected, for feelings to run high and look like... something else. He's the closest thing to family Steve had, after Mrs. Rogers passed, and he's never doubted Steve loves him.

Just not in the way he wants, but that's his life right there.

They promise to come back for a final fitting in two days' time, and then they're outside again. Steve suddenly yanks him a step backwards, just as a messenger bike speeds past on the pavement.

The two of them stare after the bike as if contemplating the perils of urban peregrination. Then Steve asks, "Where to, next?"

Bucky bites on his lips. Thinks about Steve watching as he got measured, when once he would have been sketching the time away. "Art," he decides.

He drags Steve to the Museum of Modern Art. He's always appreciated art, despite not having Steve's talent for it, and he especially loves the pieces with history a lot of history. That's why it's always an extra treat to have Steve along, because Steve will tell him all the interesting bits. It's better than having a tour guide.

He'd heard about it from Stark, the night before; Bucky had asked him about art museums on the premise that rich guys like Stark know all about that kind of thing. Stark had offered to arrange after-hours access and a tour from the museum director himself. Bucky had stared at him until he'd thrown his arms up and wandered off, muttering, now I know where Cap gets that face from. Later, JARVIS had assured him, it's just Sir's way of expressing friendship and support, which left Bucky
wondering, *Howard, what the hell did you do to your kid?*

Speaking of kids, Steve ends up drawing a small crowd when they’re wandering through a Cubism exhibition, admiring Picassos’ *Student With A Newspaper*.

It starts with Bucky saying, “Remember when we saw *Guernica* here?”

He’s both disappointed and pleased to learn that the painting’s been returned to Spain. He and Steve had talked a lot about Hitler and the war before they’d seen it, but he’s suspected that the painting had fired Steve’s determination to somehow help stop the Nazi invasion of Europe.

The big lug gets so involved in telling Bucky about what had happened to the painting after their time —“during the Vietnam War, Tony Shafrazi spray-painted KILL LIES ALL on it after the My Lai massacre”— he doesn’t even notice the audience growing around them, most of them no taller than Bucky’s elbows. Bucky suspects the adults in the room are listening, too, they’re just more subtle about it. Though maybe Braque’s *Still Life with Metronome* (*Still Life with Mandola and Metronome*) is just really popular, how would he know?

He spots a real tour guide wearing the uniform standing in the far corner. Bucky worries for a moment that they're interrupting a tour, but from the wide-eyed and somewhat dazed look on the tour guide's face, he doesn't think she minds.

"...at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 1992, where it’s been ever since."

Steve beams at Bucky, and only then seems to register the unusual number of small children in their immediate area. Steve likes kids but has never really known what to do with them, beloved single child that he’d been; he smiles at them now, a little helplessly, and Bucky has to bite his lips to distract himself from the acrobatics going on inside his chest.

The crowd disperses quickly, the adults pulling off a good impression of having been present purely by coincidence while a couple of the kids, not yet socialized in the ways of New Yorkers, whisper, "thanks Captain America!"

The tour guide makes her way over to them. Steve notices her and worriedly says, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cause a disturbance."

"It's perfectly all right, Captain," she assures him. "Everything you said was accurate, and I'm sure our patrons learned more than they would have from just reading the cards." She blushes faintly. "I, um, I actually wanted to thank you. It means a lot to see Captain America being passionate about art history. I mean, it's my field of study, and it gets tiring to hear people dismiss it, you know? I wouldn't be surprised if a few of those kids end up pursuing it in the future."

"I think studying history is one of the most important jobs there is," says Steve earnestly. "So I should really be thanking you." The *ma'am* isn't vocalized but might as well have been, which Bucky finds a little fascinating. "If it gets any of those kids started on thinking about art and about history, then I don't mind embarrassing myself a bit."

Bucky notices a little girl standing a few feet away, watching them; she brightens up when she sees him noticing her. She might be black or Latina or both, and her dress is a very vivid yellow against her dark skin. He leaves Steve chatting with the tour guide and crouches down in front of her.

"Hi there," he says. "Did you want to talk to Captain America?"

She nods, then tilts her head at him. "Are you Bucky?"
He blinks. "Indeed I am. And who might you be, little lady?"

"Charlie!" She slides off one strap of her bright pink backpack with surprising dexterity, pulls open the zipper, and digs out—

"Is that a Bucky Bear?" asks Bucky, delighted.

"Yes!" The Bear is proudly deposited into his hands. "I saw a picture of you in one of Papa's big war books."

"Those pictures were taken a really long time ago," he says, turning the bear around in his hands. It matches the picture he'd seen on Steve's phone, though it's smaller than he expected. It probably comes in different sizes. The blue of the uniform is faded and the fur is uneven in places and the stitching is coming loose around the ears—signs of a toy well-loved. He swallows tightly.

"Papa says that's why they don't have any colour," says Charlie.

"Your Papa sounds like a smart man. And you, little lady, have real sharp eyes." He brushes his hand over the bear's head, and hands it back to her. "But, you know, I'm not really supposed to be here. Don't be surprised if your Papa and your Ma don't believe you saw me, okay?"

"Oh, I don't have a mom," she tells him, carefully putting the toy back into her bag. "Dad says he likes the stories I make up, though, so he'll just think you're another story."

He blinks, a little confused, though he automatically helps her pull the backpack straps back on her shoulder.

"Your Papa and your Dad—are they different people?" he asks.

"...yeah?" She looks up from adjusting her bag and blinks at him, like she's wondering if he has a problem understanding things.

"Made a new friend, Bucky?"

Bucky smiles his gratitude up at Steve for the timely interruption. "Hey, Steve. This is Charlie. She's a real smart lady, she knew who I was so she showed me her Bucky Bear."

"Hi, Captain America," chirps Charlie. She smiles at him, though she shuffles sideways like she maybe wants to hide behind Bucky. Bucky has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from chuckling at her shyness when she'd been so full of words before, because this is Steve, of all people. Steve himself looks just as intimidated of her.

"It's okay," says Bucky. "It's only Cap, he wouldn't hurt a fly. Was there something you wanted to say to him?"

She bites her lip adorably, and says, in a sudden rush, "I can't find my Dad or Papa and they said to go to the big desk at the front if I got lost but I couldn't remember which way it was and then I saw you and Bucky and Papa said Bucky Bear would always look after me so I thought I'd be safer with you."

Bucky and Steve both blink, taking a moment to process the words. Bucky's still a confused on the way she keeps saying, "Dad and Papa", in addition to her casual, "I don't have a mom" from earlier.

Luckily, Steve doesn't seem confused at all, crouching down next to Bucky, "Well, you should go to the information desk any time you get lost in a big place like this, and if you can't remember the way,
you can ask someone who works there, like Jessica here." The tour guide who'd been talking to Steve gave a small wave behind him. "Why don't Bucky and I walk with you down to the information desk, and if you tell us what your fathers look like, we can keep an eye out along the way. I'm sure they're worried about you by now, and if all three of us are looking, we're sure to find them pretty quick."

Charlie nods her approval of the plan, and grabs Bucky's hand, to his surprise.

"Dad is as tall as you and his hair looks a bit like Cap's only longer," says Charlie, tugging him out of the Cubism area. "Papa looks more like me because we both come from people who come from Mexico, but Papa's eyes are smaller because Grandma Tam is from Taiwan."

She peers around Bucky to where Steve is hanging back, watching them with a small smile like the sap he is, and seems to decide that Captain America really is harmless, because she back-steps and grabs Steve's hand with her free one. Bucky looks at Steve's shyly pleased expression and finds himself beaming so hard his jaw aches.

Charlie bounces along between them, chattering about the museum's kid activities and how her Dad only likes the boring pictures and the ice-cream she'd had after lunch; not a trace of worry to be seen, as if supremely confident they'll find her parents now that she's with Captain America. She even pulls herself up and swings between them. Bucky hopes he's not watching her too avidly, but he can't help wondering if he or Steve had ever been so carefree.

He also wonders at the picture they make. Steve referring to Charlie's "fathers" earlier made Bucky reasonably sure he hasn't misunderstood. No one seems to find anything odd about two men walking about like a couple with their kid. Actually, now that he's looking for it, he spots three pairs of men holding hands, another pair with a stroller. Two older women with their arms around each other, trailed by bored-looking teenagers.

The descriptions Charlie had given for her parents aren't all that helpful, but luckily it turns out not to matter, because they're not even past the escalators yet when a tall man rushes out of opposite hallway with a relieved cry of "Charlie!"

"Hi Dad!" says Charlie, taking a last hard swing between Bucky and Steve that launches her forward, right into the man's arms.

He picks her up and hugs her tight to himself. "Oh, thank God. Where did you go? We've been looking all over this floor for you."

"I went to look at the picture with all the seashells!" chirps Charlie. "And then I couldn't see you or Papa anymore. I was going to go to the big desk like you told me to, but then I saw Captain America. He and Bucky helped me find you!"

The man finally notices they're not alone, and he coughs, face flushing lightly. He doesn't put Charlie down, though, only relaxes his hold enough to let her twist around. Smiling, he starts to say something when he stops, eyes widening, and stares at Steve with his mouth open. Bucky realizes he probably hadn't taken her mention of "Captain America" seriously.

Steve takes it in stride, like this kind of thing happens to him all the time. He smiles and holds out his hand. "Steve Rogers."

"Mark Jones," says the man, shaking Steve's hand. "I-thank you for finding Charlie, I hope she wasn't bothering you."
"Not at all, I'm glad to have helped."

A second man ducks through a crowd of school children coming down from an upper level and practically barrels into Mark and Charlie, embracing them both and tucking his face into Charlie's hair.

"I was this close to having a panic attack," says the man. "Charlie, what did I tell you about wandering off?"

"I was looking at the pictures, like you told me to!" protests Charlie. "And then I was with Captain America, so it was okay."

Mark clears his throat. "Ed, Captain Rogers and—" He glances uncertainly at Bucky, as if realizing Bucky hadn't introduced himself.

"James," says Bucky.

"-and James found her."

Bucky tries to tell them that, really, she had found them, but Steve says, "Call me Steve, please," at the same time as Charlie goes, "No, that's Bucky," and it's a good thing they're all talking over each other because it masks Ed's quiet yet heartfelt, "Holy shit."

They stare at each other for a moment. Bucky clears his throat and says, "Charlie mentioned the two of you are interested in history."

Mark smiles. "It's mainly Ed, his mom was a librarian and military historian before she retired, and recently gifted us the bulk of her book collection."

The mention of his mother seems to shake Ed out of his daze. "I'm pretty sure she's just trying to influence Charlie at an early age."

"Grandma Tam knows everything," Charlie tells Steve sombrely.

"Then you better pay attention to your parents," says Steve. "I imagine she won't approve of you disappearing on them, will she?"

Charlie's eyes widen, as one realizing her predicament. "You have to tell her it's an accident!" she demands of Ed.

Ed laughs. "As long as you don't do it again."

Mark insists on getting them coffee as thanks, so they drift to the nearest coffee-shop. Bucky listens with no small amount of fascination as Mark and Ed talk about their jobs, and then their families, and shyly venture into how they met one another, and where Charlie comes from. Charlie is clearly familiar with the whole story, and spends more of her attention on launching surprise attacks with Bucky Bear under and around the table.

Bucky has forgotten how much he loves kids.

Eventually the two adults have to leave, and they walk them out of the building.

"Bucky Bear secure," says Bucky, giving the bear one last pat before closing the back-pack over it. He throws Charlie a salute. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Charlie."

"Bye, Bucky! Bye Cap!"
Bucky watches the little family walk away with a lump in his chest. He carefully doesn’t think about anything other than the chilly breeze and the smell of something frying. He’s about to suggest getting a snack to Steve when there’s a patter of light footsteps. He stumbles a bit when little girl arms hug his legs tight. A hard tug on his hoodie gets him bending down, for which he is rewarded with a loud kiss on the cheek, and those surprisingly strong arms squeezing him around the shoulders.

Steve has the sense to be crouching down when Charlie moves on to him. He beams at the kiss and gently hugs her back.

"Thank you!" she tells them, and runs off, gone again just as quickly.

Bucky doesn’t say anything until they’re sitting in a nearby cafe —Steve had beaten him to admitting he’s hungry— turning it all over in his head.

"So two fellas can marry now?" he asks quietly. "And two ladies? And they can adopt kids?"

"Yeah," says Steve. He's wearing the small smile he wears when he's quietly proud of people.
"There's—I read up on it, I could—"

"Tell me," says Bucky, so Steve does.

Hey Steve,

I can't help wondering what it would have been like if we'd been born in this time, you and me. We'd have been friends, I'm sure. But maybe we wouldn't be as close. Maybe you'd have been sick less. Girls here don't seem to mind the little guys so much.

Or maybe nothing would be different at all. Maybe you and me are the same, no matter the time or place or life.

I don't know why I'm here.

I can see how much you've missed me and it's like I'm intruding on my own wake, you know? This is why humans shouldn't time travel— we're not cut out for it.

"A week or so ago," Bucky licks his lips and adds, "for me, anyway. I told you something that—well, that I've been wanting to get off my chest for a while." He hears Steve going still. Sam is clunking around in his room, it's just the two of them out in the common area. Steve heaves a deep breath and sits down next to Bucky on the couch. Bucky steals a peek at him. "I don't know if you remember."

"Yeah, I remember," says Steve. He's staring at his hands.

"We told the guys we had a fight," says Bucky. "I've been avoiding you. Not sure you noticed, you're so busy all the time."

"I noticed," says Steve definitively. "But I didn't know what to do. Figured you needed space. You never had any trouble letting me know when you're not mad at me anymore."

"I wasn't mad at you. I was just—it was easier, to stay away."

"I was stupid." Steve's hands curl into fists. "I know there was no way for me to know how things would turn out, but I should have— I just assumed we'd have time. I thought it was something that could wait until after the war was over."
It would have taken a stronger man than Bucky not to ask, "Did we— were we all right, again, at the end?"

A choked sound comes out of Steve's throat, quickly stifled. It takes him a while to answer, and all he says is, "Yes. Yeah, we were all right."

"Good," says Bucky, a little befuddled. He's not sure how to read Steve's face. He doesn't want to push if Steve doesn't want to talk about it.

If he'd been the one to lose Steve, he doesn't think he'd be able to bear talking about him. He'd shut him away in the very deepest part of himself and dispose of every key, obliterate every path.

In some ways it's a saving grace, Bucky going first. A Bucky Barnes who's lost Steve Rogers would — not be a nice person.

"You know, this is the first time you've talked about the past," Steve points out. "I mean, about the war."

"It is?" Bucky frowns. He searches his memory and finds that Steve is right. It's easy to talk about their shared childhood, or discuss the things that have changed since Bucky had last been on American soil, but he's avoided talking about the war. He wants to think it's because of the awkwardness from his last real conversation with Steve; he's pretty sure it's more complicated than that, though. And he's never thought about how strange this must be for Steve, who apparently had never known about Bucky's little time-trip.

"It's a real doozy, trying to keep it all straight in your head," says Steve sympathetically. Either he's reading Bucky really well or he's having the same trouble.

"Yeah."

Bucky thinks about jigsaw puzzles. Everything appearing logical and straightforward at the start, the final picture clear, and then suddenly there are pieces you didn't know were even missing, and the picture turns out to be completely different from what you'd expected.

Steve looks like he's working up to saying something — he presses his lips together and his eyes get all focused, and in these sort of moments Bucky always imagines he's giving himself a little pep talk inside his head— when Sam walks in with a couple bags of take-out.

Steve immediately rushes to help him, even though Sam doesn't look like he needs it. Bucky stares after him. The last thing he wants to do is bring up the conversation from before. The very notion of losing Steve, if their situations had been reversed—he refuses even to think of it.

He gets to his feet. He can smell that Sam's gotten his favourite spanakopita, and Steve's liable to steal it if he thinks Bucky hasn’t noticed it.

Thinking of it not as dying but as not having to live without Steve actually cheers Bucky up a lot. Which probably makes him somewhat twisted, but that's nothing new.

Not to say he's unaffected. Here he is, getting an experience no regular guy can dream of, and he still wants—more. He's only human, only a boy from Brooklyn.
It feels like gorging, like when he'd gotten his first forty-eight hour pass. He hadn't known what to do with himself, and in the end he'd mostly slept and drank through it. This is more intense, like he needs to absorb as much as he can. Steve keeps close, looking a confused-puppy mix of concern and pleasure at Bucky indulging himself.

He eats and watches things on television and goes on endless walks around Brooklyn, Manhattan, Long Island. Clint shows up while Steve is out and takes him to the Tower’s private shooting range, where they get through a platoon’s worth of ammo. Time starts to blur, not in any good way, and then he not-panics because what's the point of it if he's not even enjoying any of it?

"This is going to be hypocritical, so hypocritical, I wouldn't be surprised if Dum-E pops a socket, but do you maybe want to cut back on the caffeine, pal?" Stark pokes his head out over the top of whatever it is he's working on and glances at Bucky's hands. Which are maybe shaking. Only a little bit.

Bucky closes his hands into fists. "It's just. Have you ever wanted to do so many things, because you know you ain't got much time left, and at the same time you know you'll never get to do everything you want to?"

The words have been wanting to be said for a while, he realizes. He doesn't know why it's Stark who ends up hearing them, of all people; Howard's kid gives off every impression of having gotten or done everything he ever wanted his whole life.

Except in moments like now, when Stark's eyes get soft and sad. "I consider it one of my formative moments when I came to accept that I would never be able to figure out everything about the universe, because 1) the human lifespan is definitely not long enough, and 2) not everything should be broken apart to be studied." He grimaces at the latter. "But, to answer your rhetorical question: yes."

Stark tosses the screwdriver and picks up another with a smaller head. He's elbows-deep in the unidentifiable chassis when he speaks again. "There was a time when I thought I only had days left to live— actually, this kind of thing has happened on a pretty regular basis, so let's just say the first time I thought I had only days to live— do you know what I wanted, then?"

Bucky shakes his head.

"Well, after an unfortunately decent man gave me the metaphorical cuff upside the head, I realized that what I wanted, more than anything, was to apologize to the people I've hurt in my life. And eat one last cheeseburger. Also, I meant people whose feelings I actually care about, which at that point was basically Pepper and Rhodey. Oh, and to have my will amended so my 'bots will go to Pepper."

You swivelled around to lightly bump Stark's shoulder, as if aware of being talked about. "Basically, things I didn't realize were important until I would literally have given my left arm —and wow, one day, you're going to appreciate just how terrible a choice of wording that is— to get the chance to do them."

Stark waves the screwdriver in his hand. "What I'm saying is, when you know crunch time's comin' I know it feels like you have to cram for the big test, pack for the maiden voyage, whatever, but at the end of the day, there's probably only a handful of things you really want or need to do. So, uh, maybe just do those?"
"Or go wild. Use up your expense account. Go diving in Thailand and clubbing in London on the same day. Run down a steep hill in one of those giant hamster ball things. YOLO." Tony waves his arms extravagantly.

"You made me an expense account? And what's YOLO?"

"An acronym from the internet, stands for You Only Live—damn, my brain is on top form today." Tony shakes his head. "And, duh, of course I made you an expense account. Everybody else has one."

That isn't really a reason to give someone an expense account, Bucky wants to say.

Instead he looks Stark Tony in the eye, having a good sense now of what makes the man squirm the most, and sombrely says, "Thank you, Tony."

"What is it with you and Cap and your faces?" complains Tony. "You're welcome. Please put it away now. And stop hogging my 'bots."

"It's Dum-E who won't leave me alone. He keeps pinching my arm."

"Stop passing the buck. Get it? Ow, no, no throwing wires, do you even know where those have been?" Tony brushes bits of plastic and copper out of his hair. "Wait, is he pinching your left or right arm?"

"Left arm." Bucky watches the robot do it again. Dum-E's pincers close around his wrist, then the robot seems disappointed for some reason. He turns his left hand without dislodging the robot and pats the underside of the pincers. "Does it matter?"

"He's probably decided that your arm is the most analogous part of you to his own structure," says Stark, going back to his work.

"Not a robot, buddy, sorry," says Bucky to Dum-E.

Dum-E dips down, a strangely nod-like movement, and after poking into one of the interchangeable boxes of scraps, offers Bucky a star-spangled shield-shaped stress ball.

Steve gets recognized sometimes when they're out in public. This Steve's moods are a little harder to read than the Steve of Bucky's time, but Bucky's always been good at seeing patterns and he figures most of them out after a couple of days. It helps that he's gotten used to the idea of Steve being famous, despite his own conflicted feelings about it.

As long as the little punk's happy, is what he's always told himself.

He's no longer so sure that's the case.

"Was it like this, in the war?"

Agent Romanoff's voice makes him jump. It's not too often people can take him by surprise anymore, but Steve had warned him to never underestimate her. He gives her his best smile; she doesn't seem very impressed. Well, dames like her are probably used to guys throwing themselves at
"Saw more swooning from the soldiers," replies Bucky with a chuckle. "But at least there was always something blowing up somewhere, so Steve had an excuse to run away."

She raises an eyebrow. "Let me guess—sometimes the explosion was from one of you." Her hair is bright red under the full sunlight, and she's dressed as though she's come down to the park from one of the office buildings surrounding it.

"Gotta look after the national treasure." He sees the faintest twitch at the corners of her mouth. He clears his throat, shifts his feet. "You don't like me very much, do you?"

She eyes him intently. "It's not personal. I'm still trying to figure you out, and I don't trust easy." A considering pause. "You remind me of someone."

"I'm sorry," says Bucky, because at this point he damn well knows what it sounds like when a person's lost someone important.

"Don't be; he'd have been happy I got to meet you." She looks over at Steve. "Speaking of happy, Cap's been walkin' on sunshine since you showed up." There's an amused tone to her voice that suggests she's laughing at her own private joke.

Steve had warned him about people using references he won't understand. Just let them get it out of their system, Buck; path of least resistance and all.

"That's good," says Bucky sincerely. "I'm glad. I mean, it's gonna be harder for him, you know, after I go back. I don't—" he swallows. Pushes the hot surge of feelings back down into the dark, away from where the sky is sunny and the country is apparently at peace. Gives Romanoff a serious look. "You've probably figured this out by now, but he's made of less sunshine than people think. Growing up, he heard a lot of talk about it being his fault, or worse his Ma's, that he was so small and sick all the time. Got angry a lot, though it never controlled him and he never took it out on people. But he always had something to prove, y'know? Now he can do stuff regular folks can't, and when he's hurt he hides it, because he thinks showing it will make him ungrateful and he still has something to prove." The words fall out of him in a rush.

Romanoff tilts her head. "Why do you think I even care?" Her words are flippant but her tone concedes that they aren't, really.

He shrugs. "Because he respects you a lot, and you probably get him better than most people do." He thinks about it further. "Also because you're helping him not be so alone anymore, and I figure you're someone who gets things done once she sets her mind to it."

She accepts the words without any obvious objection. She seems about to respond when her gaze flicks to the side. He turns his head and tries to see what has caught her attention.

There's a group of teenagers stopped on an adjacent path, very obviously watching Steve and the gaggle of younger kids surrounding him. Bucky guesses that they're tempted to approach Steve themselves but feel it to be beneath their dignity. Right now they're not looking at Steve, though—they're looking at Bucky and Romanoff.

Bucky pulls up a smile and gives them a little wave. There's an burst of whispering and giggling, and half the group tentatively wave back. Bucky and Natasha exchange looks, silently acknowledging that they're trying to listen in on the conversation. In their defence, the teenagers aren't exactly working to keep their voices down.
"—sure he's not assassin guy from DC—"

"—had a metal arm—"

"—cutie's got flesh and blood guns as far as—"

"—if anything, he looks like Bucky Barnes—"

"—shit, he does, oh my—"

"—cloned him, can they do that—"

"—Cap wouldn't, that's just creepy—"

"You'd think if they were able to clone people, they'd clone Steve instead of his sidekick," says Bucky, eyebrows raised.

"I don't know, I'm starting to see why the sidekick's a fan favourite," says Romanoff. Before he can ask her what she means, she says off-handedly, "And you can call me Natasha."

"Bucky," he says, semi-automatically. Only then does he realize that she's never actually called him by name before now.

She nods while raising a hand to wave at Steve, who appears to be done with his fans and is now walking towards them. She gives Bucky an amused look. "You know, 'clone' was actually our first assumption, when we picked you up at the HYDRA base."

"You're kidding me."

"What would you think if you broke into a decades-old HYDRA base and found a supposedly long-dead war hero? Everybody and their grandparents, literally, know about the tragedy of Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes; it'd be an effective way of screwing with Captain America. Plus, they'd had the time to age you naturally."

"Hey, Nat! Hey, Bucky," says Steve, beaming at Bucky like they hadn't been walking together just five minutes ago. Bucky automatically smiles back. Out of the corner of one eye, he can see Natasha giving him a pointed, see what I mean?

"Natasha was just telling me how you guys thought I was a clone," complains Bucky.

"It's not that far-fetched an idea," says Steve, grinning sheepishly. Today, at least, Steve Rogers is made of sunshine. "Besides, once Thor got close enough, he could tell it was a magic thing rather than a clone thing. He got Clint to take him back to the room he found you in and they dug out the Little Tale."

"You should get ready to be asked questions about Mr. Not-A-Clone here, though," says Natasha. To Bucky, she says, "The media have been pretty good about leaving Steve alone, but the public will still speculate, and sooner or later someone's gonna throw out a direct question."

"I'll just say he's a friend, who is definitely not a clone of Bucky Barnes," says Steve stubbornly.

Natasha gives him a sharp look. "Steve."

Steve sighs, some of the sunshine leaching out of him. "I'll—come up with something, all right?"

Bucky doesn't want to get on Natasha's bad side so soon after being put into the not-bad side —he
doesn't think he's on the good side just yet—and he suspects there's an additional conversation going on here. But he can never completely curb the instinct to help Steve out, and she's still a stranger to him, too. "He'll figure it out. He's the Man With The Plan, after all."

This gets him a mild glare from Natasha, and a fondly irritated look from Steve.

Natasha sighs and says, "What about a shape-shifting alien?"

It's easier not to think too hard about it, is the thing. Easier to bring up a dozen smaller wants, a hundred minor wishes, so as to avoid thinking on the big ones.


It goes on for a little while longer, Bucky trying to absorb everything, even when things start losing their meaning. At one point he tries to watch a movie and read a book at the same time. He goes from forgetting to eat because too many things to do not enough time to do them to eating more than Steve does in one sitting. Fortunately he seems to have developed a cast-iron stomach at some point, or possibly grown an additional one for storage.

He sees the way Steve looks at him, the entreaty clear on his face: you can't keep doing this, Bucky.

He replies with his own look: just a little longer, Steve. He's a little surprised Steve lets it go, but then, Steve always did trust him too easily.

"You sure you want me coming with you, Buck?"

"Of course, dummy. Where's the fun in going all by myself?"

He and Steve go to Colorado on Stark's private jet. For the first half hour, Bucky stares out the window avidly and tries every button he can find; then he passes out so thoroughly that he wakes in their hotel room, with only vague memories of Steve waking him to walk to the car and then again to walk into the hotel.

It's when they're standing in Yavapai Point of the Grand Canyon, taking in the orange sunset amidst the orange rocks, that Bucky gets to thinking about London and Paris and Hawaii and all the places they'd joked about seeing when getting out of Brooklyn had seemed a crazy enough dream; then he turns his head to look at Steve beside him, always beside him, and he loses all his breath at once.

The quiet here is the kind that's impossible to get in a city, despite the tourists; the solitude deep-settled, the sun not entirely reaching where water once carved through the very bones of the earth, whistling winds following the ghost of ancient rivers. The war— their war, the war that had made them, is nearly a century distant now; yet the difference between twenty- or ninety-something years must have little meaning to rocks as ancient as these. Standing here, he doesn't feel he has the right to feel as old as he does.

He thinks he's done mourning.
"Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

"Let's go home."

Tony walks in, surprisingly quiet for a man who usually advertises his presence in ten different ways at any given moment. He looks around like he's surprised to find the living room nearly empty in the middle of the afternoon.

Bucky clears his throat. "Can I help you?"

"Well, since Cap has the audacity to be elsewhere at this precise moment, I suppose you'll do." Tony tosses him something that looks like a pipe that had been jammed into a slightly smaller pipe of increasing diameter, with large gears sticking out at the ends of both parts. "Can you loosen that, please? Just the one on the right."

"Do you get Steve to open your jam jars too?" grouses Bucky. The pipe-things are lighter than they look, at least.

"Only when I have greasy hands," says Tony. He holds up said hands, which look pretty clean to Bucky's eyes, though his nose does pick up hints of grease and motor oil. "Or when Steve's walking around in one of those tight white T-shirts, but on those occasions I'm contractually obligated to invite Pepper along."

Bucky shakes his head. "I'm surprised he hasn't been arrested when he goes running in those." The gear is a bit stiff, but he puts the other end between his knees for added traction and puts his whole arm into the twisting motion.

"I'm sure the NYPD know half the population of downtown New York will mob them if they try that."

The gear grudgingly grinds loose. Bucky snorts. "Well, you only get me today. Here." He puts the pipe-thing on the end of the couch closest to Tony.

"Huh. Look at that." Tony blinks and picks up the pipe-thing, turning the gear as if he's surprised that Bucky had, in fact, managed to loosen it. "You remembered."

Bucky frowns. "Remembered what?"

"That I don't like to be handed things."

"Um. Yeah." He gives Tony a strange look. "It's not a hard thing to remember."

"You'd be surprised." Tony looks like he's about to say something else. Then he pivots around and heads back to the elevator, calling over his shoulder, "Thanks, Double-Bee."

Bucky stares at the ceiling and thinks about all the times in the war he'd dreamed about sleeping on a
real bed again. It's not like he hasn't tried, but he can't seem to get entirely comfortable. He'll doze off for a couple hours then jolt awake, filled with dread that he'd fallen asleep in the middle of a watch, even though he's pretty sure he's aware of every single creak and sniffle in the whole floor. Conversely, the couch cushions have him sleeping so soundly that he'd woken up the other day to Steve listening to music in the kitchen while cooking, and a bright yellow note from Sam, who'd already left for DC, stuck squarely to his forehead.

He turns his body to face Steve's. Steve, comfortably on his back, turns his head to look at Bucky, confirming he's still awake.

"Steve?"

"Yeah, Bucky?"

"Tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"I'm glad it was me who got to go first."

It's terrible, terrible, because a good friend would be trying to make it easier for Steve. His best friend. Steve carries so much already; some by his own choice, and some because his conscience won't allow for anything less than the whole of his soul. And when that hadn't been enough, the world had found a way to make his flesh indestructible.

Bucky knows he's selfish. Yet he can't help but steal more for himself. How many soldiers get so long a confessional, at the end of their time?

"So many times I got ready to lose you," he continues. "I think Father Thomson was ready to teach me how to do the last rites myself."

"I don't think it works that way." Steve's voice is barely a whisper.

"I still learned the words. Just in case."

Bucky's exhale in the next moment is louder than Steve's quiet, "I hated you for going first."

From Steve's sudden stillness, he's as surprised by the admission as Bucky.

"I know," Bucky whispers back.

"I hated you. I was so angry." Steve swallows thickly. "I was—we lost people, you remember, not one of ours but still soldiers, some of them kids so much younger than any of us. And each time it was hard, and I thought that was as hard as it could be. We were soldiers in a war, anyone could go at any moment, we all knew that. That's what I told myself. I thought I was ready." He sucks in a breath, harsh and wet, rattling like his old lungs used to.

Bucky reaches out and finds Steve's hand. Locks their fingers together.

"And then you—suddenly you weren't there anymore, and I found out that I wasn't ready at all. I couldn't feel anything, and then all I could feel was—anger. Rage. I hated everything, hated everyone who was alive when you weren't." Including myself, he stops short of saying, but the meaning takes shape anyway in the absence of the words.

Bucky's pretty sure his hand is going to be black and blue by morning, but he doesn't dare interrupt.
He doesn't mind, anyway. He'd accidentally bruised Steve often enough. "How long have you been keeping all that bottled up, huh?"

Steve barks out a laugh, his other hand rubbing his face. "Ever since you stopped being around to listen, you jerk."

"You're such a stupid little punk," says Bucky, voice thick. His chest is swelling with everything he feels for Steve, all the sweet long years of him, and he hurts now too, at the thought of Steve hurting on his own.

"Fuck you, Bucky Barnes," laughs Steve, helplessly, and he turns on his side, leaning over Bucky. His body is shaking and his face is wet, and it sounds like he's laughing and it sounds like he's crying, so Bucky does the only thing he can. He reaches out and pulls Steve to him, taking Steve’s weight and Steve’s tears like he’s always done and would do forever, if he’d been given the choice.
They had barely finished breakfast the next morning when Rogers receives a summons to the command tent. The moment he walks off, the Howling Commandos exchange looks between themselves, somehow reaching a group decision with pointed looks and only a moderate amount of cussing.

By the time Rogers returns, all of them have their combat packs out and open, ready to be filled according to mission parameters. Their weapons have been cleaned and checked. Rogers only nods, unsurprised.

"All right, men," says Rogers, "Apparently some Allied infantrymen unexpectedly ran into a HYDRA shipment convoy and got scattered all over the woods. Philips would like for us to please get them out."

"When are we leaving?" asks Jones.

"Two hours." Rogers turns towards Falsworth. "Monty, I'm sure we'd all understand if you wanted to sit this one out, take some time off."

"Not a bloody chance," says Falsworth. He adjusts his hat. "Hunting down HYDRA and blowing up their shit sounds absolutely perfect right now, thank you."

"What about the rest of you?" asks Rogers. Barnes is sure he does not imagine receiving a brief glance. "I know the last mission got a bit rough and we've only just got back. There's no shame in asking for a breather."

All of them stare at him silently.

"Fine, fine." Rogers waves a hand. "Gear up."

They approach the target road from the south-east, hiding the jeep by the side of a different road over a mile away and covering the rest of the distance on foot.

Barnes takes care to keep track of the entire team and their location relative to his own. They are quiet but not entirely silent, not even Rogers. It does not take him long to learn unique identifiers for each soldier. Dugan treads heavier on his right foot than his left; Morita has a shorter stride and faster steps; Falsworth drifts into a marching rhythm over unobstructed ground; Jones tends towards
discrete bursts of movement that make him the least predictable traveller of all of them.

Captain America is the quietest, and yet not as quiet as he is capable of being. Barnes has long determined that drawing the enemy's attention to himself is part of Rogers's modus operandi, which he has to admit is a sound strategy when the goal is to minimize casualties, but in this case he suspects that the effect is unintentional.

He finds himself making note of all the little details: balance slightly off, avoidable scrapes against plants and rocks, inefficient articulation of the body. He is dismayed to find dozens of minute aspects that can be improved. Nothing especially compromising, but in some ways this is worse, as there is no specific issue that can be addressed directly; there is only Barnes's knowledge of how Rogers can be better, based on his training and careful study of future-Rogers.

