Dead Man Running

by onethingconstant

Summary

A ghost stands in the Smithsonian, staring at his face behind glass. The sign says he's dead. The WORLD says he's dead. But as James Buchanan Barnes—Bucky, sometimes the Winter Soldier—pieces together his fragmented psyche, he begins to wonder. If he's not dead, what is he? A murderous ghost? A lost hero? A broken weapon? Something more—or something much less?

On the run from Hydra and haunted by his shattered memories, Bucky must choose between his will to survive and his love for a friend he can barely remember. And as he fights for his life against rogue terror cells, well-meaning superheroes, and his own programming, he must determine once and for all whether he can once again become what he most wants to be—Human.

He tells his story in his own words.

[intended as a spiritual, tonal, and thematic sequel to CA: TWS—as close as I can get to making another movie]
Notes

Please be courteous; I wrote this in a notebook as a therapeutic exercise in summer 2014, unaware of the rest of the fandom at the time, and was only recently persuaded to share it. Any resemblance to anybody else's fic is unintended, coincidental, and vaguely embarrassing, but I hope we can be friends anyway.

Hi. :)


Chapter Summary

Bucky Barnes goes to the Smithsonian, makes a friend, eats ice cream, and causes the first of many public disturbances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So ... I'm dead?

That's what I'm thinking as I stand in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, staring at my face behind glass. At least, I think it's my face. It's got most of the features I recognize—same twice-busted nose, same bent-bow mouth, same permanent stubble because I'm usually too busy to shave. It's even got the little half-moon scar under my left eye, the one that must have a story behind it. Not that I can remember the story. Or a lot of other things. But there it is, staring back at me through the glass.

The eyes, though. The eyes are wrong. The eyes, and the card next to the photo that says I'm dead.

I wonder: If they say it in the Smithsonian, does that make it true?

Am I dead?

I keep coming back to those eyes. They're all wrong. I've seen my eyes in enough mirrors to know they're pretty blank, almost expressionless. The color of empty skies, and just as vacant, set in deep hollows so most people don't notice right away. This guy's got the hollows, but even with a straight face, his eyes are crinkled at the corners like he's just told a dirty joke. He's looking at something off to one side, and whatever it is, it's lighting up his whole face. He's proud as hell of something. There must be a million thoughts flying through his head, and he's having the time of his life thinking them.

I wonder what that's like.

People are milling around me, walking from exhibit to exhibit, talking in low voices. I can hear their fear and worry. There's a still-smoking helicarrier sticking out of the Potomac, and they're in an exhibit hall dedicated to the guy who put it there. Most of them are tourists who've been planning this visit for months, and now they're nervous. Is anybody going to see them in here? Are they taking a side? Should they be denouncing Captain America where the museum guards can hear them? Do federal rent-a-cops count as part of the surveillance state? What do we do now?

"Bucky Barnes, huh?"

The voice is at my shoulder so suddenly that I almost flinch right out of my skin. As it is, I'm a half-step away and putting my arms up to defend myself—okay, to kill somebody, I've gotta be honest about that—before I hear the last syllable.

There's a little old man standing there, giving me a look. Not a dirty look, which is weird. Kind of a
sad look, like I'm a scared puppy that just peed on his shoes. He's wearing a blue windbreaker that says *U.S. NAVY* on the chest, but he's way too old to be in active service. He's got a matching blue ball cap with an embroidered picture of—according to the yellow letters around it—the *U.S.S. Indianapolis*.

Navy vet. I don't know what to say to that. I was Army, I think. The guy in the picture would probably have something smartass to say. Not me.

Navy Vet nods at the picture. "Not a lotta people over here," he says. "An' you been here twenty minutes, lookin' at that picture. Either you're a slow reader, or there's somethin' on your mind." He sticks out a paw. "You shake hands, soldier?"

I think I do. I take his hand, and the shake happens automatically. Thank God.

"Where'd you serve, if you don't mind my askin'?"

A hundred images flash through my mind. Most of them make me want to throw up. "All over," I mumble. It's as good an answer as any.

"You Army?"

I nod. It's a nervous little twitch. "How'd you ...?"

Navy Vet smiles kindly. "You're too short for a Marine. And with a startle like that, you been shot at on land." The smile cracks wider, conspiratorial. "Plus you can read. That's the Marines eliminated, right there."

My mouth twitches at that. I sort of remember Marine jokes. Now I almost remember smiling.

"Geoff O'Toole," Navy Vet says. "Useta be Naval Intelligence. Now I'm just a nosy bastard in museums. You gotta name?"

Behind my blank face, I panic. I can't tell him my name. I'm not even sure I know my name. And my best guess is on that card in front of me, right above my date of death. I can't say *Bucky*. Who the hell is *Bucky*?

But there was something else they called me, wasn't there? I remember a big Irishman with a carrot mustache and a—yeah, that was definitely a bowler hat. Son of a gun. Of all the things to remember. He had a nickname for me, and I hated it, but I can use it now. I called him Dum-Dum, and he called me—

"Jimmy," I say. "Jimmy—" I rack my brain; what *was* that stupid Paddy's last name? "—Dugan."

"Pleased ta meetcha, Jimmy. You eat ice cream?"

I nod. I don't actually know, but what are the odds I'm allergic, or I hate it?

"Then c'mon. They got the best ice cream in the world down in the basement. Lemme buy a brother vet a chocolate sundae."

I don't want to talk to Geoff, or anybody, but he's got to be ninety years old and he looks determined. And the last thing I need is to give him time to notice how much I look like the dead guy behind the
And that's when I find out that I hate elevators.

I should've seen it coming, to be honest. I spent a lot of years frozen inside a small metal box. Elevators are a little bigger, and a lot warmer, but they're still way too close for comfort. Geoff keeps looking at me sideways, with that poor-puppy face. I start keeping a mental tally of things I don't like about what's happening to me now. *Elevators. Talking. Being pitied.*

Basements. Oh, God, do I hate basements.

When the doors open, I expect to see long gray corridors and barred gates on a laboratory door. No windows, nowhere to run. But instead there's just a hallway, painted green, leading to a brightly lit ice-cream parlor with a line of people stretching out the door. I guess Geoff wasn't kidding about the sundaes. I tug the bill of my ball cap down a little lower over my eyes and follow the old guy to the end of the line.

Geoff keeps up a steady stream of chatter as we wait. I just try to keep my head down. I can't believe I'm doing this. All it would take is one tourist bumping into my elbow, knocking my left hand out of my pocket, and everybody would see my left arm is made of metal. Instant panic. I'd never make it out alive.

"Easy," Geoff says softly, in the middle of his monologue, and that's how I notice I'm starting to hyperventilate. I stop, force myself to breathe slowly.

"You need to take a walk?" Geoff asks quietly.

I shake my head. Nothing would make me happier than bolting for the stairwell right now, but it's stupid to run in a building full of armed guards.

Besides, it feels more comfortable to stay, somehow. To follow orders, even if they come from a half-crazy old deck monkey. I wonder if that's part of what was done to me. I wasn't always like this, was I? Whoever the guy behind the glass was, he wasn't like this. Of course, he's dead.

Without wanting to, I remember the last time I did something like this—just following orders while I was screaming inside to do anything else. I'm not supposed to remember it, but I do. How I fought the lab techs who were trying to hook me up to the machine. How I broke the arm of a guard who tried to hold me down. How I tried to hold on to the little fragment of myself I'd found in a downtown D.C. gutter. Somebody recognized me, and wasn't afraid. He looked me right in the empty eyes and called me by name. *Bucky.*

Who the hell is Bucky? I answered. But I wasn't just asking him. I was asking the whole damn world. So I fought to keep that ... ... and then they called Pierce.

I remember sitting there, seething, not letting anyone touch me—and then I remember Pierce walking in. He was older than I remembered, he always surprised me by getting old so fast, but it was him. I knew his voice.

I don't remember much of what he said. I asked my questions, and he talked, and the longer he
talked, the calmer I felt. Pierce always made sense. He could have been reciting the phone book, and it would have calmed me down. By the end, I wasn't even listening anymore. I was just soaking in his voice, feeling it seep into me.

I only remember one thing he said. One of the techs said I'd been out of cryo too long. Pierce was walking away by then, and he didn't even turn to look at me.

"Then wipe him," he said. "And start over."

If anyone else had said that, I think I would've woken up and fought back. Like I said, I was screaming inside. I wanted that fragment. I needed that piece of myself.

But it was Pierce who said it, and hearing him speak was like sinking into warm water, so slowly I never realized I was drowning. I never thought of disobeying him. Maybe I couldn't.

I remember Pierce walking away. I remember a tech picking up a mouthguard so I wouldn't bite off my tongue. I remember the guard slipping into my mouth. Like a dream. No more talking. No more questions. I remember lying back in the chair, the clamps snapping to around my arms. I remember the clank of the door closing. Pierce was gone, but I didn't move. I remember the apparatus closing around my head. I remember the echo of footsteps receding down the hall, and the buzz of high voltage against my ears.

After that, I just remember the pain, and the feel of my throat as I screamed. I never could hear myself inside the machine.

"Two chocolate sundaes," O'Toole says, closer than I expect. At least I don't jump this time.

The kid behind the counter—he's half the age I feel, and maybe a fifth the age I really am—makes a production of the ice cream, scooping and tossing and drizzling chocolate syrup from two directions at once. The little show makes Geoff smile. I watch the kid's hands and eyes. I can tell he's never had to hurt anybody. And he's not afraid of me. That's a novelty all by itself.

I concentrate on the ice cream. Ice cream is simple. No orders, no pain. No voices. No faces behind glass. I'm sorry when the kid passes over two pink cardboard trays loaded with slowly melting dessert, cherries and all. I wanted to watch some more. Ice cream is simple.

The place is crowded, but Geoff finds us a table. He plops both sundaes down and drops into a chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

I don't make any noise as I sit down across from him. I don't need to.

Now, however, I have a problem. I'm not wearing gloves, so I can't use my left hand without giving Geoff a heart attack. And it's only a day since my right arm was dislocated by—

Don't think about him. Don't see his face. That's a road you can't go down ...

