The Days that Bind Us

by VendelynSilverhawk

Summary

Jaime Buchannan Barnes is a tough Brooklyn girl, concerned with only two things: herself, and her best friend Steve. Then war comes and it isn't bullies she's swinging punches at, but Hydra soldiers, because when Captain America asks for you to fight, you don't refuse. Vignettes of Bucky's military beginnings, up to post CA: TWS. Companion to "The Peculiar Case of Jaime Barnes."

Notes

So this is my narrative of Jaime Barnes, and it glosses over a lot of stuff so I'll be writing a few more stories within this universe, but consider this an overview.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

We were young and drinking in the park
There was nowhere else to go
And you said you always had my back
Oh but how were we to know

That these are the days that bind you together, forever
And these little things define you forever, forever

All this bad blood here, won't you let it dry?
It's been cold for years, won't you let it lie?

_Bad Blood_, Bastille

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Bucky found him behind the theatre, having heard the sounds of a fight and rightfully concluded that Steve had taken the high road and was getting a fist in the face for it.

"Hey!" she shouted at the mouth of the alley, stomach roiling in anger at the sight of the hulking man standing over her friend, whose small frame was laughingly covered by a trash can lid clasped in his skinny hands like a shield.

Bucky put a firm hand on the man’s shoulder. At her intrusion the bully whirled around, obviously fully prepared to smash in someone else's face.

Except that society at large generally disapproved of hitting a dame.

"Pick on someone your own size!" she yelled before her first connected to his jaw. Stumbling back, he wiped blood from his split lips. His eyes grew ugly.

"You little bitch!" When he came at her again she feinted to the side, fist ramming into the back of his skull. He plowed to the ground, Bucky's curled fists daring him to rise in her direction.

"Slut," he growled as he walked away.

"I think you need to forget that word, friend- unless you like to kiss concrete," she growled, but the man didn't come back. As soon as he was gone she turned to help Steve out of the garbage. When he was up he saw her crisp military uniform, khaki skirt and cap, and couldn't help the twinge of envy that showed in his hesitation to smile.

"You got your orders then?" he asked, brushing himself off.

"Yep- assisting nurse of the 107th. I ship off in the morning," Bucky said- she knew how much the war meant to Steve, the 107th, but that didn't mean she liked his determination to go get shot at.

"I should be going with you."

"I don't think you're pretty enough to wear a skirt to war, sorry Steve," she laughed, trying to make light of things.
\"I have no right to do anything less than they're doing!\"

\"You know what they're doing? Getting shot at. Dying.\"

\"They're letting dames over and still won't give them the vote, but I have to sit and wait here?\"

\"Us dames can only patch up the men, I'm afraid. No guns for us.\"

\"I don't know why- you could storm the beaches yourself and take out the Nazis before the rest of the men arrive.\"

\"Tell that to the U.S. army.\"

Steve was still seething quietly, and Bucky sighed, swinging an arm around his frail shoulders. “Come on- let’s get you cleaned up. I found us a double date for my last night in this great country of ours.”

Ignoring the sarcasm in her tone- the last thing anyone could accuse Bucky of was being patriotic- Steve let her help him limp from the alley. It was only a few blocks back to their apartment, but Steve was already having trouble breathing by the time they were across the street, and Bucky cursed under her breath.

“What’ll your date think, a dame using language like that?” Steve wheezed, and Bucky would have laughed but she was too concerned with the sudden lack of air in her own lungs. Ignoring the looks they were getting- a strapping woman in a military uniform supporting a 98-pound asthmatic man- Bucky tightened her grip on his shoulders, only relaxing when his chest rose normally.

They took their first breaths together, without noticing.

“Funny, I don’t ever recall caring what a man thought,” Bucky said wonderingly, staring mockingly off into space. “In fact I forgot that I wasn’t one.”

“Me too,” Steve said seriously, but it made Bucky smile. Her being a girl hadn’t bothered him when she beat up Calvin Hasse in the third grade to save him from being bullied, and it hadn’t mattered in the years since. People could talk all they wanted about how indecent it was for a man and woman to live together without being married, the oddity of Bucky’s male dressing habits- she only wore dresses when her former work as a secretary demanded it- and how she’d make a fine wife if she just quit bruising her knuckles looking after Steve, but neither of them paid it any attention.

Except that one time, which she refused to think about ever again because Steve was smarter than that. Of course it had all come flooding back at the recruiting station when she grumbled about not getting a gun and the \textit{look} the woman had given her!

“What in God’s name are you talking about, Steve?” Bucky asked as she pulled up her hair, shoulder-length brown hiding neatly beneath the smudged blue head scarf.

“Well, I just… I heard some of the guys talking in the store today,” the shorter man said, worry crossing his pinched, pale face. “I thought maybe-”

“What, that I’d decide my chances of marriage were better with one of the guys in the store and take off in a new dress and heels?” she exclaimed, at a complete loss as she looked at her only friend in the world, who was proposing that she would want to leave him on his own because
living with him was detrimental to her being ‘a proper dame.’

“No-”

“Do you really think so little of me? That I’d leave you to fend for yourself in the middle of winter? You’d be dead in a week without me!”

“I know, I just- being with me isn’t exactly the best thing for you,” Steve interjected lamely, brushing the hair out of his eyes. At once Bucky’s flashflood of anger abated, leaving a pit of emptiness in her chest.

“You mean because the guys in the shop were talking about what a waste it was that I haven’t married? Steve… don’t you know me better than that?” she asked.

“Of course I do! It just got me thinking, is all. I never really thought about this, about how us might affect your life,” he said earnestly, gesturing to the corner of their flat littered with sketchbooks and half-finished paintings. “I mean, we both know what the newspaper pays me for my art is nothing, and I’m lucky to get paid for working at the shop. You’re the one who keeps us afloat, working as a secretary and now at the factory, and I know you only do it because the money’s good. You could be off on your own, with- with nice clothes and jewelry and your own place by now if I wasn’t here to weigh you down.”

Bucky took a deep breath, and gestured very pointedly to her wrapped hair and thick trousers, white blouse smudged with grease. “This is not because you’re weighing me down, it’s because dresses and heels are the stupidest beauty ideals created by civilized society, and because I’m stronger than half the guys who worked at the factory before they were drafted and shipped off to Europe. I have never expressed a desire to marry, and I don’t think I ever will, if any future husbands will disagree with a trouser-wearing wife. So stop thinking that you’re keeping me from bigger and better horizons- I like ours, small and lacking heat though it is.”

Steve smiled, looking infinitely reassured as Bucky squeezed his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Bucky-”

“For God’s sake, stop apologizing already! I’ll be late for work,” Bucky laughed. She got up and headed for the door before something occurred to her. “Are you going out tonight?”

Steve frowned. “Maybe. I was thinking of maybe sketching by the docks-”

“Well, if Susan Malone has to come running to tell me that you went all white knight for some stupid girl’s honor-”

“You’ll mess me up six ways from Sunday and have an asthma-nefrin injection ready so you can say you didn’t kill me,” Steve grinned.

“Punk.”

“Jerk.”

Bucky blew Steve a kiss before breezing out the door, staunchly ignoring the evil eye Mrs. Vittone gave her on her way down.

By the time they got back to the apartment Steve’s breathing was completely normal, and Bucky was flooded with relief at not having to use one of their nefrin injections- they were too expensive to waste, with her and Steve barely scraping by on their meager salaries, Steve’s from the
art shop and Bucky the munitions factory.

After cleaning up and putting some cold water on Steve’s split lip, Bucky and Steve headed out into the rapidly darkening streets of New York. One trolley ride later- and one escapade into a recruitment station, during which Bucky was filled with terrifying visions of Steve in a uniform, running into a fray of bullets, ending up on some poor nurse’s table- and they were on their way to what Bucky was determined would be a fun night.

“Twins,” Bucky grinned, waving to the blonde man and woman waiting outside the recruitment center. “Blonde and green-eyed wonders looking for a night of fun.”

“What’d you tell her about me?” Steve asked nervously, pushing back his blonde hair before shoving both hands deep into his pockets. Bucky slapped him on the back.

“Only the good stuff.”

“Where are we going, anyway?”

Obligingly, Bucky passed him a pamphlet and guided his gaze to the bright advertising stand right behind their dates, STARK EXPO in bright red lettering glowing through the night.

“The future.”

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She was supposed to stay back.

Nurses were not soldiers- combat was not their place. It was too dangerous. That point had been reiterated for the past four months.

Even though everyone knew that she’d saved the commanding officer by shooting a German soldier between the eyes when he got past the lines. Hadn’t even hesitated to grab one of the wounded soldiers’ guns and pull the trigger, yet all she got was a reprimand.

Well, she was in for one hell of a reprimand this time.

If she lived.

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No one could believe their eyes when, after the latest wave of prisoners of war were herded into the Hydra base like sheep, a woman was dragged in a few hours later. The Hydra thugs dragging her by her wrists didn’t seem to notice or care that she was a woman as they shoved her into the nearest man-filled cage, and it was dismay that other prisoners got a good look at her as the bars closed. Stragglers from the 107th dispersed in other cages recognized the woman with dismay, and her name quickly floated around the room, accompanied by shocked exclamations.

The soldiers who had been there longest, a motley crew of English, French, and American soldiers from all different divisions and regions of the world, stared with dead eyes at the newest disruption.

Bucky.

For those driven mad by pain, starvation, or festering wounds, she was nothing- why should they care, hovering on death’s door as they were? But there were a few with less than savory
thoughts when they saw her torn uniform— a white blouse and trousers stolen from a supply truck—and the pink skin beneath, the blood and dirt coating her body irrelevant.

And then there were the men from the 107th, soldiers who had been healed by her, knew her bravery, and even under the current circumstances were determined not to let anyone touch her despite being sectioned off in different cells. Bucky ended up with strangers, and her companions looked on with worried eyes.

They needn’t have. Those who crowded around her in the cell, noting the blood on her head and the mud and dirt staining her military-issue trousers and boots, quickly made a pillow out of jackets for her, and one even took off his shirt and pressed it to her wound. Whoever this woman was, she was now no better than the rest of them, and soldiers stuck together.

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It was dark.

It was dark and when she moved her head throbbed. When she tried to breathe cold air ripped through her chest, breaths rasping past her dry throat until they became a deluge of wracking coughs.

"Easy there, love," someone said— someone unfamiliar. Her brain registered that it was a man with an unusually mellow voice— English. Rough hands cradled her head, and a gruff man muttered an apology when she let out a hiss of pain.

"The good news is you aren't bleeding anymore," the Englishman said.

"Do you think she can handle the bad news?" the rough voice, owner of the equally stern hands, asked. There was rustling around her and she was aware, as her eyes adjusted to the dimness, of the concrete beneath her and the heavy jacket thrown on top of her.

"She's a tough girl. I think she'll take it better than the rest of us did," said the Englishman.

Bucky blinked rapidly, and through the dim shafts of blue light was able to make out the bars of the large circular cell, the dancing shadows of guards strolling the catwalks above, the dirty, grim faces of her fellow prisoners. She had no doubt that was what she was, her last memory that of sneaking into the base with a stolen Hydra gun, hell-bent on rescuing the men, before everything went dark after she stepped into the cell block. And now she was in a cell, worse off than when she started.

"Welcome to Death Camp," a voice called from across the cell. "A right fine hotel for dames and soldiers alike."

"I am a soldier," Bucky rasped, struggling to get up despite the pounding in her head and aching in her limbs.

Her declaration was met with very little laughter, and none of it from the Englishman who helped her into a sitting position. In the dark she could see his honey gold hair and mustache, which had certainly known better days, and he smiled grimly at her. The hands of another man guided one of her hands to her head, where a shirt was balled up and pressed to her temple. She didn't need to see it to know it was soaked with blood.

"No doubt of it, sweetheart," the gruff man said, grinning beneath his thick chops, a ragged bowler on his reddish brown hair. How it had survived Bucky couldn't fathom, but it was a change from the ripped cloths and ragged uniforms covering the battered bodies of the eight men in the cage with her. One of them, interestingly enough, looked Japanese.

She tried not to think about the state of her own uniform after crawling through mud and blood on
her way into the base. It was a good thing she'd stolen trousers before leaving—her skirt wouldn't have survived.

"What is this place?" she asked, glancing around at the rows of circular cells, each filled with men, while the sounds of heavy machinery rumbled from different parts of the base.

"A weapons factory, as far as we know, and I have been here the longest of this group—a few weeks, I think," the Englishman said. "We are fed twice a day enough to keep us alive, and all of the prisoners are rotated above to work hours in the factory. There are some smart men in here, and so far none of us can understand what in God's name we're making."

"Only thing we are sure of is that we'll die here," the Japanese man said grimly. "Worked to death, or starved, or just shot when we can't work anymore."

"That's no way to talk," Bucky said, glancing around at the hopeless men. "Think like that and you're only making the job easier for them."

"It's true," the man shot back. "In a few hours you'll see what I mean when we're taken to work. Pretty soon we'll keel over, or get sick and that's about the same as getting shot in the head—no use for workers who can't work. Of course there's always the doctor..."

An icy shadow trailed up Bucky's spine at the man's words, and she wasn't comforted by the dark look exchanged by the Englishman and the southern gentleman with the bowler.

"What doctor?" she asked.

"Try to rest—they hit your head pretty hard," the southern man said. "You'll find out about the doctor soon enough."

Leaning back against the bars, Bucky felt her stomach rumble. She hoped she'd learn about food before this doctor fellow, but considering her luck recently she didn't think she would. She was right.

About an hour later, after introductions and brief explanations of how each of them got there and how long ago, Bucky heard the squeal of the large prison doors sliding open. All of the men shrank back against the bars but Bucky pressed herself to those closest to the large doors across the room, knuckles white from gripping the metal. Two guards entered, dragging a man by the armpits between them. As he passed their cage Bucky could see the deathly pallor of his exposed face and chest, the sweat dotting his brow. If she hadn't seen the faint rise and fall of his chest she would have thought he was dead. The guards dumped him in a cage farther along, where the men immediately draped their jackets over him and dragged him far from the cage door. Bucky watched the guards leave, and did not speak until the main doors screeched shut, leaving them in silence.

"What was that?" she asked, shaken, as she turned back to her cell mates. Falsworth, the Englishman who had so magnanimously donated his shirt to her head wound and was now lounging against the bars in the frigid cell in nothing but trousers and boots, blinked slowly. He looked at her with a blank expression.

"The doctor's latest guinea pig," he said.

"You mean they're... Experimenting on people?" Bucky whispered in horror. Working and starving she could do—that had been her entire year before she enlisted—but medical experiments?

"Yeah, that batshit doctor," "Dum-Dum" Dugan said as he flipped his bowler aimlessly in his hands. "No one knows what he's tryin'a do, but each time he chooses someone they come back looking like death. Sometimes screaming, sometimes complaining about burning or freezing or not bein' able to see. After a few visits, they don't come back at all."

"Just make yourself small, and stay out of sight as much as you can," Falsworth said. "You really should sleep—we will wake you when food arrives."

Bucky huffed, but knew he was right. If what they said about being worked to death was true, she would soon wish she slept more. Laying down on the cold stone she bunched up Falsworth's bloody shirt beneath her head, and let her eyes slip closed.