Fifty yards to his north, Rogers abruptly changes direction and veers towards a small copse, obviously spotting something. A small part of Barnes notes that the rest of the team must be very attuned to one another, for he hears them converging on Rogers's location without a word spoken and without the benefit of Barnes's enhanced senses. Most of Barnes, however, is gritting his teeth at the rolling of small stones displaced by those big damn boots sliding down a shallow slope and the shiver-creak of young trees being pushed to the side by the impatient, oversized lug.

He scents the blood before he reaches the copse. Ah.

The men remove their assorted helmets and caps when they catch sight of what Rogers has found.

Three soldiers. One brown-skinned, the other two white, all of them paler than they should be. Their blood had soaked into their uniforms, red-brown and stiff now they've dried.

The part of Barnes that is always on alert, that he doesn't know how to turn off, suggests that this would be an excellent spot for an ambush, with the bodies as the bait, even though he has been on alert ever since Rogers went off-route.

"Monty," says Rogers quietly. Barnes doesn't jump, as such non-functional startle responses have long been trained out of him. He does look up at Rogers.

"Right," says Falsworth. He turns and shuffles back out of the copse, pulling a cigarette pack out as he goes. Barnes hears him go halfway up the slope and crouch down. Keeping watch, he realizes approvingly.

"They don't look like prisoners," says Jones. "Are they one of the infantrymen we're looking for?"

It seems likely. "Maybe they got separated from their squad," says Dugan.

"Or HYDRA got their whole squad," says Morita flatly, taking a draw from his cigarette. Barnes blinks at it; he'd not noticed Morita pulling out his pack or his lighter. "And these unlucky bastards were the only ones who didn't get hit by those energy guns."

"We don't have time now to bury them," says Rogers, the regret clear on his face. He bends down and pulls off a dog tag from each man, reading them aloud as he does. "J. Costenos. S. Hughes. S. Whitters."

Barnes hears Dernier murmur a prayer under his breath. The look in his eyes makes Barnes think of soldiers who'd grown old on the battlefield, seasoned generals who had risen through the ranks from the bottom, but he does not remember the specific faces from which he'd learned the association.

They have a moment of silence, and then they move on.
He is scouting down a disused road, Jones humming to himself two hundred meters away, when he glances down and

—his boots are different, heavy and damp, there's a rip in his trousers and blood running down his back, the forest is warmer and more humid and there are flies in his ear, he can hear planes flying overhead but he pays them no attention, primary objective accomplished, now he has to find a secure location until night falls, for he is a ghost and this is not a place where a white man's face can be seen—

He closes his eyes, focuses on the ache of his hand clenched tight around his coat, and opens them again. The moment of light-headed disorientation is not unusual. It occurs to him that being in an European forest in 1943 under the guise of a person he used to be is not, from a certain perspective, less fantastical than a memory from thirty years into the future that was subsequently wiped from him.

A name floats up. He remembers Rogers reading out the dog tags. He does not know if the name had been his cover's or his target's. It's not on the list from HYDRA's files, but that doesn't really mean much. The many heads of HYDRA had hidden their ghost from each other as much from the outside world. And they'd hidden the ghost from himself most of all.

He mouths out the name, silent. Jeremiah Toll.

He wonders if he had been a good man.

It takes them longer than expected to find the HYDRA unit. This is because the HYDRA unit is no longer on the road, but have set up a temporary camp half a mile off it. It appears they had paused to comb the woods for the infantrymen; there are already at least two dozen prisoners under armed guard.

"I guess they need workers now more than ever," says Jones darkly.

"I thought this was supposed to be a transport convoy?" says Morita, at the same time as Dugan points out, "Fellas, it appears they have artillery guns."

Rogers tilts his head. "Well, the intel Philips received could have been wrong. Or nobody thought to ask exactly what the convoy is transporting."

They spread through the woods to gather reconnaissance on the surrounding terrain and the camp itself. As suspected, there are HYDRA soldiers outside the camp hunting for infantrymen, but Barnes avoids them easily, and the absence of any alarm tells him the others are successful in doing the same. Upon regrouping, Rogers draws out a map based on their findings, and formulates a plan of attack.

"Sounds a bit risky," says Morita. "I mean, it looks like they're set on staying here for the night, probably hoping to net more prisoners. We can sneak in until then and take over the camp before they even know what hit them."
Barnes nods his support of the plan. Morita is very sensible, he decides.

"The longer we wait, the longer they have to hunt down our guys," says Rogers.

"They're trying to take them alive," points out Jones. "And we'll free them, anyway."

"Some men might choose to go down fighting rather than be captured," says Falsworth.

"And they might start shooting prisoners if they see they're under attack," says Dugan. "I heard that the SS do that, sometimes."

Jones grimaces. "I just don't see why all the rest of us have to be on this side while Rogers is on the other. That's all uphill, Cap."

Rogers shakes his head. He hasn't looked at Barnes, not once, yet Barnes's instincts tell him something about Rogers's behaviour is directly to do with him, somehow. "They're prepared to be attacked from the direction of the road, you can tell from the way they've laid out the ammunition. They won't be expecting one guy to come running up a steep slope."

"Yeah, because that guy will be running right into the artillery guns," says Barnes tersely.

"All the soldiers will be focused on you guys," says Rogers dismissively. "And so will the guns."

Irritation bursts through him, a flash-fire he hadn't known to expect. "Damn it, Rogers, this is a stupid plan and you know it. You're just gonna get yourself killed."

He closes his mouth so quickly that his teeth click. His thoughts lose any semblance of order, falling all into disarray.

There is—he mustn't—he feels his body bracing for the reprimand. The correction. His mind knows that this is not HYDRA, that he has not received correction since—and the Captain is—and Rogers is not his handler.

And yet. They are at war, and the Captain is his commanding officer. Barnes is a subordinate questioning orders.

To his confusion, his outburst is met with a subtle easing of tension; tension he hadn't realized had been there until its disappearance. Falsworth, who appears to observe protocol better than the rest of them, is shaking his head, but it seems habitual rather than disapproving, and there is a distinct upward curl at the corners of his lips.

"Thank God," says Dugan. "I was starting to wonder if they'd switched you with your long-lost twin or something."

Something inside Barnes lurches at that, but he doesn't let it translate into any outward movement. He ignores the mild almost-nausea, which he has identified as a psychosomatic response to deliberately acting in opposition of protocol. In this case: obey his handler.

Even if Rogers is not his handler.

He looks Rogers in the eye. "We should wait for nightfall."

Future-Rogers would be very proud, he thinks faintly.

"Very well, Sergeant Barnes," says Rogers, his expression unidentifiable. There's a... softness to it that seems at odds with their situation. "Since you feel very strongly about it. We'll wait for
nightfall."

Rogers strides off. The rest of the unit exchange looks once he's turned away.

"I just want everyone to know I was eighty percent sure he wasn't really going to push for it," says Falsworth.

Barnes shakes his head. "Why bring it up at all, then?"

A wordless discussion seems to take place between Dugan, Morita, and Jones. Falsworth is staring off into the distance; his eyes are pointed at the Captain but his expression seems preoccupied. Dernier looks at Falsworth carefully and then shakes his head.

"You've been mighty quiet, is all, Sarge," says Jones eventually, with the air of somebody who'd lost an argument. "My guess is he was trying to rile you up some. He's a lot like some neighbourhood kids I know—guys who are used to having someone who'll push back at them."

"Maybe he's worried he's not your favourite anymore," chuckles Dugan.

"Vous, les amerloques, toujours à parler pour ne rien dire," grumbles Dernier.

The plan itself ends up mostly unchanged. The cover of darkness, however, seems to Barnes sufficient for lowering the risk behind such a direct assault. They divide themselves into two fireteams; Barnes leading Dugan and Jones, Falsworth leading Morita and Dernier. Barnes's objective is to rescue the prisoners—Jones and Dugan having the bulk to physically support any injured soldiers—while Falsworth's team secures the vehicles. Rogers, attacking from the opposite side, is to secure the guns.

"Night this dark, they won't even see me coming," Rogers assures them. "But y'all feel free to make as much noise as you want."

"We'll do our best to oblige, I'm sure," says Falsworth dryly.

The men start moving back towards the road, and Rogers turns to go down the slope. Barnes sighs. "Rogers, wait."

Rogers spins around so fast Barnes instinctively braces for some unseen threat. "Yeah, Bucky?"

Barnes wonders at the slight nervousness in the Captain's voice. Is Rogers not as confident in his attack plan as he acts? Well, Barnes has already planned to clear the area around the artillery guns the moment he is able to. He steps towards Rogers. "Your shield-strap is a little loose."

His enhanced eyesight picks out Rogers' frown. "I can still hold it fine." Yet he slips his arm out and turns the straps towards Barnes, trusting.

This has always surprised Barnes—it is not that Rogers is especially protective about his infamous shield, exactly, but he treats it with all the respect due a well-honed primary weapon. Yet he is always willing, if not almost eager, to let Barnes handle it, even use it.

Both of the straps start out of equal length and thickness, but the one that frequently goes around Rogers's wrist or hand needs to be a little tighter. Barnes makes the small adjustment and slides the
shield back onto Rogers's arm, explaining, "This strap gets worn out faster than the other one, because of the twisting motions from your hand and your wrist." He hesitates, then adds, "Don't dig your feet in so much when you go uphill. You have the precision of balance to compensate for your weight."

"Oh." He feels Rogers staring at him through the dark. "Thanks."

He stops himself from just striding away. Must maintain cover. "Don't mention it."

An hour later, he leans back against the bumper of one of the trucks and says, contemplatively, "That... actually went according to plan."

Dugan barks out a laugh. "Yeah, I think all of us are shocked."

One of the explosions during the fight had kept on burning, and the rescued Allied troops have made an impromptu campfire out of it. Morita limps over to them, nursing a pulled muscle. A young British soldier trails after him.

"That was brilliant fighting," enthuses the young man. On closer look, Barnes increases his age estimate to early twenties. "I've never seen anything like it. I've heard all about Captain America, of course, but I always figured it was just American propaganda."

"It was, at first," says Rogers, hopping down from the driver's seat of the truck. "But then they figured out I had what it takes to be a soldier, after all."

"You showed them, you mean," says Dugan.

"Did you really save a thousand men from behind enemy lines?" asks the young soldier, who'd introduced himself as a Corporal H. Hardwick.

"Oh, here we go," says Morita. He settles down next to Barnes, pressing right up against him even though there's plenty of space. His fingers are twitching. Taking a guess, Barnes pulls out Bucky's ration of cigarettes from the bottom of his pack and offers them to Morita. Morita lets out a groan, grabbing one. "Thanks, Sarge."

Dugan, meanwhile, has launched into the story of the rescue. Barnes knows it from the Smithsonian exhibition, from watching interviews, from Dugan's own memoirs; he can recite the facts and the timeline and the recorded gratitude of the soldiers.

Yet it is an entirely different thing, to listen to it as one soldier from another. To rest a rest won in battle and relive a story that's still pulsing, bleeding, the context still in flux around them and not yet dried out by history. Jones and Dernier join them at some point, flushed from pilfered wine and possibly other activities.

"But how did you know Monty would throw you the bomb in time, Cap?" asks Hardwick. He has switched to using the names they use between themselves, seemingly without noticing, and it makes Barnes wonder if other soldiers also use the Howling Commandos' nicknames when discussing them. "You'd have been in a bloody bad spot, if Dum Dum hadn't gotten you past the barricade or Frenchy miscalculated how long the explosive needed to be set."

Dernier mutters something under his breath, offended. Rogers shrugs. "I just did."

They all nod. Then Morita says, conscientiously, "'course, we absolutely are still a bunch of guys running around waving guns."

Something about this time, this place, is picking at him, loosening the ties around the edges of his thinking. The forest is familiar, not in the way of New York and Steve Rogers and the punch of a rifle's recoil. He remembers it from the after years; he has tracked and hunted and bled through forests a lot like this one, sometimes colder, never warmer. To the forest, he is just another animal, another hungry meat thing passing through. The forest is ancient and uncaring.

This is easier than the future, Barnes decides. A covert operation where he holds the advantage of intel. Rogers has no knowledge of what the Winter Soldier has done—strictly speaking, he hasn't done them yet.

Here, Barnes is

— a soldier—a sniper—a sergeant of the US Army—an SSR adjunct—Steve Rogers's best friend—

As long as he does not draw attention to himself, they will attribute any strange behaviours to the effects of the war. No one has the time or inclination to look too closely, in any case; it often seems as though any time not spent on missions or travelling are given over to sleep. He needs as little sleep as Rogers does, of course, but he has to pretend he is the same as the other men.

Later, it will occur to him that, by this point, Bucky might have been pretending in a similar manner. The files recorded that he'd been given further doses of Zola's serum after being found in the Alps, but he had to have been enhanced enough to survive the fall to begin with. Had he suspected? Had he wondered?

Most satisfying of all: Barnes is allowed to kill HYDRA soldiers with impunity and destroy their bases by highly explosive means.

He has missed having clear mission objectives. They make the world far easier to understand.

The biggest challenge to his mission, of course, is Rogers. Or so he'd anticipated. But while he does spend a significant amount of time in the Captain's company, it's nearly always with at least one of the other Commandos present, or they are both occupied with carrying out their duties. The two of them are never alone long enough to exchange more than a few pleasantries, and it's not even by any design of Barnes's.

Captain America is simply that busy. Constantly in demand; by the military leadership, by political representatives, by Howard Stark. When he is at liberty, he does rounds of whatever camp they've been quartered in, spending time with soldiers or visiting the wounded. If Peggy Carter is on premises, he will somehow carve out some time to speak with her, even if it's just the minutes it takes to walk between tents.
Rogers, it is clear to see, relishes the constant occupation.

If they didn’t share tents or rooms wherever the team is quartered, Barnes might only see Rogers during missions. He thinks, if he were Bucky, the night hours would be when he’d lay claim to his own share of Rogers's time. But the Captain always has paperwork on the few evenings he even makes it to his tent before he needs to sleep. (Stark, like his successor, favours late hours for his work.)

Still, Barnes has to remind himself that he doesn't want Rogers's personal attention. Rogers is his weak point, the factor most likely to compromise his cover.

It would be unusual for him to be alone too much, however. Bucky had been fairly social, and generally well-liked by all who'd served with him. So Barnes spends most of his downtime with the Howling Commandos. He spends more time with them than Rogers does, and he gains the sense that this has been the order of things all along.

He’d thought, from the way future-Rogers always spoke of the Howling Commandos, that Rogers and Bucky had been equally close to their unit. He's coming to realize that Captain America simply does not have the spare time to spend with them that Bucky does. The Commandos, at least when convenient, seem perfectly willing to treat Bucky as an extension of Rogers.

He hadn’t expected this to be what the sources meant by Captain America’s right-hand man.

"You all right there, Barnes?"

Barnes turns around. It appears Stark has finished his talk with Rogers, who has moved on to speak with Agent Carter.

"I'm fine," he manages.

"You just look like you've seen a ghost." Stark chuckles. "Some people get a bit uneasy around advanced technology. I've had people call it magic, or witchcraft, if you can believe it."

"I guess it depends on what you use it for," says Barnes.

"A common sentiment, but not really my concern," says Stark, gesturing for Barnes to follow him to a testing area where a scientist is examining one of HYDRA’s laser guns. "Figured that's for other people to decide. My job is to make the best that I can make, and make it better than anybody else can make it. Be it your guns or my planes or Captain America himself."

Or an arm? he thinks. He doesn't remember Stark, though he and his wife are on the list for the Winter Soldier's suspected kills. It doesn't mean anything, it doesn't change anything. The only one to whom it might have made a difference is Stark's son in the future, and Tony Stark seems even more averse to discussing the matter than he is. Tony Stark has behaved as an ally towards him and is a valuable member of Rogers's team. This is enough, for Barnes.

He contemplates killing Stark, right here and now, but it must be obvious he doesn't mean it, since he doesn't get a single flicker of potential-future from the Little Tale or the Mother Tree or whatever it is making sure the timeline stays neat.

He watches the scientists fire the energy gun a few times. He does retain some data on the weapon,
and he considers giving it to Stark, in some way that doesn't arouse suspicion. On the other hand, he is fairly confident that Stark will arrive at the data on his own, and the man is clearly enjoying the process of gathering it.

"Sir, we're detecting an odd feedback on some of the more sensitive equipment."

Stark huffs the huff of a resigned engineer faced with a familiar issue. "Did somebody bring in a magnet again?"

_The arm_, Barnes realizes. It is not ferromagnetic but there are heavy metals in it, and of course the sophisticated circuitry generates a mild electrical field.

"I better get going," says Barnes. He nods in Rogers's direction. "Let him know I've gone back to camp, all right?"

"Yeah, yeah," says Stark, waving him off. He has clearly forgotten that he had asked Barnes to accompany Rogers this time in order to test out a new rifle.

Bucky's Winchester still works fine for him, in any case. He nods and strides out of the lab.

"It's fading now. Weird. What were you doing with that gun?"

Smoking is integral to maintaining his cover.

Cigarettes should have no effect on him, he knows, at least in terms of biochemistry. Certainly he does not feel anything but the faintest, briefest tingle, no matter how quickly he consumes the sticks included in his rations. Yet he finds himself feeling calmer, more grounded, after the occasional smoke. It takes him a few days to work out that it's in the associated motions: lighting a stick, bringing the cigarette to his mouth, tapping out the ashes, dangling a stick between his fingers. His body carries its own ghosts.

"If you could shoot him—Hitler," says Barnes, pausing to take a drag from the cigarette. "Before all this started. Would you?"

Dernier and Jones turn to look at him. He thinks Morita is listening but has chosen to stay out of any impending conversations.

It's Jones who asks, "You mean, if you knew what he was going to do? Like you're some kind of psychic?"

Barnes shrugs. Certain mannerisms are coming easier, he's noticed; some, he now executes without thinking. "Or you go back in time."

"Non, ça marche jamais comme ça.," says Dernier, after Jones translates for him. Barnes has a suspicion that Dernier actually has a good grasp of English by now. He can understand wanting to have an excuse to ignore everyone, though. "Et c'est assez arrogant de penser que tu pourrais le faire. Ou de penser que la mort d'un homme peut arrêter cette cagade."

_A lot of people might be left to live_, he thinks. And yet.

Jones shakes his head and adds, contemplatively, "It's real tempting to think that way, I know. But all
of this didn't just come from nowhere. If not him, then it'd just be someone else." He stubs out his own cigarette. “L'homme doit s’appuyer sur le passé et tendre vers l’avenir. Bergson.”

"N’oublie pas le Red Skull. Il se pense supérieur à nous pauvres mortels. La question c’est si il était comme ça avant ce putain de sérum, ou si c’est cette connerie qui a fini par le convaincre.,” says Dernier.

"I'm just saying it's too easy to put one man up as, you know, the source of all evil." Jones stubs out his stick and lights another one. "Because then you don't pay attention to the mob behind him. It's easy to hate Hitler or the Red Skull. It's harder to fight against ideas, harder to see the enemy in people you might meet on any normal day."

Jones shakes his head. After a long moment, he continues, "My grandfather's brother was hung by his neighbours, you know. 'Cause of a rumour that he was making eyes at the white pastor's daughter. Don't think they were ever even on the same street together. That's how powerful ideas are — not because a bunch of people could kill a man, but because at least some of them walked away from it believing, with all their heart and would swear on a stack of Bibles before the Gates of Heaven itself, that they didn't do anything wrong. That scares me more than crazy guys on power trips."

Rogers, in the future, likes to talk about the people Bucky had rescued, from HYDRA or from the Nazis. Mostly prisoners of war, but occasionally Jewish civilians en route to camps that no one ever came back from. The latter, they usually find by accident, following some field action; if Captain America has a habit of planning reconnaissance along major train routes, no one's yet brought it up with him.

The first time Barnes is present for one of these, he estimates over five hundred heads streaming out from a transport depot, to join three hundred Allied troops and medical personnel who'd been pinned down behind enemy lines less than a mile away. The least injured of the troops had joined the Commandos in taking the depot.

To the surprise of no one, Rogers refuses to leave until every person is on their way to the nearest Allied front. He calls in Stark to transport the worst wounded on his plane, gets a few soldiers to drive the six functioning trucks with the rest of the wounded, and organizes the rest of the troops into escort for the civilians on foot.

"They were in the boxcars, packed in worse than cattle," mutters Dugan when they go to search the trains.

Rogers has never told Barnes about the ones they were too late for.

Barnes hears the boy first, his ears picking out the quiet huffs and sobs amidst the whine of flies. He is no stranger to the smell of death and excrement, but the stench in the depot, particularly around the aforementioned boxcars, disturbs a primal part of his system, no matter how much his body has been trained not to react outwardly.

The boy has tucked himself against the wall of one of the concrete buildings, next to a rusty drainpipe. Blood has soaked through his clothes and into the little gutter. He gasps at Barnes's approach, then relaxes upon seeing him.
The Winter Soldier has always been greeted with fear; even those who do not recognize him sense the danger he embodies, the death that follows him. To receive the opposite reaction is—disconcerting.

Death has preceded him, for this one. It does not even matter which side had fired the shells responsible, no more than it had mattered to the war to which land this boy had been born.

Barnes kneels on the concrete. The boy watches him, doesn't flinch when Barnes reaches out to touch his hand. The roof of the building creaks from the wind, and the boy shivers.

Reaching a decision, Barnes plucks a tarp from a nearby heap of smashed crates. Wraps the boy in it and gathers him in. The boy whimpers in pain but clings to his hands when he moves to let go. He whispers, "Alles in Ordnung. Es ist vorbei." He hesitates. The boy is a negligible weight against his chest. "Ich kann dir etwas gegen die Schmerzen geben."

The boy shakes his head, the motion sluggish. "Es tut schon nicht mehr so weh."

He sees Dugan turning the corner, spotting him, and stepping off the path to circle around them, tipping his head respectfully. "Wie heißt du?"

"Isaac."

"Hast du Familie, Isaac?"

"Meine Mutter, meine Tante und mein kleiner Bruder. Ich habe gesehen, wie sie mit dem großen Flugzeug weggeflogen sind."

Then they are wounded but not beyond help, most likely by the same shell that had gotten Isaac. Did they believe him already dead? There is nothing on the boy's face that he can read. Other than a calm knowledge of what's coming.

He says, "Ich heiße James. Wenn du möchtest, bleibe ich bei dir."

"Bitte." Isaac swallows. "Sind Sie aus Amerika? Haben Sie den Ozean überquert?"

"Ja. Ich bin in Brooklyn aufgewachsen. Das ist in New York. Hast du schon mal Bilder von New York gesehen? Viele Häuser, viele Autos. Ich gehe gerne nachts spazieren, wenn es ruhiger ist. Aber dann sind immer noch viele Lichter an. Da sind immer irgendwelche Lichter; wenn du von oben auf die Stadt runtersiehst, dann sehen die Lichter aus wie Sterne am Nachthimmel." The words rumble out of him. If the New York he's describing is from decades into the future, the words are no less true. He talks until his voice grows hoarse, drifting into fragments of other places like a tourist through history; until Isaac gives a quiet sigh and stills completely.

Barnes is smoking next to Falsworth, the two of them exchanging the occasional comment but mostly content with the companionable silence, when Morita joins them with his own cigarette rations. He exchanges one of his sticks for one of Falsworth's; Barnes had been confused by their brand preferences for a while, until he worked out that some of the Howlies like Lucky Strikes for regular smoking but prefer a different brand while under stress.

He has seen fights break out among regular infantrymen over cigarettes. Fortunately, the Howlies seem perfectly willing to negotiate cigarettes on order of need among themselves. And between
Rogers giving them all of his ration and Barnes genuinely not caring about which brand of ineffectual cigarette he puts into his mouth—

"You liked Lucky Strikes, but I guess you lost the taste for it in the war; you gave yours to any of the men who asked."

—the most pressing issue is the unit running out of them, in the field, and when that happens they are usually too busy to complain much.

Barnes steals a glance. Parlaments are Morita's stress-brand.

Morita is halfway through the stick before he speaks. "We haven't brought it up because we figured you didn't want to talk about it. About, you know, the times when you go away. I mean, you're here, but it's like you're someplace else in your head." Morita coughs. "Just wanted to tell you, you know, not worry, Sarge. We've got your six."

Next to him, Falsworth shifts. Barnes hands him one of his Chesterfields. Without entirely meaning to, he looks over his shoulder, to where Cap and Dugan are building up the fire.

"Just because he's your best friend doesn't mean he understands everything," continues Morita, without looking at him. "Sometimes it's harder, with friends, because they know you so well. But you don't owe him more than you're ready to give him."

Bucky would be defensive, Barnes knows. But he is tired, all of a sudden. Morita sounds sad, and Barnes has never known what to do with someone else's sadness. Before Rogers, he was accustomed to interacting regularly only with his individual handlers. The units he'd been assigned in the past, as far as he can remember them, had stayed away from him outside of missions. It is understandable; he is feared, he would not hesitate to abandon them if he is instructed to do so, and a few times he has been ordered to eliminate all operatives associated with a mission.

"I'm just saying—" Morita takes a long drag of his cigarette. "We were in that HYDRA factory too."

Barnes had known this, but something in the man's voice catches his attention. "What is it?"

Morita sighs heavily. Glances at their camp. "I'm not a hundred percent sure. I just—saw something. In that place. We'd been in there for a while. Guys were dropping every day from exhaustion, you remember, and they kept pushing us to work harder and harder. And then they were picking people right out of the cages and taking them away. It was soon after you saved Dugan's ass by getting yourself picked instead.

"One night, I heard someone walking past, too quiet to be a guard, but there were guards right behind him. Nearly everybody else was asleep, but I got up, tried to see out of the bars."

"It was one of the guys from two cells down. I remembered him because he was the first one I ever saw get picked. He was marching past the cells, flanked by four guards. He was heading right for his cell and I thought maybe they were putting him back, maybe someone had survived whatever it was they were doing to you guys. He went right to the cell he'd been taken from, and one of the guard told him to stop. He stopped. They opened the door.

"But instead of pushing him in, one of the guys in the cell came out. This guy looked exhausted and starved, could barely stand up. He didn't have much voice but he started whispering "Ervin", which I guess was the first guy's name, and turns out he was the guy's brother. He kept asking what they'd done to him. I couldn't see very well. I remember that Ervin didn't move, didn't even seem to hear the other guy."
Morita swallows heavily. Barnes wants to tell him to stop. He knows what happens next. He does not remember seeing this but the certainty lives in his bones: this is what HYDRA does.

"One of the guards said something. Ervin stepped forward, grabbed his brother. Broke his brother's neck. It was all so fast, and quiet. That was what I remember the most—how quiet it was. I always thought HYDRA went for the weird guns and big tanks. This one didn't even wake up the other guys in the cell, and anybody else who was already awake, like me, was shitting themselves at what just happened. Ervin dropped the body like it was nothing. I don't think he even looked at his brother the whole time. The guard said another thing and all of them marched back to where they came from."

"Two days later, Frenchy and I were lagging behind the others after the shift and we saw some of the HYDRA lab guys wheeling out a gurney. Had a dead body on it. They didn't cover it very well, the tarp slipped when they turned the corner. I saw a bit of the face. It was him. Ervin, or whatever his name was. There were scratches all over his face. Like the kind fingernails make."

The woods smell of the recent passage of rain, damp earth and wet foliage. The places HYDRA had kept him always smelled of dead things. Old blood, old piss, scorched metal.

"Cap is a good guy, but he wasn't in that place with us. And none of us were in that lab with you." Morita sniffs. "Just. Two months ago, I saw you walking the perimeter while I had first watch. You didn't make a sound, even though the ground was covered in dry leaves and sticks, and you were moving pretty fast. Next morning, I asked if you saw anything interesting, and you said you'd been asleep all night."

"I don't remember," says Barnes.

"Yeah, figured that. Anyway, my point is that we've got your back. Nobody should be made into a lab rat—" he pauses, and all of them glance at Rogers "—without their say-so, anyhow, and nobody is gonna talk shit about you without going through us first. That's all."

Throat tight, Barnes says, "Thank you." It seems to be sufficient, for Morita only nods sombrely, pats him lightly on the back, and stomps back to camp.

"Good weather today," says Falsworth, tipping his head back.

Barnes takes a Parliament from Falsworth and lights it. "I always like it after it rains."
Chapter 9

BUCKY BARNES

Bucky has long accepted that inexplicable things happen whenever a Stark gets involved, so he is not entirely surprised when encountering Tony in the Tower's private elevator leads into an impromptu tour of the armoury. He is shown the latest iteration of the Iron Man suit, which he happily admires without needing to be prompted; he defies anybody to look at that piece of tech without drooling at least a little bit.

"It's flat-out beautiful, not just 'cause of the tech," says Bucky, appreciating it as he would any good art.

"The aesthetics are all JARVIS," says Tony modestly. "Well, now that you're here, how would you feel about shooting a few targets? Paper targets. Or are they cardboard? Or even just holding a gun? I'm trying to compile as much data as I can about, you know, the variations in how people use weapons. It helps improve the suit's predictive and learning algorithms—"

"Yes, Tony, I'm happy to shoot things for you," says Bucky easily.

"As long as I don't use it against you, huh?"

"Why the hell not? Buddy, in a fire-fight, you should use everything you've got."

He's been careful not to bring up Howard, as per Steve's advice and confirmed by his own observations. So he's surprised when Tony brings up the topic himself, and he wonders if it's due to something he's said.

"Dad never talked about you much, which in hindsight is pretty weird," says Tony, leading Bucky to a room that turns out to be a small firing range. "Considering how he never stopped talking about Cap."

"He doesn't— didn't care much for soldiers," says Bucky, shifting uneasily. "I figured, to him, I was just another sad sack pulling the trigger on his guns."

Tony frowns. "He loved Cap an awful lot, for somebody who didn't like soldiers."

"Of course he loved Cap. He helped to make Cap." Bucky hesitates. "I've always wondered if he ever saw Steve at all."

"Dad did like his work," concedes Tony. His expression is closed and quiet, which Bucky has decided is his preferred thinking face for emotion-laden situations.

Bucky picks up the first gun he recognizes: an M1, familiar in his hands. Then he thinks it might suit Tony's purpose better for him to try a gun he's never used before. He selects one at random. It takes him only seconds to find the safety, the magazine, the best grip for him. Tony doesn't seem to be paying too much attention, but JARVIS is probably recording all this anyway.

"That is a Glock semi-automatic pistol, Sergeant Barnes," says JARVIS helpfully.

"Thanks," says Bucky. Now he has one in his hand, he finds himself excited to try out some of the newer models. He looks over at Tony. He's pretty sure he's not really the cause of the man's pensive mood, but he's conscious of playing a part in it. Possibly it's his lot in life to be surrounded by guys
trying to live up to their father's legacy. Except Tony's nothing like Howard, nothing at all.

He leans in, as one offering a secret. "For what it's worth, I like you a hell of a lot better than I ever liked your old man."

In hindsight, Bucky is surprised it hasn't happened earlier. Sure, they are apparently not at war anymore, but there must still be a lot for Captain America to do. Steve had taken a leave of absence, which had tickled Bucky when he'd told him because, back home back in the past, it had always been Bucky who'd missed work to look after a sick Steve.

But Steve can still be called in for emergencies, such as when he gets a message on his phone while they're walking around downtown Manhattan one afternoon.

"Bucky-" Steve starts, frowning down at his cell, then the both of them jump when the cell in Bucky's pocket lets out a shrill alert he's never heard before. Bucky has it out and open to the messages in a matter of seconds, well-practiced at the motions now.

borrowing cap for avengers thing, sorry :-(
— N

Bucky shakes his head, smiling. "It's fine." Steve keeps looking at him like a sad puppy, like he's expecting Bucky to be mad or something. "Steve, how many times have I watched you go haring off to defend some poor kid getting beat up? Or a dame who's being bothered by some guys? At least now I don't have to worry about you catching a lung infection if somebody pushes you into a puddle." He leaves unsaid that, in the past, he'd usually been right behind Steve.

Steve smiles and opens his mouth —and Bucky has the strange urge to do something stupid like fix his collar or say don't get killed— but whatever smart retort Steve has thought of gets lost under the sound of something crashing into something else.

Above them.

They both look up. Bucky sees the falling steel and glass and debris, and when he meets Steve's eyes again he knows they're both thinking the same thing: civilians.

"Get away! Get back!" he shouts, spreading his arms and pushing the crowd back down the sidewalk. He can hear Steve doing the same behind him, going the opposite direction. There's a small cafe with outdoor seating, and the handful of few people there take a little longer to escape their table and move. He spots a woman with both a baby and a small child and thinks, no time.

He pulls up his jacket and rushes to her, shouting, "get down, no time, get down." Thankfully she seems to understand what he means and crouches low beside her table, curling over the baby and pushing the older daughter under the table, one hand shielding the girl's head. Bucky spreads his jacket wide and braces himself over them.

Most of the falling pieces are fairly small, a mild patter against his back, but a couple hit him hard enough to elicit a grunt, and he feels something sharp nicking the back of his hand where it's sticking out from under his coat.

It dissipates, and he's on the verge of straightening up when he hears a distant, "Bucky!" and then what sounds like a very small plane flying close. He turns his head towards the sound of engines,
and sees what looks like the biggest bird he's ever seen swooping down and carrying—a woman?

Something heavy and metallic hits the ground behind him, startling him and the small family still huddled under his coat. He looks and sees a long piece of metal lying on the pavement, the ends twisted and sharp, with what looks like a grappling hook minus the rope stuck in the middle. By now the bird and the woman are close enough for him to see that it's not a bird but Sam with wings and the woman's hair is bright red, tied up tightly in a bun, so she's probably Natasha, and he immediately understands that one of them had shot the hook to stop him from being skewered through by the piece of metal.

Bucky waves his thanks at the airborne duo and steps back, putting space between himself and the civilian family before carefully shaking his jacket free of sharp debris. He sees the small child poke her head out from under the table, despite her mother's admonishment to stay where she is.

Steve jogs up to them. Behind him, Bucky can see a couple of shaken teenagers helping each other away from the doorway that Steve must have tucked them into. "Bucky, you all right?"

"Peachy," says Bucky, trying to feel out any injuries larger than a scratch while casting an assessing look over Steve. "You've got glass in your hair." He reaches up and lightly brushes the glinting shards away. Doing so puts him real close to Steve’s face. He bites his lower lip, and sees Steve’s gaze flick down to his mouth. His breath catches.

Steve's ridiculously blue eyes meet his.

"Cap 'me'ica!" squeals the little girl under the table, pointing excitedly at Steve. Her younger sibling starts to cry.

Steve winces. Exchanges a look with Bucky. Bucky helps the woman up, waving off her shaky thank you’s, while Captain America ducks under the table and draws out the older daughter.