"You gonna be okay, Jimmy?"

I look up. Geoff is sitting there, not touching his sundae, just peering at me.

I don't have an answer for him. I don't even have enough of an answer to lie. I don't remember what okay feels like. I just know I'm not there now.
"Stupid question, I know," Geoff says, picking up his spoon. I mimic him, using my pins-and-needles right hand and my still-on-fire flesh-and-blood arm. I had to slam it against a tree to get it back in the socket. A tree about ten feet away from where I left the guy I'm trying not to think about. That memory gnaws at my brain. I just left him.

At least I left him breathing, though. That's a change.

"You know why it's a stupid question?" Geoff asks. Nothing shuts him up, I guess. "Because nobody knows the answer. Nobody can. But there's something you learn in intelligence, about questions."

Intelligence. That's right, the old guy said he was naval intelligence. Another reason I shouldn't be here. The last thing I need is a spook.

"The thing about questions is that just asking them can change a situation. Even if nobody knows the answer. The question counts."

Yeah. Like Who the hell is Bucky?

"Take an example." The old man's spoon bites into a vanilla scoop. "On a day when everybody and his brother-in-law is coming into the Captain America wing—"

The name triggers a memory. A voice: What about you? Ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?

I shake the voice away. Don't think about it.

"—why is this guy spending twenty minutes of his life reading two paragraphs about Bucky Barnes?"

The words make me go still.

"I don't know," I hear myself mumble. "Who the hell is Bucky?"

This time my fragmented brain coughs up an answer, in the voice I'm trying to forget: You're my friend.

And my remembered voice answers: You're my mission.

"Now there's a good question." Geoff points his spoon at me. Reflexively, I lean back, out of stabbing range. "Who the hell is Bucky? You wanna hear my theory?"

I shrug. I don't think he's giving me a choice.

"He's the reason there's a traffic hazard in the middle of the river right now."

I try not to move, try not to blink. My memories of the last forty-eight hours are a jumbled mess, but I remember the helicarrier. I remember smoke and the squeeze of my finger on a trigger. I remember the crack of bones under my fist. I remember fire. I remember falling. No, not falling—I think I jumped.
Why would I jump?

I'm pretty sure my face doesn't move. Geoff is watching me closely, and his face doesn't change at all.
"Y'see, Jimmy, everybody knows that Captain America took down those carriers. But not everybody knows the last thing he did before that." He scoops up some ice cream, shovels a glob of it into his mouth. "But I got a buddy used to be a guard here. He got fired yesterday morning 'cause somebody snuck in and stole Captain America's uniform. Next thing you know, that uniform's on the news, with a coupla bullet holes in it an' you-know-who inside it." He takes another bite.

I don't trust myself to talk, so I shrug again.

Geoff swallows. "So I hear you saying, who cares about the uniform? Man wants his clothes back, it's his business. But." He taps his spoon against his temple. "Intelligence, remember? This stuff matters to us. Cap coulda worn anything he wanted yesterday. Me, I would've gone for a bulletproof vest. So why steal his old glad rags?"

It's almost comfortable, listening to him ramble on. I still want to crawl out of my own skin, but something about Geoff is beginning to remind me of Pierce. I'm drowning in his words, and I don't particularly mind.

"The day I retired," Geoff muses, "I hung my uniform in the back of my closet. All neat and clean, pressed and in plastic. And I don't take it out for nothin'. Not the Fourth of July, or Veterans Day. Never, except one time. I take it out for funerals."
Like warm water. I find myself gazing down at the dish of ice cream in front of me. Watching it melt. It's easier just to listen. No more thinking. No more talking.

"I ain't got a lotta friends left from the war," Geoff says. "But for them, I put the uniform back on. So they'll know me, maybe, even when they're dead."

The word dead breaks the spell. I look up.

Geoff cracks a lopsided smile. "Gotcher attention now, huh, Jimmy?"

My brain is spinning. What does he know? Who has he told? Am I going to have to kill him?

Then I realize I don't know what I'm supposed to be keeping secret. Who the hell is Bucky? For all I know this guy can tell me. Better not kill him, then.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I relax a little. I don't have to kill anybody right now. Good.

It's a weird feeling, though. I haven't had a preference on killing people in a long time. Why am I starting now?

But I might as well use Geoff while I've got him. Or he's got me, I guess.

I clear my throat. My mouth is dry. I manage to mumble:

"What about Bucky?"

"I think the uniform was about him. On the news, they're sayin' Cap was fighting Hydra. Hydra
killed Bucky, so maybe it was on his mind. Or maybe he wanted Bucky to recognize him."

"Bucky's dead," I say. "Says so upstairs."

Geoff shrugs eloquently. "An' I just found his long-lost twin brother starin' at the picture like he'd walked into his own funeral. What a world we live in, huh? How's that scar these days, Jimmy?"

I want to deny it. My head fills with excuses. The guy behind the glass would have had something snappy and pat to say. The guy who listened to Pierce would have cut Geoff's throat. But there's so much spinning around in my brain, like a black tornado, that I can't say anything at all.

And for the first time since the helicarrier, I'm afraid.

Geoff spoons ice cream into his mouth. I watch, sweating, as he swallows.

"Take it easy," he advises me. "I'm not gonna tell anybody. I'm not even gonna ask why you're reading about yourself in a museum. We all gotta get our kicks somehow, huh?"

I say nothing.

"You wanna know why I dragged you down here, Jimmy? And that's not such a great alias, by the way. You had Dugan's bowler hat right behind you when you made it up."

I lick my lips. It doesn't help. "Why?"

Geoff's spoon stabs into his sundae. "Because they got the best ice cream in the world down here. And I figure anybody who's got a best friend in a coma right now—"

He trails off, staring at me. I try not to move.

"Oh," he says, and all of a sudden he's got that poor-puppy look again. "I guess you didn't know."

No point in lying. I shake my head. I can't even remember his face, not unless I try—and it hurts to try. Why would I know he's in a coma?

Because I put him there?

I squash that thought fast. It's not going anywhere good.

Geoff sighs, reaches into a pocket. I tense up, but he doesn't seem to notice. He just pulls out an aluminum card case, pops it open, and slides a business card across the table.

"Here," he says. "You need somethin', you call me. Any time, day or night. I'm an old man, so I don't sleep anyway."

I stare at the card, but I keep both my hands out of his sight.

"It's not gonna bite," he says gently.

I just sit there for a minute, trying to think. I find I can get about halfway through a thought, most of the time, before it shatters like spun glass. I wasn't always like this, was I?
I remember forests at night. I remember stone castles. The smell of gun oil. And fire, always fire.

I take the card, stand up, and give a jerky little nod to say thank you. I leave the ice cream melting in its paper boat. I feel Geoff's eyes on my back as I shoulder my way through the crowd. I want to scream, but something won't let me.

I blink, and I'm upstairs again, staring through the glass at the face of my dead twin. The guy who has a best friend in a coma. If I strain, I can just remember the crack of my fist hitting a skull. It was my left fist, the metal one. A punch like that should've killed anyone, but not him. His eyes stayed open, and he kept talking.

*I'm with you to the end of the line.*

I glare at the smirking picture. *Who are you?* I want to scream. *Who is he? What's so goddamned important that it's worth all that pain?*

Who the hell is Bucky?

The next thing I register is the crunch of breaking glass.

I freeze, startled by the noise. But my left arm is out, and the glass is falling all around it. I draw back my arm and punch again. More glass breaks. The picture buckles under the impact. And from the moment I see that, I know I can't stop.

Glass breaks. Plaster crumbles. Metal bends. I hear shouts and screams as I tear into whatever's in front of me, rending and clawing and punching until it's destroyed and I move on to the next thing. I rip the front wheel off a motorcycle—I think I rode it once, but it doesn't matter now—and hurl it across the room like a discus. I tear heads and clothing off a line of dummies; a bowler hat goes flying and now I've got a fistful of blue peacoat that I don't want to let go. I hold the coat in my throbbing right hand and punch through a wall with my left. On and on I go, bashing and ripping with my good arm, the arm that's not mine.

After two or three minutes, I realize that all the tourists have run away, but the screaming hasn't stopped.

A minute after that, I feel my throat getting raw and I realize it's me screaming.

But I don't stop until I see the face again.

It's got to be the last screen in the exhibit hall that isn't dark and smoking. I stop my fist an inch from the flickering image and stare at it. Two guys, laughing and joking silently with each other. One of them is built like a Russian weightlifter, big and broad and blond, with an enormous grin and a laugh I can feel in my sternum, even with the sound off.

The other is smaller, darker, quieter, with a nearly permanent smirk. Like he knows something I don't. And there's a half-moon cut, still healing, under his left eye. I just know it's going to leave a scar.

He laughs at me. They both do, the man from the bridge and the guy with my face.

I hear the big guy's voice: *Your name ... is James Buchanan Barnes.*
You've known me your whole life.

But I can't remember what I said back. My head's too full of noise to hear my own voice.


How does everybody in the whole world know more about my life than I do?

I lower my arm, let the black-and-white men keep laughing together. They're not laughing at me now. Just at each other, and the world. And why shouldn't they? The world's probably pretty funny when you've got your best friend next to you. It's only when you're alone that it hurts.

"Hold it right there."

I hear the click of a round chambering. Nine-millimeter. I don't know my own name, but I know guns. I look over my shoulder. There's a security guard there, pointing his pistol at me. His face is rigid with fear—finally, something I recognize.

"Sir," the guard says, "put down the coat."

What coat? I look down at my right hand. I'm still holding the peacoat I ripped off the dummy. Sergeant Barnes' coat. Bucky's coat.

My coat. I'm not giving up my coat.

I glance back up at the guard. Our eyes meet. He actually looks more scared now.

"No," I say. Actually, it's more of a croak. My throat hurts from screaming.

And then I run.

I jump onto the dummy platform, punch my left arm through Sergeant Barnes' chest on the mural, and bash myself an escape hatch. I jump through the hole, hit my stride in two steps, and just don't stop.