Days passed and Bucky got used to the routine, the hours spent hauling and welding in the factory
above until they were all ready to die of exhaustion, swallowing the thin gruel and metallic water as fast as she could when it arrived because who knew what starving men would do, even if they were all stuck in it together? Often she talked to the men from her unit, who were spread among different cages- all of them were dismayed at her presence, but none of them were surprised. One of them even said it was about time she finally became a soldier- she was a damn fine nurse, but an even better shot if the stories about how she used spare hours were true.

Still, a lot of good taking her fate into her own hands at done. She was doomed to die of starvation, or exhaustion, or some random sickness that would occasionally take hold of one of the soldiers to the point where it was apparent they could do the factory no good. The first time an ill man was dragged away, Bucky had fought tooth and nail, but all it had gotten her was a busted lip and no meal after her work shift. After that she kept her mouth shut, even though it burned letting men get killed off like animals, even if it was in the best interest of her survival.

Between meals, and work, and resting while pretending to sleep, hours were left to occupy themselves. Mostly, being men who were tired of war and waiting for death, they talked of home. "You should see the English countryside in summer," Falsworth reminisced a few days after Bucky arrived, once the food had been ravaged and it was decided that none of them could sleep. "Sun like fire, river water clear as anything cool on your skin. My love's hair is brown like the trees, and the sky's in her eyes I swear it."

"Damn," Dugan laughed. "Talk about English poetry. I've got twenty girls back home and I couldn't tell you what color their eyes are if you had a gun to my head."

"What about you, Bucky?" one of the men, Harry, asked softly from his position on the floor, eyes glazed with fever. They’d been trying to get him to eat but he couldn’t hold anything down, and all of them were terrified that pretty soon his condition would become too obvious to hide from the guards. "There some guy at home waiting for you? Or a soldier?"

"God, no," Bucky said, but a smile crept onto her face nonetheless. "Unless you count the ninety-pound soaking-wet asthmatic who's probably crying his eyes out in Brooklyn without me."

"A spitfire like you, with a runt?" Dugan exclaimed, and Bucky bristled. She knew it was a compliment, and that if he met Steve he'd realize that size had nothing to do with anything, but even here she had to protect him.

"He's small, yeah, but he's got more guts than the lot of us put together," Bucky snapped. "He wanted to go to war so badly and you guys were probably dodging the draft for as long as you could."

"Dum-Dum didn't mean any harm," Falsworth said peaceably. "You're extremely protective of this beau of yours."

"He's just a friend," Bucky said, despite the skeptical looks thrown her way. "My best friend. I've been looking out for him since we were small- well, smaller, in his case. I just hope he's ok without me."

Bucky laid her head back against the bars, staring at her feet and contemplating the deep-set weariness in her bones. The silence weighed on all of them for a few heartbeats before Dugan spoke up.

"That's it?" Bucky lifted her head, brow furrowed in surprise. Dugan was looking at her. "Come on, we've heard everyone's story but yours- even let Shakespeare here sing his girlfriend sonnets. Your turn."

"I'm sure you guys are more interested in the Brooklyn pinup girls than a skinny kid who can't pick a fight," Bucky said wryly, but Falsworth shook his head.

"Hearing any story that doesn't end with a woman left alone would be nice. Perhaps the little guy safe at home is really what we need."

"Alright," Bucky said, something warm growing in her chest at the thought of Steve. Her best man. Probably filled the apartment with drawings by now... "He's been skinny as long as I can
remember, but he didn't seem to realize that, even when he rescued Mary Davis from getting gum put in her curls by Calvin Hasse in the third grade. Got more medical problems that I can probably list..."

She talked for what seemed like hours, about Brooklyn, being a secretary and then a munitions worker, about Steve. All of the guys laughed when they heard of Steve's determination to come overseas, but no matter how many war jokes Dugan cracked, it was sobering to hear of one man's impossible courage. When they heard that he was an artist, Dugan asked if he was too shy to do pinups, and Falsworth said he'd love a portrait of his girl. Pretty soon guys from all the cages were making requests of Bucky's patriotic friend, and one said it could be his contribution to the war effort since he couldn't come to Europe himself. By the time their next shift in the factory came up Bucky was actually feeling pretty good, and thoughts of Steve at home, maybe with some pretty girl or simply sitting in the fire escape with his sketchbook, kept her strength up during the long hours of pushing and pulling metal parts and riveting and welding.

By the time they reached the long haul, their last hour before rotation, it looked like everyone might just make it back alright for, as Dugan put it, "More stories about your blonde and blue-eyed wonder boy."

Then Harry collapsed, and this time he wouldn't get back up. Wiping the sweat from her eyes as she riveted two large metal plates together on the cannon-like structure, Bucky heard the yell across the room and stuck her head around the cannon's bulk. The sight of Harry on the ground, barely moving, chilled her despite the aggressive heat of the room.

She dropped her riveter without a thought, rushing over to where Falsworth and a few other guys were trying to get him back on his feet. There were guards approaching, Bucky realized with dread.

"What's wrong?" she muttered, dropping down by Falsworth. He shook Harry desperately but the fevered man could only moan.

"I thought he could make it, but he just collapsed. He's too sick to work-"

"Nothin' to see here," Bucky heard Dugan say, looking up just in time to see him struggle vainly to keep the guards back. They swatted him to the side where he crumpled against a welding station, blood pooling above his eye.

"Move back," one of the guards said through his mask, gun pointed at those gathering around Harry protectively.

"He can work," Bucky said, leaning down next to Harry. "Come on, Harry- there's just an hour left. Come on just get up, you can do this."

Having no patience, the guard lurched forward and grabbed one of Harry's arms, dragging him back like so much trash. Anger rose in Bucky as he began to just wall away, dragging Harry behind him, without concern for any of them.

But she didn't move, and neither did any of the others.

Later she told herself there was nothing she could have done except get herself killed, that Harry was dying anyway, but that didn't change the fact that keeping everyone's heads down had cost a man his life. It was something that obviously weighed on everyone else's consciences, too, because there was no reminiscing about home that night, no pestering Bucky for stories about Steve, who had become a sort of Everyman symbol of hope for some god damn reason Bucky couldn't understand.

She ate, and slept, and tried not to dream about being frozen as Harry was dragged away.

Bucky hid the wracking cough as best as she could as the guards passed by on the overhead walkways, wary eyes scanning for any coming their way. Signs of illness were never well-received by Hydra’s thugs, who hauled off any soldiers unable to work or survive the Doctor's twisted experiments. Those men were never seen again, and it became a daily struggle to prolong the discovery of their less-than-well companions.
By now all of the men felt a sense of community, an irrevocable bond that kept them murmuring hope and sharing food with the weakest, and refusing to let hope beat them down. Within each round cell a community was formed—changing, as men died and new ones were brought in—and everyone knew that whether or not they escaped or died, they would see these men again, in one life or another.

And within Bucky’s cell community, she was the voice of hope. Even though she’d told the story a hundred times, she always ended up telling it again, repeating information because maybe if she said it enough it would make him less of a fading memory.

“So you know he’s asthmatic, got arrhythmia, colorblind, had scarlet fever when he was a kid, etc.,” she said, taking the offered drink only when it was forced on her. It soothed her aggravated throat, the byproduct of a cough that had come and planted itself firmly in her chest even though the men in her cell had given her every coat and jacket they had to offset the frigid temperatures of the cell room. “But the punk wouldn’t let up— I swear before I left he tried six different times to enlist and come over here.”

“Don’t know why,” Dugan, laughed gruffly, and a chorus of half-hearted chuckles joined him around the circle.

“I’ll tell you why,” Bucky said firmly. “Because he wanted to make a difference, and he believed that it was his duty to fight for freedom, and for peace. Now if Steve Rogers can still want to fight, who are we to do any less?”

They’d all heard the story before, heard all of her stories about Steve Rogers from Brooklyn, but it still helped. Helped knowing that if a skinny kid back home refused to give up hope, they shouldn’t, either.

“Who are we to lay down and die, give up and let them drag us away? That doctor can do what he wants, and those guards can wave their guns all day, but it’s our responsibility to make sure that if death comes for us, we don’t stop kicking and screaming. And until then, or until we’re rescued or escape, we can’t give up, because that’s as good as shooting ourselves in the head.”

“Our resident wordsmith does it again. You are quite the storyteller, Barnes,” Falsworth murmured, eyes closed as he leaned back against the bars. The solemn Englishman was full of bawdy jokes and drinking songs, but after a few days he’d gone quiet, and stopped eating, and Bucky was worried. Here in this darkness, forced to do their business like animals when they were let out every few hours between working on Hydra’s nebulous machines for exercise, forced to sleep on concrete and given nothing but broth and stale water twice a day, hell often seemed like better living. Bucky refused to let any of them sink into despair, and often her stories and voice carried to the other cages, and the fiery brunette who’d gone charging into the fray with the rest of the men seemed like an angel to their weary eyes.

Of course, those in her cage knew the truth; she was just a soldier, like them, trying to survive.

Steve… safe at home, but with no one else to shoulder the cost of the apartment, no one to stop the bullies when his heart didn’t realize that even though it had the courage of the lion, it had the body of a lamb… what would happen to him?

She was about to elaborate— it would be a few hours, by her internal clock, before their pen was cycled for work duty in the factory above— when something banged on the bars of the cell to her right. Instantly the soldiers within shrank back, and Bucky felt her heart stutter when she realized that this was no ordinary visit.
There were two Hydra guards outside the cell, flanking a short man in circular glasses and a white lab coat and bow tie, such a ridiculous sight that Bucky almost wanted to laugh. Then she realized that she was sick, and injured, and stinking of a week without a shower and proper food, and laughter would probably break a rib if it didn’t get her shot on the spot.

The little man looked around the cage, and Bucky knew instantly that this was the doctor men feared, who had soldiers grabbed from cells and brought back to his lab to be experimented on. Some of the men came back, and were violently ill in different ways for days, before being taken back again. Others were dragged off never to return.

When his eyes settled on her, she felt her lungs give up and a cough rising in her throat. Instantly someone’s arms were around her shoulders, a coat tucked around her hunched back, but the men in the cage could not make her disappear any more than they could themselves.

“Zat one,” the doctor said in a breath, high-pitched voice that sent shudders down Bucky’s spine. One of the guards stepped in, gun primed menacingly, but no one moved.

“Stand down,” Bucky wheezed, much to Dugan’s shock. “Move back.”

Although she could see that it was hard for them to do, each of the men who had scooted closer moved away, until they were pressed up against the bars and she was alone in the center of the cage, guard towering over her. When one thick gloved hand reached down to grab her long, greasy and tangled hair, she took the opportunity to surge up. There was no way in hell she would just let herself become a lab rat, and if she was going to die it might as well be in a stupid escape attempt.

She rushed the guard, upsetting his balance and sprinting for the door of the cage where the Doctor stood, looking completely unphased by her reaction. It was one mimicked by the others taken, but this was the first time the doctor had come in person. Savage, angry, desperate cry ripping past cracked, swollen lips, Bucky was fully prepared to at least break his glasses before she was subdued.

She didn’t even make it that far.

The bulky Hydra guards were faster than they seemed, and before her feet touched the ground outside of the cell she was held on both sides, arms pinned as she writhed and spat. When their grips tightened, sounds of fury became whimpers of pain, and the doctor smiled.

“Hello,” he said, smiling. “I am Herr Zola, and I am hoping you can help me.”

“Go to hell,” Bucky spat, and was satisfied when her saliva his his glasses. The smile disappeared.

“Bring her,” he commanded, and led the way out of the cell block while Bucky was dragged, kicking and screaming, behind.

“Why does it not work?”

“Maybe a woman will be different.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how is your pain, Nurse Barnes?”

“Zis injection will hopefully hurt less zan ze others...”
“Try to twitch when ze nausea passes.”

“Can you see again? I apologize- temporary blindness is a relatively new side-effect of ze serum.”

On and on it went, Herr Zola’s parade of pain. Bucky lost count of how long she was strapped to the table, it could have been hours or days and she wouldn’t have known. Rendered senseless by the various serums Zola tested on her, nothing was relevant but holding on to reality and not giving up. After a while, even that slipped away.

When next she came to her senses she was back in the cage, surrounded by the concerned faces of her new comrades. Blinking black dots from her vision and trying to say something, Bucky found that her throat hurt too much to speak. As though she had screamed herself hoarse, until her mouth was raw and bleeding.

Maybe she had.

“Here, have water,” Falsworth murmured, cradling her head with one hand as he held the cup to her lips. This time she drank greedily, but almost immediately spit it up as it burned down her insides like liquid fire.

“We thought you were a goner for sure,” Dugan said, ever the optimist. Bucky shook her head tiredly and tried to get up, but her wrists and ankles ached and when she looked down, she saw the dark bruise climbing across her stomach through the ripped material of her blouse. How hard had she struggled against the restraints, and for how long?

When she finally admitted that she felt like her entire body was one giant bruise she gave up trying to move, and just lay where the guards had deposited her, head pillowed against Falsworth’s lap. Just thinking about going back to work made her ache, but soon her tired eyes slipped shut and she couldn’t fend off the sudden, overwhelming pressure of sleep.

She was dragged away the next day as all of the men were shifted to the factory, and she was still too tired to fight, whatever Zola did to her completely sapping at her strength until she could barely twitch a finger as she was strapped to the table again.

“How did you feel yesterday, Ms. Barnes?” Zola asked as he prepped a new syringe in the corner, some new torment. Bucky didn’t respond, just stared stoically at the ceiling.

“Ms. Barnes, I cannot know the progression of my work without your cooperation.”

Fine.

“Assisting Nurse Jaime Barnes, 3-2-5-5-7.”

“Mrs. Barnes, please.”

“Assisting Nurse Jaime Barnes, 3-2-5-5-7.”

Zola let out a frustrated noise, and when Bucky felt the tip of the syringe on her skin she winced. Looking over, she saw Zola’s satisfied expression and scowled. He smiled mildly.

“Perhaps there does not have to be so much pain if you cooperate, yes? Be glad you are here, and not being worked to death in the factory.”
She returned to studying the ceiling. The needle pierced her skin, burning like fire on its way to her veins, and when he pulled the plunger suddenly everything fell away.

AngerRedPainMeanRabidLoath-

Everything was painted in crimson and ruby, flooding her vision, blocking her throat, constricting her limbs and gouging into her eyes-

“AAAAGGGGHHHHH!” Bucky’s screams split the air in the room, a thousandfold worse than those of yesterday, judging by Zola’s pained frown. They ripped apart her already damaged throat as she thrashed against her bonds on the table, fighting blindly the chemical cocktail the deranged scientist was testing on his human guinea pig.

She wants to hurt someone, to rip something- anything- apart. Somewhere Steve is being beat up in a back ally and she wants nothing more than to tear the throat out of anyone who has ever dared to lay a hand on him-

The bullet finds its way between the eyes of the German soldier who got past their lines, who thought he could do some good by taking out the ranking officer in the tents by the nurse stations. That is not enough. She wants a thousand soldiers and ten thousand bullets and to riddle their bodies with metal until they are nothing but blood-

“Hold her down! She will harm herself!” Zola shouted, and two of his helpers went to keep her hands from compulsively digging into the flesh of her outer thighs, to hold her head still on the table to stop the thrashing that had already broken skin and begun to drip red onto the floor.

Oh God oh God what did he do to me?

Bucky didn’t know how long it had been when she came back to herself, but Zola was scribbling notes fiercely at his desk across from the table and looked extremely pleased with himself. Swallowing dryly, Bucky felt the splitting pain in the back of her skull, the aches of the bruises, the buzzing energy where yesterday was only lethargy. It was as if Zola had replaced the vacuum sucking away her strength with a stick of dynamite. In spite of the pain she felt like she could take down a tank, run head-first into an army without a thought.