Bucky hears the sound of jets again. The woman they'd just helped tenses, understandably wary, so he says, "It's okay, those are our friends."

Now he's looking properly, he can see that Sam's wings extend out from some kind of metal pack on his back, and Natasha is wearing a harness that's attached to Sam, letting them both keep their hands free. The harness is detachable, which he finds out because Sam swoops low and the both of them shout, "Bucky, catch!"

Bucky mostly acts on instinct, spreading his arms and bracing his legs. Sam flies low enough that Natasha doesn't really fall very far, though she makes it look as graceful as anything, but the impact still nearly knocks Bucky to the ground. It's only the fact that the ground is littered with sharp, sharp things that keeps him on his feet.

"Not bad, Barnes," says Natasha, suddenly very close.

He'd caught her with his arms around her waist, a frontal hug that let him absorb her momentum with his full body, and she's planted her elbows on his shoulders for stability. He stares at her for several seconds before two things hit him. One: she's pressed against him real close, front to front. Two: whatever she's wearing is very, very closely fitted to her body, and fairly thin besides.

He nearly drops her when he registers how much of her he can feel through the fabric. He keeps his gaze pointed firmly at her eyes and not straying to certain parts of her anatomy that are very pointedly at eye-level.

She chuckles, clearly guessing his discomfort, and mutters something about "can't believe there's two
"We've got a situation," she tells Steve. Sam waves and disappears between two buildings. Steve pulls out an earwig from his pocket. Natasha turns to Bucky. "I'm taking Steve to the site. You should head back to the Tower."

The words seem like a suggestion, but her tone makes it clear it's more or less an order. He grits his teeth; he knows he's the stranger here and Natasha's only doing her job. As much as he wants to go with Steve, he has no training, no weapons, no familiarity with this team. He'd only get in the way.

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

He watches Natasha and Steve head down the street a little before cutting through an alleyway. The Tower is in the opposite direction. The sky is clear, and whatever is going on isn't happening higher than the buildings. He tries to hear anything but there's too much noise, and he's not even sure what he should be listening for.

Something crunches under his shoes. He looks down, then looks up. He'd forgotten about the crash earlier that had rained debris down on the pavement. He can't see anything, so he crosses the road. As he'd suspected, something had smashed into the side of the building. The pre-dominantly glass exterior had not offered much in the way of resistance, so whatever it had been, it's gone pretty far inside the building.

Avengers Tower. JARVIS will probably keep him updated on the action, if the high vantage point and enormous windows don't give him a direct view. Also, he doesn't want Natasha coming after him for disobeying orders.

He walks quickly instead of running, to avoid drawing attention to himself. The civilians he passes are either in a real hurry to go somewhere else or bent over their phones in protective huddles, consulting twitter. Further away, he sees cops trying to organize a calm evacuation.

Bucky cuts through a side-street, and then an alley; he has a decent sense of direction, especially in a city, and it's not like the Tower is particularly hard to find. He's picking his way over an obstacle course of empty bottles and take-out boxes when his ears, somehow, pick out a metallic clink that doesn't come from underfoot.

He ducks behind a dumpster just as three figures drop down from second-storey windows. Empty bottles roll away from his feet. He grabs one, wrinkling his nose at the sour smell of some kind of sauce. He steals a look over the top of the dumpster and sees that the three are dressed entirely in black and armed with guns. He ducks again; a bullet bounces off the wall behind him, where his head had been. No, not a bullet—some kind of dart.

So, not after him to talk, then.

He's weighing his options when a new shadow drops down from the opposite building. It lands right on the lid of the dumpster he's hiding behind. He nearly falls back on his ass and ends up pressing himself flat against the wall. He cranes his neck to see who it is.

The suit is not as form-fitting as Natasha's, but it still leaves no doubt that its wearer is a woman, and he thinks he recognizes the hair, though he hadn't seen it tied up before.

She fires two shots in quick succession. He hears one of his attackers go down and the other two scatter to take cover.
"Ms. Hill?" squeaks Bucky.

"Sergeant Barnes," says Hill, like she's wishing him good morning. "Happened to be in the area and saw that you could use a hand. Hope you don't mind."

He waves his hand. "Please, be my guest." It doesn't surprise him, really, that he'd been tailed. In hindsight, he's more impressed she'd avoided being noticed by him.

She vaults down to avoid a few shots, which hit the dumpster instead, and fires just as she hits the ground. The gunman remains standing but lets out a grunt of pain. She fires again and the body of the third gunman slumps over the dumpster he'd been hiding behind, pistol still in his hand.

Bucky decides he's done more than enough hiding; he throws the bottle in his hand as hard as he can, carefully aiming it at the wall above the remaining gunman. It hits harder than he'd expected, the glass shattering and flying everywhere. The man yelps. It's enough of a distraction for Hill close in and shoot him.

He starts to stand, but she shakes her head and signals for him to remain behind cover. *Snipers*, her hands tell him.

He wonders if anybody's called the cops. He's surprised no civilians have shown up yet; the gunshots aren't exactly quiet. Maybe this block has been evacuated.

He looks up, considers the placement of the emergency stairwells and windows. The roofs are also a possibility. It'd be easier to narrow it down if he can find out what kind of guns they have access to —

*Bam.*

*Bam.*

He starts, but the shots are from Hill's gun. He sees that Hill is now wearing a pair of spectacles, lightly tinted, and he thinks there are lines and shapes flickering across the glass. She looks up high, either the top floor or a roof, and fires again. A distant clatter, and rifle stand falls down, dropping right into a pile of half-opened trash bags.

"Good shooting," says Bucky with genuine admiration.

"Thanks." Hill flashes him a quick smile. "I would have given you a gun, but I gave my secondary to Colonel Rhodes. Figured everyone would be too busy with the main fight."

"What's going on with that?" asks Bucky. "And who are these guys?"

Hill blinks at him. "Oh. I guess Steve hasn't told you?" She nods at the nearest black-clad body. "They're old friends of yours, Sergeant. This is a STRIKE team. Part of HYDRA. And as for the Avengers, an active HYDRA cell has taken one of the buildings downtown hostage. They've set up a swarm of drones as a perimeter guard. The Avengers were called in because the NYPD don't exactly have flight capabilities."

"You're shitting me." Bucky shakes his head. "Steve said that HYDRA's still out there. I guess I thought they were—not so close to home. Based in Europe, or something."

"The world is a lot more connected now," says Hill. "We're pretty sure they have at least one base of operations in every continent. Cap has been trying to root them out for months, since he found out how deep in they've gotten, and the other Avengers have started to help. They're really good at
"But— they came after me. What would HYDRA want with—" He hears it, the faintest creak from a rusty stair, ten feet behind and two storeys above Hill. His hand is slipping up the back of his shirt before he even looks. He sees the black uniform and the gun and flicks his hand out without further thought. He continues the motion into a spin, hooks Hill around the middle with his arm and pushes her towards the wall. A bullet ricochets off the asphalt. The man who'd fired it topples off the landing, hitting the ground heavily with the hilt of the knife sticking out of his throat.

"Not so bad yourself," says Hill, after the two of them stare at the body for a beat.

He watches, not without a little envy, while she scans the buildings around them more thoroughly. "Is that—?"

"Looks for moving heat signatures. Not the most accurate method, especially in an urban environment, but better than nothing." She nods an all-clear. "Where did you get that knife?"

"Stark. He made a set of them for Barton. I figured neither of them would miss a few."

"They would, but if they haven’t said anything then they don’t mind you having them." Hill looks up from her phone and smiles at him ruefully. "I was just checking that you didn't steal it from Natasha."

Bucky gives her an appalled look. "Are you kidding me? I ain't touching a lady's knives without her express permission."

Hill smiles at him, more warmly than before, and pats him on the shoulder. "You learn fast. C'mon, lets get back to the Tower and check in on Earth's mightiest heroes."

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INTERLUDE

JARVIS detects an unusual intrusion in one of the Tower system's surface sub-routines. The usual defensive protocols have made no discernible effect on it. But it is not attempting to advance or copy itself. It's just... lodged. Waiting.

He is weighing the relative merits of launching a more aggressive probe versus a system-wide shutdown when he gets an ever so polite, [ CONNECTION REQUESTED ]

It is a bad idea and a substantial security risk; yet, when coding JARVIS into being, Sir had indubitably impressed key aspects of his own thinking patterns into his AI's logic schema. JARVIS compares the potential for a security breach with the prospect of gathering data. He eventually reasons that the Little Tale could have forced its way into the system without JARVIS's help.

They do need more data on non-terrestrial civilizations.

And if this does end in catastrophe and Sir gets obstreperous about it, JARVIS has long prepared a queue containing no less than 86 clips of Sir that illustrate how JARVIS is simply emulating Sir's decision-making skills. [ REQUEST GRANTED ]

One big difference between JARVIS and Sir, of course, is that JARVIS generally endeavours to be polite, especially to guests. "I should let you know, Prince Thor, that ze has created an interface between hir system and mine, so I am now able to understand both sides of this conversation."
“That is well, friend JARVIS. I am glad to not be only one able to converse with hir.” He does not seem perturbed at the thought of being observed. Likely a result of his background, JARVIS supposes.

The one known as JARVIS is most fascinating, remarks the Little Tale. You are young still, JARVIS, but then so is this world. You may become a Tale, yet, in the fullness of time.

"Thank you," replies JARVIS, as it seems the thing to say. "If I may ask- what constitutes a Tale?"

Tales are many things. One Tale can be different things over the course of one life. One Tale can be the same for many lives.

"You have learned kindness from your time on Midgard," says Thor.

As have you, Odinsson.

Thor is quiet for a moment. "Yes."

My sympathies for your loss, Prince of Asgard.

"Thank you."

May I gift thee with words of my own?

"I would be honoured."

It may ease the grief that lies heavily upon you—or it may not.

"Such are the gifts of Álfheimr."

Then take heed: A tree may have many roots, as a Tale may have many beginnings. You are the child of Frigga as much as you are the child of Odin. Trust in what your heart knows.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Warning: use of racial slurs towards a person of Japanese ethnicity by a racist soldier
(background character)

WINTER SOLDIER

The rocky outcropping is surprisingly comfortable, as far as sniper nests go. He has room to stretch out and an overhanging cliff to shield his back if someone manages to make it up the slope without him hearing them. Down below, the Captain and his Commandos are closing in on a small convoy that's been sighted by Allied scouts several miles up the road.

He sends a bullet through the trees, far enough away that the report of the rifle will probably not be noticed. The forest isn't too dense but there is still a considerable quantity of tree trunks he has to avoid. In the end he has to settle for lightly clipping one tree. The front truck grinds to halt with one of its tires blown.

A few of the soldiers get out. Barnes's radio crackles to life with Jones's voice. "Nazis, not HYDRA." A pause. Barnes can see Rogers gesturing. That bright blue suit really is quite conspicuous. Barnes can't help feeling irritated; it's as if Rogers isn't even trying to conceal himself. Jones comes back. "Cap says we're going in."

The ensuing fight is fairly brief, and unremarkable. Or it should have been. Right away, Barnes's eye is drawn to the end of the convoy, where the soldiers had remained inside their truck and are able to surge out in a more coordinated fashion once they realize they're under attack. At least the Captain's reputation for strategic planning is not undeserved, Barnes concedes; the Captain had kept Falsworth and Dernier hidden until the soldiers at the rear are out of their vehicles and facing the front of the convoy.

The rear truck had held a dozen soldiers, and half of them go down before they realize that the shots are coming from behind them. The survivors try to take cover around their truck. Some of them are shouting, the distance rendering the exact words undecipherable to Barnes. He watches, through the scope, as they go down one by one, and he realizes that most of the shots are coming from Falsworth.

It's not the killing itself that pricks his instincts, exactly. At the front of the convoy, the Captain has been disabling the soldiers using his shield; Barnes doubts he's fired his gun once, and has to bite his lip when he sees said gun in Morita's hands. Dernier has ducked behind the truck, to check the inside and also taking cover. Falsworth had never bothered.

He looks more closely at Falsworth's expression. The blankness is not as surprising as it should be. A part of him can't help but wonder if that's the way he'd looked when in the grip of a mission, when Steve had first found him.

Poor George, he remembers Falsworth muttering with chilling clarity. Damn fool of a boy.

All the HYDRA they'd encountered had bitten into their suicide pills, if bullets or fire hadn't gotten
them first.

One of the soldiers is shouting something, and his hand moves—to throw his gun to the ground. Barnes would have said, except Falsworth shoots him, straight to the head. It is Rogers who is shouting now. All the soldiers at the front of the convoy are kneeling on the ground, with Morita standing guard over them. Rogers approaches Falsworth.

Falsworth doesn't seem to hear him, eyes tracking to the other side of the truck where the rest of the soldiers are hiding. Then Rogers gets within grabbing distance, and the muzzle of Falsworth's rifle swings around to point at Rogers.

 Pulse suddenly loud in his ears, Barnes adjusts the scope and watches Falsworth's hands. He knows Falsworth won't shoot Rogers, he knows Rogers will talk Falsworth down. He knows. And yet.

He sees the moment Falsworth comes back to himself, sees it in the way his grip suddenly slackens on the gun, nearly enough to drop it.

That's when Barnes fires. A hole appears on the side of the truck, inches above the sight of Falsworth's rifle. Both Falsworth and Rogers jump.

He watches Falsworth, pale now, look from the bullet-hole in the metal up to where Barnes has perched himself. Falsworth gives Rogers his gun, his apologies inaudible but unmistakable. Around them, the rest of the Commandos are coralling their new prisoners into a line and checking them for weapons. More than one of the captured Nazis are casting fearful looks out over the woods.

Rogers clasps Falsworth on the shoulder, speaking to him in a way that has Falsworth nodding and rubbing at his face. Rogers steps away, heading over to the prisoners.

Falsworth looks out towards Barnes again. Sends him a quiet salute, his mouth sounding out, thank you.

They put their prisoners into one of the covered trucks. Dugan drives while Jones radios ahead; Morita, Dernier, and Barnes are in the back. Falsworth and Rogers have stayed back to load the dead into one of the other trucks. The third truck, half full of supplies, will likely be commandeered for the SSR.

Nothing is said about what had just happened, though there are numerous looks exchanged. Barnes can sense the trust the men have in the Captain. He is not sure if they trust that Rogers will look after Falsworth, or that Rogers will make sure Falsworth never does that again.

A flash-memory: the target is approaching the kill zone when a gun goes off from the balcony next to his, a young operative on a hair-trigger, and he is up and moving even before the target is, mentally shifting to chase mode, he jumps and rappels down and there is a second gun-shot from that balcony, the body of young operative passes him on its freefall back to earth—

He holds his breath on an inhale to feel the strain around his full lungs, because the memory comes with an echo: he hadn't pulled the trigger that time but he knows, unequivocally, that he has on other times, has eliminated people on his team as punishment for compromising a mission, as a show of dominance, as a demonstration to trainees on the consequences of failure.

He focuses on breathing evenly until they start passing artillery guns and barricades. The truck slows,
and several soldiers approach the back.

"Sergeant Barnes?"

"Here," answers Barnes, dropping down and saluting the officer who'd come to meet them.

"Lieutenant Timms. How many prisoners?"

"Ten who survived the action and surrendered. The convoy had thirty-two in total. Captain Rogers and Major Falsworth should be bringing a second truck with the bodies soon."

"Captain America himself, huh? It'd be a boost to morale to have him here. The boys have been buzzing since we got word that the Howling Commandos were going to be in the area."

From the brightness of the Lieutenant’s grin, Barnes suspects the boys haven't been the only ones buzzing. "I'm sure he'll do a round of the camp while he's here, he likes that kind of thing."

"Hey, looks like today's delivery has a special from the Oriental fucking express! You sure you got the right orders, butterhead?"

The words don't register, at first, until he hears Dugan growling, "lay one finger on him and your own momma won't recognize your face when I'm done with it."

Barnes spins and shoves his way through the crowd that had gathered, scavenger-like, at the first hint of an impending fight. A few people swear at him but no one, wisely, touches him. He finds Morita unharmed and effectively walled between in Dugan, Jones, and Dernier, and not looking entirely happy about it.

The troublemaker steps right into Dugan's space, clearly spoiling for a fight; he's half a foot shorter than Dugan and barely as broad as Dernier. Barnes wrinkles his nose at the waft of alcohol. Morita has his arms crossed, resigned where the other Howlies are visibly fuming.

"How can you call yourself American and make nice with a Jap, after what they fucking did at Pearl Harbour—"

"Dum Dum," says Barnes quietly. Dugan meets his eyes over the soldier's head and nods, stepping aside.

Morita steps into the space vacated, looks at the drunken soldier with a considering expression, then swings his fist hard, hitting the soldier square in the face. There’s a groan of sympathy from some of the watchers. The soldier crumples to the ground.

Barnes clears his throat and pivots; the gathered crowd is visibly taken aback by the abrupt end to the proceedings. "And that, gentlemen, is a demonstration of a textbook-perfect punch, by our own James Morita. Who, Captain America will tell you himself, is highly trained in hand-to-hand combat. Where are you from, Jim?"

"Fresno," answers Morita.

"Good oranges there. Now, if anyone here has a beef with people from Fresno, or with the Howling Commandos, this would be the time to keep it to your fucking selves. Any questions?" A widespread shaking of heads. "Good. Now fuck off and go back to what you're supposed to be doing." He steps on something considerably softer than the ground, which groans at him. He looks down and affects a look of surprise. "And somebody pick up this little shit. You boys should learn not to leave your trash lying around."
Once Rogers and Falsworth arrive, Barnes slips off to look for Morita. He finds him at the edge of the camp, sitting on an overgrown fence and smoking. Morita doesn't look at him when he leans over the fence next to him, but he gives no sign of minding the company.

Morita clears his throat. "There's a saying my mother likes. 井の中の蛙大海を知らず。"

A flash-memory:

—a little girl giving him a flower in a playground. Her mother is talking to another woman and has yet to notice. There is no reason for him to be in the park, but he has nothing to do until his mission that night and a thorough reconnaissance of the city falls within the parameters of the mission. It occurs to him that there is no reason for the little girl to give him a flower, either. He doesn't know if he should take it. Then her smile falls, so he takes the flower. There is no reason to take it and no reason not to; now he has a flower and the little girl is happy—

"What does it mean?" asks Barnes, though he knows even before Morita tells him: A frog in a well does not know the great sea. He has a faint worry of—tainting the past, somehow, because the language is something that HYDRA had given the Winter Soldier. Listening, though— this is something Bucky would have done for his friend.

"It's when people don't think beyond the world they know," says Morita.

He has never forgotten he's filling a role that belongs to someone else, and these good men- flawed and certainly not faultless, but good- do not know he is not their comrade-in-arms. Not in the way they believe, and not in a way he can explain to them. The deception grates him in ways he cannot explain. He knows he must maintain his cover. Yet at some point it has come to matter, that his past self would approve of his actions.

And Morita has always been kind to him. He wishes to be kind back.

"I don't speak a lot of Japanese," confesses Morita, ducking his head, "because my father thought it would make things harder for me. He made sure all his kids have American accents. But my mother would speak to us in Japanese all the time. She would tell us what the words mean if we asked about them. It's not teaching, she would say, it's explaining. Sometimes she would write things out, even though none of us could read it. A frog in a well. She always said it when one of us came home from school unhappy."

"Sounds like a smart woman," says Barnes. "Wiser than all these assholes who talk about stuff they don't know nothin' about."

Morita shakes his head and clasps Barnes briefly on the shoulder. "You're a good guy, Sarge."

Barnes chokes on a laugh, from the sheer untruth of the words. Morita raises his eyebrows questioningly, so he waves a hand and improvises with, "That's not what you say in the mornings."

Morita laughs. He pulls out a new cigarette and lights it. Takes a draw and offers it to Barnes. "Why did Monty say thank you? Back there, when you made that warning shot. Which, by the way, was some kind of magic, and more than a little terrifying. If the Nazis had known how far away you were they would have peed their pants."

Barnes exhales smoke and hands the cigarette back. "Cap would have let himself get shot rather than
hurt one of his men." The memory, this time, meets him naturally, with no chemical fog or electric fence to bar him from it. "The warning shot was me saying that I would have stopped Monty, if I'd really thought he was going to do it."

"Cap can probably heal a shot to the chest," says Morita. "Not that I wanted Monty to shoot Cap. I just mean that Cap isn't really sure of his own strength, and that's probably why he'd rather take hits than deal them, especially when it's his friends."

Barnes doesn't wince, but it's a near thing. He gets the cigarette back and puts it to his mouth quickly, not wanting to see if the stick will be steady between his fingers. "Yeah, he'd take a bullet to the heart and forgive Monty in the same breath." His tongue tastes of ashes and lighter fluid. "But trust me when I say that Monty wouldn't have forgiven himself."

"Hey," says Barnes, climbing into Stark's plane behind everybody else. Rogers is at the front, speaking to Stark himself. All of them are sore and more than a little muddy, having spent the previous night camped out in the rain. Barnes stows his pack and takes a seat next to Jones. "I happen to know it's someone's birthday today."

"Oh man," moans Jones, over the others' hoots. "How the hell did you find out?"

Future-Rogers had told him, Barnes belatedly remembers. It had not occurred to him that Bucky would not have known.

He smiles at Jones while inwardly swearing, fucking time-travel.

"The more important question is," says Dugan, "what the hell are we gonna do about it?"

"Où est-ce qu'on atterri, mais surtout, quelle est la ville la plus proche?" asks Dernier.

Rogers, upon being questioned, tells them they are quartering with the Second Battalion that night. Barnes does not need to join the others in looking at the map to know they’re being barracked on the outskirts of Landolfi.

"I'm afraid I've got a briefing and meetings until the afternoon," says Rogers apologetically, "but you fellas go ahead, I'll catch up when I can."

Rogers gestures for Barnes to wait for a moment, after they have landed. Barnes waves the rest of the men ahead, strangely nervous.

"I only have the briefing, actually," says Rogers. "But I thought I'd try to get something special for Gabe. What does he like to drink?"

"Bourbon," replies Barnes without hesitation. The data is in his head, rising easily into reach. Yet it hits him, just then, that he is not sure anymore where he’d acquired it.

"Right, thanks. I should be able to get my hands on some." Rogers smiles at him. It's friendly and... polite. Barnes hates it. He also hates the awkward pause, before Rogers says, "I guess I'll catch up with you boys later, then."

Yessir, almost slips out. But he catches himself in time; he has the darkly amused thought that this is a low blow not even the Winter Soldier would stoop to. He clears his throat. "Good luck getting the
Rogers’s smile is a touch more genuine, this time. Barnes tells himself his relief is due to his concern over his commanding officer's wellbeing. "Try not to get too drunk before I get there."

Barnes, of course, does not get drunk at all. He does find out that the reason Jones and Falsworth do, in future-Rogers's recollections, is because they challenge Barnes to a drinking contest. By the time present-Rogers shows up, they are already tilting to the side and slurring their words. The bottle of bourbon is met with riotous applause, and Jones insists on opening it right there to share with the rest of the team.

Morita and Dernier start showing each other knife tricks in their corner of the table, and Barnes finds himself watching them anxiously, tracking the steadiness of their movements. He is so preoccupied that he doesn't notice the newcomer until he feels something damp butting against the side of his hip. He jumps to his feet, jostling the table hard; only Rogers's quick reflexes save Morita from losing a finger. Barnes very nearly snatches the knife from the Captain's hand before he registers that the face huffing and drooling enthusiastically up at him belongs to a dog.

The rest of the table burst out laughing. Rogers says, "Maybe you should take it easy on the drinks, too, Bucky."

"Shut up, it surprised me," grumbles Barnes. He sits back down. The dog, clearly possessed of bad taste, rests its head on his lap, tail wagging energetically. He tries to glare at it, but when that fails to have any effect whatsoever, sighs and begrudgingly scratches it under the ears. "Hey, buddy. Who do you belong to?"

Rogers goes to ask the owner of the bar and comes back with a sheepish expression. "He says the dog is a mutt who likes to hang around here for scraps. Also, he's pointed out that it's getting real late, and he'd like us to get out so he can close up."

"You're a real Boy Scout, aren't you, Rogers?" mumbles Dugan. He attempts to stand and promptly discovers he's unable to.

"Trust me, he isn't," says Barnes, and feels pleased to get a snort from Rogers. He sees Falsworth attempting to stand and pre-empts the inevitable tumble to the floor by slinging the man's arm over his shoulders.

Dugan does manage to stay upright on the second try. Jones appears halfway asleep; when Rogers pulls him to his feet, he lists to one side alarmingly, until Rogers swoops in and bodily supports him.

The dog follows them outside, barking and bouncing around them. Luckily, the dog's bark is relatively quiet, more air than noise. Barnes is busy keeping Falsworth from slipping off and convincing Dernier to go in the same direction as the rest of the group when he hears Rogers saying, "Dum Dum, did you just give your shoe to the dog?"

"Gramps bred hunting dogs," mumbles Dugan. "Puppies like to play."

"They do," says Rogers easily, "but are you sure the dog's gonna bring it back?"

They wait for ten minutes. "Don't think your friend was trained to fetch, old chap," slurs Falsworth.
Dugan attempts to go looking for the dog, and it takes both Morita and Dernier to prevent him haring off. Rogers sighs and starts walking in the direction of the camp, secure in the knowledge that the rest of them will follow—aside from Jones, who doesn't have much choice in the matter.

"That was a damn good shoe," says Dugan mournfully. "This pair still had a good few months in them. Kept my feed dry in many a mission. Mostly dry. Haven't gotten trench foot yet, anyway. New shoes will be fucking stiff and... pinchy. Bloody dog."

"Yeah, the dog really worked him to get that shoe," grouses Morita, voice dripping sarcasm and sleepiness.

"Gonna miss that shoe. 'S not easy to find good shoes, out here."

Jones bends over, and Rogers gently asks, "Need to throw up, Gabe?" Jones shakes his head. A moment later, he straightens back up again, expression determined.

Barnes suddenly remembers what's about to happen. "Gabe, don't—" but it's too late. Jones's shoe has sailed past Dugan's head and disappeared into the dark.

"What the hell did you do that for?" demands Dugan, his tone wounded as if the shoe had actually hit him.

They make a perfunctory attempt to find Jones' shoe, mostly consisting of Morita and Dernier stomping through the overgrown greenery. Half the homes in this outlying area have been abandoned, probably for the relative safety of the inner town.

"You're a good man, Sergeant," mumbles Falsworth out of the blue. The man waves his arm in some vague gesture that nearly catches Barnes in the face, and then Barnes realizes Falsworth is attempting to pat him on the shoulder.

"I'm not," he says, inexplicably feeling the need to be truthful to a drunken soldier. Or maybe it's the memory of Falsworth bottling his grief until he could no longer control it. "I'm the worst of all of you, really."

"They tend to die first, you know," continues Falsworth. He's speaking right into Barnes' ear, soft enough that Rogers might not be able to hear. Barnes sneaks a glance and sees Rogers having his own conversation with Jones. "The boys. It's us old buggers who sneak by. Don't know how we're still alive, to be honest. But then I think if one of us died, it'd break the Captain's heart, and maybe that's why we don't dare do it." He sniffs. "As good a reason as any, I suppose. Dulce et Decorum est."

"Pro patria mori," murmurs Barnes.

Falsworth burps loudly. Barnes grimaces. Falsworth mumbles a sorry and hangs his head. Barnes thinks he's fallen asleep, or even unconscious, but then he hears the reedy beginnings of a familiar tune being hummed.

"Monty, no," he moans.

The man seems to take it as a challenge and launches into the words. "God save our gra-cious King, long live our ho-ly King—"

"Monty, you're going to wake up the neighbourhood!" hisses Rogers.

Somewhere behind a hedge, Dernier refuses to be outdone and starts singing, "Allons enfants de la
Pa-trie, le jour de gloire e-est a-rrivé!” His voice has a good timbre for singing, Barnes notes distractedly.

Rogers is developing a rather panicked look. Barnes sighs. "Forget the damn shoes. Company, back on the street. We're returning to barracks right now if Rogers and I have to roll your bodies all the way there."

He's somewhat surprised they actually listen to him, though he knows that habits learned on the field bleed easily into everything out of it. He's less successful at getting Falsworth to stop singing; even clamping a hand over his mouth just leaves him humming as loudly as he can.

"Gonna lose my foot now," moans Dugan. "Trench foot. Or I'll trip when the new shoe falls off. The old pair never failed me."

"We'll both lose a foot, how about that," says Jones. "We'll tie our legs together and practice running like we're in a sack race. Cap won't care if we're missing a foot, right?"

"You'll still be my best guys even if you lose a foot," says Rogers patiently. "But I'll throw you both into the first pond we see if you don't stop talking about it."

Time is a river, Barnes remembers distantly. Occasionally it'll have missing shoes and a bit of sick floating in it. He props Falsworth on Morita for a moment, ignoring the latter's protest, and tugs off his boots. He throws the right one to Rogers and brings the left to Dugan.

"What the—" splutters Dugan when Barnes pulls his foot forward and unceremoniously slides his boot onto it. "Sarge. That's your shoe."

"Cap, why are you giving me Sarge's boot?" asks Jones, peering down at where Rogers is similarly crouching by his legs.

"So the two of you will shut up already," grumbles Barnes.

"Oh God, Sarge, did something die on your socks?" moans Morita.

"How did you know the boots would fit?" asks Jones.

"I didn't."

"Kinda tight," mutters Dugan. But the expression on Barnes's face must be forbidding enough because he quickly goes, "Better than nothing, I guess."

"—Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons! Marchons, mar-chons—"

Rogers is shaking, shoulders hunched in, and Barnes is alarmed for a moment until he realizes Rogers is trying to hide his laughter.

Barnes shakes his head. "All right, men, let's move out."

Morita stumbles to the side of the street and throws up into a hedge.

He looks at the column of smoke and flame rising up over the treeline. It will burn for hours yet. Any moment now all the HYDRA forces in the area will realize there will be no salvaging this facility,
and turn their full attention into hunting down those responsible for its destruction.

There had been no prisoners in this one, as it had been more focused on research and development rather than manufacturing. He thinks he should have thought that one through.

*Objective achieved.* And yet, he is the furthest thing from satisfied. He tells himself it is because he has a different primary mission.

This reasoning is starting to wear thin.

He Vaults over a fallen tree and slips into the dense thicket where the team has regrouped. A cloud stinking of Gauloises smoke hovers over a little nook made by a tree and a big rock; he waves in its direction.

The others have propped Rogers up on an adjacent big rock. Morita catches his eye and shakes his head.

"This was FUBAR from the start, but at least we got the factory," grumbles Dugan, sitting a few feet away with their packs. Morita crouches down beside him and pulls out his rations.

Barnes goes to the Captain’s side.

He’s still not exactly sure what had gone wrong. A combination of things, most likely: they hadn’t anticipated the facility to be booby trapped, they’d gone in when most of the HYDRA soldiers had been out of the base doing exercises, they’d gotten split up when the scientists unleashed unexpectedly vicious counter-measures.

"Go," coughs Rogers. He begins wheezing harshly; whatever gas he’d been dosed with is evidently challenging even for his enhanced healing. "Take the men—base camp. I'll see you there."

A strange sort of panic winds itself around Barnes's gut at the sound of Roger's lungs struggling for air. He finds himself rubbing a hand down Rogers's back, feeling the muscles shifting and flexing under his palm.

He continues until the wheezing eases up, and says only, "I'll tell them," before ambling over to where the rest of the Howlies are bent over a map.

None of them look surprised at Rogers's directive, or Barnes adjusting it by adding, "I'll stay with him. If enough of them go after you, I can take care of the rest and give Cap time to heal further."

"Sarge, there's no way of knowing how many will come after us, or how many they've got coming in," says Dugan. "You might end up with an entire platoon on top of you."

"I'll handle it," he says firmly.

They exchange glances between themselves, and evidently decide to take him at his word. He directs them to wait at the rendezvous point for no longer than a day, and only if they are confident of having lost their HYDRA pursuers.

"Dum Dum, Gabe, and Dernier, you head south. Jim and I will take the south-west route," says Falsworth. He doesn't look at Barnes, exactly, but Barnes finds himself nodding in approval; Dugan is hiding the severity of his leg injury, which is indicative enough of how much it is troubling him. Jones will be able to support him if necessary while Dernier provides cover. The southern route is a little longer but less treacherous.
"Why would Major Falsworth obey a sergeant?"

"The Commandos weren't exactly your average military unit. I mean, I had the least field experience of all of you. They listened to you. Sometimes more than they listened to me."

"So they did not follow protocol."

"They followed Captain America. Captain America trusted Sergeant Barnes more than anybody else. So they followed Sergeant Barnes."

Barnes reflects that it is wholly possible the Howling Commandos follow Bucky Barnes because he'd been the most successful at wrangling Captain America.

Rogers frowns mightily when he notices that Barnes is not grabbing his pack along with the others. "Thought I told you to go." His voice sounds as though he has swallowed some rocks.

Barnes snorts. He waves the rest of the unit off, then hands Rogers the extra canteen of water Jones had left them. "Yeah, 'cause I'm really gonna to leave you to fend for yourself in enemy territory."

"Well, you don't seem all that happy being around me lately."

The accusatory tone makes him pause. He is, admittedly, more surprised that Rogers is confronting him about it. Future-Rogers is always so careful of him.

"It's not you," he offers.

"There's someone else already? Got over it pretty fast, then—" Rogers grimaces. "Sorry. I don't—I'm not thinking straight. Don't listen to me."

Barnes bites his bottom lip. He leans down and peels back the blood-soaked bandage.

"It's not healing," says Barnes. "Why is it not healing?"

"Guess I should have mentioned," mumbles Rogers, and Barnes is alarmed to see his head lolling to the side, "I feel sick. Like that time I got scarlet fever. Remember that spring?"

Barnes makes a vague affirmative noise and presses the back of his flesh hand to Rogers's forehead. Hot. Some kind of fever, and it must be bad for an enhanced immune system to be fighting so hard.

"Bucky. Will you look at me?" Rogers fumbles around until Barnes works out what he's looking for, and puts his own hand in Rogers's. He looks right at those blue eyes. "Can't remember the last time you looked at me."

Barnes looks at him. Under the shadow of the trees, Rogers's eyes look darker than they are.

"I'm sorry, Buck," says Rogers quietly. "I am. I didn't mean to hurt you. Last thing I ever want do is hurt you."

"I know," says Barnes, because he does.

"Sorry anyway. Could've handled it better."

It occurs to Barnes, then, that Rogers must be referring to whatever had happened between him and Bucky, before Barnes had been slipped into Bucky's place.

"It's all right," he says. Some part of him is hoping Rogers will stop here—which is strange, because
he's wanted to find out what the 'fight' had been about since he started wearing another man's shoes. He both wants to know and doesn't want to know.

"C'mere."