I charge through other exhibits, a couple of offices, even what looks like a conservation lab. I don't care; I just run straight through, busting through walls and hurdling tables and dragging my right arm. It's nearly numb now, but the coat flaps from it like a battle flag. I hear the guard yelling into his radio. I hear running footsteps. I don't care. I keep running.

Then I see the glass ahead, and I start to have something like a plan. I throw my left arm up to protect my face, pour on the speed, and jump.

The shattering glass is the loudest noise in the world. I feel the shards skimming the top and sides of my head, bouncing off the ball cap I've been wearing to cover my long hair. That's something I'd like to kill Pierce for, I think—if you're going to be controlling someone's every move, you could at least give him a damn haircut occasionally. What good's a soldier with his hair in his eyes?

As I start to fall, I realize I just had a complete thought. Something in the back of my mind is waking up. I want to laugh like a maniac, but before I can do more than grin, an airplane hits me in the gut.
I vaguely remember airplanes from when I walked in. Planes and spacecraft, suspended from the high glass ceiling by high-test wires. The Hall of Flight, they call it. And now I'm clinging awkwardly with one arm to something called—I lean out cautiously to read the nose art—the *Spirit of St. Louis*. That sounds sort of familiar. Maybe laughing boy—Bucky—maybe he knew it. Right now, though, it's nothing but an obstacle between me and the exit.

Or maybe a springboard.

Behind me, the guard is standing by the hole I left in the glass, gaping in horror. "Hold on, pal!" he calls. "We'll get rescue up there! Just don't let go!"

I ignore him. I tighten my grip—my fingers dig into the aluminum with a little crunk noise—and pull my knees up to my chest. Then I kick out with both feet and start to pump my legs like a kid on a playground swing. I've done this before; I don't know how or when or why, but I've done it. I know what to do.

With a warning groan, the *Spirit of St. Louis* starts to swing on its wires. Not a lot, but enough. Forward and back, forward and back. The arc of the swing keeps getting bigger as I add momentum. I'm heavier than I look, thanks to my arm, and a lot of the rest of it's muscle.

Finally, I swing out to the apex, and just before I start to fall back, I push off and I go flying.

I fall, of course, but I turn myself over in the air to give myself a little more horizontal distance. I tumble forward and down, over the heads of the security guards and the panicking crowd—

and I hit the glass front of the museum, feet first.

More falling glass. More screams. I must be covered in blood and debris, but I don't notice as I land on my feet on the front steps. I immediately break into a run, zigzagging through traffic and cutting straight across the grass of the National Mall. I'm safe inside the Metro station on the other side before the first police cars pull up, and on a departing train before any cops come down the stairs.

I feel the adrenaline rush start to ebb, and I know to sit down before I fall over. I collapse into the nearest seat, shaking slightly with reaction. Other passengers in the car give me worried looks, but I ignore them. I just shake, and breathe, and try to think.

At least I've hung on to the coat.

The stations blur past, and I ignore them too. The thoughts come slowly, through a haze of pain and confusion. But I keep worrying at them, like a dog on a bone.

*What do I do now?* I can't go home. I don't know where home is. SHIELD is in ruins. Hydra is in chaos—and the thought of Hydra fills me with such revulsion that I want to retch. No, I'm not going back to Hydra. But that means I have nowhere to go.

*What do I do?* Always before there were orders. A mission. If I wasn't working, I was waiting. Work and wait. Kill, and wait to kill again. Now that's gone.

*Why is this happening?* The big guy's face flashes before my eyes—laughing with my twin in the museum, gaping at my face on the bridge, begging me on the helicarrier—

I try to close my eyes in time, but it doesn't help. I see my fist smashing into that face, over and over.
The big guy's not resisting.

*Finish it,* he says. *'Cause I'm with you to the end of the line.*

I shake my head violently. No. He didn't do this to me. He's not why this is happening. He's a lot of things, but he's not why I can't think. Why I hurt. Why I'm lost and alone and sitting in a subway car with a museum-piece jacket in my numb hand and glass in my shaggy hair. This isn't him.

As the train screeches into its last station stop, I stand up. I know what I'm going to do next. I'm going to find the man who made this mess and I'm going to do what he made me to do.

I'm going to kill Alexander Pierce.

Chapter End Notes

I seem to be the only person in the TWS fandom who thought Steve dislocated Bucky's arm rather than breaking it. Oh, well. Makes a good story this way.
Chapter Summary

The ghost from the museum reaches Alexander Pierce's house and makes a few unsettling discoveries. Discovery one: Pierce is dead. Discovery two: The ghost is not alone in his own mind. Discovery three: Memories can hurt a lot more than a supersoldier punch ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pierce's house is big and sprawling, set back from a winding road in one of those leafy Virginia suburbs where everyone's either a government official or trying to lobby them. I remember how to get there.

As I walk through the woods toward the house, I get fragments of other memories, like flashes from a blackout. There's a bronze Buddha head on a table in the living room. A bowl of green apples on the kitchen counter. I see Pierce walking into the kitchen and opening the fridge before he sees me sitting at his breakfast table. I remember the flicker of uncertainty on his face as he recognized me. I didn't think about it then—didn't think a lot of things then—but now I wonder if he thought I might have come for him. For a heartbeat, he was scared of me. Scared of his monster.

I hold on to that memory. It's a good one.

The lights in the house are off, except for one glowing on the back deck. I circle wide, but keep my eye on it. It's taken me until two a.m. to get here; what's Pierce doing on his deck in the middle of the night?

But it's not Pierce. It's two guys I don't recognize, in navy-blue windbreakers that say FBI on the backs. One is locking the back door, and the other is stretching yellow crime-scene tape across it.

Something cold settles into the pit of my stomach. What's going on here?

"Just doesn't make any sense," the door-locker, a tall and lanky black man, tells his partner. I'm surprised at how clearly I can hear him from fifty wooded yards away.

"Anybody can walk in front of a bullet," says the other one. He's short and stocky, and when he turns around I get a glimpse of his face. Chinese, maybe forty years old, with some kind of scarring on one cheek. I sink down behind a bush to eavesdrop.

"In the Triskelion?" Highpockets asks.

"Don't look at me," says Scarface. "It's all above my pay grade."

"Still, it's crazy. Hydra? Seriously? And nobody knew?"

My breathing gets faster. These guys can't be Hydra. So how do they know the secret?

For a few seconds, I stop thinking. My vision floods red, and I feel the machine hammering on my
brain. This is core programming. **Kill anyone who sees you. Kill anyone who discovers us.**

**Kill for Hydra.**

I'm lying prone behind the screen of brush. I slam my face into the dirt so hard I see colorbursts behind my eyelids. When I open my eyes again, the red is gone. The machine is silent.

There's dirt on my face and leaves in my hair, and I'm shaking, but I haven't gotten up. Haven't walked out of the woods with the machine in my head. I'm still me, whoever that is. I can feel how close I came, though.

Who the hell is Bucky? I start making another mental list. Bucky is someone who would rather headbutt the ground than let the machine control him. Finally, a reason to like the guy.

The feds are still talking.

"—read the stuff they put up online?" Scarface is saying. "I may never sleep again. Freakin' nightmare fuel."

"I thought they were still mining it," says Highpockets.

"Oh, they are, but there's guys on Reddit pulling out the low-hanging fruit. Assassinations, mass surveillance, even mind control—"

"Mind control? You're makin' this up—"

I hit the dirt again, forehead-first. The whole forest is spinning. **Mind control.** Just the phrase is giving me vertigo. I may have to kill these guys anyway if they don't stop making me sick.

**Kill them.**

*No.*

**They know too much.**

*No!*

**This is what you are for.**

*NO!*

This time my head makes a thud so loud the feds turn around.

"What was that?" Highpockets asks.

I roll my head sideways onto the leaves and just lie there, silent and dizzy and sick. I hate this. I hate the machine. I even hate Bucky, for fighting it so hard. I feel like I'm being torn apart. And it's not just the concussion, either.

"I don't hear anything, man," Scarface says.

"Maybe a deer or something," Highpockets replies.

"You wanna hang around here for Bambi? C'mon, I'm goin' home."

I stay still while they double-click the back-door lock, fumble in their pockets for keys, and clump off
the deck to the side path around the house. Between the machine in my head and the bruises on my face, I don't want to move for about a week. I can feel the knot rising on my forehead.

A memory flash hits me, so hard I wince: a blue helmet with a white A on it, coming toward me fast. Wham. Starbursts. It hits me two more times.

The big guy from the old footage. The man on the bridge. My failed kill.

Bucky's best friend, who's in a coma because of me. This is going to take some getting used to, and I'm not sure I want to get used to it.

I listen to the sound of a distant car engine starting up and driving away. There are probably cops out front, guarding the crime scene, but it will be easy to get into the house.

Do I want to, though?

The house is a crime scene, and from what I overheard, it sounds like Pierce is dead. I can feel my blood boiling at that. I missed my chance. Only now do I realize how much I was looking forward to putting a bullet between that smug bastard's eyes.

Before the helicarrier—before the big guy—I didn't feel anything like this. At least I don't think I did. But it's not an improvement; I miss the mental quiet of not having all these feelings. I wish I could go back to that.

That's the machine talking, stupid.

The voice is a new one. I blink.

The machine'll win if you let it. Don't let it.

Great. More head-voices to deal with. I press my hands—pointlessly—over my ears. I wish they'd all leave me alone.

Not me, buddy-boy.

"Shut up," I growl at the voice. At all the voices. God, I'd give anything to be alone in my own skull. Even if it's currently trying to split in half.

Tough beans. You've got things to do.

"Things?" I mutter. "What things?"

Inside.

I lie still, waiting for further instructions and hating myself for it. But the new voice doesn't elaborate.

I think about running again, just to spite them all. I wonder how hard it would be to disappear, to dissolve so completely that even I can't find me. There's so little of me right now, after all. I should be easy to erase.

But finally, my body gets the deciding vote and overrules my brain. My stomach growls, and I realize I can't remember the last time I ate. Yesterday? The day before? I have almost no memories of eating, now that I think of it. Do I eat?

That's stupid. Everybody eats.
I remember the labs. I remember needles and tubes. Into my veins, up my nose. I don't remember food. Maybe they did something to me. Maybe I don't eat anymore.