“How do you feel, Ms. Barnes?” Zola asked, not looking up. Bucky was too busy trying to reign in the snarling red beast in her chest, the dragon roaring to be set free on every living thing in the vicinity to put her newfound energy to work, to answer.

“Ms. Barnes, I do have syringes here that are for purely psychological torture, and I would hate to waste them on you,” Zola said, and when she met his eyes she knew he wasn’t joking. The thought of undergoing what she had the day before, when each second she had believed it would be her last- hoped it would be- only let the bone-rending pain continue, was enough to loosen her tongue.

“So, how do you feel?”

“Angry,” Bucky rasped, and a portion of the rage inside of her was suddenly directed inward, for her weakness, for her willingness to give in to spare herself added torment by helping this madman.

“Interesting….” He scribbled something on his notes. “Angry in what way? Are there any notable physical differences?”

“Angry like… like I want to kill someone,” she swallowed painfully, fingers clenching as
she bit back tears. *Oh God it’s anger like fire-* “Like fire.”

“So increased energy levels, yes?”

Bucky nodded.

“Anything else?”

“I want to rip out your spinal cord.”

“Fascinating.”

* It was only later, once she was forcefully walked back to her cage to keep her from seriously injuring someone- the orderlies who released her were in… less than desirable condition- that she actually tried to fight the rage battling her mind, having no desire to hurt any of the men in her cage. That didn’t stop her from being snappy, or rude, or just plain ugly, all the while the energy twitching at her fingertips, begging her to channel those feelings with spilled blood.

Zola had somehow bottled bloodlust, and he’d given her hours’ worth.

After the men realized that it was a side-effect of whatever Zola had done to her, Falsworth and a few of the others used their jackets to bind her wrists to the bars and they took turns watching her while the rest slept. When she food came she physically couldn’t eat or drink, and dry-heaved after all of the broth had already been expelled. All the while the men took turns, making sure she was alive, making sure she wouldn’t hurt any of them, that she wouldn’t hurt herself as she had tried to do.

She did not sleep at all, for the whole eighteen hours between returning to the cage and the men going for their factory shift. When Zola came again, she thought there couldn’t be anything worse than eighteen hours trying to resist the impulse to bath in the blood of your friends.

He pulled out a new serum, and proved her wrong.

* Steve was there.

_Steve_ was there, tall as the Empire State building and dressed in an American flag, but he was there, and when Bucky saw his face she was sure that she had finally died.

But she was alive, and racing out of the Hydra base, away from the pain and serums and the crank doctor, running as fast as her weak legs could take her. Even though he could probably run much faster- how the hell was he _so big_?- Steve never once got ahead, and until they reached the safety of the deep forest he didn’t let her out of his sight, and she didn’t let him out of hers.

She wanted to say something, _anything_, once they stopped to regroup and find their bearings, make sense of the Star-Spangled wonder who had rescued them, but a sudden wave of exhaustion overwhelmed her. When her legs gave up Steve’s arms were around her instantly to keep her from sprawling in the dirt, one around her waist and the other bracing her back.

“Bucky?” he murmured fearfully.

“S’fine,” she drawled, swallowing painfully. “I’m fine-”
“Don’t let her lie to you,” Falsworth said, coming up behind them toting a giant Hydra gun, looking grim but exhilarated at the prospect of freedom. “She’s in worse condition than the rest of us.”

“It’s my job to get beat up, remember?” Steve muttered as he picked her up bridal style despite her attempts to smack him away. She’d walked out of the Hydra facility by herself, she could walk now.

“Yeah and I’m doing a brilliant job of saving you,” Bucky snapped, fighting the urge to let her brain check out, shadows of the flash-lightning pain of Zola’s lab eating away at her memory. “What were you thinking, running into a base with a tin shield and helmet?”

“I was thinking that the next time I do it, I’d much rather have you there with me.”

“Punk,” Bucky murmured, slipping away, drowning, terrified of closing her eyes and unable to stop it.

“Jerk.”
Chapter Notes

So, WWI! Fighting time! Also, notes: I'm trying not to depict Bucky as a tomboy, just Bucky as a girl. Part of my less-than-feminine rational for her behavior is that male Bucky in my opinion also would have held a bit of disdain for gangs of guys who objectified women or talked constantly about macho man stuff. He's a confident guy who likes women, but he's also friends with Steve, which means he would be less drawn the cliche man behavior. Therefore, female Bucky would be less drawn to cliche female behavior. I hope that makes sense and shows in the story. Again, this is not the historically accurate fic you are looking for.

They were in the woods for three days, figuring things out, walking, tending to the wounded and letting the soldiers reclaim their strength. A few of them knew where to find edible plants, and the Japanese man named Jim Morita and an African American named Gabriel Jones, along with a few others, were handy enough with their guns to go hunting. Between that, and sticking close to streams as they made their way back to the U.S. SSR base that Steve promised was safe for all of them, Bucky dodged talking about what had happened in the Hydra base.

Steve asked, said he could carry her if she was too tired, ordered her to ride on one of the tanks with the injured men. He even tried to pull rank when he found out that she wasn’t eating or sleeping, but she ignored him and the questions in his eyes. Those hopeless blue eyes that made her ache.

“Did it hurt?” Rushing out of thr base, it was crashing around them. She still hurt- so she wasn’t dead.

“A little.” Steve wouldn’t stop looking back at her, reaching out an arm, keeping pace.

“Is it permanent?”

“So far.”

A few hours after the base attack, after Bucky had woken to find herself in the middle of a mobile, bustling camp of men eating, drinking, and caring for one another in the middle of the woods, Dum-Dum and Falsworth came to find her. They had some meat and mushrooms, and stream water that was so cold it numbed her tongue. They had questions.

“You lied to us,” Dum-Dum berated her, and Falsworth shot him a look.

“Why keep it a secret? That your little Steve Rogers was actually Captain America?”

“You’re acting like I knew,” Bucky snapped, picking at the mushrooms with no appetite at all. She had slept in Steve’s arms on the first walk away from the base, yes, but she didn’t think she ever would again. She’d gotten maybe two or three hours of shut-eye on the entire march so far. The mere sight of food made her want to heave, Herr Zola’s words buzzing in her ears. “Last I checked, he still was little. How was I supposed to know he was recruited for some super soldier experiment?”
“Well, in any case we owe you a big thank you,” Dum-Dum said, slapping her on the back. “If you hadn’t been fool enough to try rescuing the prisoners at the base, your friend here never would have come.”

“Well, gee, it’s a good thing I’m cute then,” she joked, but there wasn’t heart in it.

Bucky’s eyes found Steve across the camp, partially obscured by the trees as he talked to the men and supervised those riding on the tanks. They would be marching soon, and Bucky could already tell that the men didn’t care to where- they’d follow Steve into the jaws of hell itself if he asked. He was their saving grace, even for those who weren’t American.

“Really… he would have anyway,” she murmured. “He can’t stand a bully.”

“He also probably can’t stand watching his best friend starve herself,” Falsworth said. “Talk all you want about his spirit- he came here for you. Now eat- you need it more than most.”

“No I don’t,” Bucky said, setting the food down on the log beside her. “Give it to one of the injured men, or one of the sick.”

“That psychopath experimented on you days Bucky,” Falsworth said, eyes dark. “Whatever he did to you, you need-”

“Shut up,” Bucky said suddenly, freezing. Either Falsworth didn’t hear her or he thought she was just ignoring him, because he kept talking until her hand shot out and twisted in the front of his shirt, up close to his neck. “Shut up!”

The desperation in her voice silenced him, and he was free a split second before Captain America himself joined them. He knelt down in front of Bucky, concern knit in his brow, before sparing a glance for Dum-Dum and Falsworth. His eyes narrowed at the protectiveness of their positions at either side of her.

“Steve,” Bucky said, trying not to let her voice tremble. “This is Tim Dugan and Montgomery Falsworth. We were in the same cage, at the base, along with Jim Morita.”

“It’s a pleasure, Captain,” Dum-Dum said, tipping his hat. Steve smiled, then turned and shook hands with Falsworth.

“Splendid to meet you. Call me Monty.”

“Nice to meet you,” Steve said. “We’re heading out in a few minutes- can’t waste daylight, and it’s at least a day’s march back to headquarters. Factoring in water collecting and rests, more like one and a half.”

“Hey, Captain!” someone called from across the camp, and Steve’s attention was suddenly split. He uttered a quick apology- and told Bucky she needed to eat, too- before sprinting away to where he was needed, leaving the three of them in tense silence.

“He doesn’t know,” Dum-Dum said gravely, eying Bucky suspiciously.

“No, and what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” The threat was more than implied, and Bucky knew both of them understood it, and would honor it. They’d all been through a crucible together, and there was no way they would ignore that, even when it came to Captain America’s best friend.

When it became clear that Bucky wouldn’t eat, both of them left to give the food to others.
who needed it, and Bucky remained sitting lonely on her log. At march time Steve tried to get her to ride the tank- she refused. She walked every step of the way back to the SSR base camp, drinking and eating only when Steve was there to stare her down, and never enough.

He knew something was wrong, she could feel it, but there was no way she would ever tell him what. Odds were she’d be right as rain after a day of bed rest and real food; he was worrying unnecessarily, something that was new. Normally that was her job.

“Let’s hear it for Captain America!”

And cheers erupted, drowning out the pandemonium of her mind as she struggled suddenly, inexplicably, to find where she belonged. The rock she was tethered to had been cut and cast adrift, replaced by this new safe harbor that she didn’t know how to react to, except with confusion and bitterness. They had taken Steve, gentle and fierce and plucky, and put a gun in his artist’s hands. They had made him a tool of war, and she had only ever judged herself against Steve.

She supposed it was fitting- the men swore she had always been more suited to war.

* 

As soon as the cheering stopped Steve was pulled away from her, and the men were told to register by men with clipboards- apparently they had been expecting something like this, because there was much less chaos than Bucky would have expected when a U.S. base was confronted with almost a hundred and fifty men of different nationalities and squadrons that needed to be taken home. She lost sight of Dum-Dum and Falsworth, too, and Morita and Jones- both had been amiable companions on the march back, when Steve was too busy to talk to her about how he became Captain America, and the striking dame named Margaret Carter that he’d met, and fuss over her health.

In the ensuing madness she let herself get pulled along by the string of men until she found herself in a relatively clear section of the camp by the med-tents. Exhausted, she lowered herself onto a crate and buried her head in her hands, breathing deeply and trying to reconcile almost two weeks of imprisonment with liberation, and mud.

Then she heard the squishing sound of shoes approaching, and a clear, feminine voice called out.

* 

“Jaime Barnes?” Peggy called, and the woman on the crate raised her head. The woman looked back at her, tangled brown hair swinging, eyebrows furrowed.

“Who’s asking?” She looked like hell, mud and blood adorning her ragged cloths, a scrape on her forehead, hair a complete rat’s nest, but there was still a glint of strength in her eyes that Peggy instantly recognized. This had to be the woman Steve told her about- told her to find before he was dragged off to answer to Colonel Phillips.

“Agent Peggy Carter,” she said, reaching out to shake hands and pretending that she didn’t notice how Bucky’s was trembling. “I’m-

“A hell of an agent, from what I’ve heard” Bucky said, sincerity in her tortured green-grey gaze. “Fighting the good fight from the beginning while I was dragging Steve out of draft stations and dodging nursing posters.”

“I’ve done no more than my country needed of me,” Peggy said, taken aback by the influx of information- that definitely wasn’t how she’d expected Bucky to react. The soldier snorted,
looking away. Her profile was silhouetted by the evening sun, full lips and long lashes especially pronounced. She had an odd, brutal beauty beneath the beaten exterior of her body.

“More than that, the way Steve tells it.”

Peggy’s breath caught in her throat for the second before she forced herself to breathe normally again. It was embarrassing, letting Captain Rogers get a physical reaction from her, even if it was perfectly acceptable for her to feel that way. A strong woman never let it show- there was some nonsense about it potentially interfering with business. A man’s rule, of course, because they couldn’t keep things personal. Still, with Steve…

She was surprised he had talked about her, but that would explain Bucky’s knowledge and predetermined disposition towards her- whatever that may be.

“I’m sorry, but-”

Bucky’s laugh was the last thing the SSR agent expected, the last thing anyone probably expected from Bucky Barnes after what she went through.

“I’ve been a free woman for forty-eight hours and every minute Steve hasn’t spent fussing over me he’s spent talking about you. Not so many words, of course, but… trust me, I’ve never seen Steve so worked up about a girl,” Bucky grinned, looking Peggy up and down. “And I can see why. You’d give any Brooklyn girl a run for her money.”

“Except you,” Peggy said, even though they both knew it was a question. A petty one- she couldn’t believe she’d said it, and something along the lines of -a disgrace to Queen and country- how could you- jealousy is man’s folly- began to run through her mind before Bucky shook her head, still smiling.

“We don’t even belong in the same category,” Bucky said. “Look at you- all dolled up but you’ll still shoot some German’s shit ass if he tries to get into this camp.”

“Oh. Well, I can assure you that my relationship with Captain Rogers is purely professional,” Peggy said uselessly. Bucky winked at her rakishly, and Peggy briefly wondered how a woman like this had been bred in this day and age. In similar circumstances as her, probably. Suddenly Peggy decided that she liked this Jaime “Bucky” Barnes- they were women after each other’s hearts. It was just a happy coincidence that Bucky wasn’t also after Steve’s.

“I’m sure it is, and since according to Steve you’re all about the rules- hijacking planes, flying civilians and bonds salesmen over enemy lines…” Bucky could have gone on, but she let her voice trail off when it was clear Peggy understood. “Look, I spent my first six months praying that Steve got a girlfriend with me out of the way to ruin his reputation- it’s the least he owes me, after what I went through. And you are one hell of a gal. I wish you many star-spangled babies.”

Bucky saluted sloppily but Peggy pursed her lips, trying to be severe. But this was Steve’s best friend, a POW, a severely traumatized women, and she couldn’t find it in herself to admit that the joke wasn’t funny, however misguided.

Before Peggy could respond, a white-clad nurse walked over, clipboard in hand. She didn’t look phased at all by the female soldier she addressed.

“Barnes, Jaime. You’re next for evaluation and treatment,” the nurse said, checking the name off her clipboard so only Peggy noticed when Bucky’s face went white. Her hands gripped the edges of the crate so much that Peggy thought she would cut herself, chest rising and falling just a
little faster as she scowled at the ground, obviously trying to regain control of herself.

“I’d rather not,” she gritted, and the nurse frowned.

“If you’re in need of medical attention we have to help you,” she said. “And Colonel Phillips told me that the higher-ups needs to see you in the medical tent, anyways. Ms. Barnes, please.”

Peggy put a reassuring hand on Bucky’s shoulder, causing the other woman to flinch violently. The nurse didn’t miss it this time, and her frown deepened. Peggy gave Bucky an apologetic look- she should have known better than to do that.

“I’ll see what I can do, Ms. Barnes,” Peggy said, and Bucky nodded jerkily.

“Please follow me,” the nurse said. When Bucky rose she looked like a woman preparing for her own execution, each step hesitant and jerky and slow, as though she were uncomfortable in her own skin. Looking around desperately, Peggy spotted the red and blue of Steve’s uniform through the tent flap of Colonel Phillips’ command center. She took a deep breath, glanced once more at the med tent where Bucky had disappeared, and started over.