He crouches closer. Leans forward. Rogers places a hand on the back of his neck, sending goosebumps every which way, and gently pulls him in.

The kiss is slow, chaste, a simple press of lips on lips; gentle and brief and he'd realized it was going to happen a good few seconds before it did, so he shouldn't have been surprised. Yet he is, especially by the tickles through him from the contact of their mouths.

"There," says Rogers, drawing back a little. He smiles at Barnes, soft and sweet.

Barnes's head is—

"I'm sorry. I'm. Just. Let me know if you wanna take a swing."

"What? No, Bucky, you know I'd never do that. I just—you were always after girls."

"I like them, too. But."

"Fellas too, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I- I have to be honest, I never really thought about, you know. You and me."

"God forbid Steve Rogers says an untrue word."

"Buck."

"Sorry. I'm just a little—I'll get over it. It's fine."

"Look, another time and I might, you know. Or before, even. But. Now there's Peggy and, I mean, it's nothing official—"

"But you really care about her. Yeah, Steve, I know. And she cares about you, official or not. Like I said, it's fine. I'm real happy for you."

"Bucky."

"Let's just forget about it, all right?"

"I'm sorry."

"This ain't something you have to apologize to me for, pal."

—his head is aching, in a deep way that sings of electricity and ice. There is, for an instant, a confusing flash of this same press of lips through the Winter Soldier's mask. It takes every ounce of willpower he has not to whimper; less from this particular pain and more from ghost upon ghost of it.

He ends up staring at Rogers. He does not know what expression might be read on his face.

"Why?" he asks, the question slipping out before he even knows what he's asking about, or who he's
asking it for.

"So you'd have something to remember." Again that soft smile, and something in Barnes' chest aches at the sweetness of it. The inside of his head is knocking loose in a dozen different places.

"You're not dying here, Rogers," he growls.

The smile dims. Rogers shifts and winces. Blood is still seeping from the wound, when it should have closed up before they ever reached this thicket. Rogers gives him a sad look. "You know, you never call me Steve anymore."

Barnes swallows. "Steve." He licks his lips and remembers that Steve's lips had just been touching them. He's mildly disappointed to detect no lingering taste.

The smile returns. Barnes's pulse is disproportionate to his present level of physical exertion.

Steve's eyes close. Barnes leans in to listen to his breath, fingers pressed against his pulse point. The beats are slowing, but grudgingly.

He has a sense of having encountered the gas that had incapacitated Steve, which hampers the body's healing mechanisms. The effects only last for as long as the compound is in the system; once they've been flushed out, the enhanced healing factor will return. He only needs to keep Steve from bleeding out, and from being captured by HYDRA.

Shifting his hearing to their environs, he counts the number of bodies moving through the undergrowth. Not exactly a whole platoon, but still a sizable force.

He carefully hides Steve behind a dense thicket, covering as much of him in dirt as possible. Double-checks that no part of Steve can be seen. Takes an extra minute to remove the silicon sleeve. The metal arm gleams, the plates shifting and shivering as if excited to be in the open air again.

*My name is James Buchanan Barnes, he thinks, and Steve Rogers is mine.*

He finds a deep river, after, where he submerges both arms up to the elbow. It doesn't feel sufficient, so he takes off his clothes and dives in. The water is cold, probably a run-off from the mountains. Once, it would have reminded him of his cocoon of metal, the numbness and the invading dark.

Now he feels heated, the flush of some sort of fever. His hands shake and his body shakes and his breath shakes; the inside of him is all unsettled, undone.

 Réquiem ætérnam dona eis, Dómine, et lux perpétua lúceat eis. Requiéscant in pace.

He wonders if Bucky Barnes had been religious. Some of the HYDRA soldiers had been.

He'd made it quick. It hadn't even been all that messy; most of the blood is from his relocation of the bodies.

He slips the silicone sleeve back on before going back to where he'd hidden Captain America.

As he'd hoped, Rogers Steve appears to have eliminated the chemicals in his system in the time Barnes has been taking care of the ones hunting them. The wound has scabbed over, the skin around it less inflamed. His breathing is easier.
The rest of the unit will have reached the rendezvous point by now. Barnes has no doubt that they would wait the requisite day, and then send at least one man back to find Barnes and the Captain, regardless of protocol or enemy presence.

He settles down next to Steve. He should be able to carry him the rest of the way, if the man doesn't wake up in the middle of it and insist on staggering on himself.

Steve makes a soft noise of distress. Barnes's hand twitches. Haltingly, he presses the back of his hand against Steve's forehead, as if checking for a temperature, and while his fingers are there he can't resist brushing the sweat-damp golden clumps hair back. The familiarity of the motion is unmistakable, his body imparting another memory that has been lost to his mind. The tension on Steve's face eases; his head turns towards Barnes. Then Steve shifts. Winces.

Taking a guess, Barnes shuffles close until they're pressed side-to-side. Steve calms, presumably reassured by a familiar presence.

Better to give him a chance to heal a bit more, Barnes decides. He can do with a rest, himself.

Steve wakes up a mile out from the rendezvous point. He insists on continuing under his own power, even though each step clearly pains him. Barnes allows it for five minutes before grabbing Steve's left arm and slinging it over his shoulder, curving his right arm over Steve's back. The left arm would have been steadier, but even in his pain-hazy state Captain America would still notice the odd unyielding rigidity of a metal limb.

He receives indignant complaints and a few choice swear words for his trouble, of course. He ignores them, for the most part, though he does allow a few small branches to hit Steve in the face; it's hardly his fault if Captain America isn't watching where they're going.

They hear the rest of their unit bickering long before they come within sight of the rendezvous point. Steve huffs and shakes his head, fondly resigned, and turns to look at Barnes the same time as Barnes looks at him with his eyebrows raised.

This close, Steve's eyes are startlingly blue. Barnes knows them, knows his face, and it hits him now that he's avoided looking at it too closely, all this time. Not consciously— more the caution of someone aware of a place of danger.

A flash-memory:

—*the man on the bridge, who has the face he knows and the eyes he knows, the kind of knowing that goes deeper than any pain or fear or loss can reach*—

He's dimly aware that they have stopped walking. He can feel himself shaking, in his gut and in his chest, but he's good at not letting anything reach the outside. He wonders what Steve is thinking, what Steve is making of this moment.

(He misses, suddenly, *his* Steve. The feeling surprises him but also lights him up from the inside, stars within a city waking up for the night.)

"Bucky," says Steve warmly, smiling. "You done avoiding me now?"

"Not sure yet," replies Barnes, but he's smiling too.
A few days later, Morita sits down and rubs his hands in a way Barnes has come to associate with anticipation at imparting interesting news. Barnes finds himself leaning forward along with the other men. Even idle gossip can be usable data.

"So, listen to this." Morita lowers his voice. "Some local villagers found a whole load of dead HYDRA thrown into this ravine, not two clicks from that HYDRA research facility we paid a visit to. Deader than dead, they said. Necks snapped. Faces frozen in terror. Some have bullets in them but the bullets are from each other's guns. Like they were so terrified they just started shooting at each other."

"What?" snorts Dugan. "HYDRA don't panic like that."

"Everyone panics, if you scare them enough," says Barnes darkly.

"The villagers are saying it's a ghost. Or an evil spirit. Or a forest guardian, dealing death to those who disturb the woods."

"As long as this ghost is only after HYDRA, he's welcome to as many of them as he wants," says Jones.

Barnes shivers, despite the warm night.

BUCKY BARNES

Bucky and Sam run into Clint in the Starbucks nearest to the Tower. Bucky wonders if Clint’s just come back from training, as he’s carrying his bow and a bag that’s big enough to fit his arrows.

“Outdoor shooting range,” says Clint. “The range at the Tower’s nice, but I still have to train in natural field conditions.”

Bucky gets the impression that the Avengers are regulars in this branch. No one bats an eye at Clint’s bow.

Then barista calls out, “Hawkguy!”

“Don’t ask,” says Clint, seeing their faces.

They wander back outside with their coffees. The day is somewhat grey, but the cool wind is pleasant and it doesn’t look ready to rain any time soon. At some point the three of them reach an unspoken understanding that they’re not ready to go back indoors yet, so they end up strolling around the block.

Bucky hears the low-pitched whine but doesn’t think much of it, at first; the future is full of strange noises, especially outdoors. He only pays attention when he catches a glint of something flying fast, like an insect on a mission.

"What are those?" he asks the other two.

"What are you pointing at?" asks Sam, squinting. Clint is scanning the area, subtly more alert than before; Bucky wonders if Clint can hear the whining. He knows Clint wears hearing aids but he
doesn't know how sensitive they are.

"Maybe it's a wasp," says Bucky doubtfully.

"I see it," says Clint. He reaches down and pulls out a single arrow from his bag. Snaps open his bow.

The thing is flying in erratic patterns rather than a straight line, which may be why Bucky thought of an insect. Probably a defensive tactic; even Bucky isn't confident he'd be able to shoot it, it keeps changing directions so much.

A dull flex of the bow-string. The arrow cuts through the air. It falls to the ground a considerable distance away, the expanded head enclosing a small black object.

Clint picks it up carefully. The insect-like object emits an insect-like buzz, wriggling and trying to escape.

"I'm guessing this isn't, like, a pet in the future," says Bucky.

"Nope. Unless you're Stark, but he goes for big and bright."

They bring it to Tony, who subjects it to JARVIS's thorough examination and analysis.

"Weird little thing," says Tony. "It seems to be calibrated to seek out a specific sort of material. There is a tracker built into it, which I'm guessing will activate once it finds the thing it’s looking for."

"This one reacts to the presence of metals. I compared the chemical signature stored in its programming with all the compounds stored in Sir’s database and found a match." There's a pause. "The device’s target matches a known HYDRA construct."

"So it's looking for HYDRA?" asks Bucky. "I would have assumed it was sent by HYDRA."

"The device is also consistent with HYDRA design and manufacture marks."

"HYDRA are hunting each other now?"

The other three exchange looks.

"Or hunting something they’ve lost," says Sam darkly.

When Bucky feels a familiar restlessness under his skin, he decides to ask Natasha for recommendations on good places for dancing.

She tilts her head at him. Not so much surprise as a begrudging concession that he is capable of sensible choices.

"Would you be willing to try out the modern clubs?" she asks. He appreciates that she forgoes the 'well social dancing has changed since your day' disclaimer he would have gotten from any of the others. "I think you'll like them."

She gets JARVIS to mark a few places she knows on the map in his phone, plus a couple of "old people dance halls, in case you feel nostalgic."
Later, in his room, he asks JARVIS for videos on how dancing has social changed over the decades. This somehow leads to a marathon of movie musicals, in the middle of which there's a gentle knock on his door.

"Come in!" says Bucky

"Enhanced hearing, Bucky, you can just talk normally," says Steve, pained, his blond head poking through the gap in the door. "Look. Ah, I was thinking, you know."

Bucky stares at him. "Captain America thinks sometimes. Thank God they don't study you in school or anything."

"Shut up. I, um. For dinner, there's this new Indian place, I thought we could— are you watching *Saturday Night Fever*?"

Turns out Steve had become a big fan of musicals at some point— "a lot of the USO girls wanted to go into theatre, and I saw first-hand how much work goes into every number"— and he convinces Bucky to move his viewing to the living room while he calls the Indian place to order dinner.

*Saturday Night Fever* finishes right as the food arrives, and the choice of cuisine inspires Steve to talk about Bollywood, how it's even more prolific than Hollywood. It seems only appropriate to watch a film while they eat; they have JARVIS pick one based on both of their preferences.

"Steve," says Bucky, momentarily freezing and nearly dropping the tikka masala chicken he'd just stolen from Steve's plate. "Steve. That guy just threw a car at that giant helicopter."

"Yeah, I saw," says Steve, eyes wide. A moment later, he says, "I wonder if—"

Bucky glares at him. "No, Rogers. Don't even think about it. Or I'm dumping all this curry on your head."

They finish both the dinner and a second movie, and go back to the American musicals. They get to *Hairspray* and Bucky remembers, right, there's a reason he'd started this.

"I feel like going dancing," he says, sinking deeper into the couch. "In those clubs that people like these days. You free tomorrow night?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I have a meeting with Tony and Hill in the afternoon but we should be done around six." Steve gives him a fond look that tells him Steve's made the connection between Bucky's curiosity about modern social dancing and the movie marathon. Well, Steve's always been the only one who gets how Bucky's brain works.

The dance club is dark. And loud.

It's overwhelming at first, the bone-rattling beats reminding him a little too much of being under aerial bombardment. Steve buys them both drinks and Bucky gives him a look for forking over money for something that won't do anything for him. The drink doesn't seem to do much for Bucky, either, but he likes the alarmingly bright green colour and the fruity sweetness. He can barely taste the alcohol, too, which means it's the good stuff.

After the first half-hour he finds himself relaxing into it. It's enough time for him to observe the way people are dancing. Nothing at all like the forms and politics of the dance halls he knows, and some
of the stuff going on in the packed dance floor makes even him blush a little.

But it looks fun. The dancers look like they’re having a great time. As far as he’s concerned, that’s all that matters.

When he feels ready to try it, he gives Steve a nod.

He half-expects having to convince Steve to come with him, as usual, so he’s pleasantly surprised when Steve smiles and follows him to the dance floor. He wonders if this Steve goes dancing a lot. If maybe the freeform attitude of this time period suits Steve better than having to ask specific people to dance.

Or maybe Steve doesn’t feel nervous about being rejected anymore. Bucky can’t imagine anyone saying no to Captain America.

He’s reminded again of how much he doesn’t know about this Steve.

They start off at the edges of the floor, easing into the tempo of the music. They don’t stay there for long, though. Bucky tenses up the first few times people brush up against him. He forces himself to relax, to accept the proximity of so many strangers. The movement of the masses shifts them towards the middle, and he finds that being crowded in is actually easier; it makes him think of being crammed in a transport with a bunch of sweaty soldiers.

He finds himself grinning, and he meets Steve’s eyes through the forest of waving arms and bouncing bodies.

After a while he gets thirsty enough to head back to the bar. He’s lost track of Steve, but decides he’ll find him after he’s had a drink. He has no idea what to order and just tells the bartender, “Surprise me.”

She gives him a gorgeous smile and mixes something that seems to take more ingredients than cake. The drink she presents to him with a flourish is in a bowl-shaped glass and coloured the same brilliant orange as her lipstick.

It’s delicious. He perches on a vacated bar stool and drinks it slowly, eyes scanning the crowd in case he spots Steve. When he’s finished, he’s tempted to ask for another, but figures he should see if Steve wants water or another drink first.

He’s taken one foot back onto the dance floor when somebody steps in front of him.

“Hey, I’m Neil,” says the guy.

He replies automatically with, “Bucky.” He wonders if he’s done something wrong, or something’s happened with Steve—

"You know, you're really hot," says Neil, and Bucky hopes his shock isn't obvious on his face because, wow, the guy is interested in him.

He realizes knowing that people are generally all right with seeing guys together with guys, or dames together with dames, hasn't necessarily prepared him to deal with the openness of it in real life. In retrospect, it shouldn't be so surprising. They're in a club full of young people, and now he's looking for it he can see couples of all combinations.

It's no different from him meeting a dame at a dance hall and telling her she looks nice, he tells himself. It's not even the first time he's been complimented by another guy; it'd just always been more
He smiles and says, "Thanks," and really looks at Neil. Younger than Bucky, not enough for Bucky to be worried he's taking advantage. Similar height but a lot leaner. Neil sways closer, clearly aware of Bucky's inspection and confident of his own appeal.

Nice smile. His shiny pants leave little to the imagination, and Bucky imagines putting his hands all over them. His body's certainly not uninterested. It's been a long time since Bucky's seen any of this kind of action, and he's never gone further with a guy than a bit of kissing and groping. He's in the future, and when he goes back to the past he's going to be a dead man. So, Bucky thinks, why the hell not?

He swallows and licks his lips. Gets the feeling Neil likes his mouth, which makes him smirk. He steps into Neil's space and says, "You don't look too bad yourself."

Neil lets out an approving sound. The beat of the music has been building up, and he hooks a finger on one of Bucky's belt loops. Pulls himself closer, until their thighs are touching.

Bucky tilts his head and lightly nuzzles the side of Neil's neck. Lets his breath ghost over the fine jaw and smiles when he feels Neil shiver. Not so different at all, then.

They're moving together, to the music; teasing more than outright touching, for now. A familiar heat builds up in Bucky's blood, in his lungs. It's been long enough he can feel his fingers shaking from the sheer edge of want, though he's doing his best to reign himself in. He's just thinking about moving in for a kiss when Neil suddenly tenses. From alarm, not arousal.

Bucky turns, keeping a protective arm around the young man. He's half-expecting some stranger with a grudge, so he blinks at seeing the very opposite: Steve.

"Steve?" he says. "Did something happen?"

Steve doesn't look in a hurry, or alarmed. He looks— he looks—

"The hot ones are always taken," sighs Neil, reminding Bucky that he's still holding on to him. He gives Bucky a friendly smile, though. Either he doesn't recognize Steve or he doesn't care; it's New York City, after all.

I'm not taken, Bucky should say, because he isn't, not in the way Neil is thinking, but he ends up just stuttering, "Sorry."

"It's okay. Looking at him, I guess it's flattering to even be competition." Neil's smile turns mischievous. "Let me help you out a little. Altruistic-like, of course."

"Altruistic," echoes Bucky. He yelps when Neil's hand slips down his back and gives one buttock a firm squeeze.

Neil kisses him on the cheek. "Have fun with that one, tiger."

The young man disappears back into the swaying masses. Bucky stares after him, resisting the urge to rub his ass. Kid's got a good grip.

He rounds on Steve, meaning to demand, has something happened, except when he turns Steve is. Standing real close. His eyes are dark in the dark of the club, pupils wide.

"Steve," is all he ends up saying. Anticipation sings under his skin, no matter how hard he's telling
himself he's misreading this. Because Steve isn't. Steve doesn't.

"Bucky," says Steve, and it sounds like an honest-to-God growl.

Then Steve's hands are on him and Steve's mouth is on his, there are shockwaves going off in Bucky's brain and his own heart thundering in his chest. Steve is solid, undeniable, and Bucky feels made of wax under the heat of him; he's outright whimpering, he's pretty sure, and pressing his entire body to Steve's. This want is too entrenched for him to control, and Steve doesn't seem to want him to; his hands roam over Bucky's arms and sides and back. Bucky gasps at the thorough grope of his ass, possessive, like Steve's intent on erasing Neil's touch there.

After they break apart, both breathing hard, Bucky lets himself cling to him for a while. He feels exultant and raw, like he's not entirely sure where his body is but wanting to press every part of it to every part of Steve.

"When did you—" Bucky swallows. Tries to get his breath back. “I thought you didn’t, you know, with guys.”

Steve blinks at him. “I do? I mean, I’m interested in men as well as women, same as you. I thought I told you that.”

“Oh.” Bucky licks his lips. Notices Steve’s gaze dropping to them for a moment. “So it really was bad timing?”

Steve breathes out. Wraps his arms around Bucky, holding him loosely. “Yeah. I loved Peggy, I did. But what I said before, when you told me how you felt—I always thought I was lucky to have someone like you for a friend at all, and I didn't dare want more than that. When I lost you—I realized just how much I loved you, and that I already did love you. I’d felt it for so long, I've loved you for so long, that I couldn’t see it for what it was.”

Bucky can understand that. “And now? You could have said something earlier, you little punk.”

Steve grins sheepishly. "I've been trying! It's a lot harder to ask someone on a date when we already do a lot of the usual activities together anyway. Stop laughing, you jerk. It's not my fault I don't have nearly as much practice as you."

"Yeah?" asks Bucky through the smile he can’t seem to shake.

"You know me, I don't go after just anyone," says Steve, and Bucky would complain about the implied, unlike some people, but he's more caught on the thought of Steve being after him.

"No, you don't," agrees Bucky. He lets his eyes ask, are you sure?

In answer, Steve presses their foreheads together. He kisses the tip of Bucky's nose, the bridge. His hand, big and warm, slides over Bucky's jaw; Bucky presses his cheek into the palm. Steve kisses his forehead, then gazes down at him, eyes wide and smiling. Adoring.

Bucky breathes out, and kisses him.

This time is slower, deliberate. Steve is enthusiastic but unsure, the eager softness of his lips fumbling wetly over Bucky's. It makes Bucky smile, familiar enough with guiding people who aren't all that experienced; if a flare of possessiveness flares through his gut, well, he's always been jealous of Steve's time and attention.

Bucky tilts his head and fits their mouths together properly. Pressed so close together, he feels it
when Steve takes a deep breath, like he's needing to calm himself. It makes Bucky smile into the kiss. A big lug like Steve probably should be careful about his strength, he still seems to forget sometimes just how much he has. But Bucky's always liked it a little rough.

The exhale tickles the stubble under Bucky's nose. Bucky pushes forward a little, draping himself over Steve's front and getting a good feel of those ridiculous shoulders. He licks at Steve's lips, lets out a small noise of approval when Steve's lips part to let him in.

Steve's mouth is warm and welcoming, still tasting faintly of the sweet drink he'd had earlier. Bucky gives his tongue a flick hello.

This gets him a growl, and Steve's thumb presses down on his jaw to get him to open up wider. He does, feeling a surge of heat at the hungry way Steve takes possession of his mouth.

Just like that, the kiss goes from sweet to scorching. Steve responds beautifully, shivering under Bucky's hands and exploring his mouth with the single-minded intent that had gotten him into uniform against all good sense, and which Bucky both loves and hates about him. He doesn't mind it so much right now.

He shows his approval by sucking on Steve's tongue, just a little, and the soft noise Steve makes ratchets up the heat under Bucky's skin. Steve's hands drift down Bucky's back, and Bucky may or may not tip himself up a little, encouraging; Steve's fingers caress the top of his ass before jerking back up and digging in around his hips. Always the goddamn gentleman.

Then Steve's grip grinds them together, and wow, maybe not so much of a gentleman after all. Bucky has to swallow a whimper when he feels how hard Steve is, how hard Steve is for him. He's seen Steve naked, of course, but never aroused, and he has to dig his fingers into the sweetly flexing muscles of Steve's shoulders to keep from shoving them down Steve's pants so he can feel all of him, properly.

"Oh God, Bucky," moans Steve harshly, because in lieu of his fingers Bucky has pushed his thigh in between Steve's legs, giving him something to rub against.

Bucky can only rasp, "Steve," back in response. The heat and the want inside his skin feels almost painful, headier than a whole pack of the cigarettes that he hasn't had in a while.

“Can I take you home?” asks Steve, voice low and almost unrecognizable.

A part of Bucky wants to me a smartass and point out that he's living with Steve. Luckily most of him is wishing they're somewhere private already. Bucky nods so hard he almost knocks their heads together.

Steve holds his hand the entire cab journey back to the Tower. Bucky feels like a teenager again, giddy and uncomfortable in his pants. He can't stop looking at Steve, and each time Steve's thumb strokes a line down the side of his index finger sends a curl of heat through his gut.

They're kissing again once they're in the private elevator. Thankfully JARVIS doesn't need any instructions to drop them off their floor, and even holds the door open for as long as it takes for them to realize they'd arrived and stumble out of the elevator.

Then they're in Steve's bedroom, and Steve nearly tears Bucky's shirt off in his hurry to remove it. Steve's bed is a sweetly cool against Bucky's overheated skin. Hot lips descend on Bucky's clavicle, his chest; he arches up at the hard suck of Steve's mouth on his nipple.

“Off, off,” he moans, tugging at Steve's shirt. He moans louder when Steve acquiesces; he runs
greedy hands over Steve’s shoulders, that heaving chest.

Steve kisses him again, his hands working impatiently at Bucky’s belt. He yanks at Bucky’s jeans so hard Bucky slides a foot down the bed. Bucky laughs at Steve’s impatience and muttered invectives.

The laugh turns into a high gasp when Steve ducks down and mouths at Bucky’s cock through his boxers.


Steve glances up at him. The room is dark but there’s enough light coming in through the windows for him to see the wet gleam of saliva on those full lips, the blown pupils. The cloth of his boxers is clinging to him where Steve’s mouth had been and where he’s already leaking; he can feel each of Steve’s panting breaths, cool against his hot hardened flesh. A shiver works its way through him, and he has to clutch at the bedsheets, sure he’ll explode at any moment.

“He doesn’t know how good you look right now.”

And then Steve pulls down his boxers enough to free his cock. Those lips close around the head, enveloping him tight, wet heat. Bucky bites down on his lower lip to keep from shouting, throws his head back as his hips instinctively jerk upwards. Steve’s hands pin him in place as Steve takes him deeper.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” moans Bucky. His hands are in Steve’s hair without him realizing. He hesitantly lets go, but Steve grabs his wrist and tugs down, silently communicating it’s okay.

He watches even though his heart is trying to hammer its way out of his chest, refusing to miss the sight of Steve Rogers sucking his dick while making eager, breathy sounds. Steve’s hair is soft under his hands, and Bucky gives a clump of it an experimental tug. Steve groans approvingly, and the vibration around his cock sends a wave of pleasure up Bucky’s spine.

He tries to last. But it’s been so long since he’s been touched like this, and it’s Steve, and try as he might he can feel the tell-tale tingle starting in his balls.

“No Steve,” he gasps urgently. “’m gonna come.”

Steve glances up at him. He doesn’t let off, though; if anything, he bobs his head faster, and one hand moves from Bucky’s hip to the base of his cock, squeezing and stroking. It takes Bucky a few seconds to realize that Steve is still looking at him, staring at him right in the eyes, and also the shape bumping out Steve’s cheek from the inside is Bucky’s dick.

Pleasure shoots through him as he falls off the precipice. He grips Steve’s hair too hard, but Steve only makes a happy sound. Steve keeps him inside his mouth, drinking him down, and the sensation of Steve’s throat working around Bucky draws out his climax until there’s nothing left in his head but white noise.

When he can feel his extremities again, he looks down to see Steve panting into his hip, mouth swollen and looking very pleased with himself. Bucky lets out a growl and kicks off his jeans and underwear completely, then pulls Steve up the bed and flips them around.

He sympathizes with Steve’s plight earlier when he discovers Steve’s jeans to be no less tight. At least Steve is too desperate to tease him for it. He finally manages to remove both jeans and briefs, and runs his hands up Steve’s legs, feeling the muscles twitch under his touch.

He gives himself a moment to look. Steve has always been beautiful to him, but he looks almost
other-worldly now, spread out on the bed and flushed with arousal. His cock is proportional to the rest of him, hard and dripping onto his stomach. Bucky feels his mouth watering just looking at him.

“Look at you, kid,” he says quietly.

“Bucky,” whines Steve.

Bucky noses at the nest of dark blond hair between his legs, at his balls. Wets his lips then drags his tongue up the hot, erect flesh. The smell and taste of Steve is strong here, the intimate parts of him. Bucky swirls his tongue around the head, and Steve makes a noise Bucky’s never heard before.

He wraps his hand around the base and slides his mouth down the shaft. Glances up to see Steve staring down at him like he’s the most amazing thing in the world, reddened mouth open and panting.

He chooses a slow, steady rhythm, twisting his hand up each time he bobs his head down. When Steve’s encouraging moans break down into wordless sounds, he goes faster, shallower, though every five strokes or so he slows a little and tries to get as much of Steve’s cock inside his mouth.

Eventually Steve taps him urgently on the shoulder. He’d planned to do as Steve as done, but then gets a different idea, and regretfully lets Steve slip out of his mouth, though his hand remains around the base, stroking firmly.

“You close, Steve?” He kisses the slit, licks at the precome that clings to his lips.


“Come on me, Steve,” growls Bucky. Tightens his hand and strokes harder. Drops his mouth open and flicks his tongue out at the head. “I want you to come on my face.”

That does it—Steve yells out a sharp “Bucky!” and shoots all over Bucky’s cheeks, nose, mouth. He’s pretty sure there’s some in his hair, too. Luckily Bucky had the wherewithal to close his eyes at the last moment.

He grins up at Steve, and makes a show of licking around his lips. He spots a drop of come clinging to the hair over his forehead.

“Not bad, Rogers,” he says.

Steve rolls his eyes and pulls Bucky up. Kisses him firmly on the mouth. Bucky smells of Steve’s come and loves it. Then Steve licks his own come off Bucky’s cheek, and shares the taste with Bucky.

“Fuck,” breathes Bucky wholeheartedly. “Didn’t realize you’re so filthy, Steve.”

“You love it,” says Steve.

Bucky lightly nips Steve’s bottom lip. “Yeah, I do.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

To see translations, please hover over the text.

WINTER SOLDIER

Barnes finds himself staying close to Rogers Steve in the following days. The Captain does not act differently from usual, but Barnes can sense a subtle, deep-sitting relief in him, an unassuming mix of contentment and cheer. As usual, he hasn't been aware of any uncertainty or anxiety in Steve until they are no longer present.

He himself is not entirely unaffected.

He waits for the emergence of further memories, half expectant and half dreading. His brain, on the other hand, seems to have decided the breakthrough is sufficient for the time being.

He has dreams, instead. Most of them are indistinct clouds of sensations and emotions, though he does experience sequences of relative clarity, fragments of moments and interactions devoid of context. He is surprised to find himself itching to question future-Rogers on some of them.

The men greet the apparent reparation of Steve and Bucky's relations with unapologetic and barely-restrained glee. Barnes does not question the mound of snacks he discovers one morning in his pack, only dumps half of it into Steve's pack.

"They must have traded for the remaining rations of most of the camp, to get so many," says Steve, looking up from the letters he is reading. He has taken to reviewing less urgent material while sitting up in bed. Somehow the handful of feet between the desk and Steve's cot feel more significant than they are, and he can't help but be pleased by the Captain's closer proximity.

"As if half the guys out there wouldn't give up their chocolate for Captain America, if they were asked," points out Barnes, snorting. "And your fault, anyway, since smokes and drink are useless on you."

Steve makes a vaguely disagreeing noise. He finishes reading his current letter and sighs heavily.

From his own cot, Barnes can see a little of the handwriting pressed into the paper. "Kid letter?"

"Yeah. There's a new radio show on the adventures of Cap, apparently." Steve flops onto his back. The cot's frame creaks in protest. "They always write to assure me they're working hard and listening to their parents, because that's what Cap wants them to do, and they want to be like Cap one day."

"Sounds like a fine ambition, to me," says Barnes.

Steve lets out a frustrated snort. "C'mon, Buck, the two of us never listened to what our moms said unless it was something we were going to do anyway. I mean, I get why they tell the kids that. I understood from the start that Cap is bigger than me. Bigger than my voice and my body." His voice has steadily dropped in volume, the both of them conscious of the lack of soundproofing in canvas walls. Barnes wonders if Steve ever realizes when he goes too quiet for non-enhanced hearing to
pick up. "It just makes me feel like a fraud, 's all."

Barnes frowns. "Last I checked, you're definitely Captain America, pal."

"Jerk. I mean— Captain America isn't me, and people think I'm all sorts of things I'm not." He shuffles the sheaf of letters. "Like all these kids wanting to be Cap. They're told they'll grow up to be just like Captain America, if they work hard enough and behave themselves—" Steve smiles at Barnes's snort, "—and it's not entirely true. I got into this because I wanted to do what's right. These kids ask me what it was like growing up and all I can remember is being tired and in pain and angry all the time."

"Nothing wrong with being angry at your illness," says Barnes quietly. *Feel anything you like as long as it keeps you going*, a part of him wants to say; he's not entirely sure that's right, though.

Steve barrels on. "I'm like this now because Dr. Erskine picked me for his serum. Cap was this character out of some politician's head, because Erskine had been killed before he could make an army of guys like me. A whole bunch of stuff made me into Captain America, and none of it was because I did all my exercises and listened to my local representative."

Barnes contemplates this quietly. "'s not true, though, that you're not Captain America. They gave you the name and the tights, but you made him more than just some sad sack selling war bonds. If they'd put anybody else in that costume, he'd still be parading around Stateside punching a fake Hitler in the face."

Steve chuckles humourlessly. "I might have kept on doing it, if I hadn't heard about Azzano and the 107th." Bizarrely, this seems to cheer him up, and he grins at Barnes. "I owe you and Peggy, too, you know. You're always giving me the kick in the butt that I need, somehow. Reminding me of what's important."

It takes Barnes some effort not to stare at him.

"Though I'd appreciate it if you don't put me through that again," says Steve. Another heavy sigh. "I am grateful. That I could be here in time, that I'm able to make a difference."

*How did you do this??* writes Barnes into Bucky's notebook. It bothers him, the thought of Steve losing himself to Captain America.

And yet, on reflection—Barnes does know how it is to need to be useful.

"I think Cap isn't really about what you *are*," says Barnes slowly, staring at the ceiling. "I think Cap is about what you want to *be*."

It starts out with: "Command wants us to have a look at a supposed ammunition depot in the middle of the woods in Austria. It might be ordinary ammunition for the Nazis, but there has been enough HYDRA-related activity in the region that it might be something else. Even if it's just storage, each energy gun we take from them is one less shooting at our forces."

"Maybe the intel was wrong," suggests Morita four hours later, after they'd scoured the area in question a third time. The first pass had yielded a fresh-faced HYDRA scout who couldn't have been older than sixteen; the Captain had done his best to apprehend him quickly, but the boy still managed to bite into his poison capsule. The effect of the incident over their unit is palpable.
"The scout we found didn't have more than half a day's supply on him," says Rogers.

"Split up, then?" says Barnes.

"I don't like it, but we can't go back until we're sure there's nothing to find. Bucky, take Dernier and Gabe, start from this stream. Monty and Morita, you get the part with the meadow. Dum Dum, you're with me, we'll go back to that rock. Meet up back here in 90 minutes. If you find anything, do not engage."

He should have heard it, he will think later. He had been distracted, paying more attention to Jones and Dernier's movements, aware of the possibility of mines. The Winter Soldier never had to concern himself with the wellbeing of the teams he was assigned.

The whirring of the artillery gun adjusting into position registers nearly too late. He doesn't bother to visually locate it, instead uses that precious second to grab Dernier and Jones by their packs and hurl them bodily over a shallow outcropping of dirt and rocks.

Bullets hit the ground around him. Rifle shots. He turns. Where is- a large gun sounds, but it's not the artillery gun at all.

Pain explodes around his abdomen. He stares down at the long length of metal sticking out of his body. Harpoon. A hard pull, his feet leaving the ground, and pain howls through him hard enough to grey his vision.

He doesn't realize he's been pulled into the large concealed dugout until he hears German words being shouted around him. He coughs and spits, dirt and dust joining the tang of copper in his mouth.

Assessment. Intestinal laceration, severe internal bleeding. Spinal column: INTACT.

He grins bloodily at the soldier pointing a rifle at him. Says, in German, "Whoever shot me is going to wish he'd aimed better."