My stomach gurgles and twists. Maybe I don't eat, but something tells me I'm going to give it a try.

I heave myself to my feet and head for the house—catfooled, like I always am on an approach. Some things are hardwired. But I can feel my muscles burning, and my head is throbbing so hard it wants to split like an overripe melon. I'm exhausted. I can't remember sleeping, either. Not unless the cryo counts.

The back-door lock is easy. I walk down the long hallway lined with art photos and framed portraits of powerful men. I don't recognize most of them, but something about the way they look and stand tells me they give orders. And they're all with Pierce.

I pass the Buddha head and turn into the kitchen. There's the bowl of apples, just like I remember. Without thinking about it, I snatch one up with my right hand, toss it, and watch it spin. Then I grab it out of the air and take a bite. The juice and pulp explode in my mouth.

And I remember apples.

It's spring again, but a grim, wet spring, and I've got a coat that doesn't fit and a stomach that can't be filled. I've also got a paper bag containing two apples and—something. I can't remember that yet.

"Catch," I say, and toss an apple at a skinny teenage boy with straw-colored hair and a face like a starving ferret. He turns around just in time to see the flying fruit, and puts his hands up to intercept it, but somewhere between his brain and his fingers a connection gets dropped and he has to fumble to keep the apple from hitting the ground. He lunges forward, and I put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from plowing into me or the sidewalk.

I laugh, not entirely at him. "Nice job, Babe Ruth!"

The boy straightens up. He's maybe half my size, even though we're almost the same age. Thirteen? Fourteen?

"Where'd you get this?" he asks incredulously, staring at the apple.

"Off ol' man Tinkelbaum on Tenth." I palm my apple, spin-toss it, catch it and take a bite. It feels natural to do it that way.

The blond kid's face clouds over. "You've been stealing again?"

I hold up my sack in my defense. "Hey, I gotta bag."

"How many times are we gonna do this?" the blond kid demands. He's got a reedy voice, starting to crack, but there's steel underneath it. A strong spirit in a weak body. "I told you once, I told you a hundred times—"

"Whoa, cowboy!" I put my hands up in surrender.

He ignores me. "We're not little kids anymore, Bucky! You get caught stealing apples now, you go to juvie! What's your mom gonna say about that?"

"Next time, don't get caught?" I joke. But he's not in a kidding mood. He shoves his apple into my skinny chest, turns, and starts walking away.
"I'm not gonna send you to jail, Buck," he says over his shoulder. "You're my friend."

I stick my tongue out at him. He keeps walking.

Ten steps later, I run after him. He's easy to catch; he marches like the asthmatic he is.

"You done now?" I ask, crunching into my apple again as I fall into step with him.

"I mean it, ya jerk."

"Punk." It's an easy insult, one I use on him a lot. Anybody else would punch me for it. He thinks it's funny, most days.

Today, though, he just shakes his head and walks on.

We walk half a block in silence. I eat half my apple and feel him stewing. Finally, I sigh.

"Okay," I say, holding his apple out to him like a peace offering. "Ya got me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asks, ignoring the gesture.

"Old man Tinkelbaum threw out his back this morning. I was walkin' by. I helped him unload a few boxes, and he gave me the apples. You happy now?" I give him my cheekiest grin.

The blond kid takes the apple, but it doesn't go near his mouth. "You're pulling my leg," he says.

I hold up two fingers on my apple hand. "Scout's honor."

"Jerk." He smirks and bites into the apple. "You're not a scout."

"Nah, I just stole the honor off one." I hand over the bag. "Tinkelbaum gave me these, too."

He looks inside, and his blue eyes widen. "This ... I can't take this, Buck."

"You can, and you will," I say. "I unloaded ten boxes for those things, and what the hell am I gonna do with a set of drawing pencils?"

He looks up at me. "What are you gonna do? What am I gonna do?"

"How 'bout that drawing class down at St. Steven's?" I ask. "Don't lie, I saw you readin' that notice. I got myself an artist for a friend, huh?"

"Maybe. Maybe." The kid glances down at the pencils, then up at me. "Thank you, Bucky. I owe you one."

"Draw me a naked dame," I say, and laugh as he turns bright red. We walk on together, our heads full of the future. I can tell he's thinking about art classes.

Me, I'm thinking about old man Tinkelbaum and how much groveling I'll have to do to get him to hire me as an assistant. I'm going to need more pencils, I can tell.

And I can't keep stealing them forever. Sooner or later my friend will catch wise, and I hate the way he looks at me when that happens. I'd do anything to keep from disappointing him.

Just like that, I'm back in Pierce's kitchen with a mouth full of apple and a belly full of sick. I lunge for the sink and make it just in time to splatter the steel lining instead of the tile floor.
Take it easy, the new voice advises me. Maybe don't eat and remember at the same time.

I wipe my mouth with my flesh hand, run a little water to rinse my fingers and wash the vomit down the drain. It's all liquid, except for the apple bits. I really haven't eaten lately.

I crane my head under the faucet, letting the water trickle over my face and into my mouth. A shard of glass falls from my hair and clinks into the drain. I swish and spit after it.

Okay, no eating and remembering. I splash water on my face, shake myself awake, and turn off the tap. The apple is still in my hand, and I'm still monstrously hungry, so I go sit down at the breakfast table. No eating and remembering. I bite into the apple and think instead.

Now you're getting it, the new voice says.

Pierce is dead. That's becoming clearer and clearer to me. I can't kill a dead man, so what do I do now? I have a head full of the machine—plus one sarcastic voice—and a set of skills that make me a perfect assassin. But I have no orders.

Do I want orders?

Quick, nauseating flashes answer that: an apple spinning through Brooklyn spring air, a dark forest floor coming up fast at my face. No orders. Whoever Bucky was, he didn't like rules too much. Put up with them, maybe—the museum said he was a sergeant in the Army—but didn't willingly go looking for them. And while there's definitely a part of me now that wants to stop thinking, to rest in the cool oblivion of cryo—

That's the machine in you.

Yeah. I'm pretty sure it is.

But if I'm not going back to Hydra, I think, I've got to go somewhere. And I've got to stay ahead of Hydra while I do it. They'll come looking for me, I'm sure of it. They'll put me back in the machine. They'll try, the voice adds, in a murderous growl.

So what's the first thing I need to stay ahead of pursuit?

Information, the voice says. And then supplies.

Nice to know we agree on something. I stand up, leaving the apple core on the table. I don't remember finishing it, but that's okay. I've got to start somewhere.

The crime-scene techs will have taken Pierce's laptop, but I know how hard it is to scrub every piece of tech out of a big house. I'm not sure how I know—probably something to do with an assignment—but I know where to look for the backups. There'll be a compartment under the floorboards, or a hidden wall safe, or a piece of furniture with deceptive dimensions...

In the end, I have to shove the Buddha head aside to find it, but it's all there: a clean laptop, a smartphone, passports, two guns and ammunition, and a first-aid kit with a lot more than Band-Aids. Standard Hydra bug-out bag. Pierce is old-school.

Was, says the voice. Was old-school. Serves him right.

I'm starting to get comfortable with this voice. If'd better not be Hydra.

Everything in the bag looks clean and unused. I start pulling things out and setting up. As I work, I
try not to think about my shiny new memory. The skinny blond kid seemed important, though. Something around the eyes ...

*You know me.*

I freeze, my fingers hovering over the keys. It doesn't make sense. The skinny blond kid ... and the big guy from the bridge?

*You've known me your whole life.*

I didn't retain a lot from the museum, but there was a picture that stood out. A skinny little guy in uniform, morphing into somebody a foot taller and built like a Greek statue. Maybe they really are the same person. And they both knew Bucky,

Bucky. Me. I'm still not sure where those two overlap.

*I'm with you to the end of the line, pal,* the voice says.

I start typing. Data analysis I can do. Untangling my mental snakepit is too much.

It doesn't take long to realize something is seriously wrong. The whole internet is on fire, users digging through an enormous data-dump like ants on a sugar loaf. My eyes get wider and wider as I read.

Someone has dumped all of SHIELD's confidential files—including the hidden Hydra databases—onto the public Net. Some of it's still encrypted, but there are thousands of hackers and cryptanalysts chipping away at the protocols. Within days, weeks at most, every secret Hydra has will be out in the open. Base locations. Engagement protocols. After-action reports. Personnel records.

For a moment, I think about searching for myself. What did Hydra know about me? What did they do? Could it be undone?

There's too much information to sift through in one night. I plug a portable hard drive into the laptop and start downloading. There's no telling how long this stuff will be up, and I don't want to lose it.

I move past the Hydra files, leaving the download running, to news sites and blogs. It's surreal to read the names of presidents and politicos and not recognize anyone. When I think of the President of the United States, I see a guy in a wheelchair with a Harvard accent. I think Bucky met him once. With the big guy, of course.

*He's got a name, you know.*

Yeah, but I'm avoiding it. I dig deeper into the news updates. Police scanners, surveillance cams—everything Pierce had set up to monitor the outside world. All of D.C. looks like a hornet's nest that's been hit with a baseball bat. There's so much activity that it's hard to tell what's what. The entire intelligence community is either running for cover or charging in for the kill. Some parts are doing both.

And I was never really a spy. I was a soldier, an assassin. The machine put a basic hacking and data-analysis package in my head, just like it gave me the ability to speak Russian and use an ATM—stuff Bucky never learned how to do—but all this spy-versus-spy crap is out of my league. I had other people to handle it.

The voice has a point. But I'm still lost. My life, my freedom, my sanity depends on keeping away from Hydra. And I can't predict what Hydra will do with this much chaos. I should just run, I think. Just run and hide and try to disappear. Find somewhere I can try to be safe and whole.

And let them get away with it?

I sit back and pull my knees up, rest my aching head on them and close my eyes. Everything hurts. Why does everything hurt?

The price of freedom is high.

It's the big guy's voice again. Another memory. I heard it over the Triskelion PA system as I waited in the basement for Pierce to turn me loose. To let me off my leash like an attack dog.

The price of freedom is high, but it's a price I'm willing to pay.