Her hands were shaking as she went to pull off her bloody, muddy, travel-work blouse, hyper-aware of the anti-biotic syringes being prepped by one of the nurses. There were two, and a skinny kid with a camera who introduced himself as one of the SSR secretaries charged with documented Hydra and things connected to it- like the damage done to soldiers in one of their bases.

Bucky swallowed thickly and concentrated on the ceiling as the shirt fell away, leaving her in nothing but a bra and what remained of her pants, which had been cut away just above the knee so the nurses could reach the scratches on her legs. She hissed as one of them started cleaning the long gash on her right thigh, inflicted when she dropped a piece of equipment in the factory, too weak to continue holding it up. She had just barely managed to put herself back to work before the guards decided she was disposable, but her slowness had earned her the scabbing cut on her right cheek.

When one of the nurses’ fingers trailed over the multiple injection sights on her forearm, bruised and bloody where Zola had been unkind with his needles, Bucky physically jerked away, startling the woman tending to her leg.

“Ms. Barnes-”

I don’t need your help.

“Please try to remain-”

My leg should have fallen off from infection from that wound.

“-trying to help-”

These needle-marks should still be green not fading purple.

Get your hands off of me.

Before either nurse could put hands and medical equipment back onto her body, the flaps of the medical tent flew open, and three men entered with absolutely no hesitation as to the state of Bucky’s dress. One of the nurses quickly threw a rough blanket to her, which she grabbed and
wrapped around herself as the men lined up along the far wall of the tent. They looked unhappy, but one of them looked at her with open curiosity that sent something unpleasant running down her spine. They looked important, but didn’t wear any bars—maybe SSR? Steve had said that was who was calling the shots, at least on his end.

“You’re Assisting Nurse Jaime Barnes of the 107th?” one of them asked, and Bucky nodded mutely.

“We have reports classifying the Hydra base you were rescued from as not only a weapons factory, but an experimental medical facility,” another said. They all looked the same to her—threatening, but maybe that was just the aftereffects of extreme malnutrition, medical experimentation, and almost being worked to death twisting her brain.

“And accounts from the soldiers rescued that you were one of twenty men subject to the experimentation of Doctor Arnim Zola. Is that true?”

“What about it?” she snarled, struggling to swallow a smart comment about three distinguished officers being in the room with a half-naked woman. Steve would probably tell her now was neither the time nor the place. Or he would have made such a comment already and leapt to defend her honor, before she had to pull him away wheezing and—

No, not anymore. Steve could handle his own fights now.

“We just have a few routine questions, Mrs. Barnes,” one of them said placatingly, but his more intrigued companion seemed to disagree with his approach.

“Namely how and why you survived where nineteen other men did not,” he said, his tone unsettling Bucky greatly. “We have information regarding the potential subject of Doctor Zola’s studies. Have you ever heard of Doctor Abraham Erskine?”

*Leave me alone, jackass, this has nothing to do with me.*

“I—”

*Oh God I’m gonna hurl.*

The hands clutching the blanket around her shoulder were white from gripping the fabric so tight, and cold spread across her skin. Her lungs were stifled and she had a brief moment of panic where she wondered if this was what Steve felt like every time he had an asthma attack. She could feel her heart racing, chest constricting—

“I’m sorry sir you can’t go in there—”

“The hell I won’t! There’s a soldier in there, Barnes, Jaime, right?”

“The Colonel—”

“Can have it out with me later.”

All of a sudden Steve was there, red, white, and blue suit and everything, except missing the helmet and shield. The look on the faces of the brass as he interrupted their interrogation was priceless, but he was all eyes for Bucky.

“You okay, Buck?” He asked as she pulled the blanket tighter around herself.
“You know me—I’ll bounce back from anything,” she said, already feeling the tightness in her chest abate as she threw him a sloppy grin.

“Captain Rogers—” one of the men began to protest, but then Peggy was beside Steve, red lipstick bright and eyes like fury.

“Colonel, this woman has been through a severe trauma and it is in the best interest of her mental and physical health for you to stop barraging her with questions and allow her to eat, drink, and rest. Unless you want to permanently damage an asset of the U.S. Army and Captain America’s best friend,” she fired off, effectively shutting down the trio and earning an admiring glance from Steve.

“You’ll hear about this later, Agent Carter,” one of the men said as they filed out.

“Don’t I always?” was her only response, before they were gone and after a quick glance at Steve and Bucky she, too, ducked out. “The Colonel is going to want to see her, too, Steve. But you can stop by the mess first and I’ll make sure there’s some food left.”

“Thanks, Peggy,” Steve said. “You alright, Bucky? I had no idea they were gonna interrogate you like that. What was that all about?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “Just… routine, I guess. Let’s just get out of here.”

Steve nodded, and Bucky slid off the table gratefully, blanket falling away before she could think about it.

She wanted to die the instant Steve saw her—pale, starving, covered in bruises and cuts, that stupid gash on her leg and the needle marks… Her hands flew to cover the black and blue and red insides of her arms, and she raised her crossed arms quickly to make it look like she was just shielding her woefully under-dressed upper body.

His eyes widened at the damage but he immediately whirled around so he was facing the outside of the tent, red spreading to the back of his neck. If this had been any other time or place, she would have laughed— it wasn’t like he’d never seen her undressed before. In winter when the heat was shut off at night and their ragged blankets weren’t enough she would curl up against him in the small bed, and pray the body heat kept him from freezing till morning. He’d drawn her for his art classes, too, before his scholarship ran out and they couldn’t pay the tuition. Never nude, but close to it, and Bucky was fond enough of showing her skin in summer, much to the chagrin of their little Italian neighbor Mrs. Vittone, who had it in her head that Bucky would teach her grown grandsons the wrong ideas about women when they visited.

Wordlessly she took the spare nurse’s shirt that one of the nurses offered her, tugging it on and tapping Steve’s shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here, Captain.”

“OK, but are you sure you really don’t need—”

“I’m fine, unless you count being hungry enough to eat a horse.”

“Peggy said she’d save us some food, so…”

“Let’s stuff our faces before this Colonel Phillips of yours wants to throw me out for being a deserter.”
As it turned out, she hadn’t even gotten through two bites of the meal Peggy had left for her and Steve near the private tents before the same SSR photographer from before- how many pictures had he gotten from her wounds before he fled the tent with the others?- came with orders for Jaime Buchannan Barnes to report to the Colonel’s tent immediately. Sighing, Bucky briefly considered ignoring him, but she had had enough dodging for one day. Might as well bite the bullet and get it over with.

Hello Brooklyn. Or rather, hello potential imprisonment because no way in hell was she going to leave Steve over here to get himself shot at. Super soldier or not she wasn’t letting him out of her sight ever again, considering the trouble he’d gotten himself into when she hadn’t even been gone six months.

Steve trailed her all the way to Colonel Phillips’ tent, where Bucky learned that the man was dry, stubborn, devoted, and someone who would either kill her or have a good laugh if they had met under different circumstances.

Standing at attention before him, she listened with a raised chin as Phillips listed her crimes, which were numerous and clearly appalling to the female secretary in the tent with them.

Using a gun without permission within a medical tent.

Desertion in pursuit of men declared Missing In Action.

Reckless endangerment.

Theft.

And, of course, those unspoken rules of society which dictated it inherently evil for a woman to behave as she had. Phillips didn’t list those, but they were made apparent in his tone.

“So… what am I to do with you, Ms. Barnes?” he said at last, giving her a critical, enigmatic look.

“Sir, permission to speak?” Steve asked from where he stood at ease to the side.

“Denied.”

“Bucky is one of the best shots out of all the men rescued, I saw during the rescue myself. In addition she’s a gifted nurse and tough as nails-”

“What part of ‘Denied’ did you not understand?”

“It would be a waste to send her home and if you courts martial her you’ll have to take me too-”

“Shut up, Rogers, I’m not arresting her!” Phillips yelled, and Steve instantly swallowed all of his threats of leaving with her.

“You’re not?” he said.

“Of course not! I’m promoting her. Half the men out there today said she was a credit to her nation, one in particular I think you know, Barnes- name of Dugan threatened to desert, too, if you didn’t see action. Welcome to the army, Sergeant Barnes.”

There was a beat of silence which followed this announcement, but Bucky snapped out of
it long enough to shake his hand and register him telling her and Rogers to beat it before he changed his mind, because “The others are gonna love this.”

As she stumbled out of the tent, she realized dimly that she was now a soldier. A Sergeant.

She was going back into the fray. For a brief moment fear, sharp and hot, seized her gut, but then she saw Steve grinning beside her like he’d won the lottery- not only was she alive, but she wasn’t going to jail- and couldn’t keep the smile from her own face. She was going back, but this time she’d have this idiot beside her.

When Steve petitioned for the Howling Commandos and won the first SSR integrated command team, that warm fuzzy feeling she’d had in her stomach since she was promoted only grew. Then morning came, and the hangover, and a sniper was shoved into her hands.

Mission One.

All of the Howling Commandos were murderers- they knew that, and they lived with it knowing that what they fought for was the right for future generations to not kill- but the war unlocked something ugly inside of Bucky that gave even them, Captain America’s soldiers, pause. She never hesitated to pull the trigger on her sniper, or fight her way into a Hydra base in a spray of blood and bullets beside the rest of them, but it quickly became apparent that Bucky didn’t cope like the rest of them. The longer they fought, the longer her face became, and the deeper the shadows under her eyes. Sure, she still shared a smoke every once and a while and drank with equal gusto, pointing out the pretty girls at local bars for Dum-Dum and the others when they had a minute between missions, but there was darkness growing inside of her that was more frightening than any mission. It kept her from sleeping to the point of passing out on their way back from a mission one day, woke her half screaming before she shoved her face into her jacket to keep from waking the other men, but whoever was on guard already knew, already knew what she'd do if they told Steve. They respected her too much to go behind her back.

Never was it more apparent than when a mission went wrong, and the most striking example was less than three months after the squad had started, when Morita and Falsworth didn’t cover their blind spot and a few Hydra soldiers reached Bucky’s sniper spot. By the time it was all quiet and the base subdued they realized Bucky hadn’t joined them. Steve led the charge up the outcropping.

Morita would never forget what he saw, although he left it out of his famous biography. Bucky, drenched in blood, stood over a small pile of corpses- at least four men- with her knife jammed into the throat of a fifth who was held aloft on the knife’s handle by her sheer strength. One of the man’s legs twitched, but he was dead, blood pouring down her arm and coating her up to her shoulder in a ghastly red sleeve.

“Bucky,” Steve said, and her attention snapped away from the corpse on her blade. As soon as she saw him her wild eyes softened; with a noise of weariness and disgust she let go of the knife and the man’s corpse fell onto his brethren with a stomach-curling thud.

“You’re hurt,” Steve frowned, blue eyes falling to the bullet hole in her side. Bucky pressed a hand over it as her eyebrows furrowed, mouth a straight gash in her face.

Dum-Dum had always respected Bucky, liked her as a drinking and war companion, but he always wondered how a woman like Bucky could ever resemble the girls back home with their red lips and curled hair. Never had the difference been more apparent than that moment as she
draped an arm around Steve and let him help her down the outcropping while she staunched the bleeding, leaving her pile of mutilated corpses behind.

“Better take care of that blind spot,” she muttered to Falsworth as they passed. He nodded, swallowing thickly, before heading up to get her gun. That night she didn’t participate in their usual post-mission banter or drinking games, and Steve voiced his concerns, but she wouldn’t let anyone into her tent and eventually Jones said that they might as well give her a minute of peace.

The next morning it was like nothing had happened, as she cleaned her gun and joked about the food quality of America’s Most Important Soldiers, but when they packed up Morita saw something in her gaze that gave him pause. It was dark, and achingly unhappy, and ugly as sin.

The first time Steve went into action without her, it was because she had sustained bullet wounds to her shoulder, abdomen, and thigh while raiding a Hydra weapons shipment, and had lost enough blood that the nurses insist she stay at camp for at least a few days before daring to go out again. After she was patched up- no needles, no painkillers- each of the commandos came in to visit, and she made them swear on their lives that they wouldn’t let Steve do anything stupid. After that Steve came in, and for a little while they talked about nothing, but Bucky knew they were leaving again in a few hours to stop another shipment, and then who knew how long it would be until they got back?

As soon as Steve walked out of the tent Bucky was itching to follow him, pick up her gun and hop into the truck with the others. When she heard its engine pop and groan and the wet tires squelching through the mud, she knew she was in for a long few days.

For a long time she refused to look at the book Steve had left- intentionally or not- on the crate beside her bed, and filled the passing hours with lewd songs and, when she accidentally jostled her stomach, a string of colorful curses that did absolutely nothing to relieve the pain. She stubbornly ignored the nurse who said that she would be much more comfortable if she let them give her sleeping drugs, or at least something to dull the pain, but one required losing control and the other needles and there was no way she would ever let anyone else inject her.

Peggy visited for a while in the small hours of the night, saying that Steve hadn’t messed up yet, to which Bucky replied that she hadn’t been away from his side in all that time. Who knew what sort of stupid risks the punk was taking without her to yank him back by the collar? Or, these days, blow the brains out of anyone who got too close. By the time the sun peaked over the treetops Bucky was exhausted, nearly deleterious from the pain, and decided fuck it, because if Steve left his private sketchbook it was his fault- she needed something to distract her.

The first picture was her, and was dated the day after she left for Europe. Bucky’s breath caught in her throat as her fingers slid over the careful pencil lines, the way he captured her smile- she didn’t look that cocky all the time- and the crease in her factory work pants. A stray strand of hair fell out of her hair wrap, and one calloused hand reached to push it back as she leaned against the door frame of their apartment. It was minimalist, and... Was very generous to her looks. How typical Steve. He drew her like she was some sort of movie star in a poor person’s costume.

For a moment she contemplated not moving on, a lump forming in her throat. Before she could stop herself her fingers were turning the page, and suddenly she was lost in the mind of not Captain America the soldier, but the artist. Her Steve.

There were more pictures of her- lounging on their ratty couch, cooking, drying her hair in the summer air on the balcony. And Peggy was there, too, leaning over mission reports or simply smiling, and somehow Steve managed to capture the vibrancy of her lips with nothing but shades of
grey on faded paper. She occupied herself with the pictures for hours, images that took her home to Brooklyn, and brought to life the battlefield they now inhabited.

The one of her cleaning her rifle after a mission, perched on an outcropping, was unsettling enough for her not to spend precious time studying it. Instead, she went to the next page quickly and spent an hour admiring his skill at capturing each of the commandos on paper. There was Morita working the radio in a snowstorm, Gabe chatting up some French girl, Falsworth sitting by the fire…

By the time the sun was high in the sky she had practically memorized the book from cover to cover, and let it fall beside her on the crate. Bucky felt her wounds throbbing, and shifted her legs despite the lance of pain it sent through her. The urge to get up and run, or at least give her hands something to do, was overwhelming, but she was confined to the bed as surely as if she were chained.

When Peggy brought food later she chastised Bucky for moving so much, and asked if she really didn't want morphine. All she got in response was a scowl as Bucky picked at the latest rations.

"You really shouldn't worry, you know," Peggy said. "He'll be back in no time."