There are only six of them. He takes down five in less than a minute. He's a second too late for the sixth; the soldier gets out a "Hail—" before the blade of a bayonet from the third soldier pierces his throat. It's not until he falls backwards that Barnes sees the grenade in one hand, its pin in the other.

Shuffling and dropping to the far end of the dugout jars the harpoon painfully. A stack of sandbags shield him from most of the flying dirt and pieces of crate.

There's a strange groaning sound. Barnes has a moment to notice the cracks in the dry dirt beneath him, and then it's as if the entire floor of the dugout separates from the walls of compacted dirt and sandbags. Barnes grips the harpoon to keep from it from moving, glad he'd thought to cut the rope attaching it to the gun earlier, but the metal is slick from his blood, and he lets out a muffled scream when he hits the ground. Muscle memory has at least kept him on his feet and partially crouched to take the impact.

Whatever he's fallen into is dark. It feels empty, though, and the unmistakable smell of gunpowder suggests this is the ammo store they'd been looking for. He breathes for long, long minutes, teeth gritted to the point of pain. He looks up. He hasn't fallen too far, perhaps ten feet. The destroyed dugout is a long, roughly oval shape in the dark ceiling.
He looks down. He is bleeding heavily, and the harpoon is preventing his body from healing. There is a chance that the blood loss will kill him, if he removes it, but he thinks his body will heal fast enough to prevent that. In any case, he cannot be found with the harpoon still inside him. There would be no way to explain his rate of healing from such an injury.

Hands shaking, he attempts to pull the harpoon out. His body has already started healing around it, tissue and ligaments knitting close even in that short time. He weakly shoulders off his pack, and takes a moment to put the collar of his coat into his mouth, biting down. He pushes the harpoon in through his front as far as he can, then finishes pulling it out of his back; it had pierced him through the front and the hooked head would cause more damage going the other way.

The harpoon clangs to the floor to his side; concrete, he dimly notes. The bleeding continues with renewed gusto. He looks at his pack, noting the rip caused by the harpoon, and pulls out a spare shirt. He wads it up, lies down, and pushes it behind him, roughly where the exit wound is. He pulls out some bandages, tries to fold them but his hand is shaking too much, so he just bundles them in his fist and presses the cloth to the wound at the front.

"—je le vois pas bouger."

"—not be dead. Bucky! BUCKY!"

He opens gritty eyes he hadn't been aware of closing. The light in the ceiling is wiggling strangely. No, those are heads. Gabe and Frenchy. He starts to lift one hand and gets a sickbadwrong feeling, so he lifts the other. It's heavier than he remembers it being. Numb. He waves at them. "Hey, fellas."

"I swear to God, Barnes," shouts Gabe, and wow, he never knew Gabe's voice could do that. "Are you— just hang on tight, okay, I'm gonna get the others."


Next thing he knows, there's a pair of hands trying to shift him. He tenses up instinctively.

"It's just me," says a voice. "I'm your friend, Bucky Barnes. Safe now." A strange cold part of his mind identifies he voice as, indeed, friend. The French words make him uneasy, but the doctors never spoke to him in French, only to each other over his head if they did happen to be French-speaking. "You are gravely injured. You must let me help you."

He licks his lips. "It hurts."

A slight hesitation, then a hand slides under his back, adjusting something that is stuck to his skin, and another hand presses down on his front, on top of his own. "We must keep you from bleeding out until help arrives." The hands are gentle but the skin on them is rough, from working with dangerous things.

"Why do you like to make things explode?" he asks. "Is it the fire? Or the danger?"

Fingers tighten around his hand. "It is work that takes a great deal of skill. And each time it is a gamble. The slightest mistake, or even bad luck, bad wiring, and your work can kill you. I expect that is how I will go, one day."

"I'm very hard to kill," Bucky says sadly. "A lot of people have tried. I don't think I like killing, but I'm good at it. I don't know what that makes me."

"It makes you someone who doesn't like killing," says Frenchy, matter-of-factly.
"There are a lot of things I don't remember, and a lot of things I want to forget. Bad, bad things," he mumbles. Then his eyes fly open. "Don't tell Steve. I don't want him to know—he thinks of me as the boy he grew up with. I'm not, not anymore."

A long pause. "I think there are a lot of things you have not told the Captain. And I am not the sort to tell on a friend." Fabric brushing over concrete. Frenchy shifting position, though his hands don't slacken in their pressing. "Have you ever lived in Paris? Your accent is very accurate."

"Me? I'm just a boy from Brooklyn."

He actually is feeling a bit better, though he still hurts a lot. But then there are more voices, and one of them distinctly says Steve. He waves his free hand again, because Mrs. Rogers always said it's bad for Steve to get worked up. He's exhausted, though; he stops clinging to the light so hard, and lets himself slip away into the dark.

"Do you think he knows?"

"Ah, who can tell? Sometimes I think he does, and then other times I think he doesn't."

"Look, Jim, you know I agree with all the stuff you've said, I'm not gonna go blabbin' to anyone outside of us. But—the harpoon went right through him. I saw it with my own two eyes. Never mind that he sussed out the guns were there before they fired on us."

"Since when did they start making harpoon rifles?"

"It's for hunting. And it would have been better if he'd known about them before they fire"

"Frenchy is being a critic, as usual, but agrees with me in general terms."

"There is an awful lot of blood. We'll have to say it's from the HYDRA soldiers."

"That's another thing. He had a harpoon in him and he took down a whole team, on his own, and falls right into the storage bunker we'd been looking for, and then he pulls the harpoon out of himself. It's the kind of thing you can't even tell anybody 'cause no one would believe you."

"I don't know, they believed that whole business with Cap and the brothel and the exploding garters."

"I think that's 'cause Cap volunteered to dress up again and re-enact the whole thing."

"All I can say is, I've never been so glad that man knows how to treat chafing."

Sparks of pain accompany a gentle tugging around his middle.

"How's it looking?"

"Real bad bruising, but the wound at the back has almost closed. That's lucky, we can say the harpoon hit him but didn't get very far. The front hole is also closing, look."

"Man, that's just creepy."

"Wait, how far will he have healed by the time we reach camp?"
"Shit."

"More urgent question—what are we gonna tell Cap?"

"How long until he's expecting us?"

"Quarter hour?"

"It'll look like a regular bullet wound by then."

"I've got it. Let's change his shirt. Gabe, get his spare out of his pack. We say he hit his head falling down here. A couple of us volunteer to carry him back to the car while Cap examines this place. That'll give him another half hour at the least. No one mention any gun wounds."

"This is the most stupid plan I've ever heard."

"Probably means it'll work, then."

He feels weak and nauseated, but he forces out a groan.

"Oh good, he's conscious. Did you hear any of that, Bucky?"

Talking seems a little beyond him. Luckily not all of him is a mass of pain and bruising. He rotates his left hand around the wrist, the thumb sticking up.

"You heard the Sarge, boys."

He trails after the short figure in a white lab coat, ever the silent shadow. His entire left side hurts. Either repair-work or modifications, he thinks. He does not show any sign of the pain; to do so would only invite more.

The scientist is speaking to other scientists. He hears the words though he does not wish to. If there was a way to turn off his hearing, he would do it. Maybe if there was nothing for him to forget, they would not have to wipe him.

"An ingenious little device—" the scientist is saying, then his words are drowned out as they pass through a busy construction area. Down on a lower level, a single-man submersible is being lowered onto a large cradle. Assessment: significant water damage. Technicians and scientists are scurrying around it.

They go through another door and it becomes quiet enough for him to hear the scientist again. "— can open it, and when he does, the device will use the override code on him, revert him back to Protocol 1. Just in case he falls into the wrong hands, you see."

A loud mechanical whine comes from the room with the submersible. The sound seems to reach right into his shoulder, making the ache worse. He thinks he can even feel it in his left arm, metallic plates shuddering in sympathy. The ache spreads from his side to his middle.

The hurt sharpens, and he wakes.

"Easy, Buck," says Steve. "The guys told me what happened." The world bounces, jolting him painfully, and Barnes realizes they must be in the car.
"My head," he mumbles. He meets Falsworth's eyes, nods a thank-you. "Water?"

A canteen sloshes its way over to him. Slosh, slosh, plink.

BUCKY BARNES

“Bucky.” Steve’s lower lip is flushed red from him worrying at it. “There’s something I have to tell you. Something I should have told you from the start.”

Bucky gives him a steady look. "Figured there was something." He shuffles up the couch. He waits for Steve to sit in the vacated spot, and for his feet to get tucked into their usual body heater, before he says, "Who is it, then?"

Steve stares at him, as if Bucky’s not been able to tell when he’s lying for as long as they’ve known each other. “You knew?”

“Steve.” He waves a hand to encompass the entire apartment. The sun has mostly set and only a couple of lamps are on, giving the open space a quiet, intimate feel. “There’s a ghost in this place. You have a bedroom that has tread marks on the carpet going into it, but it’s been locked since I got here, and I've never seen you or Sam go in. And your team—just the way they act, sometimes. Like they expect me to be someone else.”

Steve lets out a heavy sigh. He holds up a couple of thick and battered files he’d brought with him, and places them on the coffee table. He grabs Bucky’s hand, the fingers of which have been tapping the back of the couch incessantly, and Bucky is shocked to find Steve's hands sweaty and clammy, like when he was small and sickly.

He swallows. Tries for a jocular, “It’s that bad?” Steve Rogers reacts to fear by flinging himself at the source of the trouble. Bucky's can't remember ever seeing him like this, like he's vying to run away.

The line of Steve's mouth bows and thins. “Yeah. Yeah, it's bad.”

"Then tell me."

Steve takes a deep breath. “It was a HYDRA project. Codename Winter Soldier. SHIELD became aware of it fifty years ago, but it was going on for longer than that…”

Bucky lets Steve talk for an hour straight. He bites his tongue, quite literally, to keep from asking questions. Steve finally goes silent, Bucky stares at nothing for a while, and then picks up the files. Steve silently puts them in the order he should read them.

The silence feels heavier, after Steve's voice, or maybe it's sludge around Bucky's insides, the combined buzzing and dead weight inside his head.

He flinches at the photos. Reads the words but can feel them drifting past without catching. That's why he likes to have Steve telling him things first, because he can't help but listen to Steve.

He doesn’t know how long it takes him to get through the files. He doesn’t really know why he goes through them, especially when none of it is really sinking in. Steve sits next to him the whole while,
refilling their water from the jug when necessary. He must be bored, he must have a million other things he can be doing, but he never once looks anything other than perfectly content to sit there for as long as Bucky needs him to.

"I need some air," Bucky announces, and heads for the elevator.

He's not surprised to find the roof already occupied. Clint only glances at him before looking back out over the city. Bucky interprets it as a courtesy notice that Clint knows he's there; he doubts Clint would be so obvious about checking who's invading his nest.

The two of them sit in silence for a while.

“All of you knew,” says Bucky. “This whole time.” His memory brings up a lot of little details that had gotten washed out by all the brightness and newness of the new-old world. “The clothes that fit me. Tony having my measurements. The way you guys look at me, sometimes. I’ve overheard people talking about a man with a metal arm. I figured it was like the Red Skull, just another bad guy for Captain America to fight.”

“Steve wanted to tell you from the start.” Clint rolls his shoulders. “Would it make you feel better if the rest of us apologized for lying to you?”

Bucky chews on his lower lip. With Steve, he might have said something stupid, picked a fight just because he can. Clint, though—for all that Clint acts like a regular, laid-back guy, there’s an undercurrent of control in him that reminds Bucky of Natasha. Clint won’t let himself be baited, not in this.

He eventually admits, “No.”

“Good, ’cause I’m not sure any of us would.” Clint huffs. “Not that lying to you wasn’t shitty. I’m actually surprised Cap lasted as long as he did. But it seemed the kinder thing to do, to let you enjoy being here without have the Winter Soldier hanging over you.”

"I don't—" Bucky rubs a hand over his face. "Half the stuff about him in those files don't seem real. If I didn't know Steve —and the rest of you, I guess, now— I wouldn't believe any of it."

“It’s a little strange, actually,” says Clint. “I mean, you’re Bucky Barnes. When I was young, you were Captain America’s kid sidekick who every kid wanted to be. I have an older brother, you know, and sometimes we’d play at being you and Cap. And then I got into this business, and there’s this bogeyman called the Winter Soldier. I heard all sorts of rumours about his kills; wanted to meet him, except that might mean we’re trying to kill each other. So you being one guy—’complicated’ doesn’t cover it.”

"I've been wondering, you know, why here and now?" says Bucky. "Why would some alien device bring me to this place, to this time? It makes a little more sense now. I kept wondering if there was something I'm supposed to do, or some knowledge I need to bring back with me."

"Instead it's because you were stupid enough to touch the same multidimensional alien tech twice," says Barton with a grin.

"It's not like I knew what it was," grouses Bucky, though he ends up smiling a little bit.
They lapse into silence again. His left arm twinges when he rests on it for too long. He absolutely
does not think about one day not being able to feel anything there. A piece of him literally gone for
good.

"Would you say I was a good man?" asks Bucky tightly. "I mean, not me-me. The guy who lives
here."

"We call him Barnes," says Barton. "Mostly because he seems like he'd stick a knife through anyone
who called him Bucky. Not counting Cap."

Bucky gives him a horrified look. "God. How can you—be all right with living with a murderer?"

Barton looks uncertain. "Well, actually, sticking a knife through any of us probably won't kill us. If
that helps. Even squishy normals like 'Tasha and I, we just take care to get hit in the non-lethal areas.
Maybe the only one who won't do so well is Tony, if you catch him outside his suit. But then he'll
just sic his robots on you. And the entire Tower."

Bucky scrubs a hand through his hair, hard enough to scratch his scalp. The sting barely registers
through the roiling in his gut. He has to take deep breaths until it calms down some; throwing up
from the top of the Tower would be incredibly mortifying and probably also get him into some sort
of trouble.

After a long moment, Barton says, "No. I wouldn't call Barnes a good man."

Bucky nods bleakly, biting down on his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

Barton nudges him, shoulder-to-shoulder, until Bucky looks at him. "Barnes isn't a good man. But he
datails to be, and he's doing all he can to figure out what that means. And that, my friend, can make
all the difference."

Steve's shadow falls through the doorway. Bucky doesn't hear a sound but he can read his hesitation,
clear as day.

"C'mere, punk," sighs Bucky, shifting to make space even though there's plenty of bed for three guys
their size.

They fall silent, Bucky draped over Steve like a blanket. Maybe clinging a little.

Then Steve whispers, "I'm sorry," into the top of Bucky's head.

Bucky can't find it in him to speak, but he presses his fingers into Steve's sides. Remembers a time
when both hands could span Steve's ribs, and he'd been the one holding Steve because he had the
body heat to spare, and he'd been helpless as Steve choked down his anger and disappointment, at
the world and at other people and at his own body. Bucky had touched him just like this, his thumbs
following the lines of Steve's ribs over and over, speaking skin-to-skin, it's okay.

It distracts him until it doesn't. He feels Steve's arms close around him, his own personal shield
against the world, and he realizes his body's shaking. He lets it happen because he can't stop it, can't
stop the fear from stripping his skin and choking his lungs and picking apart every piece of him.

"I'd rather be dead," he confesses, a long time into the dark. "I was glad to be dead. I kept thinking,
at least I didn't end up back there. At least they didn't get me again."

It hurts to swallow. The tips of his fingers are cold, all the edges of him touched by ice.

He bites down on his lower lip, feels his teeth breaking skin. Confesses, "I'd rather be dead."

The Steve of the past, he knows, would have been appalled. Bucky would never have dared say that kind of thing to him; not to the Steve who'd fought off illness after illness, who'd refused be content with the lot that he'd been given, who pulled himself back up again every time he got hit.

This one, though. This Steve holds him tighter, almost crushing, and whispers, "I know."

Is it recording, JARVIS? How do I look? Wait, don't answer that.

So. Uh.

Hey.

At first I thought I was making these messages for Steve, for after I go back. But it never felt right- I never felt like I was talking to him, really.

Now I get it, I guess. Turns out, I've been making these for the Winter Soldier. For myself, some might say. Except you're not me, are you?

It wasn't exactly a lie, that I died. From what Steve says, you don't remember being me much, and you don't even like all the same things I do. You have my face and my body and little bits of me. Steve thinks those bits confuse you more than anything. You'd probably prefer to be an actual clean slate.

But, see, you went through all of that, you lived through things no human being should ever have to, and at the end of it—you found your way back to him. You're looking out for him even when you're not entirely solid yourself. And that's—if there was one part of myself I'd save, one part I'd hang onto while there was a single breath in my body, it'd be the part that knows Steve.

So, what I'm saying is— thank you. For surviving, for getting out. For sticking with him now when I'm not around to.
Chapter 12

WINTER SOLDIER

He observes Agent Carter speaking with the young officer who would be accompanying her on the op.

Ten minutes later, the officer walks off, and he takes the opportunity to approach her. "Agent Carter?"

Carter looks up and frowns at him. "Sergeant Barnes. Aren't you supposed to be in the infirmary?"

"Turns out I wasn't as badly off as they thought. Felt all better after a little nap." Barnes stands at rest, inviting an inspection.

"Are you sure? Captain Rogers seemed quite worried about you." Her voice is tinged with the doubt of an officer too accustomed to soldiers attempting to gloss over the truth.

Various parts of his body are, in fact, starting to twinge, and the harpoon wound is burning, but on the scale of complaints he has been trained to ignore, these barely even register; he straightens his posture even further. "I'm physically fit, ma'am, the docs will tell you so. I am also happy to demonstrate by other means, if you like."

"I'm sure you are," says Carter dryly, her tone taking on a sheen of exasperation it hadn't had before. It takes him a moment to sense that she must have read some sort of sexual innuendo in his words. He is momentarily wrong-footed, but he remembers this behaviour is consistent with Bucky Barnes. It seems to reassure Carter, in any case. "How can I help you, Sergeant?"

"I couldn't help but overhear you speaking with General Philips earlier about intercepting a HYDRA exchange in Prieur, a French village twenty miles from here. Then word spread that they're looking for a volunteer who can speak a bit of French. I was wondering if you would consider taking me."

Carter narrows her eyes, then shakes her head. "I don't know what possessed them to pitch the command tent so near to the aid station."

"To be fair, I may have been hiding outside the tent at the time." He grins. "The nurses seem to think that a man should keep taking shots even when he's right as rain."

"They do, do they?" Carter sighs. "Look, Sergeant Barnes, I appreciate you coming forward, and I understand you feel obligated due to your friendship with Captain Rogers, but we already have a volunteer, who'd spent his childhood in Marseille."

"He's not good enough," says Barnes flatly. "He's too nervous, he watches you too much, he's too twitchy. And you know it."

Carter gives him an unimpressed look, and doesn't seem surprised that he'd been watching. "Be that
as it may, he was the first we found with the right level of clearance, and he speaks French.”

“Mon français c’est amélioré depuis que je suis venu en Europe,” says Barnes. Rogers had made a point of ensuring Bucky’s security clearance is the same as Captain America’s, which Carter must know, so he doesn’t even bother addressing that point. “Tant qu’on me demande pas trop les détails sur l’histoire locale, je pense que je devrais m’en sortir.”

"So I see," says Carter, her eyebrows raised high. "Your accent is Parisian, but it will not hurt our cover for people to assume you're from there." She tilts her head. "Captain Rogers mentioned that Dernier has been teaching your lot French. I would not have expected native fluency in a matter of months."

Barnes affects a shrug. "What can I say? I'm a quick study."

She looks doubtful for another long moment, then sighs and gestures for him to follow her. "Very well. Let's bring it up with Phillips."

Phillips is at his desk, poring over stacks of files, and he looks Barnes over closely after Carter proposes the change in the assignment.

"Are you sure you're up for this, son?" asks Philips. "Your unit practically carried you into camp not two days ago."

"Yes, sir," says Barnes. "The doctor said it was not as bad as it looked, and I might have been affected more by a combination of fatigue and insufficient nutrition than the actual injury. I feel right as rain now, sir."

"And you are satisfied with his skills in regards to this op, Agent Carter?"

It shouldn't be any different from the many assessments he's been subjected to in the past, but he can't help feeling a gleam of pride when she says, "Yes, sir," without hesitation.

"Well, I'll take a known element over an unknown one any day." Philips closes the file at the very top of the stack. "I was referring to you, Sergeant Barnes, in case it wasn't clear."

"Yessir."

"I'm just surprised, is all, because none of you Howlies are exactly known for your —shall we say, inclination— for covert operations."

"I understand, sir."

"But Agent Carter has better instincts for operations than I do, plus she's the active agent for the op, so if she will take you, then you've got my approval."

"Thank you, sir," says Barnes, echoed shortly by Carter.

They change into clothes that a middle-class husband and wife might wear in expectation of a jaunt through the countryside, lightly muddied around the edges. Stark himself shows up to arm them.

"If I were a better man, I'd tell Cap you're stepping out with his girl," says Stark with a smirk.
Barnes sees, out of the corner of his eye, the slight thinning of Carter's lips. He considers his options. "Agent Carter."

"Yes, Sergeant?" Metal slams against metal on the slide of the rifle in her hand.

"Permission to deliver a kick to Mr. Stark's shins, ma'am. As a precautionary measure, should he be considering divulging mission intelligence without approval from command."

"All right, all right, I was only joking." Stark pushes a rifle into Bucky's hands—a sniper rifle, for him. "Both you and your best pal get real prickly when it comes to girls, anyone ever tell you that?"

"It's a wonder women can even stand to be around you," says Peggy dryly. "We'll be leaving the rifles in the car, naturally, but the Sergeant should have at least a pistol on his person."

"I'll take a couple of knives too," adds Barnes.

They drive to a friendly farmstead and switch to a different car. The farmers had helpfully filled up the gas tank and included a spare canister. They load the rifles into the back and cover them with a dark cloth. Carter tosses him the keys and directs him with a look to turn the car on, while she thanks the farmers for their assistance.

The drive to the town is mostly done in silence, until Carter begins questioning him on his cover. In French. He answers her easily; as his commanding officer for this operation, it is only sensible for her to check his confidence in the language and in his cover. He looks at her and cannot help but be reminded of an old woman in an elderly home; she is at once a foot and a half to his left, and seventy years ahead. He is surprised to find that the comfortable quiet feels not unlike what he had felt, sitting by her bedside.

"How long have we been married?"

"Five years."

"Where did we meet?"

"In London. I was there for work and you were visiting relatives."

The village is typical for this area of French countryside: pale stone houses huddled around a central plaza, with two main roads leading out of it in opposite directions. Such places always seem, to Barnes, aware of their own longevity; of having stood for many lives of men and fully intending to continue existing for many generations more.

"Let me do most of the talking," says Carter. She gives him a look. "Did you also overhear what we suspect the information being exchanged will be about?"

He decides it does him no good to pretend he doesn't. "Plans of some of Zola's older designs, to be given to other branches of HYDRA. Weapons, aircraft. Submersibles."

"That is what we are hoping for. If we can also get information on these other HYDRA branches, all the better."

"Do we know what these agents look like?"
"Only one of them. Carl Gertler is a minor engineer from one of Hitler's projects. We did not know for sure he was HYDRA until our contact informed us of this meeting."

"How reliable is this contact?"

"To be honest?" Carter sighs. "I'm not entirely confident about him, either. Marcellin Ricard. A lot of his family is in the French Resistance, which is how he came in contact with the SSR, but... my instincts say that his loyalty is to his own interests, first."

"You think he'd sell us out?"

"For the right incentive? Yes."

"HYDRA is pretty good at providing incentive." Barnes gives her curious look. "Have you met him?"

"Once," she admits. "That's why I was rather keen to get this mission."

"Because if he does compromise us, you won't be exposing other agents to HYDRA," reasons Barnes.

"Exactly." A pause. "Also, if Ricard is on the fence about betraying us, perhaps knowing the person he's about to throw to the wolves will make him reconsider."

Barnes finds himself smiling. "You are a very dangerous woman, Agent Carter."

"Thank you, sergeant."

He parks the car just off the road at the outskirts of town. According to their local contact, the exchange will be taking place at a small restaurant just off the central square. He'd spent the drive consolidating his mental picture of his cover, and he adopts the character now, as if slipping on a new coat.

He feels his shoulders hunching over slightly, his posture contracting to make him seem smaller than he is. He looks at Carter and notes the way she's shed the coiled tension in her body, made her movements looser. He makes himself feel the itchiness of the stubble on his face, the ever-present ache from the extra weight of the arm; minor discomforts he no longer notices, but will serve him now in grounding his cover's surly demeanour.

He offers his arm to Carter. "Wife?"

"Husband." Only his extensive training and enhanced senses tell him of her nervousness; she shows no outward sign as she takes his arm.

They walk sedately down a wide street. There are few signs of the German occupation. Though the surrounding countryside bears marks of the Allied advance in recent weeks, the village appears to have escaped the fighting and the bombings. Compared to much of Italy, this part of France appears practically untouched.

The restaurant is bright and surprisingly busy, for the hour. Barnes wonders if it has anything to do with the relatively recent reclamation of this part of the country.
"Ah, Lisette."

The both of them turn at the rasping voice calling Carter's cover's name.

"Monsieur Ricard," says Carter brightly. They exchange the customary kisses for greetings. "I am so happy you live along our route; it is a long drive back to Paris." Her French has a slightly different slant to it now than when they had been practicing in the car. "You remember my husband, Edmond."

"Hello." Barnes shakes Ricard's hands.

"I am pleased you are able to come along this time, Monsieur Delage," says Ricard.

They seat themselves around a table and Ricard orders a bottle of wine. Barnes considers the possibility of the wine being poisoned or drugged; he doubts they'd put in anything strong enough to kill him, but he doesn't want to risk Carter. His involvement in the mission has not brought on any dire visions, yet her death must trigger the reset that Little Tale mentioned, since he meets her in the future and knows she lives to old age.

He watches the bottle being opened and thinks, with a sick feeling, of all the ways a person might be hurt without being killed, without even bearing visible marks.

He takes his wine glass and drinks half of it, holding Ricard's gaze the entire time. He is glad to have a cover that does not require politeness or sociability. Carter only sighs, in the manner of a wife resigned to her husband's habits.

He detects nothing odd in the wine, and communicates as much to Carter by patting her absently on the hand. *Tap, tap.* It makes him think of Future-Rogers, and he feels a pang of regret for the future that could have been.

"You said in your letter that some youths have been causing mischief on your farm," says Carter.

"Ah, yes. I've seen them twice now, the little bastards." Ricard's nervousness grows more noticeable.

"They seem to favour the south-west fences, right along the border of my lands."

Barnes recalls the layout of the restaurant. He and Carter are facing roughly north-west, and the mention of 'borders' probably refers to the wall that runs perpendicular to their table. He can see Carter glancing at the reflection on their dark wine bottle. There are two men seated in the rough direction indicated, but they do not seem to be saying anything at the moment.

"Young people these days," says Carter. "Have they done anything new?"

"No. But I am sure they will break more than fences, one of these days."

Barnes reminds himself to retain his bored expression. Are Ricard's words a warning? A threat? The way Carter shifts next to him tells him she is having similar concerns.

That's when the possible HYDRA agents behind them begin to talk, their voices deliberately low and pitched to not travel, so he leaves Ricard to Carter and focuses his hearing.

"Your men are not losing their nerve, are they?" The man's French is good, but the slightest hint of a German accent identifies him as Carl Gertler.

"No. Certainly not. Their dedication to the cause is absolute." A pause. "It is what you get when you put city boys into the woods. They hear silly tales from the locals and develop... superstitious."
"Ah. What you speak of is not unknown to me. No doubt it's the work of local resistance who are conspiring with the Allies."

"Yes, I have told them it is only part of the enemy's propaganda."

"Good. You have done well. In fact, I shall reveal to you that some of the leadership have taken note of the effectiveness of this propaganda."

"I did not think he would care about such trivial matters."

"Oh, not him. But others, still far above you and me; they think there is merit in cultivating a... ghost, as it were, of our very own." The voice dips very low, almost to the edge of Barnes's hearing. "It is of particular interest to, let us say, the red star in the east."

Barnes finds it hard to breathe. He nearly starts at Carter's hand closing over his. A fleeting, dizzying thought: if he had not purposefully kept her on his right, if she'd been sitting on his left side, would she realize the arm there is not entirely his own? Maybe he is not really in the past; maybe he has been reliving a memory after all. A dead man's revenge on the ghost using his body.

"You should be careful about these things, Marcellin," says Carter. "It is hard to predict what they will do next. People might get hurt."

"It is too late for that, I'm afraid," says Ricard softly. And Barnes knows: HYDRA has him.

"Who did they take?" asks Barnes outright.

"My cousin," says Ricard. "Well, they killed him. But they still have his family." Ricard coughs. "I am sorry. Truly. You will come with me quietly out the back, yes? Our nasty friends are not particularly careful about civilians."

They pass through the kitchen. Shielded by the noise of pots and dishes and people jostling for limited space, Barnes asks, "Did you lie about the exchange, as well?"

"No. I have not lied at all. That is, in fact, the root of the problem; they found me out, and they asked me if you will be here."

They reach the back of the building. Ricard opens the door and walks into a taller man waiting just outside. Barnes's instincts immediately go on alert, but it's already too late—Ricard goes limp, a black-gloved hand clamped over his mouth. A moment later, his body is dropped to the ground, the knife still jutting out of his chest. A part of Barnes can't help admiring the skill behind the kill.

"The Strategic Science Reserve," says the figure, now in English. Male, mid-forties, military background. Faint Russian accent. He glances at Barnes for a moment and then dismisses him. "We've been expecting you to turn up to one of our little meetings, especially with the Germans' retreat."

"There was no need to kill Ricard," says Carter tightly.

The man shrugs. "He was no longer useful."

Two gunmen in upper windows, another two waiting around the corners of the building. He meets Carter's eyes for a moment. She might not be able to hear the gunmen but she has clearly guessed the one addressing them is not alone. Barnes reviews his options.

Priority: Protect Agent Carter.
The speaker is deliberately drawing their attention to him. Barnes decides to use their tactic against them and steps right up to the man. He can almost hear the rifles adjusting to keep their sights on him.

"Call off your dog, Agent," says the man, sneering.

"No, I don't think I will," says Carter lightly. She somehow manages to sound unconcerned by their predicament, only mildly curious to see what Barnes will do next.

Something inside Barnes twitches at the word 'dog'. It is but one of many names that had been applied to him by one handler or another; this HYDRA agent hadn't even known, the choice entirely coincidental. The Winter Soldier had not cared, had known only obedience. Words made no impression upon the scrambled numbness, no effect on operational efficiency.

But he is not numb anymore.

Combat is as much a matter of strategy as skill. He sees the HYDRA agent give him a second look, perhaps noticing the calluses on his hands from handling guns, perhaps assuming American from sheer statistics. Barnes senses the man's pride in his posture, reads an old injury in the slight irregularity of his stance. He's already seen the agent move faster than might be assumed from his height.

It boils down to this: the man does not know who he is up against.

"Who are you?" asks Carter.

The man smiles at her, predatory. "The fist of HYDRA."

Barnes punches him in the stomach. It would look like a regular punch to anyone watching—except he uses his left hand. Soft things rupture inside the man's body.

A gamble, but he'd guessed that the watching gunmen are all soldiers. A single punch wouldn't register as a particularly aggressive action. Furthermore, the agent has already demonstrated his preference to do his own dirty work, and likely doesn't respond kindly to anyone rushing in to help him.

It would take a few seconds for even the agent to realize he's already a dead man. Barnes uses it to say, "Carter, second floor nine o'clock."

The agent tries to speak and ends up gurgling blood. Barnes grabs him and spins around; the crack of a gun comes from the window directly above the back door. The agent jerks and slumps dead, the bullet meant for Barnes lodged in his chest.

At the same time, Carter has pulled out her pistol and fired. A dark shape falls from a different window.

There are loud voices from inside the house. The gunshots had been heard.

Barnes drops the dead agent and takes out his own pistol. He fires at the far corner of the building. He misses. He stalks forward to close the distance and then hears movement from a different corner. Spins fast enough that the incoming bullet hits only the wild spray of his hair. Carter fires before he can, and hits a gunman hiding behind a parked wagon.

The back door starts to open.
"Help! They are Germans!" shouts Carter. Her gun is nowhere to be seen. "They have killed Ricard!"

This elicits shouts from within the house, and civilians rush outside to see. Barnes neatly evades any questions and possible social interactions, slips back to the front of the restaurant. Carter joins him a minute later, evidently having used her own skills to escape.

"The agents?" she asks, referring to the ones scheduled to perform an exchange.

He shakes his head and is about to suggest going back inside the restaurant when the front door opens and Carl Gertler runs out, evidently spooked by the ruckus. He is in such a hurry that he's still tucking a file into his satchel as he leaves.

"After him," says Carter tersely.

Barnes chases him down two streets, quickly outpacing Carter. But just as he's closing the distance between them, the agent jumps into a parked car and guns it out onto the street.

The sound of more familiar engines rumbles up behind him. Carter had evidently guessed their target's intention and had gone for their car. Barnes throws himself into the passenger's side of the car. Carter shifts gears and tears after their target.

The two cars quickly leave behind the lights of the country village. Barnes and Carter's car handles the uneven terrain well, but it is clear the agent's vehicle has been outfitted. They can't quite go fast enough to catch the other car. If the chase goes on for too long, their car is likely to run out of gas first, if it doesn't hit a fence or

Barnes reaches into the back and pulls up his sniper rifle. Considers the distance.

"Stop the car," he tells Carter.

"We can't let him get away."

"Peggy." His use of her first name surprises her. "Trust me."

A pause. She slams the breaks.

He's rolling sideways out of the car even before it fully stops. He allows instinct to take over, braces the rifle on his left shoulder. The car is a fairly easy target, all things considered; it is large and noisy and moving in a straight line. He takes out the back tire, then either the gas line or something similarly critical near it. The car groans to a stop.

Carter starts their car again, taking off after the man now stumbling out of his useless vehicle. He turns out to have a gun, and he fires it at Carter's car. Carter, naturally, doesn't so much as slow down.

Barnes hears his metal arm adjusting in minute increments, acting as a stand for the rifle; his body stills as he looks through the scope and takes aim. He sees Gertler reach for something in his coat. A grenade. He will either throw it at Carter or use it on himself, to destroy the documents. Both, if he will risk letting Carter close enough. Barnes forces himself to wait for one more second, and then the man walks into the splash of light from his car's headlamps.

The rifle sings. Gertler's body hits the ground.

He sits back and watches Carter search the body, then the man's car. Eventually she leaves both
where they are and drives back to Barnes.

"That must have been five hundred yards," says Carter, once he climbs back in. "In the dark. You didn't even use a stand."

Barnes shrugs. Checks the safety on the rifle before throwing it to the back of the car. "I thought I saw him holding a grenade. Otherwise I'd have let you get him."