I think of laughing boy's face—Bucky's face—in the museum. He had so much to laugh about, and I can't even remember it. I let myself see the big guy's face, too, from the helicarrier. How he begged me not to make him do this. How he let me hit him over and over, blows hard enough to crush an ordinary human's skull. He was a fighter, that guy. I remember the crack of his skull on mine, the clang of his shield against my arm. I remember the blackness closing in as he choked the blood off from my brain. I remember thrashing in his arms, then going slowly limp, not expecting to wake up. But I did, and by then he wouldn't fight me anymore.

I'm not gonna fight you, he said. You're my friend.

You're my mission, I replied.

Then finish it, he told me. 'Cause I'm with you to the end of the line.

Whoever Bucky was, the big guy thought he was worth dying for. The toughest man I ever fought, and he was willing to let me kill him if it meant Bucky—whoever the hell he is—would live.

Bucky must've been one hell of a guy, I think. And Hydra turned him into me. I look down at my hands, one metal, one flesh, both resting on the floor.

I think about orders, and the machine, and the voice of Alexander Pierce. I think about laughing faces in black and white, and a blue peacoat, and old man Tinkelbaum's apples.

Hydra took Bucky Barnes and turned him into me. Into a monster. Into a rabid animal. Into a machine.

The price of freedom is high ...

It sure is, I think. And I'm paying it right now.

I stand up, adrenaline rushing to my muscles. The big guy's right. Bucky was right. Hydra made me out of him, and I can't let that pass. I can't let any of it pass. I've been a monster for far too long. Now I have the chance to be something else, and I'll be damned if I pass that chance up.

Hydra is going to pay for all of it. And I know just where to start. Because I remember now why this house is a crime scene.

I walk over to the Buddha head and gaze at the floor. The stain is faint in the moonlight, but there's a dark splotch on the Persian rug. I crouch down and sniff. Blood and some kind of chemicals. This is
the spot, all right. This is where she fell.

I don't know much about her. She was Pierce's housekeeper, maybe, or some other member of staff. She was just leaving for the night when Pierce walked into his kitchen and found me sitting at the breakfast table, quietly waiting to be briefed. But she left without seeing me, even as I turned my head to follow her sound like a cat keeping one ear on a sparrow. Just in case I had to kill her. But she left safely.

And then she came back.

I didn't care then whether she lived or died, but I knew which one it was going to be when she walked into the kitchen, saying something about forgetting a phone. I watched her patiently, waiting for the order.

It never came. Pierce picked my gun up off the table and shot her three times just because she hadn't knocked. I calmly watched her bleed to death as Pierce came back and sat down and finished briefing me on my next assignment. I felt nothing. Machines don't have feelings.

But now I do. I feel rage, boiling up from my gut. This woman died because she walked around the wrong corner, because she cleaned house for a man who was also a monster. And a Hydra cleanup squad took her body away and scrubbed her blood out of the rug and probably erased her whole life from the system while they were at it. No one remembers her.

No one but me.

I stand facing the wall above the Buddha head, at the spot closest to the stain. I reach out and dig my left index finger into the sheetrock, and I scratch a nice, long vertical line. Then a curve, then more lines. Letters. A name.

I don't know who she was, not really, but I heard what Pierce called her. I can give her back her name. Let the feds start their search there. Neighbors will remember her, or coworkers. She’s got to have family somewhere.

Hydra took us both, in different ways, but she can come back. She can be remembered. She can be avenged. And it starts with one word, carved into the wall where she died:

RENTATA

There. One lost thing taken back. One poke in the eye for the people who held my leash. It's a good start.

I smile to myself as I head down the hall in the dark for what promises to be my first hot shower in seventy years.

And I hear the voice say:

Good.

Chapter End Notes

HTML is weird. This story was originally handwritten, and I used different styles of handwriting (I'm a good forger; do not ask why) to represent the narrator's different heads.
voices. Here I have to use HTML tags. Elsewhere, I used different fonts. For those playing along at home with good imaginations, it may amuse you to know that Underline Voice is known among my friends as Courier Voice, because I used a font that looked like bold Courier. What can I say? I hear typewriter keys behind that voice. You'll see why soon enough.

Next chapter: A not entirely gratuitous shower scene. Among other things.
Chapter Summary

The museum ghost has three problems.

One, he looks and smells like the contents of a dumpster.

Two, he's about to pass out from exhaustion.

Three, it'll take more than a shower and a nap to get this voice out of his head. Or the increasingly disquieting memories that come with it.

This chapter may or may not contain an assassin makeover montage, grand theft vintage motorcycle, and a disturbing conversation in an orchard.

Chapter Notes

Warning for brief references to canonical POW experiences and medical experimentation.

Also for vomiting.

Also for a vague sexual reference that Steve Rogers does not understand.

Finally, I should mention that I wrote this chapter in May 2014, a year before AoU came out, so Bucky and Steve talking about whether Steve can have kids is absolutely NOT a commentary on AoU. I just decided that Steve likes kids, Bucky knows it, and Bucky's worried.

Kind of funny in hindsight, though.

The shower wakes me up a little, but it also points out a whole set of new problems. Hot water and soap are great for finding every cut, scrape, and bruise on a body, and I have too many to count even without the burns. My right shoulder screams as I pick the glass out of my hair, and every bit of exposed skin stings like I'm bathing in acid. At least the heat is good for sore muscles. Fighting the big guy and then trashing the Smithsonian makes me feel like—

Like a fifty-mile march with a full pack.

Whoever the voice is, it's been in the wars, I decide. Real wars, not just the cold one.

The next thing I want after the shower is a shave and a haircut. The first one I can do; Pierce's shaving kit is on the bathroom counter, and my left hand is more than dextrous enough to get rid of my stubble. But I don't know a damn thing about cutting hair, and I don't think Bucky did, either. The best I could do is hack it off with scissors. It's tempting—long wet hair on my neck just feels
wrong—but I hold off. I'll take some scissors with me and do my best if I have to, but I'd rather find a real barber. Hiding from Hydra means blending in, and blending in means looking normal. Normal people use barbers, at least in this country. Besides, I want to look a little sharp. Like myself.

Oh, yeah? Who's that?

Shut up, voice.

Clothes are the next problem. I've left mine on the bathroom floor, and now that I've scrubbed seventy years of shit off myself, they look absolutely disgusting and smell worse. Smoke, sweat, blood, a swim in the Potomac and a couple of jumps through plate glass will do that. Plus I haven't slept in ... how long?

That thought makes me sway on my feet. Sleep's going to have to happen soon, and it can't happen here. The feds will be back bright and early, I'm sure. How's it going to look if they find me sacked out in Pierce's bed?

Though that does give me an idea.

I wrap a towel around my waist, switch off the bathroom light, and pad barefoot through the dark house until I find what looks like the master bedroom. I don't turn any lights on—I can't take a chance on alerting the neighbors or the cops—but I've got good night vision. I can find a closet.

Pierce was a suit kind of guy, and I'm not. But everyone's got clothes for getting dirty in, right? It's a good guess, and I'm right. A good ransacking turns up everything I need. Socks and shorts, a pair of denim pants and a belt, even a few shirts I can reasonably fit into. I pull on a black T-shirt. It feels weird—the last time I wore anything like this, I think, it was an undershirt.

Yeah, and your ma wouldn't let you go outside wearin' it.

The voice sounds a little wistful. I ignore it. I can't remember having a mother.

A pile starts to form on Pierce's bed: underwear, pants, shirts, anything I can fit into. There's not a lot—Pierce really did love his suits—but I'm not picky. I just need to blend in until I can figure out how normal people dress now. I add a couple of flannel shirts to the pile. Long sleeves are going to be important.

Which reminds me—I need to watch for a pair of gloves. I can't walk around with a metal hand and expect Hydra to miss me. Besides, I don't have dermal ridges on my left hand anymore. Makes it hard to grip things. I need the leather.

I eventually find some gloves in the pocket of a black leather jacket. It looks a little like the jacket Hydra issued me to hide my arm on assignments, which makes my skin crawl, but I slip it on and it hangs differently. It's just different enough to be comfortable. I look at my shadowy reflection in the mirrored closet door.

My wet hair is still hanging in my eyes, and the jacket does look a little too familiar, but I see something too. The Winter Soldier's blank-eyed menace is still there, yeah, but my shape isn't quite the same. I'm not holding my head the same way he did, not standing quite as rigid. My outline is different. With the denim pants and the unzipped jacket, I don't look like I'm armored anymore. I don't look quite so much like a machine.

And there's one other difference. On the left shoulder of the jacket is a five-pointed star, made of white leather. It rests just over the red star on my arm. It's probably a designer logo or something, but I like it there. I'm starting to hate Hydra red.
I walk out of the bedroom in my new socks and head back to the bathroom. The boots I'm going to keep. And the bulletproof vest. Just in case.

I spend the next hour or so going through the house, packing a duffel bag with everything I think I can use. Clothes. Medical supplies. A couple of guns and plenty of ammunition. The laptop and phone. All the loose cash I can find. A couple of fake passports. I even make a final sweep through the house, looking for small valuables I can hock. I'm not completely sure that pawnshops are still around in the twenty-first century, but I can't really see them disappearing, either. So I swipe two watches, a handful of rings, and a set of diamond cufflinks. I also grab every flash drive I can find, because you never know what'll come in handy. I keep the T-shirt on, throw the stinking Hydra body armor into the duffel, and throw the rest of the Winter Soldier's clothes—mostly odds and ends, because I'm keeping the shock-resistant stuff that's hard to replace—into a plastic garbage bag. Maybe I'll throw it into the river. Any river.

There's an old Army-style bedroll under the bug-out bag beneath the Buddha. Finally, something I understand. I grab it and make one last circuit through the house.

I stop in the kitchen to stare at the apples.

The last memory hit me like a punch in the face. This one creeps up from behind.