"You must think he's some angel or something, because I guarantee he's out there charging blindly into Hydra ranks without a care in the world for his own safety." Bucky shook her head. "$\text{There's a reason I got a reputation for fighting back home- because he was always forcing me to bail him out. Kid didn't know how to pick his battles. Still doesn't.}$"

"In that case I suppose we should start the condolence letter now and have black sewn onto our uniforms, since Captain America will be leaving us so soon," Peggy said with a completely straight face, and it took a minute for Bucky to comprehend the joke.

"You know… making a person with a stomach wound laugh," she gritted between holding her side and trying to force down the gut-busting laughter. "Isn’t the smartest thing you’ve ever done, Agent Carter."

"Was it worth it?" she asked, and as Bucky calmed herself down and reclined against the pillows, she felt the smile tug at her lips against her will.

"Yeah," she rasped. "Guess it was."

"Good. Now eat, and get some sleep, please- the nurses tell me your eyes haven’t closed in almost twenty-four hours."

As Peggy left the tent, Bucky did take a few sips of water, and realized that her appetite had returned. After devouring the entire plate of food without stopping to consider what was on it, she still struggled to resist the lure of sleep. By the time the sun was past its zenith, she was snoring so deeply that an air strike wouldn’t have woken her up.

* * *

"If you’re in here while you should be in the medical tent, Steve, I’ll kill you," Bucky said without opening her eyes- she’d heard the sounds of Captain America’s welcome home parade and when her tent flap had swished open shortly after it hadn’t been hard to guess who her first visitor was.

"I think that would make the nurses’ job a little more difficult, don’t you think?"

When she looked at him, she saw that he was still dirty and sweat-soaked from battle, a line of blood on his forehead, but he was grinning like a madman and it wasn’t easy to stay angry at Steve for long. It never had been.

"Your drawings are good," she said after a minute of silence, nodding to the sketchbook which had found its way back into his hands. "There’s just one problem."


“What?”

“You draw me too well,” she said, and confusion flitted across his features. “Like back when you were drawing movie stars for posters and the newspapers- they’re too good.”

“I draw real life, Buck- how I see things,” he insisted, but she shook her head, smiling ruefully.

“Liar.”

Before Steve could respond, Gabe stuck his head into the tent, face shining with sweat but smiling wide. In his hands was an honest to God teddy bear, with brown fur and a miniature version of Bucky’s blue howling commandos jacket and black pants. For a heartbeat Bucky was so thrown at the sight that she couldn’t say anything, and it quickly became clear that Steve was just as confused.

“We figured we were about to hear raised voices, so it was now or never,” Gabe said, tossing the bear at her. When she caught it, its fur was silky and warm and felt almost new. Where the hell had they gotten it?

“What the fuck is this?” Bucky asked, holding it by its ear. Gabe just chuckled.

“That is the newest member of our team, Sarge,” he said. “That way the next time you’re out of commission you won’t be left alone. Maybe then mom and pops won’t fight so often.”

Then he winked, laughed again, and ducked out of the tent to a flurry of questions from the other commandos. Bucky could hear Dernier, their resident French genius, ask if “Mom liked it.”

“Steve, just how long, exactly have we been ‘mom and pops,’” Bucky asked icily as she turned to look at him, astonished to find that he, too, was laughing softly.

“Oh, I think since you cussed me out for taking a bullet on the Italian job in front of the entire camp,” he said. “At least, that’s when I first heard it.”

*The Howling Commandos are a pack of toddlers.*

“I better go give Phillips my report- you alright?” Steve asked as he got up to go, looking like he wanted anything but.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Punk.”

His shoulders visibly relaxed at the old nickname.

“Jerk.”

Then he ducked out of the tent, and left Bucky alone with her newest “baby.” Gabe was going to pay for this.

The next time the commandos came to visit, they found “Mom” curled up in the hospital bed with the teddy bear held close to her heard. That night they drank to successfully averting trouble in paradise.

What Dum-Dum dubbed “Bucky Bear” became an unofficial mascot of the commandos, and stayed behind each time one of them couldn’t go on a mission. Most often, though, Bucky Bear ended up
with Bucky herself, who wouldn’t admit to anyone that as mad as she was about her and Steve’s nicknames, the bear was pretty cute. In a time of darkness, it was a welcome comic relief, but that didn’t stop Bucky from brooding, or not sleeping, or keep the brief panic from crossing her gaze each time they suited up.

Peggy saw it in the way Bucky looked at Steve, each time their units crossed paths at the same base camp. The Howling Commandos would get a few days or weeks of rest, and Peggy and other SSR agents would take care of the paperwork and planning. It gave her a chance to get to know the famous Sergeant “Bucky” Barnes, and while she admired the woman’s significant gusto for life, the darkness of the situation wasn’t lost on her.

Each time a new mission came and they loaded up the trucks, Peggy saw Bucky steeling herself for what was to come. It was in the subtle stiffness of her shoulders, the clenched jaw and compulsively twitching fingers, as if priming themselves for a trigger. It was in the memories that surged into her brilliant green-grey eyes, dark and trembling.

Bucky went through hell at that Hydra base and every time she got back to camp the Brit could tell that she was promising herself that she would never go back, but each time Steve came with a new mission and a new battle cry and Bucky was sucked back in. Unlike Steve, who had a moral obligation, Bucky made the conscious decision after each leave to go back to war, to risk undergoing similar horrors, and Peggy would always say it was one of the bravest things she had ever seen. Bucky swinging the gun over her shoulder, stepping up into the back of the truck next to soldiers who had also gone through hell, but none of whom understood the true horror of what the Hydra base had done to Bucky. It hadn’t affected the rest of them like it had her, whatever way that was.

So one day, after their latest mission had brought them to base camp weary and battered, Peggy decided it was about time Bucky had something to smile about. Exiting the planning room, she made her way out of the compound to where she knew most of the Howling Commandos were still milling around their truck or being pulled to medical tents for checkups. It was there that she found Bucky, sitting outside the med-tent where a nurse was looking over Steve- apparently he’d done something stupidly heroic and gotten himself hurt, which Bucky looked anything but happy about.

"Sergeant Barnes... Have you ever worn makeup?" Peggy asked suddenly, glancing over at the raccoon-eyed soldier who was polishing her sniper and frowning at the ground. It took Bucky a minute to realize what had just been said, and she shot the agent an amused look.

Bucky had no idea what Peggy was getting at, but she realized the distraction from Steve that the woman was offering, and decided she might as well take it.

"I tried it once, realized that I was devastatingly beautiful anyway, and decided never to bother with the stuff again," she declared, swinging her head so that she could feel her braid shift across one shoulder. While in the nursing corps it had been seen as "indecent" for Bucky to keep her hair short, so she’d begun growing it out and had actually come to like the weight of it streaming down her back in a neat braid. It made her feel like herself in a world of scarred bodies and bullet holes.

"Well I think you've missed some of the perks," Peggy smiled. "You've had a decidedly rough day- you could use a pick-me-up."

"A what?" Bucky’s heart began to beat fast at the unknown jargon. It sounded painfully like girl talk, which she tried to avoid since it usually consisted of beauty improvement treatments or drooling over men or pointing out the latest styles.
"A way to lift your spirits after getting shot at all day. I can teach you how to French braid your hair, too- it'll keep it out of the way more efficiently than your current style."

"Uh, alright then," Bucky said. Peggy smiled, and Bucky followed her lead when she stood and started down the hall.

That evening while the commandos and Steve were by the fire, Bucky was in Peggy's dorm in nothing but her undergarments, sitting splayed out on her small bed while the English woman sat cross-legged next to her. Bucky sighed as Peggy's polished nails ran through her hair, gently braiding the long locks as Bucky admired her face in the mirror.

Peggy had just applied the bare minimum of smoky eyeshadow, blush, and mascara, but it had made a subtle difference. With concealer to hide her bruises and the circles under her eyes, Bucky almost looked healthy again, and the decorative makeup made her feel like she was about to go dancing with a hot date. Swallowing thickly, she put the mirror on the bed and pressed her face against her crossed forearms, ignoring Peggy's noise of annoyance.

After a minute of readjusting her hands, Peggy spoke.

"Sergeant Barnes, have I... Upset you, in any way? I understand that makeup isn't every woman's cup of tea, but-"

"It's not that," Bucky sighed, lifting her head and contemplating the pomegranate polish that adorned her fingernails. "It's just that I've never missed home more than now, even though Steve's here and I'm following him anywhere... I miss dancing. Or, not dancing, but-"

"The feeling that being yourself is the most important thing, and not the well-being of those you love throwing themselves into life or death situations?" Peggy said, and Bucky tried to turn to look at her but Peggy forcefully kept her head still while she worked.

"That is something that every soldier feels, man or woman, especially where Steve is concerned. It's why I use makeup- because one should never forfeit the right to look or feel good."

"That's a good philosophy," Bucky mumbled sleepily.

"Don't fall asleep yet, Sergeant Barnes," Peggy ordered as she tied off Bucky's braid. "I haven't even gotten to the best part."

"And that is...?"

Peggy dropped a long, black tube onto the sheets in front of Bucky.

"Lipstick."

Bucky decided that while the rest of the makeup was a drag to use, no matter how nice she looked with it on, lipstick definitely had its perks. Peggy gave her a tube to keep in one of her jacket pockets, and the next morning when Bucky exited the tent with bright red lips she could feel the attention radiating towards her.

As she climbed into the truck with the other commandos, all of whom couldn't stop staring- Bucky, their Bucky, the foul-mouthed overprotective mother of the team, was wearing *makeup*- she came to a new appreciation for Peggy and the sentiments behind lipstick in a time of war. Power, loyalty, pride- it made her feel invulnerable, for some ridiculous reason, and that was a nice feeling before going to get voluntarily shot at again.

They were briefed on the mission as they drove, stopping that night in a little town where they decided one night of drinking and dancing couldn't hurt. Even in her military uniform it felt good to move in a nonthreatening way, and all of the commandos came to appreciate Bucky’s mastery of swing dancing even without a skirt, and with a partner as clumsy as Dernier.

The next morning she wore the lipstick again, and steeled herself for the battle to come as the train passed through the mountains below them, containing their target: Doctor Arnim Zola, and his latest shipment of Hydra weapons. This time, he would not escape.

“Bucky!” Steve’s voice lanced over the howling of the wind, the steady roaring of the train.

Snow pricked her skin and the wind froze her eyes. Her arms weren’t made for this.

“Steve,” she rasped, not daring to move. The rail shuddered beneath her and she looked up at Steve as he hung halfway out of the exploded train car.

Falling.

Cold.
"My god," the man murmured as his eyes tracked warily up and down the cryotube. Through the full-length glass front every inch of the Winter Soldier’s body was visible, clad in leather to her wrists and neck, except, of course, the slim bionic arm painted with the red star of the Motherland.

"What a weapon," he said, rubbing gloved hands together in anticipation. When he glanced at his comrade, who was at least a head taller and more imposing than the Russian man, his eyes narrowed. "She is really as fearsome as they say?"

"And more so, General," the German man said with a thin smile. "When she wakes, you will get a full demonstration of her capabilities."

"But does she have restraint?" the general worried, staring at the ghost with a furrowed brow. "I have heard stories-"

"Do not fear, comrade. The Winter Soldier was designed to be the ultimate weapon, perfect for unbridled brutality or complete control. Do not think of her as an animal, but a finely tuned machine."

The General nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer, but the German had more to say. His gaze was notably riveted on the woman's curves, and the well hidden round of her chest, the would-be delicate curve of her chin.

"Hydra knows of the dual nature of your Red Room – pain and pleasure, for equal purposes in espionage and murder. The Winter Soldier will make killers of every pupil you present her, but do not think to use her for anything beyond that," he warned, causing the general’s eyebrows to lift in curiosity.

"Surely she could be reprogrammed?"

"Of course, but her worth to us makes her ability to woo irrelevant. She is not human enough to understand such things, and we do not need her to. Take similar caution – while she is in your custody, she is a teacher and a tool, nothing more."

"Understood. It has been... A pleasure, working with our allies," the general rumbled. Both men shook hands in front of the Winter Soldier, and then she was wheeled away. She would be woken as soon as they arrived at the academy, and then she would serve her masters once more.

"Winter Soldier, respond."

"Da," she said in a voice rough with disuse and agitated by ice particles from extended cryo.

"What is your mission?"

"To serve the Red Room. To teach the art of assassination. To create more effective murderers."

"Amazing," the woman said as she stared into the blank eyes of the Winter Soldier. "Hydra actually created a near-perfect weapon. Winter Soldier, what is your purpose?"

"To complete any and all missions tasked to me."

"God help us all she is beautiful," the woman breathed again, voice dripping in jealousy and admiration. The Winter Soldier didn’t respond, just continued to stand at attention, waiting for orders. For her next mission to begin.

"If her hair was only longer, and the arm..." The woman lamented.
"I know what you mean," her comrade said. "It is a waste."
"Oh well. She can teach our new recruits half their lessons, at least.

"Attention!" the General yelled, and each of them assumed their stance- legs apart, back straight, one hand holding the wrist of the other as it made a fist behind their backs. "Today shall be the next step in your training- or the last.

"This is a test, and whether you pass or fail shall be determined by our new comrade. Welcome, Soldat."

For a moment nothing responded to the General’s declaration, but he looked unconcerned in the heartbeat of silence that followed. Then, footsteps ringing on the metal walkway above them, heavy and confident. All of them looked up just in time to see the black-clad figure vault from the ceiling and land squarely next to the General, metal arm catching the light as she straightened.

In the newcomer’s presence the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees, goosebumps running along Natalia’s arms and legs as she took in the menacing new instructor. She had a face like stone, full lips that could be used to her advantage on a seduction mission but for the rigidity of the rest of her. Standing at full attention she was the general’s height, but Natalia had no doubt that she was stronger, faster, and more deadly than the older man who ruthlessly ran their combat training. There was unspoken steel in the body hidden behind the ankle-to-wrist black body suit, not just in the impossible sleek silver arm that latched at her right shoulder before disappearing beneath a dark jacket that bit off at her throat.

There was a gun slung over her shoulder, and that along with her short, boyish haircut, as if it had been shaved and left to grow slow and wild, gave her an air of savage menace. This was no Red Room agent made for killing and seduction, this was a war machine for spilling blood only.

Her eyes were empty, pale slates that surveyed the row of prepubescent girls and boys and sent a shiver down Natalia’s spine. So this was her, the infamous “Winter Soldier,” loaned to the Red Room by Russia’s friends to train the next generation.

Natalia did not know if she wanted to be chosen, or if she wanted those soulless eyes to pass her by without notice.

“Try not to kill too many of them,” the general said before turning, crossing the room, and disappearing out the door. The sound of the lock shuddering into place echoed ominously around the chamber.

“I have been told the Red Room is the best,” the Winter Soldier said, and if it was possible her voice was colder than her eyes. Natalia noticed with interest, however, that her Russian was not flawless- it was tainted with a distinctly American accent. Her mind began to race with the possibilities that presented. Why would the motherland ally themselves with an American?

“I am to teach you all I know, that you can fight and die for your country one day. My mission parameters are ‘teach.’ My superiors do not care for any permanent or fatal damage done to you. There are always more to train."

So it really was kill or be killed. One of their instructors had warned Natalia before she went in with the others that this stage was not like what had come before. She took comfort in knowing that the instructors liked her, and that she was a favorite for the new Black Widow
program, whatever that was. This "test" would not break her.

The Winter Soldier prowled down the line, assessing each and every one of them. When her blank-slate eyes swiped up and down Natalia she held her chin high, and met that gaze squarely. Pausing, the Winter Soldier cocked her head to the side, and slung the gun off of her shoulder.