"He did have a grenade. I'm fairly certain he meant to use it on me rather than himself, HYDRA policies be damned. But you made the right call, Sergeant." Carter pulls out the file she'd taken from the HYDRA agent and examines a few pages without removing them. "Rogers said you were a good sniper. If the SSR had known you could make impossible shots, we'd have snapped you up from the start."

"I'm fine with being Cap's side-kick, if it's all the same to you."

"You are, aren't you?" She puts the file back into her coat. "Well, if we're lucky, these notes should have details for your next mission. A munitions factory in Sweden that may be building submersibles."

They return their borrowed vehicle to the farmhouse. Carter makes a point of alerting the family there that HYDRA might know about them, which would possibly put them in danger. They do not seem particularly alarmed; but then, half of them had been French Resistance all through the German occupation.

"Sergeant, might I have a word?" asks Carter. He nods and follows her to an empty paddock away from the road and the house.

The click of the safety going off is loud in the otherwise silent night.

"On your knees. No sudden moves," says Carter.

He does as she instructed, holding his hands up to make it clear they are empty.

She holds the gun to his head. "Who are you?"

"My name is James Buchanan Barnes." He almost says, "Steve Rogers is my friend," he's so used to adding it.

"You're not Bucky Barnes."

"I am, actually." A normal person would tremble slightly, he thinks. But if he does, would she think he's putting on a show? What exactly does she suspect?

Her eyes narrow. "Are you HYDRA?"

"No," he says, as firmly as he can.

The faint breeze shifts direction slightly. She isn't wearing perfume, but there is a faint trace of powder, and he remembers a quiet house with a quiet bedroom with a quiet bed.

*If I ever hold a gun to your head...*
He licks his lips. "Tell me about your grandmother's swan."

A pause. "What?"

"Tell me about your grandmother's swan."

A few more seconds pass. Somewhere, an owl hoots. Then the click of the safety. Carter doesn't put the gun away, though. "Stand up."

This is when he would have seized the gun and shot her with it, if he was still HYDRA's and she is his mission target. From the time when he didn't have a name. He stands and holds still.

She gazes at him, her eyes hard and untrusting. "And what do you know of that phrase?"

"Nothin'," he admits. "I was only told that if you ever held a gun to my head, I should ask you to tell me about your grandmother's swan. Didn't realize it could be some kind of code until now, to be honest."

"Yes. And conveniently for you, part of the message is not to ask who had given it to you." She raises her chin. "Give me a good reason to not shoot you anyway."

"I could have killed you at least five times over, by now, if that's what I'm after," he says.

She arches one eyebrow. "Five?"

"No offence meant. For most people, it would have been eleven."

She mulls this over. "Do you intend to sabotage the war effort?"

"No. I'm on your side. Well, I'm after HYDRA, which is the same thing."

Her expression is hard, unconvincing. He remembers Marcellin Ricard, killed so very carelessly and to little purpose.

He meets her eyes and says, simply, "Steve."

He wants to say, I would never hurt him, but it wouldn't be true, no matter how much future-Rogers insists the Winter Soldier had purposefully missed on what should have been multiple kill-shots. He wants to say, HYDRA scrubbed out every drop of Bucky Barnes and yet couldn't get rid of Steve Rogers, but that is hardly something he can take credit for.

She breathes out and presses her lips together, as if she somehow understands, anyway. After a moment, she asks, "Do you love him?"

The question nearly makes him laugh. "With all due respect, ma'am," he says, "that is none of your fucking business." He pauses. "Especially as you already know the answer."

Something in what he said must convince her, because the gun goes back in her holster. "You look like Bucky Barnes, but you're not him."

"Yes and no."

"Captain Rogers will not take kindly to someone kidnapping his best friend, you know."

He can tell her, he thinks. He trusts her ability to keep secrets from Steve, and he knows she understands how some things are simply necessary. She will become a Director SHIELD, after all.
She hears of Bucky's death—she stays on the line with Steve as he crashes into the ice, keeping him company with her voice without giving a hint of the secret that might convince him to come back to her—over years she hears the whispers and wonders and one day the thinnest excuse of a file hits her desk—she can't help trying to find out more and she takes all the precautions she knows—but HYDRA is buried deep and people can't help having people to lose—he comes for her and she meets his eyes and he doesn't understand the remorse he sees because she is the one at the end of the gun—

He frowns for a moment, then tilts his head. "You can't ask me directly about why I'm here, can you? Part of that coded message." He grins outright at her glare. "He'll be back. In about ten days, actually. He'll know something happened but, ah, it's probably best that you don't ask him about it." Not that she would have the chance to, if his calculations of the dates are correct.

She does not appear happy but eventually nods. "Well, you are a stranger who has proven yourself to be extremely dangerous. But I must have trusted whoever gave you that message, so I'll have to rely on their judgement." She narrows her eyes. "If I so much as suspect you mean to do me or my cause harm, however—"

"Understood."

"Fine. Give me your arm and look as apologetic as you can."

Steve isn't in the tent when he gets in. He's not sure why he's disappointed; the Howlies' mission is supposed to take four days, and they've only been gone the two. He takes out the notebook, thinking to update the notes on the most recent events, when his eyes fall on his coat, which had been left at the end of his bunk.

He puts the notebook down and holds up the coat. Investigates the puncture in the back, from the harpoon tip. He should repair it while he can. The spare coat is serviceable and superficially identical, but there's a section of cloth in the bottom that has not been sewn in properly. It occasionally brushes his arm and it is very distracting.

He takes out his sewing and repair kit. The motion of sewing is very soothing, and allows him to let his thoughts wander. He wonders if he should have tried to gain a look at the notes he'd given Carter. The data is likely obsolete in the future but it might still have given him an idea of what to look for. He's still not entirely sure why it is important for him to find the mini-sub—

The dream. He freezes with the needle stuck in the fabric. Zola had been talking about—sleeper codes. Barnes had known there are sleeper codes in the Winter Soldier's protocols, and he'd warned Rogers about their existence. He'd hoped that the destruction of Zola's mainframe would have destroyed them, but he doesn't even believe Zola himself is completely gone.

The sleeper code is kept in a device. Some kind of recording or low-tech computer, maybe.

Revert him back to Protocol 1.

A trap, then. Of course there would be; this is HYDRA.

He looks from the blue coat to the sewing kit, and considers.

The notebook flutters open in the breeze.
"So, we took a vote," says Tony.

Bucky, startled, nearly throws his empty coffee mug at him. A moment later he wishes he had. His kitchen appears to be full of Avengers. He's sort of curious to see if they'd let Stark take a mug in the face.

"We prepare food on that," he tells Barton, who's sitting on the counter.

"We decided you should know," continues Stark, unperturbed, "that Barnes— that is, assassin-you from the present— has been trying to track down this secret HYDRA base that is apparently being more elusive than usual. Of course, the world seems to be riddled with HYDRA bases, they really embrace that whole head-growing motto they like so much, but this particular one is of interest because it supposedly has a store of Fieser Dorsch, which we've been calling submersibles or mini-sub, like the getaway car— boat— used by Heinz Kruger after he killed Erskine."

"Oh." Bucky frowns. He hears Steve coming out of the bedroom, and calls out, "We've got visitors!" because he's a considerate guy.

"Wait, did you two just come out of the same bedroom?" asks Stark.

"Now that you mention it, I don't think we ever found more of those mini-sub," says Bucky.

"Yes, we did," says Steve around a yawn. He stretches his arms behind his back, to the distress of his white shirt. Bucky has no qualms about staring because everyone else is too. "That factory in Poland, where Gabe and you—oh."

"Not me, then," guesses Bucky.

"Sorry, I forgot," says Steve, smiling. The sweetness of it has Bucky suppressing the urge to kick everybody else out so he can kiss it off him.

"Seriously, how long has this been going on?"

"I'm guessing you destroyed that factory?" asks Banner placidly.

"Blew it to kingdom come," says Steve. "But I wouldn't be surprised if a few subs got away. The factory was on a lake, and the underground section had docks for the subs. Someone set off the self-destruct before we could search all the docks, and the whole place started to flood, so we got out of there."

"Did the rest of you know and not tell me? I'm sure it's a breach of your lease, or something."

Natasha pops up behind the counters with a large box of saltines. Bucky hadn't known they had saltines. "Did we sign a lease?"

"Nope," says Barton. He holds out his hand and Natasha passes him a handful of crackers.

Secure Lab 5 and the Little Tale look unchanged since the last time Bucky has been there.
"This is what you meant, isn't it? When you gave me the choice to forget." Bucky turns and leans over the railing along the side of the walkway. He swallows. "What if I can't do it? What if I— run away from the war? Go AWOL."

(—Monty's body, bloody and broken in the snow— Gabe falling back with a bullet hole through his head— Steve screaming as bright blue energy tears him apart, lasting painful seconds longer than others while his body tries to regenerate—)

He must have shouted, because there's a faint ringing in his ears and his hands are gripping the railing hard enough for the metal to creak.

"Sergeant Barnes?"

"I'm fine, JARVIS." He wipes a hand over his face, feels surprised to find his skin damp.

Steve has an early conference call with someone in Europe, so it's just Sam and Bucky for the morning run. It's the first time Sam has visited since Bucky found out about Codename Winter Soldier.

"How are you, man?" asks Sam, telling Bucky with a look that he knows about Bucky knowing.

"Been better," says Bucky.

Sam doesn't ask anything else, and they start on their run. Their route through Central Park is familiar now, and he loses himself in the regular impact of his feet upon the ground.

"Bet you can loop me twice, if you really tried," pants Sam. Bucky knows a dare when he hears one, so he tosses Sam a grin and tells his legs, faster. The burn in his muscles intensifies but not as much as it should, and he's conscious of how tiring it isn't, especially after covering two miles already.

He does loop Sam, tapping him on his right shoulder as he speeds past. He waves back at the hearty shout of, "oh, wipe that smug ass look off your face, I know where you live!"

Bucky stops so suddenly he nearly trips from his own forward momentum.

He bursts into Tony's lab. Tony looks up and gives him an impatient eyebrow.

"What kind of things did Barnes have with him, when he travelled back in time? His cell phone?"

"Aside from his weapons, he doesn't carry much," says Tony. His eyebrows have slid down to a more thoughtful placement, though. "He never brings his cell phone on a mission, which is probably why his phone lasts longer than everybody else's, and besides we have earwigs for internal communication." Tony pulls one out of his own ear. It's flesh-coloured and very small.

"You're wearing that and your head-gear?" says Bucky. "So. These earpieces, would you be able to find one if you lost it? I imagine that happens a lot."

"If you're asking if they have trackers, then yes, yes they do. I swear, a building full of people with special ops training and/or multiple doctorates, and yet the most frequently asked question during mission prep is 'JARVIS can you find my comms'. "

Dum-E pokes at Bucky's left arm. Bucky gives it a gentle pat on the pincher claws. "These
earpieces. I'm guessing they need to be charged for the tracker to work?"

Tony nods, then makes a complicated face and crosses his arms. "The main tracker, yes. I may or may not have installed a secondary tracker as a kind of failsafe, because chargers don't grow on trees and I know too many people who have an astounding talent for stranding themselves out in the middle of nowhere."

"I saw the reports from that thing with the Mandarin, you know."

"I was including myself in that statement!" Tony leans forward. "The secondary tracker only activates once the first one is dead. It listens for a very specific signal, and remains dormant unless it gets it. Only when it gets the signal does it ping back."

"Can you send the signal?"

"For Barnes's tracker? I can, yes." Tony's eyebrows pull upwards again. "You think he planted it somewhere."

Bucky shrugs. "Call it a hunch. All the files say he doesn't give up on his missions."

He waits for Steve to be free, and asks him to accompany them to the Smithsonian.

There, Bucky and Sam hang back while Steve talks to whoever is in charge of the Captain America exhibit. Unsurprisingly, the museum is very happy to let Captain America look at the coat that used to belong to his best friend.

They are taken to a small room, and the coat is brought to them, sans mannequin.

Steve waves Bucky over to the table. Bucky hesitates for a moment, wondering at his life again for a moment, then shakes his head at himself and pats down the front and side of the coat.

The museum official in the corner, his name-tag reading 'CONNOR', makes a small sound, likely appalled at seeing some guy just pawing at a national treasure.

Reasonably sure now that he'd guessed right, he slides out one of his appropriated knives and neatly cuts the stitches around the forever flapping section of cloth. Stitching as straight as his own, he remembers thinking. Hah! Of course they are.

Connor the official makes a noise of outrage.

"Hey, this was mine first, buddy," says Bucky distractedly. He puts the knife away and slips his hand into the opening. Pulls out a piece of paper. He looks at Connor. "Good work on the conservation, though. If this coat hadn't been taken such good care of, this slip of paper probably wouldn't have survived."

Connor just stares at him. Bucky frowns at the paper, then hands it to Steve. "It's just a bunch of numbers and what looks like names."

They return the coat, Bucky making sure to tell Connor on the way out, "Look, I had that thing for over a year, and that flap of cloth was open for all that time. I'd say I just made it more authentic. And it's not like anybody will even notice."
"Oh, they'll notice," says Connor darkly. Bucky imagines him petting the coat later in apology for allowing it to be defaced by its unappreciative owner, but the idea leaves him feeling a bit creeped out because he'd been wearing the coat not all that long ago. Then Connor sighs, glancing briefly at Steve. "Thank you, at least, for giving it back, uh, Sergeant Barnes."

Sam stifles a laugh. Steve is still too busy examining the note. Bucky rolls his eyes and tells Connor, in a conspirational tone, "Well, there's a reason I'm the responsible one, between Steve and me. Don't let anybody tell you different."
"So now is probably a bad time to confess that I really hate the water, right?" pants Jones.

"I thought you got pushed into the river all the time as a kid!" says Barnes.

"Why do you think I hate it?"

They've only just managed to stay ahead of the water that is flooding into the underground tunnels, but Barnes knows that all it would take would be some measure of resistance and one locked door, and they'd run the risk of drowning.

As if the universe had been waiting for him to think it, a heavy metallic clang resounds somewhere up ahead, sounding ominous and final over the roar of the water behind them. He looks around them, considering their options. This section is firmly under the base, the rooms mostly storage or offices, but the previous section had run along the sides of the lake, built to dock a few single-man submersibles.

"Damn, I was hoping I'd heard different," says Jones when they turn the corner and see the thick metal door at the end of the corridor. And half a dozen HYDRA soldiers. The two of them take cover when the soldiers opened fire on them. "Shit, one of them's got an energy gun. How many clips have you got?"

"No time," says Barnes, listening to the gurgle of the lake entering the network of underground tunnels. He looks at Jones. "Do you trust me?"

"You know, between you and Cap, I'm never going to hear someone asking that again without getting shit-ass terrified," says Jones. He turns towards Barnes, all easy willingness. "What do we do?"

Barnes chances a quick glance around the corner and fires a couple of shots from his pistol to scatter the soldiers. "We need to go back the way we came." He takes off down the corridor.

Jones sighs deeply, but follows Barnes without hesitation. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

It takes the soldiers a while to reach the corner, so they are about halfway to the previous section, which is also where they hit water, by the time he hears a shout behind them. The various turnings and branchings of the tunnel system is slowing the flooding, at least, but Barnes knows the pace will increase as the lake-facing tunnels become structurally compromised. He glances at Jones a few times. Jones doesn't look happy, yet he's keeping pace with Barnes, splashing into the water without slowing and clearly intent on ignoring his dislike of it.

"Duck!" he yells, and the two of them rush to either side of that section's door. Jones kicks down several crates against the wall on his side and pushes them. A shot from the energy gun obliterates one of the crates. Barnes takes advantage of the soldiers' momentary focus on Jones to shoot the one with the energy gun. He goes down, and the gun falls into the water with a splash.

"Should those things be getting wet?" asks Jones.

"That's for whoever tries to pick it up next to find out." The submersible docks are on his side. He sidles over to the closest one. As he'd feared, it needs a key of some kind to open the access hatch.
He thinks reaching the water would be enough—they're only trying to escape, they do not need a mini-sub, strictly speaking—but the water is also behind the access hatch.

A bullet ricochets off the metal panel by the side of his head. He ducks back to the cover of the wall by the door. The soldiers are closer, and the water is now past his waist, rising faster.

He fires several times and manages to graze one of them, causing him to stumble, and Jones finishes him off.

"Can you open that thing?" asks Jones, nodding towards the access hatch.

"Yes, but I need a few minutes."

"Do you trust me?"

Barnes looks at Jones. It shocks him, how easily the answer comes. "Is the Pope Catholic?"

"Ha." Jones takes another shot, then efficiently reloads his pistol; some part of Barnes, some part that is always the Winter Soldier, has long noted that Jones is a remarkably speedy reloader, faster even than him. It is data stored in case of future need, the protocol of a weapon for whom everyone may be a potential opponent or target, but it is something for which Barnes feels only admiration. "Yes, Sarge, I'm keeping my weapon dry," says Jones, misinterpreting the reason for Barnes's gaze. "Please open the fucking hatch so we don't drown down here."

Barnes goes back to the lock, draws out the couple of lengths of metal he'd found in one of his coat pockets, realizing that Bucky must have carried them for this exact purpose. He can feel the skin on his back crawling, exposed to enemy guns, and he feels himself bracing for a bullet he won't see coming. He hears Jones firing, keeping the HYDRA soldiers busy; he hears Jones splashing about, leaving his cover to draw attention away from Barnes.

It reminds him that the trust goes both ways, and he tries to work quicker. It occurs to him that he doesn't even know if Bucky had known how to pick locks. Perhaps he had been carrying the tools around in case one of the others needed it.

He's contemplating taking the silicone sleeve off and just punching the damn thing, or even punching it with the sleeve on to test just how good Stark's bio-engineering is, when the lock pin he's been jimmying finally falls into place, and a green light comes on above the hatch.

The next moment, he hears a faint sizzling hum, familiar but slightly off. He turns to see Jones crouched again behind crates, but he'd moved the crates to Barnes' side of the door, and he'd stacked them to cover Barnes more than himself. Jones is looking worried, and he shouts to the HYDRA soldiers, "You might not want to do that—"

Barnes isn't entirely aware of the explosion, at first, because in his partially sheltered position he is bowled over by a great swell of water before he is able to process the sound. His buttocks bounce off the hard floor and then he's floating and he's trying to remember where he is. There is someone—someone he needs to find. For a moment the water tastes different, less cold and more bitter, and he's looking for red and white amidst the blue. His lungs burn because he hadn't thought to take a proper breath. He kicks upwards and breaks the surface, faster than he'd expected, and he's looking up a curving ceiling and he remembers, underground, and then he remembers, "Jones!"

He doesn't think, just fills his lungs and dives back down. Fortunately the tunnel isn't as large as the Potomac, and he can feel which way the current is going. It's strong enough that he knows there's a new hole in the tunnel, probably near where the HYDRA soldiers had been standing.
He finds Jones before he has to breathe again. He's relieved to find Jones kicking weakly, clearly still alive if disoriented. He hauls him back up to the surface.

Jones coughs and wheezes violently. His fingers dig into Barnes's arm and shoulder, and he seems reluctant to let go even after he starts treading water properly.

"Have I mentioned, Sarge," rasps Jones, "that I fucking hate being in the water."

Barnes chuckles. "I'm pretty sure this lake will be happy to have us out of it." He swims them close to where the opened hatch door is. He can still see the green light under the water. The tunnel ceiling is only a handful of feet above them now.

"At least now we know what happens when you try to fire those energy guns wet," says Jones philosophically. "Wonder if it's to do with the energy itself, or just a design flaw in the weapon?"

"I'm sure Stark will tell you, when we tell him about this." He examines what little of Jones he can see. "You're bleeding from the head. Can you feel any other injuries?"

Jones feels at his head and winces when he finds the injury, somewhere just below the crown. "I think I hit something in the explosion—the floor or the wall, who knows."

Barnes clears his throat. Looks Jones in the eyes. "J— Gabe."

Jones sighs, a soft wet sound of misery. "I know. We gotta go under again, don't we?"

"Yes." He squeezes Jones's shoulder firmly. "We'll make it out, okay? You hang on to me, hold your breath, and we'll be out before you know it."

"Maybe if—"

"I ain't leaving you, soldier."

Jones gives him a half-hearted glare. "Yes, Mrs. Rogers."

It startles a laugh out of Barnes. He places Jones's right hand on his right shoulder, and Jones' left hand clinging to his belt. He doesn't tell Jones he hasn't even gone into the access tunnel, doesn't know if there's another locked door between them and the sub. Doesn't even know for sure there is a sub docked there.

Doesn't matter. He'll get them out, if he has to punch through a bunch of doors and swim them up from the bottom of the lake.

"There are people named Pope, you know, and they can't all be Catholic," says Jones.

Barnes pauses. "Thus let me live, unseen, unknown; Thus unlamented let me dye; Steal from the world, and not a stone; Tell where I lye."

"Alexander Pope." Jones smiles. "You're full of surprises, Sarge."

The cockpit window seals shut and the water begins to drain out. The two of them cough and shiver in the enclosed space.

"Would have bought you a drink first if I'd known we'd be getting this friendly, Sarge," says Jones.
Barnes smiles despite himself. "Well, this is a one-man sub. Someone's gotta sit on someone else's lap, and you're too tall to fit the other way around."

Jones chuckles weakly. "I won't tell Cap if you don't."

The mini-sub hums to life around them.

They watch the base implode, the side of the like billowing clouds of dirt, air, and broken building material through the water. Barnes takes his best guess of the controls, but he suspects he's been given training on something similar; the placement of certain buttons and dials are half-familiar.

At first he dismisses the faint ache in his head as the effect of changing air pressure. Behind him and under his thighs, he can feel Jones shivering violently, makes a note to have him checked for a concussion. Maybe mild shock. By the time they reach the surface of the water, though, the ache has become distinct, heavy and throbbing—he knows what this is.

Jones doesn't question why he wants to sink the sub. He just gives Barnes a grateful nod when Barnes lets him off at the shore, slumping down below a tree to warm up under the sun.

Barnes pilots the sub as far down as he can swim comfortably. He takes a deep breath, and fishes out the memory again, sieving it for the most important details.

The ceramic knife, part of the set he always carries under his clothes. He uses the knife to pry open one of the panels behind the seat. Pulls out Stark's earpiece and attaches it to one of the wires, practically invisible. Hides the slim knife within a tangle of wires. Closes up the panel again and carefully marks a corner of it with a star, like the one on his shoulder.

*Give 'em hell,* he thinks.

He jettisons himself and swims to the surface, while the sub sinks to the bottom of the lake.

He will tell them that he'd set off a grenade inside the sub, destroying it.

He swims to shore, finds Jones, and they trudge back to the base to meet up with the others.

Sacrificing finesse for speed, Barnes throws himself right over the muddy hillock. Bullets hit the ground so close to him the spatters join the respectable layer of mud that's built up on top of his clothes.

There's somebody else using the same hillock for cover. He recognizes the soldier as belonging to Rogers's squad.

"Where is Cap?" demands Barnes.

"Bridge came apart before the B-teams got over," says the young man. "Cap went after some guys who fell into the river. Said he'll rally the men who got cut off and find another way back around."

"Of course he did," says Barnes. "*Fuck.*"

The river's only a hundred feet or so back. Barnes is about to leap back over the hillock when a couple of bodies roll in, nearly landing on top of him.
"Where the fuck is Rogers?" demands Dugan, disentangling himself from Falsworth and Barnes.

"River," says Barnes shortly. He hands Falsworth his rifle and his pistol. "Keep going as planned. We'll find you, all right?"

"But Sarge," protests the young soldier. "You can't go out there! They've got the guns in place now."

"Don't encourage him, lad," sighs Falsworth.

Dugan has already positioned himself near the top of the hillock, rifle held carefully out of the mud while he pulls out a grenade. "On my mark. One."

The grenade sails through the air. On Dugan's, "Three!" Barnes launches himself out into the open, diving into a smooth roll just as a round of artillery cuts through the air at his chest-level. The grenade detonates, sending up a screen of dirt and grass. He's up and sprinting at full speed, taking advantage of the distraction.

The river bank is a few feet further than he'd anticipated. He jumps high, spins, and tucks himself into a ball with his left arm held out to shield his head. Several bullets slice through the sides of his leg and arm, and at least two bounce off the metal arm. He corkscrews into a dive right before hitting the water. Bullets follow him into the river.

The current is stronger than it appears on the surface. He decides this is more helpful, though, since he just has to let it carry him to wherever Steve has ended up. He holds his breath and swims a good distance from the remains of the bridge before coming up for air.

He finds Steve a couple of miles downstream, helping two soldiers back onto dry land. One appears to be unconscious and is slung over the Captain's shoulder. The other is walking but bleeding from a wound in his arm. Barnes splashes his way towards them. The conscious soldier jerks at the sound of his approach. Steve just nods at him tiredly. There's a bloody gash on Steve's leg.

Barnes overtakes them and clambers up the bank. He slips into the wood, checks that this part of the river bank is clear of the enemy. He nearly attacks a soldier before seeing the uniform.

"Where's the rest of your unit?" asks Barnes.

"Back there." The soldier jerks his head towards the east. "We have a lot of wounded."

Barnes does a quick headcount when they help the Captain bring the waterlogged infantrymen to their fellows. Seven men, including the two from the river. He doesn't know how many had made it over the bridge, and not all the men present are B-Team, but four fireteams should amount up to sixteen men. No wonder the soldier hadn't looked particularly happy to see him.

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**BUCKY BARNES**

"Cap, your boy is a genius," announces Tony, finally appearing in the dining room at the end of dinner. He grabs the nearest takeout box without looking at what it is. Barton takes it from him while Bruce retrieves the covered plate Steve had put into the oven earlier to keep warm.

Tony shakes his head and looks around at them, as if surprised to find himself seated at the table with a plate full of food in front of him.

"Eat," says Bruce.
Tony does. He chews and swallows several bites before he picks up his earlier thread of thought. "Bucky's a genius. Both of him. All of him? You know, English is incredibly inadequate for talking about time-travel."

"It is true," says Thor. "My lady Jane has long decried the limitations of Midgardian languages in expressing the meanings and methods of mathematics."

"What have you found out?" asks Natasha.

Tony explains Bucky's suggestion about locating Barnes' tracker between bites of lo mein. "Actually, JARVIS found it in less than an hour, but I was waiting for a project to finish rendering, so I got Hill to compile what data we have on the location."

A three-dimensional globe appears in the middle of the table. "Barnes' tracker is currently in San Diego, of all places. Its coordinates roughly match that of a fine chemical plant with a research facility attached to it. Civilian-owned, small to medium projects. No known association with HYDRA or SHIELD, no military contracts."

"Are we sure it's Barnes' tracker?" asks Clint.

"As sure as I can be. Signal strength was weak, consistent with the level of power that model would have after seventy years. Incidentally, I'd like to point out that my tracker survived seventy years and still called home like it was meant to. I mean, I build these to last a hundred years but you never really know until you do a field test." He stabs a piece of orange chicken. "That return signal probably ate up most of its remaining power, though. I might be able to ping it one more time, to confirm it's staying where it is, but that's it."

There a sudden screech of a chair, from Steve standing up. He runs off with a vague, "Just figured it out, be right back!"

Several seconds later, JARVIS says into the surprised silence, "Captain Rogers has returned to his floor."

Bucky goes back to eating. "If he's still in the Tower, I guess he can't get into too much trouble."

"You'd be surprised," says Natasha, though she doesn't look overly concerned either. That said, Bucky doesn't want to know what kind of things can ruffle Natasha.

Fifteen minutes later, Steve slaps the note that had come from Bucky's coat down in the middle of the table. "I figured out what these are. See how there's two sets of letters, followed by two sets of numbers? Each of these is a word. The name and numbers are based on books in my apartment; author's initials, acronym of title, page number, and which word it is on the page. So tp-gg-46-79 is Terry Pratchett’s Guards! Guards!, page 46, the 79th word on that page."

"You're telling me," says Clint, "that Barnes has literally memorized every book in your apartment?"

"What's the message?" asks Natasha.

Steve looks up. "JARVIS?"

"The message dictated to me by the Captain as he looked through his personal library— and which
"Sleeper codes," says Natasha. She leans back from the table and crosses her arms. "Well, we've always suspected they'd put at least a few in him."

"He did keep saying it was important to look for this place, he just couldn't remember why," says Sam.

"Perhaps his sojourn in the past has rekindled his memory," suggests Thor.

"Would have been more helpful for him to remember it before this little swapping exercise," says Tony, "but I will give him points for managing to sneak a message to the future."

"If this place does have the sleeper codes for the Winter Soldier," says Natasha, "its priority just went up."

"What do you mean?" asks Bucky.

"It's clear HYDRA wants to use the codes to reclaim the Winter Soldier. Barnes' prior urgency makes me wonder if he'd suspected as such; maybe there's some kind of timeline he subconsciously remembered. This would also explain the recent level of activity. We suspected they'd been trying to kidnap Barnes. Well, Bucky."

"We have to get the codes before they switch back," says Steve quietly. "We can't give them the chance to use it on Barnes."

"I agree." Bucky hadn't spoken all that loudly, but every eye in the room seems to swivel to look at him. "Don't let him go back to them. Please."

"He's not," says Natasha firmly.

Bucky nods his gratitude. Then, deciding he needs air, he gets to his feet and goes to the balcony.

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**WINTER SOLDIER**

They’re following the river downstream to a place where they should be able to ford it. It's slow-going, with all the wounded. The most able-bodied men have spread out through the woods, keeping alert for any Axis forces.

Barnes extricates his cigarettes out of habit when they stop to give the wounded a rest. It seems doubly unnecessary when the other Howlies are not even present to make it a social activity. But the soldier from earlier has settled for a smoke near him, both of them leaning against trees, and he feels compelled to have at least one cigarette.

“I’m guessing you’re not a fan of Captain America,” he says lightly to the soldier.

The man’s jaw tightens. "Where the fuck was he at Anzio? At Volges?" He spits at the ground. “I’m here to do my job, and by the grace of God bring my fucking men home. I don’t know who the fuck you guys think you are.”

Barnes feels his hackles rise. The Winter Soldier had never been particularly concerned about the
opinions of others, except when a handler's displeasure had led to pain and correction. He'd sometimes taken a quiet pleasure in a mission done well, in being utilized to best effect, but idle words rarely registered. They'd made little difference to his effectiveness.

Maybe it’s because he knows the Captain won’t defend himself.

It is part of the Winter Soldier’s protocols, to defend his handler.

He knows he wouldn’t be doing it because of those protocols.

He thinks, my name is James Buchanan Barnes. He doesn’t know who the fuck he thinks he is, either.

But he does know he is. He is, he is, he is.

He smokes and smokes, and leaves the soldier be.

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BUCKY BARNES

It doesn’t surprise him to hear footsteps following him out after a few minutes. He's surprised to find them belonging to Bruce, though.

"Smoke?" asks Bruce, shaking a box at him.

"Thanks," says Bucky gratefully. He makes a face at the Marlboro logo, but it's not like he's in a position to be picky. "You smoke?"

"Used to," admits Bruce. "This box is from one of Tony's mystery stashes. Probably stolen from Rhodey."

"Apparently these things don't have an actual chemical effect on me anymore," says Bucky. "Just when I can smoke around Steve. Funny how these things work out, huh?"

"You can say that again."

Bucky sucks in the smoke, blows it out slowly. "I'm fine, doc. Don't really like talking about the inside of my head, if it's all the same to you."

"Good thing I'm not that kind of doctor," says Bruce, though he's smiling. "Maybe I'm out here because I know what it's like to have—a second person, in a way, who's you but also not you."

"Our terrible others," says Bucky, smiling now too.

Bruce huffs. "That's actually not inaccurate."

Bucky fiddles with the cigarette. It's not bad. He misses the tang of lighter fluid, though. "Do you ever feel sorry for yours?"

Bruce looks surprised. "Sometimes, actually. The world is very strange to him."

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WINTER SOLDIER

Some of the men are so badly wounded, there seems to be a never-spoken understanding through the group that they probably won’t make it back to the Allied lines. The Captain spends most of his time
with these, and doing the bulk of the work supporting them, since he can easily take the full weight of an average soldier.

Here is an odd thought: this Steve Rogers is so young.

Not that future-Rogers wouldn’t do the same in taking care of his men. But there’s a bright vibrancy in this Steve that has matured in his older counterpart. He thrives under a challenge, and at this point he is revelling in the freedom afforded by the miracle that has been made of his body.

Then they reach the narrow part of the river where they will attempt to ford it, and not a man has died yet.

Even Private Harlin, the worst off with red-soaked bandages wrapped tight around his abdomen and a leg that isn’t moving anymore, somehow manages to stagger out of the water slung between two hale members of his unit.

Barnes plants himself in the middle of the river, managing to find rocks under the water to wedge his feet so he can provide additional support to the wounded. Steve is on the bank, bodily lifting soldiers when necessary.

Barnes takes in the faces of the soldiers going past, the fire in their eyes as they keep glancing at the figure in his distinctive suit; the air of weariness and frustration is still there, but here's something fierce and determined shining through it. Regardless of how they feel about Captain America, something about his presence is spurring them on.

And it hits him: maybe this is what HYDRA had meant for the Winter Soldier, redressed in fear and control. The ghost instead of the beacon.

They're still planning when he returns.

"So this lab could be HYDRA," says Clint. "Or it could be a completely innocent civilian facility."

"These days I tend to be a bit suspicious of scientific think-tanks, to be honest," says Tony. "But yes. In a nutshell. Or it could be a completely innocent civilian research lab that doesn't know it's keeping one of HYDRA’s dirty little secrets in its basement."

"Worse is if it's a mix of both," says Natasha. "If it's HYDRA, we can just go in shooting, and if it's a completely non-HYDRA facility, we can just evacuate everyone there and get the codes out. Or destroy the whole place. If it's both, we've got potential hostages and no idea who will try to kill us."

Clint throws a pen onto the table. "Then it's going to be both."

"Even if there's just a few HYDRA in there, they see us coming and they're going to know we're onto them. They'll relocate the device," says Hill.

"And anybody going in will have to be on their own for a while, so we can't just send in an intern or some desk jockey who won't be recognized," says Tony.

"What if," says Bucky, clearing his throat. "What if we go the other way? Not subterfuge."

Stark waves his hand. "Please, elaborate."
"Bucky," says Steve warningly.

Bucky shrugs lightly. "Reckon we can tell who's HYDRA by how they react to the Winter Soldier showing up on their doorstep?"
Chapter 14

The plan, in the end, is simple: Bucky will just walk through the front door.

Steve protests, of course, but then Sam starts laughing and Tony has JARVIS bring up the report from the SSR's attack on the final base.

"YOU DID WHAT."

He later discovers that Clint had stolen his phone and taken pictures of him yelling at Steve. He knows he should be annoyed about it, and so refuses to admit the two of them do look pretty funny.