I'm in an orchard, somewhere bright and warm. France? Italy? I know it's in Europe; it's got that smell to it. I'm picking my way down a line of apple trees, a heavy Hydra gun slung from my shoulder and resting in my hands. There's a hulking shadow beside me, and I turn my head enough to see the big guy walking the same row. He's wearing the same togs he had on the helicarrier, but the colors are brighter and there's a fresh shine on the shield still. He looks like a walking recruitment ad, but the tight smile he flashes when he sees me looking at him is pure Brooklyn.

"What?" he asks. "You see something?"

"Nothin','" I reply, and go back to scanning the trees. After a minute, I decide to say it.

"You and that girl. You serious?"

Another quick grin as he checks our left flank. "You want to talk about this now?"

"I'm telling you, there ain't a German for fifty miles. So it's this or the Dodgers. What's her name? Peggy?"

"Peggy," he says, and just that word tells me how bad he's got it. Now I'm grinning, and he sees.

"You gonna make something of it?" he asks.

I laugh. "Naw. It's just weird, is all. I guess I'm still getting used to you being bigger'n me."

"What's that got to do with anything?" He steps over a fallen ladder. His boot comes down silently. Catfooted on approach.

Now my smile is crooked. "Oh, you know. You. Her. Think of the kids."

"I like kids."

"Yeah," I say, "but what are they gonna look like?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" He gives me a perfectly blank look. Anybody else would be
putting me on with a face like that.

"I mean ..." I frown, looking for the words. "I mean, you ever think about what you're gonna do after the war? After," I heft my gun, "all this?"

"What's to think about? I guess I'll get married, settle down, have a family. Isn't that what every GI's planning on?" He's still looking around like he expects a Hydra sniper to fall out of a tree.

I scowl, reach up, and pick a ripe apple off its stem. While his back is turned, I toss it at him. It spins like a screwball pitch.

Just before it hits, he twists in place and snatches it out of the air. Then he blinks and looks down like he's just noticed what he's done.

"You're not quite the little guy from Brooklyn anymore," I say. "Are you?"

He cocks his head at me. "I'm still the same on the inside, Buck."

"Yeah, but ..." I pluck an apple for myself. "It's one hell of an outside you got there. Doesn't it ever worry you, that you changed this much?"

He studies the apple in his hand. "Not really." He looks up at me, and I notice all over again that he's still got the same eyes he always had. Just brighter. "Why would it?" he asks.

He's not really watching me, I can tell. He's thinking about his girl. About the future. Meanwhile, I'm thinking about being strapped to a table in a lab outside of Krausberg. About needles and knives and the leering face of a pipsqueak mad scientist who decided to see just how much I could take.

About how I surprised us both.

"No reason," I say at last. "It just seems kinda ... lonely, I guess. Seein' as you're the only one there is."

The big guy laughs. "Lonely? Living with a dozen of my closest friends, busting up Hydra together?"

"War ain't gonna last forever," I say.

"Peggy will be there," he says, and he gets that funny half-smile he's been flashing for months. The one he mostly saves for the picture he keeps inside his compass. Then he focuses on me and grins for real. "And you'll be there. So what's to worry about?"

I just look at him for a moment. Then I force a laugh and shake my head like it's nothing. "When you put it that way ..."

The rattle of gunfire in the distance makes us both freeze in place. We hear the high-pitched whine of a Hydra blaster answer it.

"Tell me again," the big guy says, "what'd we bet on those fifty miles?"

"Maybe they're Austrian," I say.

The big guy laughs. "Five bucks says you're wrong. C'mon, pal. You still with me?" He jogs off up the row, at a speed he knows the average GI can match.

"To the end of the line," I say, and run after him. Catfooted, as always.
He never did notice.

I blink, and I'm back in the kitchen. Ten tons of guilt settle on my shoulders like a sudden snowfall.

He was going to marry that girl, I think. Have a normal life. Get old. Him and Bucky both. And then ...

Ice. Steel. A whole lot of time and a whole lot of blood go by, and he wakes up the loneliest man on

He's not the only one, the voice murmurs.

But it's different for me, I think. I don't really know what I'm missing, if I'm missing anything. All I've got to be nostalgic about is a few broken pieces of somebody else's memories. He has a whole life to remember losing. And he thought he was never gonna be lonely.

So? What are you gonna do about it?

I unzip the duffel bag and load it with all the apples I can fit. By the time the bowl is empty, I'm cramming them into corners and stuff one into the right pocket of my new jacket. I open the fridge, pull out a half-gallon of milk—I remember Pierce sarcastically offering it to me, and a nasty smirk pulls across my face—and drink it all on my way to the garage.

Alexander Pierce had good taste. He had a house full of good but expensive furniture, he was a sharp dresser, and in general, if he hadn't been a sadistic torturing bastard trying to turn the world into a fascist dream state, we might have gotten along okay. But there's one subject, I discover, that we can really agree on.

The fascist psychopath was one hell of a judge of cars.

Pierce's garage is nearly the size of his house, and it's full of classic cars—most of which I couldn't pick out of a police lineup, but they're all sleek, shiny, and powerful-looking. Most of them are sports cars and convertibles, though, and as glad as I am to have my pick of such serious horsepower, they're not exactly low-profile.

I keep walking, duffel bag and bedroll slung on my back, until I find something I recognize. It's an Indian motorcycle, low-slung and muscular-looking and achingly familiar. Black with silver trim.

Like us, the voice says. It sounds amused. I run my right hand over the gas tank, wondering if Bucky knows how to ride one of these. The bike in the museum was a Harley-Davidson, big and powerful with enough armor to stop bullets. This one's lighter.

Yeah, says the voice, but this girl is fast. And you need fast.

Do I? I don't know, but I feel like I like fast. Best of all, my curious fingers find a key sticking out of the ignition.

Kismet, says the voice. Another thing we agree on.

I get my gear strapped on, swing aboard, and kick the engine to life. The Indian snarls as it wakes up, growling its way between the parked Porsches and Corvettes until I trip the motion sensor and the door rolls up and out of the way. I gun the engine, goose the throttle and roar out into the predawn darkness. The driveway is long and winding, but I cut off it pretty soon and roll into the woods. The bike grumbles over to the spot where I stashed Bucky's coat. I tuck it carefully into the bedroll, re-strap everything, zip up the leather jacket to keep the wind out, and roar off again toward
the highway.

The wind rips at my hair and makes my eyes water, but I don't slow down. I can hear the voice in my head, laughing and whooping with glee. Hydra doesn't laugh, does it?

The voice gives me a one-word answer:

Wa-hoo!

I ride until the sun rises, then realize I'm rubbing my eyes way too often and remember I haven't slept since ... when? Before that last mind-wipe, I guess. I'm a little fuzzy on when that was. But I probably shouldn't be riding long distances when I can't remember sleeping. Time to try some old-fashioned shuteye, without drugs or cryo. I'm actually looking forward to it, I realize. First thing that's made me really happy.

I pull off the road in a wooded area, wheel the bike off into the trees, and bed down next to it in a little hollow that's not visible from the highway. For a minute, I lie on my back in the sleeping bag, gazing up at the pink sky.

Look at you, the voice says dryly. Eating and sleeping like a real live person.

I am a real live person, I think. At least, I am now.

You're gettin' there, the voice says, and that's about when I black out.

Which is when the nightmares begin.

It's not like the movies. There's no story in my nightmares, nothing that hangs together. No, they're all jagged flashes, broken-glass pieces of what's happened. I dream about a long fall, hearing the big guy scream my name. I dream about labs—about the one at Krausberg and all the ones that came after, about straps across my chest and lights in my eyes and needles, always needles. I dream about the machine, and I scream inside my head. I dream about killing. Bullets in foreheads, knives on throats, fireballs and fists and feet. I dream about kicking a man into a jet turbine, shooting another man through the glass of a cockpit, firing a rocket into a police car.

And over and over, I see him. I'm trying to kill him every time. The apple spins through Brooklyn air, and before it comes down I've punched my metal fist through a skinny kid's chest. Or I creep up behind him in an orchard while he's hunting for snipers and I put two rounds in the back of his head. On the bridge. On the helicarrier. In the museum. In the war. Over and over again, I'm killing him. And almost every time, he sees me do it and just lets me come. Big, innocent blue eyes full of understanding and grief.

I'm not gonna fight you. You're my friend.

You're my mission.

I wake up vomiting.

I roll over in time to miss the sleeping bag, but I splatter a big patch of forest floor with the remains of Pierce's milk and a couple of apples. The nausea comes in waves, every time I blink. Every time I close my eyes and see the big guy's face. The stench is unbelievable.

Finally my stomach is empty and the dry heaves stop. I sit down on the sleeping bag and just shake for about a minute. Now I really miss cryo.
No, you don't.

Great. Nightmares, nausea, and the voice in my head. It's getting louder, too. I put my head between my knees and try to breathe slowly. I can do this. I can do this.

Yeah. You can.

It's hard, though. And I'm not nearly as confident as the voice is. Not when I'm sitting alone in the woods, smelling my own vomit and trying to ignore the machine and—I touch my right hand to my face—yeah, crying. Those are definitely tears. What am I crying about? I don't cry.

Everybody cries, the voice says.

Am I part of everybody now? I ask the voice sarcastically. A real live person?

Gettin' there, the voice replies.

Well, the closer I get, the more it hurts. God, if I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd have killed the big guy when I had the chance. Just stayed in the machine. That would have been so much easier.

Since when do we do things the easy way?

We? Who's we?

How's that scar these days?

I reach across my face to touch it. It's still there, albeit wet with salt water.

All of a sudden I'm back in Krausberg, on the table. A pudgy, bespectacled scientist is standing over me, sliding a needle into my arm.

"You will soon begin to feel the effects," he says, in his accented English. "You will tell me when."

I feel the pinch of the needle, but I'm not looking at him. I'm staring up at the tangle of pipes in the ceiling.

"Barnes," I say. "James Buchanan. Sergeant. Three two five five seven zero three eight."

"We are not bound by the Geneva conventions here, Sergeant," the little scientist says. He sounds tired. "Cooperation is your only hope of survival."

I know he's lying. There's no getting out of here.

"Barnes, James Buchanan. Sergeant. Three two five five seven zero three eight."