“You,” she said, pointing to the boy next to Natalia but not breaking their gaze. He stepped forward, clearly attempting to smother his terror. Before anyone could blink the Winter Soldier had slammed the butt of her gun into his face and he fell to the floor, smothering a pained cry as he held his bleeding mouth and nose. Natalia did not flinch.

“This is your final test; survive me,” the Winter Soldier declared, then motioned to the table behind them where an array of knives, guns, and torture devices were laid out. “This room is larger than it looks, and there are many hidden places. You have twelve hours.”

Their signal to start was when the soldier dropped her gun, pulled out a wicked silver knife, and slit the throat of the boy still bleeding on the floor.

Twelve hours later blood soaked the floor of the room, and the Winter Soldier sat dangling her legs from the railing near the ceiling, looking down on the pile of corpses. When the door opened and the General entered, it was to the sight of four survivors- three girls, one boy- at various hard-to-get places along the walls of the room, each soaked in blood and gripping their weapons desperately. They were no longer children.

“These have some promise,” the Winter Soldier said as she fell gracefully, blood leaping up to spatter her nearly spotless uniform.

Natalia saw the Winter Soldier many more times, but none of those interactions were as harrowing or bloody as that first test, and she began to see her as more than a nightmare or a monster.

“One day you will be the best of them, if you survive,” she said as she repositioned Natalia’s hands on the large gun, showed her the best ways to eviscerate a man, the key to killing and leaving not a speck of blood behind.

“I will survive.”

The Winter Soldier, her sister and mentor in the Red Room, did not smile. “We will see.”

One Year After the “Winter Soldier Incident”

Bucky was so proud of her hair. She’d never say it out loud, but she never cut it and always took care of it even when it was just water she could get her hands on, the long braid becoming a trademark of sorts. Seeing her in the small room with greasy, tangled hair that barely touched her cheeks sent a painful sensation through Steve's chest. How long since she'd been properly taken care of, instead of just shaved and dumped back into cryo?

"How is she?" Steve asked, eyes glued to his friend, who was still locked in the fetal position. It had been almost a day since he and Sam had finally tracked her down near Kiev, and it had been a half-hearted battle on her part when they tried to take her in. Now they were back in New York, Bucky safely stored in what Tony declared was his “panic box” in the basement of the tower, and Bruce had been monitoring her.

"Well... I wish I could say ‘well’, honestly, but she hasn't moved much since she got here,” Bruce said tiredly, as if he had been up all night watching her. "Except-"
A hair-raising shriek pierced through the observation glass and battered against Steve's super soldier hearing. Wincing in pain he quickly looked back into the cell. Horror covered his features when he took in the sight before him.

Bucky was still curled around herself, but now she was upright with her back pressed against the cell wall, both hands clamped over her head as she let out a wail of agony.

"Bucky!" Steve yelled, rushing over to the door and yanking on it furiously. When it didn't give he stepped back and prepared to kick it down.

"Don't!" Bruce said from his position pressed against the far wall, taking deep, deliberate breaths.

"It could be some kind of trick- we have almost no idea of what's been done to her," Bruce insisted. Steve agreed, but that didn't mean he could run the risk of letting Bucky stay in pain. Whatever he did, he would make sure that she never hurt again, not like this.

Steve slammed in the door after a few tries ramming against it with his entire body, and practically flew into the room. Bucky was shaking and trembling in a half upright-stance in the very back corner, still clutching her head as choking half-scream half-sobs escaped her. When she saw Steve, whatever mental sensation was hurting her so much seemed to intensify.

"No," she moaned before her words were cut off in a brief, lancing scream. Biting down on her top lip, she let herself sink to the floor, gasping and crying, but no longer screaming.

"Bucky!" Steve rushed over to her, heart beating a mile a minute when he saw the absolute anguish in her eyes, but as soon as he reached out a hand she made herself small against the wall.

"Go," she gritted, fingers turning white from pressing into her skull. The longer he stood there, the more she seemed to be fighting another yell. "No.... I won't!"

"Buck, just-"

He was cut off by her strangled cry when she tried to speak again. Tears of pain rushed down her cheeks, her eyes were glazed with them, lip bleeding from where she bit herself too hard.

"My...." she panted. "You're my m-mission. Go-"

"Steve, come on!" a voice said firmly behind him, strong hands dragging him from the cell. As soon as the door shut behind them he heard the hiss of gas, and soon everything was quiet except for his panting and the steady, thundering beat of his heart.

"She's unconscious- completely sedated," Natasha murmured as she let go of his arms. "She can't feel anything now."

"What-" Steve tried to swallow but his throat was too dry. "What was that?"

"Hydra's programming- the compulsive need they put in her mind to complete the mission at all costs. When she fails- which is why she probably learned quickly not to- excruciating mental pain is the punishment, because she has disobeyed."

"How can they-"

"Still get to her?" Natasha's eyes were sympathetic, despite the hard truths she was relaying. But deeper than sympathy was something else- something dark and carefully hidden, and Steve wondered how she knew so much already.

"They can't. The pain is all the product of her own mind, but that doesn't make it hurt any less, and withdrawal from the source of release- completing her mission, killing you- will only make it worse."

"This wasn't in the files," Steve said. He'd read all of them, even the one about her programming, but there was nothing explaining this.

"I've seen it before," the former assassin murmured. "In the Red Room."

Something cold trickled down Steve's spine at the thought, but he didn't move away from Natasha, just angled his gaze back to the observation room window where Bucky was curled up on the floor and breathing deeply. He would ask Tony later where he got gas that could knock out a super soldier.

“How can we stop it?” he asked.
It took weeks for Bucky to even be able to leave the panic box, but since that first day she hadn’t said a word to anyone and when Sam finally opened the door one day she didn’t move from her corner. She was dirty, starved, only alive because she’d accepted the bottles of water and nutrition bars rolled to her through a slot in the door but other than that she might as well have been dead.

Sam had said she was probably as safe as she ever would be, and she didn’t flinch when Steve appeared in the doorway. When Natasha had visited her they’d spoken in Russian, haltingly, without incident. Natasha still hadn’t explained to Steve, and didn’t seem inclined to.

“Bucky?” he murmured, swallowing. Her head lifted with a jerk, like a robot trying to work past rusty hinges. The bright blue of her eyes was dull but cognizant.


“No,” he said, and her eyes narrowed, focusing in on his mouth as it moved around the words. “We were… a long time ago. This is Avengers Tower, Buck.”

“I know,” she said, with a sneer, jerking her head to the side as though to brush off his comment.

“Oh.”

Silence, and then-

“I’ve just… I don’t remember you being here,” she said. It was the most he’d heard her speak since… well, since 1944. “I remember your apartment. That’s…”

“Where we saw each other for the first time, yeah,” Steve finished. “Didn’t know it then, though.”

She looked like she wanted to smile and almost did but her expression ended up looking like someone walking over broken glass and it took everything for Steve not to let himself fall right there in the doorway because how could anyone have reduced Bucky to this? Felt that they had enough power over life and identity that they could dare to take hers away?

“No,” she whispered.

“Do you… want to come out?” Steve asked tentatively. She shook her head vehemently, seeming to have descended back into silence. “What do you want, Buck?”

The question seemed to throw her for a loop, but her wandering eyes fixed on Sam behind Steve, and then Tony, and looked overwhelmed.

“Somewhere alone,” she said. And what came next nearly turned Steve’s vision red-

“Somewhere to die.”

They settled for Steve’s apartment- quiet, no people, a neutral environment where she could destroy things in safety, where Steve could monitor her behavior. Where they could heal together, maybe.

And not die. That was important, no matter how often Bucky told Steve sullenly that a
bullet to the brain would save him a lot of trouble. Every time he had to remind himself that Bucky had chosen to stay in Steve’s apartment after rejecting the tower, had chosen to break lamps and walls and mirrors rather than him each time her brain wandered into dark places.


It took months for Bucky's programming to be undone, and she developed her own routine as she accepted her personhood and gradually accepted that sometimes they would have to trade Steve’s apartment for Avengers Tower. He knew- well, guessed, he couldn’t say he knew much of anything about her these days- that she hated going there, but the only time he left her alone she’d turned up an hour later on the Tower roof waiting for JARVIS to tell Steve that his Bucky was there. So from then on she came with him, and buried herself in the gym while Steve was talking Tony down from a week of no-sleep or having brunch with Pepper. Or she settled into the Tower movie theatre with Natasha to watch Disney movies, which both seemed to enjoy- a rare enough thing when Bucky’s day-to-day existence was a deadly twenty questions about what would and wouldn’t set her off.

She enjoyed them a little less after watching *How To Train Your Dragon*, but when Steve drew her a picture of Toothless for the wall of her room she seemed happy with it, and him.

Still, things were hard as Bucky learned her way in the modern world without mission parameters and daily memory wipes, got used to the short hair and metal arm, and being sometimes forced to interact with other superhumans. Her memories of Natasha meant they were as close as sisters, and Clint knew what it was like to be unmade, so he didn’t bother her as much as some of the others when he was in town. After Tony scrubbed off the red star from her arm- she wouldn’t let him near it with tools, though, refused to set foot in his lab-, she warmed up to him, and Steve heard them talking about Howard one day in hushed tones, both looking desperately unhappy. When she met Thor it was… a shock, but it was the first time Steve had seen her come close to smiling since they found her. Thor quickly declared that she wounded like a fearsome adversary, and would love to have an “arm wrestle” with her someday, or perhaps train in the gym since it quickly became apparent that Bucky’s metal arm was strong enough to hold up against the god’s super strength.

It was six weeks almost to the day of getting Bucky back, and Steve had seen her twice today; once at breakfast, where she had to be constantly reminded to eat instead of staring blankly into the distance, and when he had passed through his apartment living room and seen her reading something on his StarkPad in Russian, absolutely immobile except for her eyes. As he collapsed into his bed that night, knowing that Bucky was probably not in hers in the other room, he could only hope that someday she would truly let him in, stop this strange dance around nightmares and memories and almost-talking but never saying the truth.


It was the sound that woke Steve, of all things. The heavy, steady whooshing accompanied by jets of warm air washing over his face.

His eyelids fluttered, gaze focusing as he swam into consciousness and registered the distinct lack of moonlight on his face. Shafts of blue light filtered across the room through the curtains, but right where the seam was, where the most light should have gone through, was nothing but darkness.

Instantly alert, Steve kept as still as possible as he took in the shadowy mound perched on the window seat by the bed, trying to decide whether it was an attack or some sort of practical joke on Tony's account. If the vaguely human-shaped thing had wanted him dead, it wouldn't have waited for its breathing to wake him up-

Something glinted in the shadows, moved to expose a familiar silvery-metal hand, and Steve breathed a sigh of relief.

"Buck-" His breath stilled in his chest as Bucky crawled haltingly off the window seat to crouch at eye-level next to Steve's platform bed. In the barely-there light he could see unshed tears
glimmering in her grey-green eyes, a hesitant, heartbreaking expression on her face.

Steve exhaled.

"S-Steve?" she murmured, voice choked to get his name out past the tears clogging her throat, her nose, sticking in her chest. The next breath was stuttering and halted at the last minute as she struggled to keep her eyes from overflowing but the look on his face was too much. Mouth partially open, eyes wide, brow furrowed in just enough concern that it was all she could do not to shove her fists in her mouth and scream.

"Bucky, what-

"I remember," she murmured, and she could almost see the air leaving his chest like a punch in the gut. "Falling."

His throat convulsed as he reached out a hand and then halted it, the distance between them too far, always too far for them to touch. To cling for dear life to each other.

"Bucky... I'm sorry," he said, and her eyes shot up to meet his, their blue vibrant and swimming with ghosts.

"For what?"

"For losing you," he said, jaw tense as for a moment self-loathing dared to cross his features. Without thinking Bucky closed the distance between them, metal fingers winding themselves with his and squeezing softly, not enough to hurt.

"You saved me," she said. "You keep fucking save me, even though... I think that was my job, once."

Bucky's hands moved to rest on his cheeks gently, one side warm, the other cold as ice, and she leaned forward...

When their foreheads touched, two solitary tears dripped to the floor. Bucky sucked in a ragged breath that shattered the stillness around them and finally prompted Steve to move. Placing his hands over hers, Steve's heart soared when she didn't resist.

"I'm so sorry," Bucky whispered brokenly. "I was so scared, being here, and seeing you- I thought you'd never come for me. Every time I remembered it was you dragging me off that table, but then they'd wipe me again and I... I'm a monster. Every time I see you I remember my orders. They turned me into one of them-

"No they didn't," Steve insisted, winding his fingers through hers and pulling her to sit on the bed next to him. "You're a Howling Commando, Buck, remember? A hero."

Bucky's head fell to her chest, long hair obscuring her face.

"Heroes don't kill children," she murmured. Steve froze.

He had tried to prepare himself for this, for learning about the atrocities Hydra had forced her to commit- Natasha had warned him that it wouldn't be pretty. He just hadn't expected...

"That wasn't you," he insisted, gripping her hands tightly. "That was the Winter Soldier, not Bucky. You're good, Bucky, you know that? You're my best man."

Bucky nodded shakily, but didn't look like she believed him.

"I had a nightmare," she said, not meeting his eyes. "A memory- about a mission... Could I-

"Of course," Steve said, and without missing a beat he scooted over in the bed and turned his back to her. He could feel her trembling when she lay down, but after a few minutes back-to-back, soaking up each other's warmth beneath the sheets, she stilled. Her breathing slowed until it
was steady and peaceful, and Steve tried to get his to match.

After Steve and Bucky started talking again, and Sam gave his professional opinion that she was relatively ready for reclassification as a Real Girl—Tony’s words—the team decided it was about time for Bucky to catch up on all the history she’d missed. She knew that the war had ended, and as mission debriefings came back Steve learned that she had a general shape of the modern history of the world, and was just missing the details.

The day they visited the Howling Commandos monument in DC was a hard one, but afterward, to offset the mood, Tony said it was about time they explained how the world remembered Sergeant Jaime Buchannan Barnes. He also just so happened to have a stack of the old propaganda comics, and gleefully set them on the kitchen island in front of Bucky that afternoon as she ate her four-thousand calorie lunch courtesy of a super soldier metabolism.

When she saw the comic version of Steve she almost smiled again, metal fingers brushing the outlandish titles and pictures of Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw. Upon seeing the issue where James “Bucky” Barnes was introduces as Captain America’s sidekick, though, there was a moment of grave silence. Supreme confusion crossed her features, a deep frown settling on her lips as she flipped through the pages introducing Captain America and the Howling Commandos, and his “faithful sidekick Bucky Barnes!”

“So… people think I was a fifteen year old boy who fought Nazis and said ‘Gee Willikers?’” she asked, looking from face to face for some sort of answer because no way had she died to be erased from history in favor of a caricature.

“Actually, they thing you were a friend of Captain America’s who was too violent to be depicted in comics, so they made you younger and more innocent. Congratulations, it’s a boy!” Tony said as he crossed his arms and leaned against the counter, looking smug.

“I do not understand,” Thor said from where he sat at another bar stool, Jane next to him quietly working on her Midgardian Bifrost schematics. “Why would your government feel the need to make friend Barnes a man? Was there some mistake?”

“Nope,” Tony said. “Back then people weren’t very fond of women carrying guns, or wearing pants, or… doing much of anything, really.”

“That is most disturbing,” Thor said, and he got a “tell me about it” look from about everyone in the room.