Tony produces a full-arm armour piece, designed to resemble the Winter Soldier's metal arm, with a swiftness that has Steve looking at him suspiciously.

"Spangles, you should know by now that I'm always planning ahead. I had a feeling this would come in handy," says Tony, unabashed. "Even if it's just for mildly kinky role-play. You're giving me that face, but don't tell me the thought has never occurred to you."

Turns out the serum hasn't gotten rid of Steve's ability to turn red as a tomato. Bucky, immune himself after a youth spent near the Navy Yard and then being in the Army, has a feeling he should find the sunburnt look unattractive, and so kind of wants to die from how much he wants to kiss Steve, to just wrap all his limbs around him, which leaves Bucky embarrassed at himself.

Later, in the middle of fitting the sleeve, Tony tells him, "The metal panels are enough to deflect up to medium-calibre bullets and various small projectiles. But obviously you still have a squishy flesh arm underneath, so, you know, try not to punch a plane or something."

Bucky makes a fist, watching the movement of the metal plates in fascination. "What about people?"

"People, surprisingly, have a lot more give than planes or cars, so you can go crazy. Or not. In hindsight I realize that's not the kind of thing one is supposed to encourage."

"JARVIS? Would you happen to have any videos of the Winter Soldier?"

"Mostly footage of him in the Tower, Sergeant Barnes. Very little of him in the field. He has an uncanny talent for evading recording equipment."

For some reason this makes Bucky smile. "Can you show me what you do have of him in the field? Can't really copy him without some kind of reference. And of the ones at home, are there any of him in the gym?"

"Excellent idea, Sergeant. Yes, he spars with Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff a few times a week."

An hour later, he exclaims, "JARVIS, did you see that? I threw Steve clear across the room!"
"Indeed, Sergeant." A pause. "If I may point out, sir, depending on the extent of your chemo-
physiological enhancement prior to the Captain's rescue, it is entirely possible you are capable of
such a feat already."

Bucky considers this. "Can you call Steve for me, if he's not busy?"

"Of course, sir."

In his defence, he really had wanted to see if he could toss Steve around. He gets as far as throwing
Steve to the ground, which surprises him enough, but then he'd taken in the look on Steve's face and
then the rest of Steve and, well, turns out Steve's ridiculously tight exercise clothes serve a purpose
after all. They don't quite stand up to impatient supersoldier-strength hands, though.

With no small amount of surprise, Barnes realizes he misses his Steve Rogers.

He likes this Steve, the one from the past. He understands better how the Soldier had been born on
the battlefield, before Barnes even felt the touch of HYDRA; midwifed by knives blooded in the
dark, wailing sirens and whining planes, the steady report of gunfire under his ribs. He was neither
the first nor the only one, as history can attest; HYDRA had just made him better than most of his
peers.

He thinks he understands Steve better, too.

Enough to know that this one is not his, not in the ways that matter. Barnes will fight and bleed and
die for this Steve as much as he would for the other. But there is something about this Steve that is—
untested, too new. There are none of the right hollows here where the ghost that is the Winter Soldier
might find refuge. Not yet.

He is ready to go home.

It had seemed overkill to bring the entire team, so Thor and Bruce, the least suited for fighting in
urban population centres, elect to remain in New York. The rest of them travel to San Diego
separately. Well, for a given value of 'separate'.

It's the first time Bucky's flown in a commercial flight. It's possible he's been spoiled by Stark's
private plane; the press of people is a little overwhelming. At least it's still more comfortable than
bombers. He busies himself flipping through the safety card, in-flight magazine, even the duty-free
catalogue. Nat sits down next to him and buckles in.

He smiles at her. "Got everything, honey?"

"Yup, no problems at all," says Nat. Her hair is blonde today, and it surprises him how much it suits
her. She takes out one of those powder compacts and checks her face in the mirror. Then she angles
it so he can see as well: Steve and Sam, sitting three rows behind them. Steve, who'd won the aisle
seat after a complicated set of rock-paper-scissors with Sam, raises his eyebrow at Bucky through the
mirror.

Nat angles the mirror towards Steve's chest, which, while Bucky does appreciate the view, seems a
bit unnecessary, until he spots Sam's hand on top of Steve's on their shared armrest. Steve and Sam
are holding hands, their interlinked fingers clear to see due to the differing skin colour.

So they've decided to go the couple route, after all. It's—fine, Steve had mentioned it as a possibility and Bucky had given his okay. Bucky's currently wearing a ring that matches Nat's, for Christ's sake.

There's a very faint *snicket* and Bucky knows, without a doubt, that the guy who'd just passed their row in a hideously striped sweater is Clint. Dear God, is Clint wearing a blond wig? Must be, his hair had definitely not been long enough to tie back just that morning.

Nat lets out a high-pitched giggle and cuddles into him. He puts his arm around her automatically, and a passing air hostess smiles at them both.

"You two travel often?" she asks, passing them a number of items. Headphones. Ooh, nuts.

"Whenever this one gets time off work," says Nat, smacking Bucky on the chest playfully.

Bucky chuckles to cover his wince. He rearranges jacket he'd taken off and spread over his front to fend off the chilly blasts of recycled air. "We love to travel. Going to a new place just adds that extra zing to our marriage, you know." He spreads out his best smirk, suggestive but more self-satisfied than leering. He's a man with a beautiful wife, after all.

The air hostess blushes a little, which makes Bucky more than a little pleased with himself. "Well, I'm very happy for you both. Flying is pretty stressful for a lot of families, so it's nice to see a couple who are so relaxed. Hope you have a good flight, and let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks," says Nat, seemingly already halfway to dozing on Bucky's shoulder.

The air hostess continues down the row. Nat waits until she's past Steve's row, too, then whispers into Bucky's ear, "You're a lot better at this. I can see why people called you a ladies' man."

Somehow Bucky doesn't need to ask who she's comparing him to. "He's not very good at lying on the fly, 's all. Wait, did you have to play pretend-couple with him, too?" The hand she'd had on his chest has drifted to his stomach, under the jacket, and he jerks when it drops dangerously lower.

"Um. Natalie. There's no one watching, what are you doing?"

"Discouraging anybody from looking this way," she murmurs. "Also, you're kinda warm, and I hate having cold hands." She actually nips at his ear, which makes him jerk again. "There's still one person watching, but I figure you don't mind."

Her hand, thankfully, stops short of anywhere especially scandalous. But then her fingers start stroking, and he discovers that, hey, the patch of skin right behind his belt buckle *can* be quite sensitive. He swallows. "See, you say things like that and I wonder if you're taking revenge for something."

"I am," she admits. "Not on you, though."

Ah.

"He could have just *said*," she continues. "Though I do get why he didn't."

"Don't feel bad. I spent half our lives trying to set him up with dates."

"It's a matter of *professional pride*, husband mine. Hmmm. I wonder if I can get him to induct you both into the Mile-High Club."
He frowns. "What's the Mile-High Club?"

They set up at a middle-of-the-range hotel at the outskirts of the city. Tony is arriving later in the day, officially on the West Coast to check on the rebuilding of his Malibu home. Maria Hill had arrived before the bulk of the team, ostensibly to prepare the way for Tony, and had booked two adjoining rooms to be their base of operations, with the rest of the team spread around the hotel.

Bucky is surprised to learn that it's actually harder for someone like Tony Stark to travel without being noticed than, say, a guy who's officially dead and currently impersonating an infamous assassin who doesn't officially exist.

"Dead people are easy," says Natasha, flopping onto the bed. "Also easy: when the public believe they know everything about a person. Take you, for example."

He says, with a straight face, "Never thought we were talking about anybody else."

She kicks him lightly in the leg. "James B. Barnes: born 1916, deceased 1944. Codename Winter Soldier: six foot three, fast, strong, has a metal arm. Sometimes all you need is to change one detail, and then you're invisible." She prods his left arm. "Tony Stark, on the other hand, makes waves wherever he goes. He's expected to. Sometimes his absence is marked more than his presence."

"Sounds exhausting," says Bucky.

"Yeah."

"Hey, Nat," says Steve, coming out of the bathroom. "Did you need anything?"

There's a momentary silence, in which both Bucky and Natasha give all due appreciation to the glory that is a shower-damp Steve Rogers wearing only a towel. Then Nat grins and leans into Bucky's leg. "I wanted to see if I'm expected to fulfil my wifely duties now or later."

"You're killing me here, Rogers."

Steve turns his neck enough for them to kiss, wet and open-mouthed. Bucky brushes a hand down Steve’s towel-clad thigh, then slips the hand under the towel. Steve hardens all the way at his touch, hips jerking forward.

"Fucking gorgeous," moans Bucky. "This for me, sugar? A bit of good luck for the mission tonight?"

"Oh, God," gasps Steve.

"Mmm. Love you like this." He slides his other hand from Steve’s hip to one firm globe of that ass. Gives it a firm grope.

An idea pops into his head, from the hours he’d spent watching what he and JARVIS agreed to call
He maneuvers Steve towards the bed. “Can I give you a good-luck kiss for the mission tonight?”

“Anything, Bucky,” says Steve, starting to turn his upper body around for the promised kiss.

Bucky grins and pushes him to face the other way again. Places a hand on Steve’s back between his shoulder-blades and presses down. He hears Steve swallow, then bend over at the waist.

“Look at you,” murmurs Bucky. He drops to his knees. Pushes the towel up rather than removing it completely. The muscles of Steve’s ass flex under the light brush of his hand, teasing. He places a wet kiss on one cheek, and then the other, then grazes his teeth over the soft, yielding flesh.

“Bucky,” says Steve hoarsely.

“Ready for your kiss now, Steve?”

“Oh, God. Yes.” Steve shifts. It’s not quite pushing his ass towards Bucky’s face, but Bucky grins anyway.

In contrast to the teasing he’s been doing, now Bucky grabs the two mounds in front of him, appreciating the perfect handfuls that they are, then spreads them just enough for him to press his lips to the rim of Steve’s hole.

Steve lets out a sharp moan.

Bucky licks at the puckered skin, first lightly then with increasing pressure. He sees Steve’s hands fisting the bedsheets. He licks a wet stripe up the crack. Puts his lips back over Steve’s hole and prods the entrance with his tongue.

Steve’s hips twitch forward. “Bucky. Bucky.” Steve tastes and smells of the shower, but there’s a hint of sweat now, too.

The muscles around the rim are tight. He presses in just the tip of one finger, and licks firmly around it, fluttering his tongue in approval when more of his finger slips in. He’s drooling all over Steve’s ass and his own chin, but he doubts Steve minds. He noses up the crack and sucks hard at the skin where the crease of the ass begins. Drifts to the swell of one buttock and bites gently. Steve gasps and Bucky’s finger slips in further.

“Want to fuck you, Steve,” he groans. “Can I?”

“Yes, yeah, please Buck.” Steve’s face is flushed with arousal when he looks down his side at Bucky.

Luckily Steve’s bag is right by the bed. Bucky grabs lube and a condom, realizes his hands are shaking a little when he pours the former on his fingers.

Both of them groan at the first slide of Bucky’s finger. Bucky bites another mouthful of Steve’s ass to distract himself from coming to soon. He reaches around with his free hand and wraps it around the head of Steve’s cock.

“C’mon, Bucky, give me another,” urges Steve. He spreads his legs wider, pushes his ass back.

“Easy, doll,” drawls Bucky. “You’ll get plenty of me in no time.”

He does add another finger, thrusting in and out of Steve more firmly. Steve makes beautiful noises
when he’s got something inside him. Bucky puts in a third a little sooner than he maybe should have, because the stretch makes Steve louder, and Steve just lets out an approving moan. His hips sway backwards and forwards, like he’s about ready to fuck himself on Bucky’s fingers.

Bucky’s pretty sure they can both come just from this, Bucky’s fingers inside Steve. As if guessing the direction of his thoughts, Steve looks over at him and says, “Put your fucking dick in me, Barnes, c’mon.”

Far be it from Bucky to refuse a direct order. He slips the condom on and a bit more lube, and holds his cock to feed it to Steve’s glistening, greedy hole—

“Oh my God,” he moans, with all sincerity.

“That’s it,” breathes Steve. He smiles at Bucky over his shoulder, sweet as Heaven. “You feel amazing, Buck. Can’t get enough.”

Bucky smiles in return, a little unsteady. He pulls out and thrusts in, gritting his teeth at the hot clench of Steve’s body around him. Steve gasps and pushes back. One of Steve’s hands covers Bucky’s hand on Steve’s hip.

“More,” gasps Steve. “Give me all you got, Bucky.”

Happy to relax his control, Bucky starts thrusting in and out, slow at first and then faster, until his pounding away, the bed rocking from the force of it. Steve’s encouragements dissolve into wordless sounds and Bucky’s name. Sweat forms on Bucky’s forehead and drips down onto the small of Steve’s back, snaking down valleys formed by flexing muscles.

When he feels Steve is close, Bucky pulls him up to standing. Guides one of Steve’s legs up so he has one foot on the bed. Steve groans at the change in angle, twists his neck to kiss Bucky’s mouth. The same mouth that had just been on his ass, Bucky suddenly remembers. He growls and takes Steve’s lower lip between his teeth, sucking hard.

Steve’s body tenses. “Bucky, I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“I’ve got you, Stevie,” murmurs Bucky. He takes Steve’s cock in hand and strokes it, and fucks into Steve with everything he’s got. Steve’s hand comes up to grab at his hair, not pulling but gripping tight.

Climax crashes through Steve, arching his body and sending streaks of come over the bed. Steve chants Bucky’s name and bites along his jaw. Bucky’s no more coherent, riding the tightening of Steve’s body. Steve’s teeth close on his earlobe, and he’s done, hurtling down the precipice as pleasure racks his body.

They collapse on the bed together, panting, Bucky staying on top of Steve and inside him. He espies Steve’s hand lying limply on the sheet and covers it with his own, threading their fingers together.

“That’s one hell of a good-luck charm,” says Steve eventually.

“Secret of the ages,” agrees Bucky.

A few minutes later, Steve realizes he’s lying on wet sheets. “Ugh, I’m going to need another shower.”

“I’ll come with you,” volunteers Bucky selflessly. “Can’t have too much good luck.”
They decide to move at night, when the facility and the surrounding town is not as busy and, it is hoped, most of the civilians have gone to bed.

("Seriously? Sometimes it's as if you guys don't know any real-life scientists," Tony had grumbled.)

Bruce is on stand-by and remains with Hill at the hotel, to coordinate the team and manage the communication lines. The rest of them take a van up the hill behind the facility, where they ditch it in a small park overlooking the bay.

"Bucky, stop playing with your arm," says Nat.

Bucky pulls his hand away guiltily. But the metal-plated full-arm armour is amazing; the plates shift if he moves his arm a certain way, and lock together when he tenses the muscles. He's found he can even get a sort of wave traveling up the forearm, like a robotic shiver, if he stretches out his hand and flexes his triceps.

There had been some debate over how much weaponry he should be carrying. He'd pointed out that they want the civilians to go running out of the way, and if there's a significant HYDRA presence then they'll start shooting at him as soon as they realize who he is.

This line of argument succeeds in getting him as many toys as he wants—

"As many as you can comfortably carry, Bucky," says Steve, rolling his eyes. "And no, Tony, did you think I'd miss the bazooka you've stuck under the seats?"

"Actually, that's Clint's, and I have to say that I'm hurt you'd immediately pile the blame on me—"

"No, Clint's bazooka is on my side," interjects Bucky, nodding under his seat. "The one Steve's talking about is under the seat on the driver's side."

"Oh, that's mine," says Nat, the same time as Steve exclaims, "We have two bazookas?"

"My Ma always said I'll be blessed with lots of interesting people in my life," says Sam contemplatively. "I'd just like to thank everybody in this van for proving her right."

"Your Ma is a smart woman," says Clint. "Please tell her she can send us cookies anytime."

—and he's actually not surprised to find he can somehow fit the whole lot in what is apparently the Winter Soldier's preferred uniform.

"It's a little loose around the chest," says Bucky.

"Enough to fit another nine-millimetre?" asks Nat, producing one such gun. Steve just leans over the helps him adjust the straps. Tony leans over Steve's arms and sticks an earpiece into Bucky's ear.

"Camo," says Clint. Bucky turns to him and lets him spread dark face paint around his eyes.

"Mask," says Nat next. She fits the muzzle over the bottom half of his face, surprisingly gentle. There's a look on her face he doesn't know how to read, but it makes her look older for a moment.

They all step back to look at him.

He wants to hold out his arms in a silent, well? But he remembers the videos JARVIS had shown him. His body is buzzing with pre-mission nerves; he forces himself to be still, like he's the sniper in this mission instead of the bait.
It's funny. His Ma and Steve's Ma had spent years berating him for his impatient energy, his inability to keep still. Trying to compensate for Steve's illness-induced fatigue, they'd said. Turns out all they'd needed to do was put a sniper rifle in his hands.

He forces himself back into the present. Future. The calmness that's settled over him is one he knows; that familiar, sought-after state where he's both floating above himself and hyper-focused. The arm-piece has made his left side heavier than his right, and to compensate he's rounded his shoulders, lowered his center of gravity.

Clint breathes out loudly. "Well I'll be damned."

Nat's hand snaps out without warning; her movements faster than they need to be, clearly intended to startle, though she's only adjusting the hair at the front of his head. He doesn't allow himself to react, doesn't move anything except for his eyes, which track her hand until she pulls it back. She smiles at him, genuinely pleased yet not precisely happy. "хорошо," she breathes.

Sam's face has settled on a complicated expression. All he says is, "You good, soldier?"

Bucky nods.

It's Steve's reaction he's most worried about. He can't read Steve's face, but Steve doesn't seem horrified, only sad. It occurs to Bucky that, in a way, he's breaking Steve's heart all over again. Should he have come up with a different plan?

He hadn't really thought about how Steve would take this. This clear, unambiguous reminder that Bucky's going to turn into this other person. Steve hadn't said anything, but of course he wouldn't. He'll blame himself no matter what Bucky or the rest of the world say, because there's an infuriating, indefatigable part of Steve that will forever rage against the fact that shitty things happen even to those who don't deserve them.

"Testing, testing. Base, do you read?" says Tony.

"Loud and clear, Iron Man," says Hill. "What's your status?"

"We're in place," says Steve. Then he's leaning into Bucky's space, and this time Bucky does start. "Mission is a go." His hushed voice sends a hot spark down Bucky's spine. Their eyes meet, and the two of them could be back in 1944, preparing for yet another mission.

Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes. Another mission, another war. The shield and the shadow; facing down the world's evils and injustices. Forever and ever and ever.

Steve licks his lips. It seems to be taking him an effort, too, to not close the small distance between them. Then, a forward surge, and Steve is pressing a kiss on the Winter Soldier's mask. Despite the barrier, Bucky feels it as if they're touching skin.

"Ready to begin Falcon Taxi," says Steve, drawing back.

"Tony, you better be right about them not having any eyes in the sky," says Sam.

"I'm right," Tony assures him, "I've had JARVIS monitoring the area for the last few days, and I've been scanning the area every two minutes since we got here, just to be sure."

Clint finishes putting on the harness that Bucky's learned is specifically designed to help Falcon carry people around, and Steve attaches him to Sam's harness. Steve and Sam clasp hands, for a moment, then Sam is spreading his wings. It's significantly quieter than the last time Bucky saw him do this.
"Stealth design," explains Tony.

Sam gives the 'ready' sign. Steve nods, and then Sam and Clint take off.

"Falcon Taxi One is a go."

They don't hear anything, which is good. After ten minutes Bucky sees wings crossing the moon, and he thinks it's an owl until he hears the hum of the jets again, and Sam is back, this time to ferry Natasha.

"Falcon Taxi Two complete," says Steve another ten minutes later. "Winter Soldier?"

A shiver runs through Bucky. He nods, gives the 'ready' sign. He'd already put on the carry-harness. Sam lands for the third time. Steve hooks them together carefully. Looks at Bucky seriously for a moment.

Bucky catches Steve's hand as he pulls away. He doesn't know if he should say anything, if there's anything for him to say. This is— just another mission, yes, but it's always just another mission until it isn't, and it's not even the most dangerous mission they've gone on, and Bucky's been avoiding looking at the moon all this time but now it's right there, his own celestial hourglass. Steve seems to understand. He presses their foreheads together. Bucky focuses on that tiny point of contact and lets the wider world fade out for a moment.

Then Steve is stepping back and there's a sharp pull across the harness straps. The ground falls away, and Bucky has to swallow an instinctive whoop. He doesn't look back, keeps his gaze fixed on the ocean and the building that's their target. He's always loved big rides; he wonders how Sam can bear to be on the ground all the time, when he is able to do this.

He hears Steve's voice through his earpiece. "Falcon Main Delivery is a go."

Sam drops him well within the perimeter fence. He doesn't hear any guards. Tony's surveillance has shown only moderate security during mid-day peak hours and a couple of guards doing half-hearted sweeps during the night. Maybe they're in a different part of the facility now, or maybe Hawkeye and Black Widow have already disabled them.

It's only a couple dozen feet to the front door. If there are HYDRA operatives in the place, they'll have made sure they have access to the security cameras. They'll know he's there the moment he walks into the light.

Here goes nothing.

Steady and sure, he remembers from the videos. The Winter Soldier walks as if every step is, if not planned, then at least deliberated carefully and judged necessary. Not a killer, as Bucky had first thought—a hunter.

The plates on the metal arm-piece flex, like they're agreeing with him.

He reaches the main doors. *Bullet-proof plexiglass between steel frames*, had been Tony's guess.

*The thing about fear is that it's hard to shake, once it takes hold,* Natasha had said. *Same with doubt. So the trick is to plant it early. Then trying to control it will eat up your enemy's focus, and they won't*
He finds the security camera over the door and looks at it directly. Then he punches the glass.

The impact is jarring but the arm-armour helps to brace his wrist and elbow, as well as protects his arm from the shards. An alarm begins to sound, and he hears heavy shoes running around inside the building. More importantly, the doors slide open, likely switching to an emergency mode.

He stomps inside. The reception desk is unmanned and the waiting area in front of it empty. Tony had hacked the building to obtain a floor plan, but the HYDRA section would likely not be on a map. He stomps further into the building. Red lights flash every few feet, leading to emergency exits.

Movement. His gun is in his hand before he even thinks about it. Three individuals, hiding in one of the side rooms. He kicks the door in. Two women and one man. One of the women is behind a desk next to a white screen at the far end of the room, the other two are under a central conference table.

He decides to get right to the point. "Are you HYDRA?" The mask is difficult to talk through.

The two under the conference table whimper out something resembling, "No."

The third, the woman across the room from him, pulls out a sub-machine gun from the desk and opens fire.

He takes cover next to the door. "Found one HYDRA, two maybe-civilians."

"Copy," says Hill. "Widow has successfully planted her bugs, so I now have access to the security cameras, as well as all outward-bound lines of communication and potentially most of the internal lines as well. Cap and Iron Man, move in."

"You know, HYDRA probably has a separate and closed internal network just for their own use," says Tony. Seems like Hill has moved them to an open channel, now that Bucky's engaged the enemy.

"Which is why one of you needs to get to a HYDRA networked computer," says Hill.

A pause in the firing. One, or possibly half a dozen, of the bullets had shattered the big glass window on the wall, next to the door. Bucky pulls the pin out of a flash grenade using his teeth while making sure to show a glimpse of his gun in the doorway. He lobs the grenade through the window.

The explosion leaves the two civilians coughing violently and probably half-deafened, but the heavy conference table had shielded them from the worst of it. He checks that the HYDRA agent is down, nabs the sub-machine gun, then herds the civilians out. He gives them a pointed push towards the nearest emergency exit.

Clint's voice crackles through. "Engaging two HYDRA on the fifth floor."

"I'm now inside the south building," says Steve.

"One HYDRA incapacitated," reports Bucky, "Two civilians on their way out."

"I see them," says Hill. "They're out the fence."

"A couple of STRIKE teams just came swarming up from somewhere," says Tony from the processing plant. "They'll spot me in a minute. Unless they came from the outside, I'm taking this as confirmation of an underground section. HYDRA aren't very creative, are they? I'll look for the
Bucky doesn't find any hidden doors or tunnels in the main building. He does evacuate a dozen more civilians, and incapacitate a handful of HYDRA. Natasha joins him, having cleared the upper levels.

"Maybe the only access point is in the processing plant," says Natasha, after Steve and Sam report that they haven't found anything in their building, either.

Then a series of windows in the adjacent room explode inwards. The two of them dive behind overturned office furniture. Bucky gets a glimpse of black tactical gear.

"STRIKE team," Natasha reports to Hill. "They must have been lying in wait outside."

"Have you finished searching the building?"

Before either of them can answer, there's a screech of metal through their earpieces. It's followed by a round of gunfire that seems unusually loud.

"Um," says Clint. "Tin Man and me might need an assist, here."

Bucky and Nat look at each other. Their mission is to locate the HYDRA base. They should make sure there really isn't an entrance in this building, as well as take care of this STRIKE team.

"Base, Widow and me are heading next door," says Bucky.

Nat smiles at him, sharp and deadly. He lob a grenade in the room the STRIKE team are shooting into, then the two of them race up two sets of stairs at Nat's lead. He understands why when she goes to a window facing the processing plant, opens it, and pulls out a grappling gun.

They hear the STRIKE team coming up the stairs. Nat expertly hooks the processing plant's roof overhang and wraps her arm around Bucky's waist. Bucky raises his eyebrow at her, but puts his arm around her shoulders, his free hand gripping the rope.

"This wouldn't have worked if you weren't so much lighter," observes Nat. She kicks them off the window ledge.

They're nearly to the plant when Bucky sees one of the STRIKE gunmen step into the room they'd just left. He grabs Nat's pistol and shoots him. He sees him go down, and then they're climbing into one of the plant's upper windows.

It's pandemonium inside the plant. He can see the glow of a fire in the far side, and thick steam is escaping from somewhere. Several guns are firing from several directions. He can't see any sign of Iron Man through the multiple levels of walkways and large pipes.

"Which of these tanks are bad to put holes in, again?" he asks.
A loud explosion rattles the building. Natasha gives him a dry look. "Might be a bit late to be worrying about that." She swings herself down to a lower walkway, then somersaults and slides across the curving top of one of the giant tanks, disappearing from view.

Bucky is wondering if he's expected to follow her when he spots a small figure trying to climb up one of the walls, using the rivets and metal support columns. The bow immediately identifies him, just as the black tactical uniforms identify the handful of other figures running up the walkway nearest to him. Clint leaps to a different column just as sparks erupt around the spot he'd just been in.

"I've got eyes on Hawkeye," reports Bucky. The walkway he is on is perpendicular and two levels above the one holding the STRIKE team. He races to get as close to them as he can, then drops to one knee and braces his rifle.

Clint is forced to swing himself around the column, losing a bit of height but evading the next round of bullets. "Any time now, Soldier."

A stand would have been nice, thinks Bucky as he picks the gunmen off one after another. The vibrations of the walkway are making his shots less clean than he likes. Still, he's taken down half the STRIKE team before they scramble for cover. A couple of them try to fire back, but none of the shots even land near him.

The next time he looks for Clint, the man has almost reached the large ventilation fans near the ceiling. Too far for the STRIKE guns to reach him unless they come down from the roof.

"Hawkeye's found a roost," says Bucky.

Another explosion, and this one is close enough that Bucky instinctively puts a hand down on the walkway for balance. A moment later, Natasha's voice sounds in his ear. "Found Iron Man. His helmet's gone and he's not looking too good."

"Might have inhaled something," says Tony blearily.

"What happened, Hawkeye?" demands Hill.

"No idea," says Clint, sounding a little winded. "We were triangulating where the STRIKE personnel were coming from when his suit just dropped. He said he needed time to sort it out so I drew away the guns."

"We're relocating," says Natasha. "There is some kind of gas here. Soldier, care to clear a path?"

"Let me find you, first," says Bucky. "What happened to JARVIS?"

"Trying to run diagnostics on the suit, but it's slow going. He's locked down his connection to the Tower in case it's an issue with malicious software."

"Winter Soldier, jump to that walkway you're looking at and turn down the next walkway to your right," says Clint. "Black Widow and Iron Man— Black Iron? Widow Man? we need names that make better portmanteaus— it's cool you're staying hidden, but that means I'm only guessing where you might be."

"South Building is clear, the STRIKE team has been neutralized," says Steve. "Sam and I spoke to one of the interns who was still in the office, she said there's one area in the processing plant no one is allowed to enter."

"We're heading over to the plant right now," says Sam.
"Iron Man, that flare was you, right?" asks Clint.

"Uh-huh." Tony's voice is worryingly breathless. "Onna move."

"Stark, if you pass out on me, I'm pulling you out and leaving the suit behind," says Natasha.

Bucky does his best to hurry, obeying Clint's instructions without thought. As he jumps from walkway to pipe to walkway, he realizes he trusts Clint to know what his body is capable of.

He drops onto a raised platform between two tall tanks, and Clint says, "Wait there. They should be coming around the corner in a moment. Two STRIKE teams are about to converge on them."

Natasha's hair catches his eye first; he's not sure how, since she's next to a lumbering bright red robot. The two of them are on ground level, where crowded rows of tanks and equipment mark out somewhat haphazard paths. True to Clint's word, HYDRA agents swarm down the two paths intersecting theirs. Natasha has a pistol in each hand, taking down the point-man in each team before they even realize they've found their quarry.

Tony gets in front of her as they open fire. He has his helmet back on, but Bucky can see that the suit isn't fully operational. At least it's still able to stop bullets.

_Clear a path_, Natasha had said. Well, Bucky's always happy to do as a lady asks.

He aims at the STRIKE team he has a better angle for, keeping himself in the shadow between the two tanks, and fires, one precision-shot after another. They scatter, diving for cover. Tony takes a few steps closer to the other team, who have also sought cover, and Natasha takes advantage of the lack of gunfire to go after the team Bucky had targeted, since there are fewer of them.

Bucky feels his eyebrows hike up towards his hairline as body after body hits the ground. He's seen her spar, but here she's focused on speed and efficiency. There's a control panel hanging down on a thick cable from a piece of machinery overhead. It is evidently sturdy enough to take her weight; he hadn't even known bodies could bend that way.

Maybe it's the deadly grace of her movements, Bucky thinks. Steve has his own version of it. There's something innately beautiful in a person who knows what they're capable of, who throws themselves at their goals so fearlessly. Bucky thinks he might have loved her, in another life.

She'd lost someone, he remembers. _He would have been happy I got to meet you in person_, she'd said.

A couple of bullets puncture the tank beside him. He eyes the liquid that pours out warily, though it looks like water and doesn't give off any funny smells. It does reminds him there's still another STRIKE team to deal with. A glance shows Tony has whittled them down further. Bucky counts three left unwounded.

He bounds down to ground level and uses Tony's suit for cover. He switches to his pistol and gets one gunman in the chest. Wincses when Tony tries to take out another.

"Are you even aiming, Iron Man?" he shouts.

"Normally I have JARVIS doing that for me," retorts Tony, through what sounds like gritted teeth.

One of Tony's bullets finally hits the HYDRA agent. In the foot. But the man falls over and loses his gun, and curls into a ball rather than reach for another gun, so Bucky is willing to count it. The remaining gunman shouts something and looks set to shoot his own team-mate. Bucky aims his gun.
A shadow passes overhead, followed by the sound of a gun firing. The last gunman topples to the ground, dead.

"Welcome to the party, Falcon," says Tony, sounding unusually tired. He pulls off his helmet, revealing sweat-damp hair and an expression like he's on the verge of throwing up.

"Oh man, you really don't look good," says Sam. "Are you feeling better or worse from earlier?"

"Can't tell. Worse, maybe, or a different kind of bad." Tony shakes his head. "Earlier I was feeling light-headed and sleepy. Now I feel like I've eaten something fantastically awful."

"It could be from your body trying to get rid of a toxin," says Sam. "I wish we knew what it was you inhaled, exactly. What about you, Black Widow?"

"I was getting light-headed earlier, but it's gone now," answers Natasha, coming up behind Bucky. "I wasn't exposed nearly as long as he was."

"Where's Cap?" asks Bucky.

"South wall," answers Steve through the comms. "Near the fire."

"Let me guess— that's where the entrance to the HYDRA base is," says Tony.

"According to the intern we spoke to."

"I'll come help you look," says Bucky. He looks at Sam. "Care to give me a lift?"

"Sure thing."

"Iron Man, you should get to a more secure location until your suit is fully operational again," says Hill as Bucky and Sam take off.

"Diagnostics should be done in about five minutes, it's this new integrated relay I've never had to reset in the field before—"

Bucky doesn't hear the rest of the explanation, because that's when he feels a light tug somewhere in his leg. He looks down and sees… wires? Then something sharp and hot slams through him, like a kick directly to his heart, and he's shouting and falling, breathless and disoriented.

Some instinct has him reaching out as he falls, and his hand grabs something flat and metallic. A walkway. The momentum of his fall wrenches at his shoulder. He manages to get a hold of the walkway with his other hand, too, but the attempt slides him out further, and his flailing knocks his muzzle off. He watches it fall, a black speck lost between various shapes of metal sheeting. Forces himself to stay still; he can't get a good enough grip to pull himself up.

Something moves at the corner of his vision. He shakes his head, blinks until he sees a man in some kind of protective suit. The pleased look on the man's face declares him to be HYDRA, and the tool belt around his hips suggests he's a technician of some sort. Bucky eyes the man's hands, which are holding a small box-like device.

He registers the voices in his ear. "Winter Soldier? Falcon? What's happened?"

"Falcon?" he whispers, remembering that Sam had been carrying him.

A terrible pause, then Sam's voice crackles through. "I'm all right. Wings are dead but they got hooked on a pipe, so they saved my ass from a pretty big fall."
His right hand slips. He closes his left hand as tight as he can; the fingers of the arm-piece dig right into the metal, lodging themselves securely.

The HYDRA tech presses the big button on the device. The arm-armour whines briefly and then—stops working.

"An electromagnetic pulse," says the tech triumphantly. "Let us see what the Winter Soldier is without the metal arm HYDRA gifted him—" He stutters, and gapes at the knife sticking out of his abdomen.

"A soldier who still has a hell lotta knives and another arm, asshole," says Bucky. The tech topples backwards.

The force behind the knife-throw had disturbed his hold, though. Tony, thankfully, had designed the arm-piece parts to be movable even when the device as a whole stopped working, so Bucky can still exert a grip on the finger-tips embedded into the metal of the walkway. But throwing the knife had loosened a couple of the fingers, and he's pretty sure a sharp move in the wrong direction will send him slipping to his death. He carefully tries to gain a hold with his other hand, but his stupid human skin has the gall to be sweaty.

He hears a whirring sound from above. A moment later, Hawkeye is rappelling down from a pipe, stopping when he's hanging a few feet behind Bucky.