He backhands me before I finish saying the last number. My left cheek stings, and I know a cut has opened up there. Doesn't matter. I've taken worse in the boxing ring at the Y. I can feel the injection doing something to me. My blood is pumping hotter and hotter, my skin beginning to tighten and crack. I feel like I'm about to burst into flames. I'm burning. I'm going to die.

Hazily, through the pain and the drug, I think about screaming. But I open my mouth and all that comes out is:

"Barnes, James Buchanan. Sergeant. Three two five five seven zero three eight ..."
I repeat it and keep repeating it until I can't hear myself anymore. Until something rumbles in a
distant part of the complex, and suddenly the little scientist is gone and someone's unbuckling—no,
ripping—the straps off me and I'm looking up at a pair of worried blue eyes I thought I left behind in
Brooklyn.

I thought he was smaller.

Back in the stinking forest, I put my hand down. Bucky Barnes was one stubborn son of a bitch.
Stubborn and tough and cursed with the worst luck in the world. And Hydra turned him into me.

Not exactly, says the voice.

What's that supposed to mean?

But the voice doesn't answer.

I can't stay where I am. I look up at the sun. It's early afternoon—one or two o'clock maybe. Eight
hours since I lay down. Forty-eight hours, give or take, since I jumped into the Potomac.

Why did I jump?

Time to find out, I think, and I pull the clean Hydra smartphone out of my pocket. The reception isn't
great, not out in the woods, but there are towers along the highway and I must be close to one
because I get a browser window open without too much trouble. The machine is good for something
after all.

I skip the news coverage this time and open up a map. I'm looking for hospitals with emergency
services and intensive-care wards in the D.C. area.

I want the one closest to the river.

Chapter End Notes

For those following along at home, Bucky's motorcycle is a 1940 Indian Scout, the kind
with the smaller fenders. I used to know a WWII vet who rode Indians, and he got
pulled over shortly after the war for doing over 100 mph on a Scout. He'd had no idea
he was going anywhere near that fast.

Please do not try this at home.
Someone You Hate

Chapter Summary

"You should've just killed me."

"Who the hell is Bucky?"

"What I want to know is, are you still crazy?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There are three or four hospitals close enough to the Potomac to make them candidates. I drive around until I find the one with a crush of police cars and a couple of news trucks parked outside. I smile tightly. Without SHIELD, there's no one to stop a random nurse or patient from tweeting about a superhero in the emergency room.

It's going to make my job harder, but not impossible.

Damn well better not.

I pull the ballcap back on and stuff my hair up under it, just in case my description has started to make the rounds. I slip the jacket off my right shoulder and turn up the sleeve of my T-shirt. Forty-eight hours on, the dislocated joint and the impact with the tree—to say nothing of the rest of the fight—have left me with a sleeve of purple and yellow bruises from shoulder to elbow. It's healing pretty fast, and it doesn't hurt much anymore, but the sight of it will make any civilian wince. I am now emergency-room material.

Like you need more doctors.

I tell the voice to shut up, lock up the Indian, and stagger toward the emergency entrance. Time for the clever part. I'm kind of proud of having a clever part. Three days ago I wasn't clever.

I drag myself up to the intake desk, trying to look wide-eyed and pathetic. I expect to see a pretty nurse in a starched white uniform. Instead, it's a young black man in blue scrubs. He looks at me warily.

"How can I help you?" he asks.

"I need help," I say—but in Russian, not English. The conversation with Geoff tipped me that I would have trouble talking to people. But I always spoke Russian on missions, so I gamble that it'll be easier to speak that way. And I'm right.

Plus most Americans don't speak Russian. And I don't want anyone to remember what I say.

"Excuse me?" Scrubs asks.

"I fell off my bike," I say, just in case there's a Russian speaker listening. "I think my shoulder is dislocated. Please, is there anyone here who speaks Russian?"
"Sorry," Scrubs says. "I don't understand—is that Russian?" He taps his lips. "Rus-sian?" As if I'm going to understand him better if he slows down.

But he expects me to be an idiot, so I nod enthusiastically. "Russian, yes," I say. "I need someone who speaks Russian."

"Wait a moment," Scrubs says, and picks up a phone from its cradle beside him.

While he's dialing, I disappear. A moment's inattention is all I need. I duck around the side of the intake desk, shrug my jacket back on to hide the bruises, and pull out my own phone. I don't actually call anyone, just put it to my ear and start talking.

"Bonjour," I say, and the rest of the conversation comes out in French. I'm not sure why I picked that language—all I really had in mind was anything but Russian, in case Scrubs sent hospital security out looking for a lost Slav with a dislocated shoulder. I think I speak several languages, thanks to the machine. So why French?

Because the machine didn't give you this one, the voice tells me. I did.

Great. One more mystery to puzzle out. Like I don't have enough going on.

The great thing about a cell-phone conversation in a foreign language is that you can go anywhere. My French feels rusty, but as long as I keep talking about the Paris train schedule, I can walk past any nurse's station or barred door I like. When people call after me to tell me I'm going the wrong way, I ignore them, pretending to be engrossed in my monologue. I study a couple of wall maps and wander the halls until I find a corridor with two National Guardsmen guarding the entry. Then I pull one of Pierce's fake IDs out of my pocket—an FBI badge, but I'm careful to keep my thumb over the photo—and I'm waved past with a quick Merci.

Now for the hard part.

The guards at the door to the room ignore me; they saw the badge dance at the entrance. I step right past them into the room, close the door behind me, and take it all in at a glance: the monitors and other machines, the bed, and the occupant.

And for the first time in seventy years, I can say his name.

"Steve."

He looks smaller in the bed, under a blanket with a sheet pulled up to his chest. Maybe it's the hospital gown. I wonder how they got the flag suit off him. Somewhere, I think, there's some broken emergency shears and a Smithsonian curator who's about to be really pissed off.

I realize I'm focusing on the unimportant details so I won't have to think about what's in front of me. So I make myself look.

I can see Steve's head and chest from where I'm standing, and he's a mess. Cuts and bruises everywhere, including a swollen and split lip and a stitched-up but still-seeping wound on the left side of his face. The bruising around his eyes is relatively light, but I can see he must've had one honey of a shiner not long ago. And there are faint marks on the right side of his throat, long and thin. Finger-marks. Metal fingers.

Steve's asleep, and I can hear the slight gurgle and wheeze in his breathing. A good choking and a near-drowning will do that. I remember what Geoff said. I wonder if Steve's really in a coma.
There's a medical chart at the foot of the bed. I move over to take a look, and I spot the IV drips in Steve's arms.

No coma, according to the chart. He had some kind of surgery this morning, and he's under anesthetic. I don't speak medical jargon—even the machine can't help me there—but I keep seeing words like *rupture* and *hemorrhage* and *fracture*. Everything in this patient broke or burst somehow. Somebody beat the hell out of him.

**Don't forget the bullet holes.**

Oh, no, I can't forget those. Four of them in the legs and torso. Nice center-of-mass shots. He'd have bled to death if he hadn't been a super-soldier.

**Yeah, you really did a number on him.**

I know that, stupid voice. You think I don't know that? I barely remember the guy—he's Bucky's pal, not mine—and seeing him like this is still tearing my heart out. I can't even think of anything to say.

I can.

"Sometimes," I whisper, speaking for both of us, "I think you like getting punched."

I wait for a minute, just in case he's going to wake up and answer me. But he just lies there, gently wheezing. The monitors beep in time with his heartbeat. It's soothing if I don't think about the source of the noise.

I pull up a chair to Steve's left, away from the door, and drop into it. It creaks a warning. I guess I'm heavier than I used to be. The arm adds weight, in more ways than one.

"I'm sorry," I say softly. I don't know if he can hear me, but it has to be said. "I'm sorry I hit you." I think for a moment, then add, "Sorry I hit you a lot. I'm sorry for stabbing you, too. And, um, shooting you. All four times."

Nothing. Just the steady beep.

"I wanted you to know something," I say. "I think I heard you the whole time. And I knew you. I said I didn't, but I lied. Figured you'd wanna know that."


"It was stupid, what you did," I go on. "Not the stuff with the carriers—that was okay. I'd'a helped if I could've. But after that ..."

That's where I lose it. I drop my face into my hands so I don't have to think about crying, and I let myself break. At least I'm not weeping for myself anymore.

It takes me a couple of minutes to stop shuddering and spit out my next sentence:

"You should've just killed me."

I give him a sidelong look through my fingers, half expecting him to wake up and scold me. It's the kind of thing he'd do. In a way, it's even worse that he stays asleep.

I drop my head. "But I guess," I say, "you were never gonna do that, were you?"
Beep. Beep. Beep. I suppose I know the answer, don't I? He wouldn't be lying there if he could have ended me. I know he had the chance. The memory flickers in before I can call for it: the pressure of his arm cutting off my blood supply, my vision narrowing to a pinhole. I've choked enough people to death to know how easy it is to finish them once you've got them down and out. Hell, he didn't even have to wait that long; all he would've had to do once I was out is take my gun off me and put a bullet in the back of my head. Easy. And he wouldn't be in a hospital bed right now, drugged to the gills and wheezing like the asthmatic he used to be.

Who the hell is Bucky, I think, to be worth all this pain?

You know who he is, the voice says.

I barely have time to think that no, I don't, before the memories hit. I see myself kicking some goon out of an alley while skinny Steve Rogers climbs out of a garbage heap. Then I'm picking up a pretty brunette girl in a diner and eyeing her almost-as-pretty blonde friend, planning a double date. I'm deckling schoolyard bullies, putting little Steve into a YMCA boxing ring, sitting in on an art class and hiding my amazement at the way a body comes to life under his pencil. I'm standing on a catwalk in a burning factory and yelling at Captain America that I'm not leaving without him. I'm looking over a thousand-foot cliff and making a joke about Coney Island. I'm stealing apples off fruit stands and trees. I'm kicking in doors and laying down covering fire. I'm seeing my best friend get shot, and I'm grabbing his shield and returning fire with no thought for my own safety. I'm falling to what I think is my death, and the last thing I see is a gloved hand and the horrified face of Steve Rogers.

Stupid, the voice says. He was never gonna let you down again.