Meanwhile, Bucky was still studying the comics quietly, plates beside her completely clean of food.

“К черту их. Я знал, что причина, я не возражал против убийства политиков,” she said suddenly, standing. Steve couldn’t make heads or tails of the Russian statement, but the look on Natasha’s face was suddenly somewhere between horror and a prelude to gut-busting laughter, so when Bucky tossed the comics in the trash and walked out of the kitchen Steve decided he didn’t want to follow.

Still, overall she seemed to have taken it pretty well, and old Bucky would have probably thought the comics were either fucking hilarious or insulting— or settled for both and laughed while she used them for target practice. That she was so calm gave Steve an idea, one he hoped would appeal to Bucky’s sense of black humor, if it still existed.
“Hey Natasha,” he said, turning to the now straight-faced ex-assassin. “Where can I find a teddy bear these days?”

“A- what?” Clint choked on his coffee. “What the hell does Captain America want with a teddy bear?”

Steve’s lips quirked into a small smile. “It’s… a long story.”

Natasha looked curious, but thoughtful.

“I think I know just the place.”

“I, uh… I don’t know if you remember, but…” Steve swallowed, watching the distinct lack of emotion on Bucky’s face as she took in the teddy bear sitting at her spot at the bar in the kitchen. It was a near-exact replica, down to the intricately detailed uniform and miniature sniper rifle slung over its shoulder, and when she had walked in that morning and seen it she had stopped cold.

Everyone else watched intently, having already been given a brief summary of the story behind “Bucky Bear.” When Steve had asked Sam about it, he said it was probably a good idea, so they’d gone ahead and gotten the bear.

“There’s this place called Build-A-Bear, where you can customize your own stuffed animal and ever since I woke up they’ve had Captain America stuff, so, Nat took me,” Steve said, quickly wondering if he hadn’t overestimated Bucky’s tenuous mental stability. “Yeah, this was stupid-”

“They called us ‘Mom and Pops,’” Bucky said, eyes riveted on the bear as her brow steadily furrowed, a frown of concentration forming on her lips. “Because I was always yelling at you for making risky decisions, and I thought it was the stupidest fucking thing ever but after I got shot and had to sit out of a mission, Gabe made a teddy bear…”

The tension in Steve’s chest dissipated all at once, and Bucky looked up at him with the funniest “WTF” face he’d ever seen her make, and there were plenty of chances for stupid expressions when they were constantly getting shot at in the war.


“Wait, wait, they called you ‘Mom and Pops,’” Tony gasped.

“Shut up, it was endearing,” Bucky said quickly as she picked up the bear with both hands and squeezed it gently with her fingers, holding it in front of her. “And accurate- they were a bunch of toddlers with guns.”

Natasha snorted.

“So… you like it?” Steve said, and in response Bucky threw her arms around his neck, bear still clutched in one hand. Steve’s arms wrapped around her, and for a minute it was like nothing had changed- they were still there, still together, friends, till the end of the line.

Then something fluffy hit the back of Steve’s head and they broke apart. Looking down, he saw a bear identical to the one Bucky was holding on the floor by their feet, only this one had a sleek silver arm and was wearing a costume identical to the one Bucky had worn when she was still the Winter Soldier.
Steve and Bucky’s heads shot up to look around the room, and Bucky was the first to look at Tony. He just shrugged.

“It was Bird Brain’s idea.”

Clint didn’t come down from the gym rafters for three hours until Bucky made a formal declaration promising not to kill him for making “Winter Bear.”

* *

“Honey?”

“Are you alright in there?”

Pepper’s voice, tinged with care and concern, floated through the fabric curtain hiding Bucky in the changing room of some mall store she had long forgotten the name of. It had taken hours wandering the store for Pepper and Natasha to convince her to pick anything, and she’d been trying on jeans and t-shirts for what seemed like forever, thinking that once they got her normal clothes they would be done.

Then Pepper had pulled the dress card, and it had become a runway as all three women went through various cocktail and casual dresses. Pepper and Natasha had finished, but now Bucky, of course, was stuck in the changing room completely frozen for the stupidest of reason and she couldn’t-

“Aggh,” she growled in frustration as her knuckles dug into her forehead, forcing down a scream. Cool air from the vents above her circulated across her bare skin, ruffling her discarded jeans and tank top on the floor in the corner.

“I, um…” she started, voice hitching in her throat. “I can’t-”

* *

When all they got from Bucky was a few almost-sentence beginnings, Natasha knew something was wrong. So far the super soldier had seemed to be dealing quite well with being out and about in a place as crowded as a mall, and had gone along with getting new clothes just fine- goodness knew she needed them after spending two days in a Captain America onesie courtesy of Tony- but something in her fractured voice made Natasha’s blood run cold.

“Watch the stuff? I’m going in-” Pepper began, rising from the bench just outside the changing room, but Natasha stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

“You don’t want to be the one to go in there;” she said, and Pepper frowned in confusion. “Trust me.”

“If she needs help-”

“I can give it to her.”

Pepper’s brow furrowed, and Natasha knew she wouldn’t let it go now that there was some secret reason she shouldn’t see Bucky.

“You heard about what she’s been through. War, violence, torture. It doesn’t paint a pretty picture on skin,” Natasha murmured so Bucky couldn’t hear, and sympathy crossed Pepper’s features.
“I’ve seen scars before,” she said, but Natasha just shook her head.

“Not like these. Go get some food or something- I’ll help her,” Natasha said, and Pepper must have seen something in her look because she just nodded, grabbed her purse, and headed out of the changing room.

“Help?” came Bucky’s voice from the stall, and Natasha pushed aside the curtain to step inside. Bucky was leaning against the wall, a dress sagging around her waist, her arms crossed in front of her bare chest. Her head came up when Nat entered, and she stood and turned, gesturing to the zipper.

“My arm… doesn’t have enough reach,” she said in a strained, barely-hanging-on voice, gesturing lamely to her metal arm. Wordlessly Natasha had her pull up the front part of the dress as she clasped it at the back, fingers falling to the zipper and trying not to stare at the scars.

They were worse than she had imagined, and she had gone through a similar hell.

It took a lot to scare a super soldier, but the brief glimpse Nat had gotten of her front revealed several burns, bullet holes, and slashes on otherwise perfect skin. There were several smaller scars on her back, and one large one that went from her right shoulder to the small of her back, the flesh almost as distorted as that around the socket of her metal arm. Natasha quickly zipped the dress, hiding the carnage from sight.

Stepping away, she watched Bucky turn and turn, eyes riveted to the mirror with an indescribable expression on her face.

“That color suits you,” Natasha said as Bucky’s hands smoothed the slight wrinkles at the bottom of the navy blue cocktail dress that hugged her strong figure, stopping above her knees. Its one sleeve covered her metal shoulder and most of the arm, and Natasha imagined that, with one hand behind her, Bucky could almost see herself whole again.

“You think?”

“Natasha? Jaime?” Pepper called from outside, and they exchanged a look. “Do you have the dress on?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, her voice cracking slightly. Nat offered her an encouraging smile, and pulled aside the changing room curtain so Bucky could step out in front of her. Natasha followed only after Pepper’s appreciative gasp.

“It’s perfect,” Pepper smiled from her seat on the bench, a bag of assorted subway sandwiches, sushi, and Japanese mall food sitting next to her and a drink holder with three cokes.

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbled, tugging at the one sleeve self-consciously, even though Natasha could see that she enjoyed the attention. According to Steve she had been, while not a social butterfly, not one to pass up a night with the boys either, a woman who was staggeringly confident in her own skin. The loss of that confidence, however temporary, was shattering to see.

“Do you like it?” Pepper asked as she took a sip of her coke. Bucky nodded. “Then get dressed and put it with the other buys.”

She must have seen Bucky hesitate, though, because suddenly she had her “I am a CEO do not argue with me” face on.

“I’m serious- we’re getting it if you like it. And don’t you dare say one more thing about
money—even if it wasn’t a gift, which it is, you have enough money to buy a hundred of those in your ninety year-old bank account.”

Ducking her head, Bucky retreated back into the changing room where Natasha helped her unclasp and unzip the dress. A moment later she emerged in her black skinny jeans and tank top, holding the dress as delicately as if it were made of glass. Then the three women went to the front of the store to make their purchases. Bucky ended up carrying two of the three bags because she insisted, since half of the clothing bought was hers in addition to the cocktail dress. Each of them had gotten two dresses, Natasha had gotten a black and white shrug that draped around her whole upper body, and Bucky had gotten several more pairs of jeans and tops, mostly in black. There was one pair of khakis and a blue and white blouse because Pepper had insisted that she have something lighter to wear.

After that they went to the food court to eat, after which Pepper said they should look for makeup, too, even though Bucky confessed that she thought she didn’t use it that often.

If people thought it was weird to see a woman consume two foot long sandwiches, three bowls of tempura shrimp udon, and two dozen pieces of sushi at the mall food court, they said nothing, but Natasha caught more than one person staring as Bucky plowed steadily through the calorie-rich meal.

* * *

“Jaime?”

_The lipstick tube dropped onto the bed in front of her, and panic clawed her stomach. Being a woman in the middle of a war was suddenly so very terrifying._

“Honey?” Pepper’s hand on her shoulder jolted her back to herself, and the taller woman let out a small gasp when Jaime flinched away. “I’m so sorry—”

“No, I—” The printed model was still staring at her, piercing dark eyes and lips like hellfire, the exact shade of red Peggy let her borrow. Her armor, she called it. “I’m sorry, I just…”

“It helps them know that I value myself, that I have power.”

“I have a gun, that’s one better,” Bucky snarked, and Peggy tugged on her hair affectionately.

“A gun isn’t quite as fetching as red lips, though.”

“Are you OK?” Natasha asked, hovering defensively behind her. Bucky missed the look she shared with Pepper, tipping the other woman off so that she took the smallest step back.

“Hello, ladies, how can I help you today?” A loud, overly-welcoming voice completely shattered Bucky’s tenuous calm and Natasha’s patience. The look she gave the sales assistance who had fluttered over was positively withering. The woman took one look at Natasha, at the completely frozen, wide-eyed Bucky, and practically ran into another part of the store.

Bucky took a deep breath, metal arm clenching, and forced herself to look away from the giant lipstick add on the store’s entrance wall.

“Trigger?” Pepper murmured, and Bucky nodded. “Do you want to go?”

Bucky exhaled and shook her head.
“Peggy used to wear lipstick like that,” she said. “She lent it to me for a mission once, none of the guys could stop staring…”

Pepper looped her arm through Bucky’s metal one. “Then we’re getting it.”

“No, really, it’s fine-”

“Today is about you, and if red lipstick is you at your best, then pick out whatever you want,” Pepper insisted as they entered the store. Bucky’s brow furrowed at the sheer amount of makeup types, styles, colors, and brands that assaulted them from sleek black and white rows of shelves.

“How do you find anything in here?” Bucky asked, bewildered. Natasha just smiled and took her other arm.

An hour later all three of them wore varying shades of red lipstick, and Bucky had gotten a slew of different colors that reminded her of the old days. They had also found a color scheme that would go with their dresses, whenever the occasion called for them- Pepper predicted that with all the media coverage still dedicated to the Avengers, especially with the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., it wouldn’t be long before something came up, even if it was just a night on the town to relax. Bucky had yet to really get out of the tower, except for this shopping spree and morning runs with Steve.

Bucky told stories about Peggy all the way home.

When Steve walked into the kitchen that morning, he nearly had a heart attack.

The last thing he had ever expected to see, aside from Bucky herself, was Bucky wearing red lipstick, but he was 99% sure that he wasn’t dreaming as he watched the mug rise to red-painted lips. Both hands curled around it, metal fingers glinted as they lowered it to the counter, and where once it had been white and pristine it now boasted a red half-imprint of someone’s lips.

Bucky’s lips.

Stopping dead at the sight of his best friend wearing freedom-red lipstick as she sipped her morning coffee, dressed in her white tank top and black jogging pants, Steve had to rub his eyes just to be sure of that missing 1%. When Bucky saw him she flashed him an honest-to-God smile, complete with teeth, and it was like a bullet to his chest.

“Freedom looks good on you, Buck,” he managed after a minute of stunned silence.

“He means it looks gorgeous, actually,” Sam interjected as he sauntered in behind Steve, looking just as surprised but infinitely more composed.

“Why thank you, Sam,” Bucky grinned, flooring Steve again with her dazzling smile. She hadn’t smiled like that since before they went to war, and in that instant the lipstick was a spot of color on the Winter Soldier’s blank-slate soul. Proof that she no longer belonged to anyone but herself.

“He’s right,” Steve said, making his way over to sit across from her as Sam slid him a coffee. “You look great. More like… you.”

“I feel more like me, too.”
Steve smiled, and she returned it, this time with something infinitely softer and more intimate.

“It’s good to have you back, jerk.”

“Punk.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re wondering, what Bucky said after seeing the Captain America comics was “Fuck them. I knew there was a reason I never minded killing politicians.” At least, according to google translate, which, I know, is terrible, but I don’t speak Russian/have Russian friends. So sorry.
I’d love your thoughts on this story, how I handled modern day Bucky, fem!Bucky, etc. Thanks for reading, reviewing, sticking with me for this little drabble. Happy reading!
Also, I have a deleted scene of them attending the opening of the new Captain America Smithsonian Exhibit- now revised to suit Bucky’s correct gender- that I took out because it didn’t really hit the main note I wanted to end the story on, and because really it was just a lot of reporters talking and descriptions of their cloths, but it will be posted as a “deleted scene.” And if you’re curious about why I glossed over Bucky’s early recovery- I’m working on a long one-shot that will elaborate on that, in traditionally Bucky+Steve+Apartment= healing style that the fandom has capitalized on so thoroughly.
Every major media news outlet has at least one person here tonight to witness the re-opening of the Captain America section of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Several months ago there was a great deal of controversy surrounding the exhibit, which featured not only a section on Captain America himself, but the Strategic Scientific Reserve and the Howling Commandos, Captain America’s elite team of soldiers during World War II. Opened after the famous resurrection of Captain America himself, aka Steve Rogers, the exhibit was intended to be a grand overview of the cultural icon and his contribution to America’s history. Unfortunately, the legendary hero had a little something to say when he attended the first opening, namely concerning one Bucky Barnes.

In the last year the world has not only learned that Barnes was a woman, a female soldier who served as a Howling Commando and Rogers’ oldest friend, but that she is, in fact, alive, prompting historians the world over to re-write history textbooks, film new documentaries, and get to the heart of this national mystery. Ever since the onslaught of formerly classified S.H.I.E.L.D. documents getting leaked to the public after the fall of the famous- or infamous- security organization, proof of Barnes’ status as the assassin known among the intelligence community as “The Winter Soldier,” long thought to be a myth of the Cold War era, became public knowledge. Now, after months of U.N. hearings after Barnes went into the custody of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, the Avengers, she has been declared vindicated of all charges.

In light of Jaime Barnes new status as a free woman, tonight’s gala of the corrected Smithsonian exhibit can be seen as a celebration not only for her, but for the Captain himself, who is not as much a man out of time as he may have thought.

This is Christine Everheart, reporting live from the red carpet.

It couldn’t have been coincidence that the final hearing concerning her multiple “Crimes Against Humanity” was the morning of the Smithsonian gala. It just couldn’t.