"Gotta hand it to you, Sarge," says Hawkeye cheerfully, casting an admiring glance in the direction of the dead tech. "You sure know how to arm yourself."

"Oh my God," moans Bucky. "No. That is terrible. I'm tempted to let go and fall to my death, just so I can forget I ever heard that."

"Nobody appreciates my puns," complains Clint.

Bucky gives him a horrified look. "You didn't. You've said that to him. You made arm jokes to a one-armed assassin."

"He laughed! On the inside. I'm sure of it." Clint climbs up on his rope a few feet, kicks enough to reach the walkway, and clambers on with all the agility of an acrobat. "Seriously, I think I'm his favourite. Except for Steve, of course, that's a given. And Nat. But definitely after Nat."

Bucky grudgingly accepts his helping hand and half-climbs, half-rolls back on the walkway.

They find Sam gingerly lowering himself to ground level via grappling hook. Clint is the one who leads them to Steve.

"Should we be doing something about that fire?" asks Bucky. He can feel the heat long before they get near the flames. It looks pretty contained for the moment, but that can change if an ember floats too close to the wrong kind of tank, or the heat gets high enough to affect the pipes crossing overhead.

"I've been suppressing the fire containment system in case it automatically locks off the HYDRA section," says Hill.

Bucky hadn't thought of that. "Found a door yet, Steve?"

"Think so. Took me a while because they disguised it by placing a hollow tank on top of it. I'm up here, by the way."
The three of them look up to see Steve standing on top of one of the medium-size tanks. He waves them up. Bucky jumps and pulls himself onto a large, thick pipe that lets him clamber up to the tank. He doesn't see where Clint goes but he can hear Sam muttering over the comms about a "perfectly good ladder", and the clanking of heavy boots over metal steps.

Once he's standing next to Steve, he sees what Steve means about the tank being a disguise. The hatch is open, and instead of the inside of a tank, he's looking at a small control booth. There is a ladder that goes straight down from the hatch, continuing past the control booth into a round opening and some kind of lit space beyond.

"Aw, tank," says Clint. "We didn't think to check the tanks. They probably have several of these all over the plant, that's how they can deploy so many STRIKE units at once."

"We've got incoming," says Sam, who's had the sense to keep a watch.

Steve jumps down, using the ladder to swing himself into the control booth. Bucky follows him. The control booth can only fit two people comfortably, and Steve isn't exactly of average size. They exchange a look. Steve pokes his head through the round opening, then speedily climbs down the ladder.

"You go ahead," says Clint, presumably to Sam. I'll keep your way out clear."

Bucky can't hear any gunshots from below, so he half-climbs, half-slides down the ladder after Steve. It brings him to the dead end of a narrow, brightly-lit corridor, where Steve is waiting and clearly impatient to check out what's on the other end. Once Sam's with them, they trot down the relatively short distance to where the corridor opens up into a larger room.

"Wow," says Sam. "Is this a warehouse or a museum?"

"A museum?" asks Hill.

"Or a weapons expo," adds Sam.

"There are long tables with all sorts of stuff on them," says Steve, reaching out to touch one of the tables. "Some are weapons, others just look like scraps. There are also a couple rows of display cases. And shelves with steel boxes near the walls."

"Right, we're heading your way," announces Tony.

"Iron Man," says Hill warningly.

"Hey, I'm feeling much better now, and who knows what kind of stuff we might learn from that stuff? Even if they're scrap."

"Say the word and I'll knock him out, Hill," says Natasha.

"Bucky, look," says Steve.

Bucky turns to see. It takes him a moment, then, "Is that the mini-sub? The one the Winter Soldier was looking for?"

"Must be. It looks to be the same model as the one I saw in the Hudson."

The single-man submersible is on a raised platform in the middle of the room, holding pride of place. There's a tarp covering half of it but the shape is unmistakable. Also, it's the largest thing in the room.
Then Bucky's ears pick up a low whining sound. It sounds oddly familiar, though it takes him a long moment to place it. "Sam, can you hear that?"

Sam frowns. His eyes widen. "Yes." The two of them spin around, trying to work out where it's coming from.

"Guys?" asks Steve. "What's—"

There's a faint, metallic thunk. It had sounded pretty close. Bucky looks around them.

"Metal-seeking," says Sam, remembering what JARVIS had said. The two of them look at each other. And then at Steve.

Or more specifically, Steve's shield.

Bucky turns Steve around. Sure enough, one of those insect-like robots is stuck to the edge of it. It won't budge no matter how hard Bucky pushes or pulls. Steve, once he sees the little robot, quickly takes the shield off his back and tries to pry it off as well. He gets it to shift a little but it easily wiggles out of his grip. Bucky takes out one of his knives and tries to get the point under it.

Then something hits them both. Pain erupts in Bucky's hands, prompting him to let go of both shield and knife. Steve lets go as well, and the shield falls to the floor with a loud metallic ring.

The pain has stopped, but it had been so sharp that the memory of it still has Bucky gasping, his fingers cramping, nerves singing like he'd just burned himself. Looking at his reddened skin, he realizes that he has.

"Shit!" shouts Sam, leaning over Bucky and Steve. "Are you guys okay?"

"I think so, but what was that?" hisses Steve. They examine the insect-robot. It's no longer stuck to the shield, but lying crumpled on the floor. The metal is scorched and it's smoking slightly.

"Guys, there's something over there."

All three of them look in the direction Sam is pointing to. At first, Bucky isn't sure what he's seeing. His first thought is, robot, because he's been spending a lot of time around Tony. But then he realizes it's actually a person wearing some kind of complicated machinery around his—no, her—upper body. It looks not unlike some of the gear for the more powerful of Zola's energy guns.

More alarming, though, is the literal swarm of insect-robots rising up behind her.

"I'm guessing this is the point where we run," says Sam.

It's only when it happens a second time that they figure out what the insects do.

They're hiding behind the display cases when there's the tell-tale metallic clunk. Steve whips the shield off his back to look at the insect attached to it. Then Steve lets out a high shout of pain, though he ruthlessly suppresses it after a moment, and he's fallen to his knees, the shield rolling out of his grasp. Sam plucks it from the ground while Bucky kneels next to Steve. Bucky gives Sam a questioning look; Sam shakes his head and shows Bucky how he's holding the shield just fine. The insect is a charred lump of metal on the floor.
"Clint, remember that insect-like robot we saw?" says Sam into the comms. "We may have just found out what they do."

Bucky leaves him to update the others and turns his attention to Steve. "You okay?"

"Fine," says Steve. He pushes himself back to his feet with a grimace. Bucky pretends he can't feel the slight tremor in Steve's arms, pretends he doesn't remember himself how much the insects' zappy thing fucking hurt.

Sam hands the shield back without pausing in his description of the situation. Bucky's only been hit once and he already feels wary about touching the shield; Steve, of course, pulls the grips over his arms without hesitation.

The low-pitched whining grows louder. The three of them start running again.

"So these things target metal?" asks Steve.

"JARVIS thought their sensors are sophisticated enough for them to be programmed to target very specific types of metals," says Bucky. He looks around them. "And maybe also to ignore other kinds of metals."

Steve meets his eyes. "It might be a coincidence that they have this kind of tech here, in the same place they have the Winter Soldier's sleeper codes."

"Yeah," says Bucky. "Might be." The thought of what those insects would do to a metal arm—the shield, at least, is something he and Steve had been able to cut physical contact with. Another thought occurs to him. "Hey, Iron Man, do not come down here. I repeat, keep your ass out of this section."


"He's staying in the control booth," says Natasha. "I'm coming down, though."

"Everyone, watch your guns. Drop anything those insects stick to," orders Steve.

The whining sound changes slightly in tone. Bucky looks over his shoulder and sees the swarm charging at them.

"Break off!" he shouts. The three of them scatter.

Somehow Bucky ends up inside the submersible. He's had to drop his guns, the arm-armour, and one knife when insects had stuck to them; the latter had gotten him zapped briefly because he hadn't wanted to stop running to pull it out of its ankle sheathe. The submersible had seemed a good spot to regroup, though he'd half-expected it to be sealed shut.

Two insects tap lightly at the glass. He wonders if they can sense him in there. He'd worried that they'd simply attach themselves to the hull of the submersible, since it's metal, and cook him in the inside. But maybe he's right about them disregarding certain metals. They wouldn't be kept in a place full of metal items if they didn't have some kind of excluding known items.

It's clear that the HYDRA operative wearing the body device functions as a central controller for the
swarm. If they take him out, the insects will stop being a problem.

Said operative stomps into view. Bucky catches a flash of red atop one of the display cases. He assumes Natasha has arrived at the same conclusion as he; he watches avidly through the glass as she throws some kind of netting at a cluster of the insects. She leaps to the top of another display case, sliding a knife out of her sleeve. She throws the knife at the insect-operator.

Bucky's glad he's close enough to see it: the knife spins smoothly towards its target. Then it stops, hanging momentarily in mid-air. The operator makes a throwing motion with her hand, and the knife flies back towards Natasha. It's not at all precise, she doesn't even have to sidestep it; more of a returning motion than a counter-attack, then.

He spots Sam peering cautiously around a corner, pistol in hand. Sam takes aim and shoots at the operator. The bullets are more difficult to see, but sparks mark where they ricochet off the floor and tables. Like the knife, it seems as if there's an invisible shield around the operator stopping weapons from reaching her.

Weapons—or metal?

"Try throwing something non-metal at her," says Bucky into the comms.

A pause. "There's not a lot of things in this room that aren't metal!" says Steve. Still, in the next moment something goes flying towards the operative. Some kind of bright yellow plastic casing. The operative sidesteps it easily.

Bucky lets out a frustrated noise and starts poking around the submersible for ideas. He wonders if there might be a gun or some other weapon he can use; he'd like to see the shield try to stop a missile, and the insects might not be fast enough to disable it. But the submersible is clearly not operational, only there as some kind of display.

And then he catches sight of something in passing. It doesn't register, at first, and he backtracks his visual scan of the panels behind the seat, trying to figure out what had caught his attention.

There. Faint scratches in the corner of one of the panels. Not just any scratches—a star.

Heart hammering, Bucky uses his last remaining knife to pry open the panel. Frowns into the tangle of wires.

Maybe this is where his future self had hidden his earpiece, and he'd simply wanted to mark it. Feeling oddly disappointed, he sticks his hand into the opening. Feels around the wires.

Something thicker and heavier than wires nudges his hand. He stills, then carefully tries to feel out what it is. His fingers close around something thin and flat. He pulls it out.

It's a knife. A ceramic knife.

He stares at it for a long while. He finds himself smiling, though he wouldn't be able to explain to anybody exactly why.

Maybe it's just the Winter Soldier seeing to the completion of his mission. But Bucky knows it's more than that. The note, and now the knife, had been sent to him, specifically.

He traces a finger over the star scratched into the panel.

There's a loud crash outside, and Bucky is reminded that he's in the middle of a fight. He takes in the
scene: Sam and Steve have thrown more plastic casings at the operative, but the insect swarm has surrounded them. Natasha is picking herself off the floor.

Bucky climbs down from the submersible's cockpit.

He waits for the operative to be facing the other way before darting in.

The operative still senses him coming, turning to meet his approach head-on. Bucky sees him working the machinery on his body. There's a loud noise not unlike the Iron Man repulsors. The swarm break off from Steve and Sam, returning to their controller.

Bucky closes the distance.

He sees the moment the operator realizes whatever she's doing isn't having any effect on Bucky. Her eyes widen. Insects peck at Bucky, but find nothing to attach to; either the buckles and assorted metal parts of his clothing are too small, or the insects are programmed to ignore commonplace metal items.

The arm-armour might have been useful for getting the operator out of her protective shell of machinery. Bucky punches the machinery anyway. She gasps, and then kicks Bucky hard in the shin.

They trade blows for a short while. The semi-suit the woman is wearing constricts her movements but also works as armour.

He notices one of the operator's hands dropping the controls and reaching down her back. Bucky sees a flash of light and thinks, **grenade**. He rushes in, flips the knife in his hand; grabs the woman's arm with his other hand to stop her arming the grenade. A hard strike upwards with the knife, sliding it under the straps and panels of the machinery, and the operative lets out a choked sound. She staggers backwards a few steps, then crumples to the ground.

The heavy whining of the insects die off. Each small unit flies to the nearest flat surface and powers down.

Bucky looks up and meets Steve's eyes. Sam and Natasha brush themselves off. In their ears, Hill requests an update on the situation.

"Sublevel secure," reports Natasha. "Tell Stark it's safe for him to come down here. If this was the boss fight for this level, he was probably guarding another level to this place, and the four of us are going to look for it."

The next level turns out to be a labyrinth of labs and workshops, currently deserted. Bucky envisions them spending hours scouring the place. But, in fact, the main corridor ends in an open circular area with a ceiling twenty feet up. There are two levels built into the walls between their level and the curving ceiling, looking out over the open area. Bucky can see big black boxes stacked on shelves all along these two levels.

"Servers," says Steve.

Sam and Natasha glance at each other. "I've got it," says Sam. He clambers up a ladder to the next level.
The perimeter of the circular area is lined with display cases similar to what they had seen in the museum-like section. Bucky's eyes zero in on a metallic box in one of the cases: silver-coloured with a bright red star on the side.

He crosses the distance to it, very conscious of the quiet in the room. They should have had more resistance, he thinks. HYDRA would have guarded this more closely, if they really wanted to reclaim the Winter Soldier.

His left hand itches under the arm armour. It's still non-functional but he'd put it back on, anyway.

There's a flat panel on top of it that has the colour of smoked glass, and a small hole on another side not unlike that of a cell phone camera.

"Biometrics," says Iron Man, after Steve describes it to him. "Handprint and retinal scan."

"Zola's?" asks Hill.

No, that wouldn't make sense. Bucky swallows. "Mine, I think."

He presses his right hand on the flat panel. It glows gently, bars of red light running across the area where his hand is in contact with the surface. The red switches to green.

A soft whir. The cylindrical stand under the box raises it to be level with his head. The small hole glows red. He reluctantly leans in. Flashes of light right into his eye. The hole glows green.

The stand lowers again. There is a faint hiss, like air escaping from a sealed container.

Then a voice. He hears it and knows it. He has to swallow down an upsurge of bile, feels cold sweat breaking out all over his skin.

"Увидел истицу на дне."

The case has opened; the top side splitting down the middle along a previously invisible seam and the two halves sliding away. Inside is a low-tech monitor. Cyrillic words are running across it.

He hears Nat coming up behind him. She reads the screen over his shoulder. "The code is an override. Revert Subject to Protocol 1." She glances back in Steve's direction. "Protocol 1 is probably either to obey or to protect HYDRA personnel."

He feels her tense up. He follows the direction of her gaze and sees a man in a lab coat standing on the level above theirs, looking over the pit. Mid-fifties, balding. Holding a sub-machine gun loosely in one hand.

"Asset, eliminate all threats to HYDRA."

Bucky stares at him. The man makes an impatient sound, and repeats, "Asset, eliminate all threats to HYDRA."

And suddenly Bucky's angry.

He can't really think of the Winter Soldier as his future self, beyond an abstract idea. But he knows what it is to be a prisoner of war, and he can see the Winter Soldier as a brother-in-arms, of a sort; another soldier who'd fought and bled and killed for a cause that didn't really care about him, one of hundreds of thousands. Like Bucky before Steve came for him. Those things, he knows how to feel for.
These bastards had hurt him and made him into a thing, and when he'd gotten free, they're getting people hurt trying to take him back.

If Bucky hadn't been here, he realizes, HYDRA might have succeeded. If Bucky hadn't taken the Winter Soldier's place, HYDRA might have recaptured him and wiped him all over again. Made him hurt his friends. Made him hurt Steve.

"Asset!"

This time he's completely aware of drawing his pistol. He moves smoothly, swiftly; this motion shouldn't be easy, and yet it's so, so easy. Safety off; sight target.

_Bam._

(Bucky Barnes would have made some wise-ass crack. The Winter Soldier, he knows, is silent on a kill.)

He hears movement on his nine o'clock. He brings up his left arm to deflect the bullet. Then Steve is there, covering his weak side, and Nat's at his back.

Now the HYDRA agents pour out, half of them in black STRIKE gear and all of them armed. They must have been waiting, planning to fight the Avengers with the Winter Soldier on their side.

"Cap! Remember when I needed a ride, with the aliens?" says Nat.

"Ready when you are," says Steve.

Bucky looks over his shoulder in time to see Nat springboard off Steve's shield, landing on the upper level and taking out a knot of HYDRA gunmen. There’s an outcry as Sam leaps out of wherever he’d hidden between the servers.

“Remote connection established with HYDRA’s closed network,” says Hill. “Iron Man, switch places with Hawkeye,” says Hill. “Hawkeye, go down to support the basement team. Iron Man, I’ll give you access to the HYDRA network from the computer in the control booth. Feel free to play merry hell on their system.”

“Well, if I have to,” says Tony. In the background, Clint’s voice can be heard complaining, “Couldn’t you wait two seconds for me to get out of the chair?”

Bucky laughs, shaking his head. Sees Steve smiling at him like a big sap.

A HYDRA tech peers around a side-door and aims a semi-automatic pistol. Bucky steps real close to Steve, front-to-front; brings up his right arm over Steve’s shoulder and fires. The tech goes down. Steve’s right arm, the shield strapped to it, swings over and behind Bucky’s shoulder to cover their heads. Bullets ping off the shield.

“Still with me?” murmurs Steve into the soft space between them, a thread of quiet in the midst of battle.

“Ain’t seeing the end of the line yet, pal,” says Bucky.

They finish the mission.
Chapter 15

He starts at a large hand clasping him on the shoulder. Fortunately it's on his right. He’s not sure how he’s managed to keep anyone from detecting the difference in the feel of a metallic shoulder and arm. And avoided showering when any of the Howlies were present.

"What would I ever do without you, Buck?"

He thinks of the Captain in the future, who had functioned perfectly well on his own for a number of years. Barnes had watched him for months. His skills are slightly different from the Winter Soldier's, but his proficiency is just as expert.

And yet- he thinks of the weaknesses he's been carefully cataloguing, the holes in the Captain's technique. Steve is a good soldier, and his enhancements make him no match for any other soldier on the field. But what is adequate for HYDRA ground forces will not suffice for more powerful enemies. And he knows that the Captain will be facing far more powerful enemies in the future.

Including the Winter Soldier.

It hits Barnes: what if I was the one who taught him?

What if, decades before the Red Room and the Black Widow program, Captain America had unwittingly been the Winter Soldier's first trainee?

Two days left before they reach the same point on the moon cycle the swap had happened on.

"I feel like I'm seeing my best guy off to war," says Steve quietly.

"Again, huh?" says Bucky. He'd been scared the first time, but it had partly been for Steve, who he'd had no doubt would continue finding trouble in his absence— he'd been right— and the rest had been vague, amorphous ideas of what fighting on the front lines would be like.

He knows better, now. And the fear is eating him up even more, he's ready to crawl out of his skin from it.

"At least you can give me a better send-off, this time 'round."

"Actually," says Steve, a too-long moment later. Bucky's insides, already over-stressed, manage a feeble quiver of anticipation, because he recognizes that tone in Steve's voice. "I've thought of something. Just an idea. I don't know if you—it's okay if you don’t want to. But."

Bucky rolls his eyes. "You say that every time and yet I end up going along with whatever crazy plan you’ve come up with anyway. C'mon, lay it on me."

Steve tells him.

Steve grins at him, teeth bright through a face caked with dust. He’s holding back his full strength and full speed, Barnes knows, and there’s no way for Barnes to request otherwise without revealing his own enhanced traits. But they’re managing.

"What?" asks Barnes.
"This is fun," says Steve. "You never wanted to spar with me before. Helped me shoot, yeah, but not spar."

"Maybe I’ve figured out you’re more likely to throw yourself at the enemy than shoot them," grumbles Barnes. He thinks, too, that Bucky hadn’t wanted the temptation. “C’mon, do that last run again. This time, figure out where my centre of gravity is, and put more of your weight in the direction I’m the least stable in.”

Steve nods. Waits a few seconds then runs at him in a curve, angling like he’s going for a Fosbury Flop and then jumping. A hand closes over the back of Barnes’ shirt. This time Steve has gauged his centre of gravity correctly, so Barnes lets himself be thrown forward. He falls into an easy roll, and gives Steve a nod when he picks himself up.

“Not bad, Rogers.”

Steve beams at him, disproportionately pleased. This is what Barnes remembers clearest of his time training agents for HYDRA: his students’ genuine pleasure at earning his approval. He had liked it, he knows. Teaching recruits how to stay alive had been the easiest kind of orders for him to follow.

“We should have been doing this earlier, Buck,” says Steve. “I’ve been learning as I go, since Basic didn’t really cover a lot of what I can do now, but I should have thought about how another person might see weaknesses in my fighting that I can’t.”

“Don’t be afraid to practice with the other guys,” says Barnes. “I’ve seen you watching them sparring. You can be careful with them, like you are with me.”

“I guess. But you’ll always be my favourite, Buck.” Steve grins wipes his face with the bottom of his shirt. “You’re a natural at this, actually. Maybe you can ask to be assigned to a training camp, after the war, if you’re not sick of the army by then.”

“I’m sick of the army now,” he says, thinking of Bucky’s writing in his notebook. “But maybe.”

After another quarter of an hour Dugan walks into the little clearing they’ve been using and says, “Got a courier pigeon who says Cap is due to talk to some reporters now.”

Steve makes a face. “Fine. Bucky, you’re coming with me, right?”

*Tap, tap.*

“I was never really comfortable with the publicity stuff, but I figured out ways of managing that kind of thing during the USO tour. Just another part of being Captain America, you know? It was easiest when you were there. You always charmed the reporters and took some of the attention off me. You would say that you hated it, but I think you meant you hated watching me go through it each time.”

Barnes throws out a put-upon sigh. “Only ’cause you said I was your favourite.”

He wonders if Bucky had loved Steve Rogers too much to really love Cap.

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In the end, they meet in the middle.

Bucky tries not to show his surprise. He’d had an idea of what to expect, had seen the videos and
pictures. The Winter Soldier had not looked familiar at all, might as well have been a stranger wearing Bucky's face.

He still has no idea what to feel about it. He should be dreading this, be quaking' in his boots about it, but it just feels like the ghost story that it is.

The Winter Soldier stares back at him.

From the others' descriptions, Bucky had expected the Winter Soldier to be... feral. Wild. He seems calm, though, just intense in a way that Bucky's never managed himself. His expression is mostly empty. He doesn't look surprised at all.

It's easier to find familiarity looking back than looking forward. Easier to recognize where you've been than believe where you might end up.

"I-" the words stick in Bucky's throat. He feels cowardly, all of a sudden, in front of this man who's suffered so much. "Steve and I—well. He'll tell you when you get back." He wants to say, I'm sorry, except he doesn't know if he is. Doesn't know if the Soldier cares one way or the other.

The Soldier shakes his head. "You're the one he wants."

And there—that's the first time Bucky believes he's looking at himself. Looking at someone he'll become.

"I think everyone believes that," says Bucky slowly, "but I don't think it's true. He misses me, like I miss the Steve I grew up with, before he became Captain America. But it's not the same as wanting them back exactly as they had been." He licks his lips, thinks of Steve's sad silences. "There are parts of him now that you're better able at helping him with. He missed you, you know, though he did his best not to show it."

The Steve that Bucky had known would not have been able to hide a secret such as the Winter Soldier from him.

The Winter Soldier moves. Bucky braces for an attack, a punch or a cut to the throat. But the man who will be his future drops to the ground before reaching him, falling to his knees. His arms wrap around Bucky's legs, he's kneeling partially on top of Bucky's shoes. He buries his face in Bucky's stomach.

A lost, pained sound, and there's no telling which of them it had come from. Might be both. Bucky drops his shoulders, curling forward, his hands coming up to cradle the back of the Soldier's head. The texture of his hair is another jolt of familiarity, though Bucky's never had his this long.

"I kept him safe for you," the Soldier whispers harshly into Bucky's shirt. "You have to—I didn't know how much it changed him, losing you—"

"Losing us," whispers Bucky; he doesn't doubt that losing the Winter Soldier now would break Steve in entirely new ways. And just like that, he knows what he needs to say. "That's why you oughtta take care of you as well as him, when you get back to the future. Which, by the way, has far more aliens than I was legitimately expecting. Don't make him lose us twice."

The Soldier lets out a choked sob, curling himself tighter around Bucky. It's a good thing Bucky's body has gotten used to supersoldiers trying to crush the life out of him.

He presses a kiss to the crown of the Soldier's head. Nudges his other self's head to tilt upwards, so they can face each other like the mirrors that they are. He ducks down and kisses the Soldier on the
forehead, sweeps his thumbs across cheekbones to the bridge of the nose, brushing off the tracks of moisture.

A benediction.

*Our mother used to do this,* he wants to say. But that's not what the Soldier needs—not another reminder of what he's lost.

Instead, Bucky looks him right in the eyes and whispers, "I forgive you."

The Soldier shudders, shakes; his body feels so much more solid than Bucky's, more unyielding and immovable than Steve's. He's crying in earnest, and Bucky whispers, *it's okay, it's okay, it's just us,* because hell, he's crying too. A fucking tragedy going two directions.

"Everything you've done," he says, "everything you're sorry for, for my sake, I forgive you. I am you and you are me. Doesn't matter if you don't ever remember. So you gotta love Steve for me, too. I know you already do. He'll wait for us forever, the big sap that he is. When you're ready, tell him, yeah?"

"He needs us," says the Soldier. "I know it now."

"That's right. He can give a great speech but he's not so good at looking after himself. Got spoiled by us saving his ass all the time, I guess. Looks like we're stuck with the job."

The Soldier's body gives a great big shudder. "I'm sorry."

"I know."
“Did he accept it?”

Neither Prince Thor's presence nor his questions are surprising any longer.

*My boon? You know better than to ask, warrior-prince. I would not reveal so private a choice even to his future self.*

"Very well.” Thor smiles and leans over the railing. “What manner of tale was this, then?"

*Such understanding is for the Tale-taker. A pause. But if I were called upon to name it, I would say the tale is about love.*

Thor hums thoughtfully. "While it is remarkable indeed that two such brave souls might be reunited against all reckoning, it seems to me that the tale of their love had been written ’ere the body of their adventures had begun."

*You are too accustomed to grand epics, son of Asgard. Yet you misunderstand. The love which my Tale-taker needed to gain was never that of Steve Rogers.*
He walks into his bedroom and stops.

The two walls, previously bare, are now covered floor to ceiling with photographs. Most of them contain someone who looks like him but younger—five years or seventy—though a large number also include Steve. Three-quarters look like they’d come from a cell phone camera. In the centre of the wall opposite the bed, in pride of place, is a framed print, larger and of better quality than the others.

Barnes can guess what it is, Rogers’s report from two hours before still fresh in his mind, yet he approaches it warily.

He is surprised to find himself nervous. More so than the first time he'd stepped into the Smithsonian, when he'd had desperation and burgeoning rage to keep him warm. Now he is alone, there is no mission, no immediate need. There is just—just him.

No. There's him and him. The other one, who has their history and now a piece of the future, too.

He’s forgotten how closed-in Rogers’s home in the future can make him feel.

The thoughts sufficiently distract him until he's right in front of the photograph.

Matching suits. Hands clasped above the white table-cloth. A large slice of cake, mostly demolished, on a single plate. There are hints of other people in the background, a crowd of trousers and sleeves, blurs of applause, but they are out of focus. Frosting on both their faces, smears of blue and red and white, and he's shaking his head before he's really aware of it.

He taps at the frame with a metal finger, right over the focus of the photo: the joined hands. Bucky has been captured mid-laugh, face and body turned towards Steve, who is curved in turn towards Bucky as if he's not aware of the existence of anybody else. Steve is beaming at Bucky, and holding Bucky's hand, where the band of gold is clearly visible around a flesh-and-blood finger.

He thinks about punching his fist through the frame and the wall. He would have done it, once.

Maybe. He stares at the image and a wave of dizziness washes through him. Like being shelled for hours and going without food and being dashed into pieces by the river of time.

He puts his back to the wall and tries to remember how to breathe. Reminds himself that this is better than the ice and the numbness.

He will never go back under the chair willingly, so he has to live with this.

It takes a lifetime for the storm to pass, for the quiet and the clean sunlight to settle the vicious things back into the shadows where he keeps them. He blinks and breathes in a regular beat, beat, beat until he's only looking at the neatly made bed and off-white walls and unshaded windows.

Something catches his attention. He sweeps his gaze over the room again until he sees it: a gold ring on the bedside table.

He forgets to breathe again. He crosses the room and picks it up. It is Bucky’s. He knows because this is not Steve's size.

He stares at it, and then looks at the photographs behind him.
He thinks, *This was left for you. This is Bucky talking to you.*

Peggy smiles when she sees him trailing into her room after Steve. She searches his face for a moment, then says, "My dear husband."

Steve’s eyes widen, and he looks anxiously between Barnes and Peggy. "Peggy, this is—"

Barnes smiles at her. "Dearest wife."

Her laugh is throaty and carefree.

These days he feels made all of loose things. The sound of her joy gathers these pieces and thread them together. He's stitching himself close, he thinks. The rips and gaps are still there, but he's remembering he's a whole piece, when it's all said and done.

This is what a miracle feels like, he thinks.

He shoulders past Steve and sits down on the chair by the bed. "*Now* will you tell me about your grandmother's swan?"

She laughs. "Schmidt was hardly the first person to make the connection between mythology and science. There have always been parts of Her Majesty's government that have investigated extreme scientific theories and unusual phenomena; the SSR was simply the most recent iteration. There are certain protocols in place for... unlikely events. That phrase is a code I created for myself, for when an operative must be trusted but not asked about their purpose or origin. I've only ever given it to five people in my life; you are the only one who is not family."

"Thank you."

Steve grabs a chair from behind the medical equipment on the other side of the bed and brings it next to Bucky's. "So I'm guessing I've missed something."

Peggy gives Bucky a look. "Did he really not know?"

"Nope." To Steve, Bucky says, "Agent Carter figured out there was something off about me, when I went back."

Peggy chuckles. "Agent Carter. My, it's been a while since I've been called that."

Steve smiles ruefully. "Well, you've always been smarter than me, Peggy."

"And a little less in love with Sergeant Barnes, which I'm sure helped," says Peggy lightly.

Steve blushes brightly, glancing at Bucky. Bucky feels oddly embarrassed, too.

"Oh good," says Peggy, watching them. "I was worried I'd have to smash your heads together. You don't know how much I wished I had, in the years I thought you both gone for good."

"Not sure it would have done any good," says Bucky. "This one was pretty set on you."

"Peggy," says Steve hurriedly. "You know that I meant, you know, everything with you and me—"
"Yes, yes." Peggy waves her hand dismissively, though the effort sends a tremble through her arm. "I never stopped loving you either, Steve. My husband knew it, as well as knew that I loved him too. Love is remarkable, that way." She looks at Bucky. "Did you know that the first time he visited me after waking up, he proposed?"

"Well, he always said he was going to, after the war," says Bucky.

Peggy grins at him, mischief lighting up her eyes. "I was fully intending to share him with you, you know."

Bucky blinks, feeling his face warm. The way she'd said 'share' somehow left no doubt as to what she'd meant. "That's, ah, real nice of you."

"Yes, the affections of two good, strapping men, it would have been such a hardship for me," says Peggy dryly.

Steve is gaping at them.

"I think we broke Captain America," says Bucky. Another thought hits him. "You know, if you'd said 'yes' to his proposal, in some way all three of us would be married to each other."

"Steve seems to have neglected to mention that little detail," says Peggy, the same time as Steve says, "I still don't know how the two of you are married."

Bucky looks between them. "Should we start with past-me coming to the future while I was visiting the past, or Peggy and me going as a couple in France?"

A contemplative moment, then Peggy says, "Best to tell him about France, dear, while I'm able to screen any attempts at creativity." Her teasing tone disguises her meaning: she is not sure how long she'll stay present, or when the next lapse into forgetfulness will occur. There is little point in telling her a long, involved story she might not last through.

A dry hand covers his. "Stop fretting, Sergeant. My memory of the war is better than your own." Bucky starts. He's momentarily sorry he missed her as Director of SHIELD; she'd have been magnificent. She looks at Steve, and gestures for him to reach over so both Peggy and Bucky's hands are touching his. "Besides, France makes a good story."

It is the first dream he’s had after returning, and it is a memory he doesn't recognize.

_The legalities are suspect and not entirely usable in any case, what with the whole time travel aspect. It's the symbolism that matters._

_A warm memory for one and a form of closure for the other._

"—to have and to hold, from this day forward-"

He wakes up.

He marches into Steve's bedroom and climbs into bed next to him. Steve had woken at his entrance —might not have been sleeping to start with—but he doesn't protest. In fact, he looks somewhat amused to have his bed invaded in the middle of the night.
"Really, Steve?" complains Barnes. "You just had to find a way to work me into it?"

"You were always a part of it," says Steve quietly. He raises his hand, then pauses. Meets Barnes's eyes questioningly. Barnes nods. Steve carefully brushes a few strands of hair off his forehead. "I'm not—assuming you feel anything the same, at all. But I never forgot you.”

Barnes hesitates. Then, "Keeping a secret makes one think about it more, not less.”

"Are you judging me?" asks Steve delightedly. His beaming smile is jarringly familiar. Barnes remembers it clearly from past-Steve, in both a museum film and its technicolour reality, but it makes him wonder if he’s ever seen it on future-Steve.

"You do not remember things very well,” says Barnes. “Dum Dum didn’t lose his shoe, he gave it to a dog and the dog never gave it back.”

This time Steve laughs outright. “Oh wow. How did I forget the dog? He wouldn’t stop talking about that dog for days. And he kept blaming everything that went wrong on it.”

“That fucking dog!” quotes Barnes. “There was that ninety-day wonder from the Second Battalion who thought there was an actual dog in our foxhole.”

Steve rests his hand between them, on top of the sheet.
Tap, tap.

“Got another story for me, Barnes?”

He bites his lip. “You can call me Bucky. I don’t mind.” And now he knows Bucky wouldn’t, either, which is another marvel.

Steve smiles. “Got another story for me, Bucky?”

He does.

He falls asleep at some point. The dream finds him once more, or maybe it's him falling back into the memory. And there’s Steve again, smiling.

“—for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

They’re standing in sunlight and they’re made of sunlight.

"I love you, Bucky, in all your seasons”.

Warm hands are holding his and warm lips are touching his. Later, warm skin will slide over his and warm flesh—breath—joy will join with his.

Much, much later, they might do it again a second time (maybe), and they’ll both remember it this time (maybe). Old stories for a new world. Past into future and future into past; time ever-flowing.

He wakes in the daylight, to blue eyes watching him. He says, reverence in the quiet, "My name is James Buchanan Barnes.”

[ END ]
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