But Bucky didn’t dare say anything to Steve, lest she sound paranoid and unstable. After weeks of being held to appointments with historians, psychologists, diplomats, psychiatrists, she was sick to death of having to relive the torture of her seventy years as the Winter Soldier. It was only because of the support of the team, notably Steve, Sam, and Natasha, that she hadn’t ended up going ballistic and proving that the U.S. Government was right in saying she was responsible for her actions, and that imprisonment- or death- was justified.

But it was over, all of it. The Winter Soldier was no more, and Jaime Barnes was a free woman, and the reporters could blab all they wanted about it- she wouldn’t be listening.

Nervously, she tugged on the sleeve of her dress that concealed her metal arm, wondering again if she could really do this.
Tony, being Tony, had paid for one of Pepper’s favorite designers to come to the tower and personally design and create the entire team’s wardrobe for the museum opening, even though all of them had complained at some point or another, insisting that Tony was being needlessly extravagant. He, of course, had ignored them, and once the cloths were made there was nothing to do but flatter his ego and wear them to the opening.

All of the men were in suits, each custom made and varying in shade, from Sam’s James Bond classic to Thor’s tunic-suit hybrid which, although very Asgardian, was so dashing that the designer had begged Thor to tell him more about Asgardian fashion and was considering doing an entire line inspired by Thor’s home realm. Natasha chose a flattering black with dashes of vibrant color along the neckline, while Pepper wore an ice blue dream gown with an open back and thin straps. Jane’s dress was Asgardian in style as well, glimmering gold that flowed around her petite frame like water and still gave the impression of strength.

As for hers… Bucky had chosen something simple, but that made her feel strong. The designer had been inspired by her memories of life before the war and proposed something like the old movie stars used to wear, but Bucky was finding more and more that she liked the modern world and the freedoms it offered women. Taking this cue, she’d had a one-sleeve dress made with a neckline that slashed across her collarbone, draping down into a navy blue skirt. On her other wrist she wore a simple grey metal bracelet that matched the links on her metal arm- covered by a white glove-, and the bright red lipstick, along with a bit of eye makeup, that Pepper got her.

She felt beautiful, which was a rare thing these days, as she looked at herself in her bedroom mirror, but the knock at her door sent butterflies into her stomach. The old her would have been excited about this, eating up the attention. That Bucky Barnes knew she was gorgeous, but what about this Bucky?

After fidgeting again with her sleeve, she reached up to brush aside a strand of hair. It was still short, but getting longer every day, and its weight was welcome after too many years of a buzz cut every time her handlers decided it was getting in the way.

“Bucky? We’re ready,” Steve called through the door. Steeling herself, she took one last look at herself in the mirror- dangerousdeadly What a beautiful assassin you are targetterminated-and stepped away. When she swung open the door Steve was there in front of her, looking dashing- and uncomfortable- in a fitted black suit, his blond hair combed back for the occasion.

As soon as he saw her he looked like the breath had been knocked out of him, and Bucky swallowed dryly.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” she rasped, tugging again on the sleeve and wanting to rip it off, and the arm too for good measure. “It was stupid, I shouldn’t even go-”

Steve caught the arm fussing with her sleeve gently, eyes questioning but also firm when he lifted her hand and splayed her gloved fingers flat in his. Her breath hitched in her throat but she didn’t move away. Taking the cue, Steve pulled the glove off of her metal fingers and let it fall to the floor, letting her hand rest over his, metal against flesh, wire against bone.

“You will never have to hide again,” Steve said firmly as he let her hand fall back against her side, exposed metal brushing her dress. “You look beautiful.”

Coming from him, she finally believed it, and wondered how long it would be before she was able to tell the same thing to herself without laughing.
“What if I…” she licked her lips. “What if I do something wrong?”

“Sam thinks you’re ready,” Steve reassured her. “But if you’re uncomfortable you don’t-”

“No, I need to,” she cut him off. “I really need to, don’t I?”

This time he didn’t say anything and she thanked him quietly for it, for putting up with her foolishness, for not flinching when she took his arm and squeezed too tightly.

*Entering the museum now is none other than renowned scientist Bruce Banner, with Tony Stark, the Iron Man, and his girlfriend Pepper Potts, currently the CEO of Stark Industries, making her one of the most powerful women in the business world…*

Prince Thor of Asgard entering on the arm of Doctor Jane Foster, a pioneering astrophysicist who is currently the leading researcher in her field and the creator of the Foster Theory of inter-dimensional travel, they look absolutely stunning in gold and red, no doubt inspired by Thor’s home world-

And there is Sergeant Barnes herself, entering behind former S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton on the arm of Steve Rogers, otherwise known as Captain America. She looks absolutely gorgeous in a single-sleeve navy blue dress that hugs her figure, very understated but elegant, and matched perfectly with bright red lipstick perhaps evoking the “Freedom Days” of World War II when lipstick was seen as patriotic. If you look close enough you’ll even see part of her metal arm, evidently the new template for Stark Industries’ line of advanced prosthetics coming out this spring-

*“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Barnes,” the older man said, shaking her hand with a bright smile. He was perhaps the third such person to approach them that night- an aging academic beside themselves with joy to meet the object of their life’s work, to whom they had devoted countless hours of research and hundreds of thousands of words.

“I know you must be tired of hearing this by now, but this is truly an honor, to see you in the flesh,” he continued, looking between her and Steve. “And I hope the exhibit is not as much a disappointment as it was the first time.”

“Thanks to people like you, it looks pretty great, actually,” Steve smiled, and the man was beside himself for a few moments under the weight of Captain America’s praise.

“Oh, where are my manners?” the man said suddenly. “My name is Karl Connelly. Sergeant Barnes, I’m one of your-”

“Biographers!” Bucky blurted, suddenly recognizing the name. Tony had bought her all of history books and historical journals that hadn’t thought she was a man, both for reference at the museum and to fill in some of the gaps her memory hadn’t recovered. She’d torn through them at lightning speed, only bothering to remember the names on the ones that had gotten it mostly right.

“Yes, that’s right,” Mr. Connelly beamed.

“You got it right,” Bucky said, and hoped this was the kind of friendly interaction that Sam had schooled her on. “Mostly. Thanks for not… you know, saying I didn’t exist.”
“I merely followed the trail history left for me, and now a great wrong has finally been turned right,” Mr. Connelly said, but he took the praise graciously and pride was evident on his featured. “Although I am hoping to do a follow-up, now that both of you can finally solidify historical record, and I was wondering-”

“You’ll have to give us some time,” Steve said in his best Captain America voice, and Bucky was momentarily disoriented by the change in him- the sudden abounding confidence in his raised shoulders, the way his chin jutted out and his voice seemed to come from deep in his chest and resonate on every word. Then she noticed the subtle change in Mr. Connelly’s stature and realized it for what it was. Steve was deflecting.

“We’re still adjusting to all this, especially Bucky, so…”

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Connelly back-tracked, hiding his mortification with a quick drink of his champagne. “Forgive me-”

“It’s no problem,” Captain America continued. “Thanks for understanding.”

“Karl, if I could steal Captain Rogers for a moment? You aren’t the only one here with your claws after him, you know,” a low, steady voice said suddenly. Mr. Connelly turned, a flush creeping up his face as he allowed the visitor a spot in their little circle in the middle of the gala.

Bucky had to keep from letting out a small breath of awe at the new addition, but her metal hand clenched in her dress as she took in the woman.

Her eyes shone behind the thin wire glasses and despite the lines beginning to form on her face she carried herself with the grace and inner strength of a much younger woman in the striking pale pink gown and gold heels. Bucky guessed she was at least fifty, but her greying hair still held gold shots of blonde that lent light to her face where they fell from the gently mussed hairstyle.

“Thank you for speaking to me, Sergeant Barnes,” Karl said suddenly, nodding deferentially to her and Steve. “Captain Rogers. If you’ll excuse me…”

He slipped away, looking both grateful and embarrassed but Bucky didn’t notice because suddenly this gorgeous, Amazonian woman was looking straight at her.

“Doctor Phoebe Sanders,” she said, and when she extended a hand Bucky marveled at the confidence in her grip. “You’ll have to excuse Karl- and myself, at some point, probably. We historians can sometimes forget that our subjects were once living beings as confused and passionate and afraid as ourselves. We can afford to, given that most are not prone to coming back to life.”

The words were delivered with subtle humor, a wit that Steve clearly appreciated judging by the warm way he shook the woman’s hand once she and Bucky disengaged.

“I must say I’m honored to meet you, Sergeant,” she murmured, a knowing gleam in her eyes.

“Just… Jaime, is fine,” Bucky said, and Phoebe nodded her head thoughtfully.

“Jaime. Welcome home.” When she smiled she displayed perfectly straight, white teeth, as immaculate as her finely manicured fingernails and the delicate way her glasses perched on the edge of her nose.

“Thank you,” Steve said suddenly, giving her a look that Bucky couldn’t decipher. Doctor Sanders canted her head to the side, eyebrows furrowing in gentle curiosity.
“For…?”

“Your article,” Steve said. “It was the best one I’ve read. I liked the title, especially.”

Doctor Sanders laughed softly but gave Steve an appreciative look.

“Thank you- I was feeling especially childish that day. *The Peculiar Case of Jaime Barnes.* Yes. I think I was just tired of hearing everyone get so surprised about it, as though there hasn’t been clear SSR evidence since before World War II was over,” she said, and Bucky wracked her brain, trying to think if she’d read anything with that title or this woman’s name on it.

“But enough of that- I’m sure you’re bored to death, hearing about your own histories,” she said, and Bucky shot her a thankful look.

“You helped with this, right?” Bucky said suddenly, remembering the names on the “benefactor” list of the invitation, the pages of academics listed on the opening wall of the museum exhibit. She gestured all around them, from the red carpets forming walkways between the exhibit panels to the white-coated waiters flitting around with champagne, and the sepia photos of her staring from across the room, where her date of birth had been scrubbed off completely.

“I did,” Doctor Sanders. “I hope it isn’t too much? I talked with a friend of yours, Sam Wilson? He made several suggestions regarding the music, and lighting.”

Steve smiled, and Bucky suddenly reached out to wind her fingers through Steve’s in a vice-grip, something heavy blocking her throat. Sam… he would have told Doctor Sanders not to keep the lights too dim, because the dark still held too many terrors and they’d kept the rooms dim when they were wiping her, would have said no music or if at all, subtle, because loud noise of any kind set her off, all the little things that made the evening comfortable rather than anxiety-inducing.

“It’s perfect,” Bucky rasped.

But that was the moment it chose, suddenly, not to be.

Something flashed to their right, the light blinding Bucky and sending her stumbling back into Steve’s arms before her metal fingers clenched and started to lash out. Steve caught her wrist before it went too far, wrenched it back until Bucky flinched and suddenly a keen of pain escaped her lips and the room started to come back into focus- she was on the floor and someone was yelling-

“Get him out of here!” an angry man said, and there was the sound of clicking, another abrupt flash of light before- “What the hell are you doing? I said get him out of here.”

“Bucky?” Steve.

“Sergeant Barnes?” It took her longer to identify that voice, but suddenly she was looking at the hem of a pink dress and there were soft hands with gleaming fingernails hovering in front of her face.

“That asshole,” the angry man muttered, voice close to her ears. “I don’t know how he got in, but I’ll have security make sure no more get through- is she ok?”

“Just give her a minute,” Steve said, and there was warm pressure on her back, on the line of scarred flesh between her neck and the metal shoulder. “Bucky? It was just a camera, you’re fine…”

A low, shuddering half-sob escaped her as the ringing in her ears subsided and she became
aware of the thick red carpets digging into her knees through the fabric of the dress. Her fingers were gouging into the floor but Steve was pulling and she was rising and her metal fingers were still looking for something to rip to wound-

Doctor Sanders caught the metal fingers in her own, hands pressing Bucky’s between them as her fingers gently wrapped around Bucky’s wrist in a loose, non-threatening hold. Her lips were in a thin line and she looked angry but not at Bucky- no, her eyes were soft, and she didn’t let go of Bucky’s hand until she relaxed. Beside her Steve let out a sigh of relief.

“A paparazzo got in,” a stranger said, and Bucky turned to take in the young man with a scruffy beard and slightly mussed red hair, like he’d just rolled out of bed and into a suit but forgotten to comb his hair. “But he’s been banned from the premises and someone’s getting in contact with his station right now, so we shouldn’t have to worry about it again. Probably one of the assholes from the Daily Bugle.”

“Thanks,” Steve said absently, his clear blue gaze pinned on Bucky. Absently she began to realize that it was no longer just her, Steve, the stranger, and Doctor Sanders in their little circle. A few feet away Natasha and Clint, their arms wrapped around each other’s waists, were still patrolling the room with their eyes, shoulders stiff as they scanned for danger. Sam was right beside Steve and Thor was headed over, a grim-faced Pepper and Tony on her heels. Bruce was nowhere to be seen but no one was panicking which meant he hadn’t Hulked out, so Bucky was just glad for him.

“Are you alright?” he murmured gently, and Bucky nodded mechanically. “I’m sorry I hurt you- I didn’t realize how much I was pulling-”

“I almost killed him,” Bucky rasped, squeezing her eyes shut. “I thought… I would have torn him apart.”

“But you didn’t,” Steve said, and behind him Sam smile reassuringly.

“You did really well, Bucky,” he added. “Just take deep breaths, remember? You’re doing fine.”

Nodding shakily, Bucky focused on breathing in and out until she nodded at Steve and he gently let go of her shoulders.

“I just got word from Maria,” Pepper said, tapping on her phone between worried glances flashed at Bucky and Steve. “Apparently the guy was from the Daily Bugle. We can sue, if you want- God knows we’ve had enough trouble from them.”

“Don’t bother,” Bucky said, and Pepper sighed and tapped a few more words out before slipping the phone into her purse.

“Well, alright, but either way he’s being fired and the security’s been upped, so there shouldn’t be any more problems.”

There weren’t. The gala was a success, and Bucky had a long conversation with Doctor Sanders- “Please, just call me Phoebe,”- about her newest project on the Howling Commandos, and got to speak briefly with the red-haired man responsible for the initial banishment of the offending cameraman. Apparently he worked for the Huffington Post and had done an interview with Steve that Phoebe mentioned in her book, all about the truth of Bucky being a woman in the war. His name was Jaaron Whittier, and as Bucky shook his hand in farewell she decided that maybe all modern reporters weren’t so bad after all.
Things are winding down here and as the guests begin to go their separate ways it’s clear that the night was a success. Despite a near-incident within the museum itself, after a rogue cameraman triggered Sergeant Barnes, all of the Avengers have echoed thanks and given positive reviews of the evening.

The Captain America section of the Smithsonian will be open to the public starting next week, and the exhibit will go on the road at the end of this year for a nation-wide tour, now including interviews from Captain Rogers himself. While Sergeant Barnes has still refused to comment or talked to the press, rumors are flying that one HuffPost reporter has managed to snag an interview. More later, this is Christine Everheart from Vanity Fair.

Chapter End Notes

This is not my last foray into this universe- I'm working, as mentioned last chapter, on a one-shot on the details of Bucky's recovery, and I'm also in collaboration with Shiphard for a crossover of our respective universes (Jaime Barnes and her "3490 meet 199999") which is coming along nicely.
Let me know what you thought in the comments!

End Notes

Did you guys catch my Winter Soldier easter eggs? There will be a few more in this story, extremely subtle but I hope fun. Thoughts on Bucky’s character and behavior?

I hope you enjoyed, PLEASE leave comments, criticisms, things you liked or didn't like or things you think may improve the story. Thank you for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!