Not for the first time, I wonder who the voice is. Or what. It doesn't sound like the machine, but it doesn't feel like anyone I can put a name to. Maybe it's Steve, I think. Kind of an inner Steve. I used to know him pretty well, or Bucky did anyway. Maybe I'm remembering what he's like.

The voice laughs. You should be so lucky.

I settle back into my chair to wait. Steve's got to wake up sometime, and I think I should be there when he does. After everything that's happened, he'll be glad to see a friendly face when he comes out of the anesthesia.

Even if the face has a stranger living behind it. I think.

After a few minutes, I feel myself slipping into standby mode, and I shake my head to stop it. It feels too much like waiting for orders. Like the machine. I need a distraction.

I pat my pockets for something to do, and promptly discover the fist-sized lump in my jacket. It's the apple I took from Pierce, the one that wouldn't fit in the duffel. I pull it out and buff it against my shirt. It looks pretty good, but I don't feel like eating it. I've thrown up my last couple of meals. Fine thing it'd be if Steve woke up to me losing my lunch on his nice clean hospital-room floor. Besides, I've got a better idea.

With a little ceremony, I toss the apple up, watching it spin for a moment before I snatch it out of the air and plunk it onto Steve's bedside table.

"I got ya something, punk," I say. "Keep the doctors away. I stole it, but you probably knew that already."

"For later, then," I say softly. "I guess you've earned a nap."

Still no response. Reluctantly, I pull the phone out of my other jacket pocket. I don't really feel like going online again, but anything beats standby mode.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Steve's eyelids twitch. I put the phone back in my pocket and turn toward him. I think fast about what I'm going to say as his eyelashes flutter. Something that tells him that it's okay, that it's not the Winter Soldier in here even if it's not Bucky either ...

But I don't come up with anything before my field of vision floods red.

As Steve's eyes begin to flicker open, my brain is suddenly full of a voice I hoped I'd never hear again.

**KILL,** says the machine.

I shake my head to clear it. "No," I mutter. "Not again, you son of a bitch."

Steve's head turns slightly my way. He's definitely coming out of it.

**He is your mission,** the machine insists.

"No," I growl, "he's my friend."

**Confirmed death,** the machine says.

"No!"

**Hail Hydra—**

**Run.**

It's the other voice this time, the sarcastic one. But it's not sarcastic anymore. It sounds angry and scared. My vision flickers between the normal view of the hospital room and the machine's red-stained version. I find myself focusing on Steve's face. There's a mark on his forehead that looks almost like a crosshairs. I know there's a gun in my rear waistband. It would be so easy ...

That's the machine thinking! Run, you jerk! NOW!

I twitch out of the trance, but I stay where I am. Steve needs somebody. I've got to stay.

If you stay here, you'll kill him. And if you do, I swear to God I'll throw you off the highest roof I can find. Now run!

Who are you? I think at the voice.

Someone you hate. Run already!

The red is creeping back in. I'm out of time and out of options. I surge out of my chair, vault over the bed, and bolt from the room. I run like the hounds of hell—or at least the hordes of Hydra—are after me.

The guards hear me coming, but not soon enough to stop me. The two on the door just stare as I burst out past them, and the two at the entrance to the hallway barely have time to turn around before I hurtle through the gap between them. One yells something, but I don't hear it. I keep running, expecting to feel the punch of a bullet at any moment.
They won't shoot, the voice says tightly. This is a hospital, remember?

Yeah, and they let an assassin with hallucinations into Captain America's room. I don't have a lot of faith in their safety protocols.

I don't bother pulling out the phone or faking my way out of the ward. I just move as fast as I can, which is a lot faster than I remember being able to run. Oh, well.

Most people dodge out of my way, but one just stares. It's a muscular young black man with sharp features and a bomber jacket. He's holding a phone in one hand and walking toward the ward I've just left. He stops in his tracks and blinks like he's seen a ghost.

Just before I run into him, the memory clicks: my grapple line wrapping around a metal wing and slamming a flight-rig pilot into the deck of an Insight helicarrier. I'm pretty sure I kicked him off the ship, too. Didn't know he survived.

I dodge around him, clip him with my right shoulder, and keep on going. The red flickers are lasting longer every time.

Okay, he might have shot you, the voice admits. You better not go back there now.

I wasn't going back anyway. I feel sick again, my head is splitting and the voices are starting to sound like a windstorm inside my skull.

Right turn, now!

The voice is so loud that I obey without thinking, and I duck into an elevator just before the doors close. It's empty, thank God.

I've got a few seconds while the elevator descends, so I close my eyes and slam my forehead into the wall paneling, then sink back, dizzy, against the back of the car. The red tint is gone. The panel is dented.

You've really gotta stop doing that, the voice says. It sounds woozy, too. You never had a lot of brain cells to spare.

"Yeah?" I mutter to it. "You got a better idea? 'Cause otherwise the machine'll end up driving."

Let me drive, then.

"Hell, no. I don't even know who you are, pal."

Yeah, you do.

"I don't know who I am, and I'm supposed to know some voice in my head?"

You really think you don't know me?

"I can make another dent in that wall any time ..."

Fine, I'll show you.

The elevator jerks to a stop and the doors slide open.

I haven't checked the control panel, so I'm a little surprised to see the hospital lobby. I'm more surprised to see someone I know standing in front of the opening doors.
I know his face, but not his name. He's a tall, burly guy with close-cropped brown hair and a big nose that's been broken even more than mine. His close-set dark eyes always reminded me of a sewer rat's. Right now his mouth is falling open as he recognizes me.

I don't know his name, but I know he's part of Rumlow's SHIELD Strike team. And he's Hydra.

This is who I am, the voice says, and together we lunge out of the elevator and tackle the man like we're sacking a quarterback.

It's my first real fight since I jumped in the river, and I'm still concussed and beaten half to hell, but it feels terrific. The Hydra op moves like a snake, but I'm faster and I catch his haymaker in my left hand and belt him across the face with my right. For an instant, I'm in a memory: throwing a perfect right cross in a ring in Brooklyn while skinny Steve Rogers yells his lungs out, egging me on.

This is who I am, the voice says, and I'm back on the hospital floor, driving my knee into the Hydra op's gut. Then I'm gone again, delivering the same blow to a Tenth Avenue punk.

The Hydra op's not getting up, but in my peripheral vision I can see more guys in black converging on me from other parts of the lobby. Some I know and some I don't, but it doesn't matter. I stand up and charge into my next fight.

It's glorious.

This is who I am, the voice tells me, and I'm simultaneously in the hospital lobby and scattered across my new memories like rice on a church doorstep. I punch, kick, jab, twist, and I'm fighting in Brooklyn schoolyards and alleys, Wisconsin training fields, English pubs, forests and meadows and cities across Europe. I'm fighting for my life, for the sake of my friends, for the sheer hell of it. I'm fighting the war I left behind, and all the smaller wars before it. I'm fighting for myself and the whole damn world.

Say my name, the voice whispers, and I do.

"Barnes!" I bark, snapping a backfist into a solar plexus. "James Buchanan!" I put a boot into someone's kidneys. "Sergeant!" I wrench an arm out of its socket. "Three two five five!" Ribs break under my metal fist. "Seven zero three eight!" Teeth go flying.

I keep moving, keep striking, keep chanting the name, rank, and serial number. The name that got me my scar. The name I didn't know three days ago. The name on the museum wall, the name I decked Steve Rogers for daring to say.

My name.

That's what the machine does, I realize. It pushes you down, locks you away in a little box made of pain and terror, and makes you forget you ever existed. And it keeps you there as long as you let it. As long as you don't remember the box. As long as no one can find the key.

Someone you hate, the voice said. After all this time, after everything that's happened, I know who's at the top of that list.

"Who the hell is Bucky?" I mutter, looking around at the prone bodies of my defeated foes. "I am."

That's when I hear the click of a round being chambered, and I go still.

"Good to hear, Sergeant," a voice says. "But what I wanna know is, are you still crazy?"
The rest of the world floods back in, and for the first time I hear what's going on around me. Phones ringing. People shouting. Frantic running feet.

*Oh, yeah, I think. This is what usually happens on a mission. But now I don't have a Hydra cleanup crew following me around.*

"Hands up," says the voice. "Turn around slow."

I obey, grinding my teeth as I step over an arm to turn in place. The last thing I want to do right now is take orders.

There's a nine-millimeter pistol in my face. Steering it is the sharp-faced guy from upstairs, the one I clipped. The one I kicked off the carrier.

"Can we make this quick?" I ask. "Hydra's probably going to send reinforcements for these guys." I nudge one with a boot for emphasis.

"Why?" the sharp-faced guy asks dryly. "Aren't you up to finishing him off on your own?"

For a moment, I don't understand what he's talking about. Then I do, and I want to punch him. But that'll only get me shot, so instead I say:

"I'd kill myself first. Believe me."

I actually see the surprise flood across his face. The gun barrel dips a couple of degrees.

"Son of a bitch," he says. "He really did it. He brought you back?"

My throat feels thick. I nod.

"And I am actually talking to the actual Bucky Barnes?"

"What's left of me," I say. "Who am I talking to?"

"Sam Wilson," he says. "You threw me off a helicarrier day before yesterday." He says it like he's telling me we had a beer together once.

"Sorry," I say. "I was having a hell of a day."

"It wasn't just you." He glances around at the swirling chaos, but he never completely takes his attention off me. Smart. He takes one hand off the gun and hooks a thumb at the stairwell he must've come from. "C'mon," he says. "We're going up. You first."

"You want to point that thing somewhere else?" I ask, as mildly as I can manage.

"No."

"How come?" I walk ahead of him into the stairwell, my hands still at shoulder height. My right arm is killing me. So much for adrenaline.

"Because as far as I know, you're still Hydra."

I grimace, even though I know he can't see it.

"Plus you wrecked my car."
That earns him a smirk.

We climb in silence, all the way to the top. I don't turn to look at Sam, not once. He's a hard guy to read. He walks and talks military, but there's something a little bit off about him. Like he's doing an equation in his head, and he's not going to make any decisions until he's got the answer. I can't help wondering what the variables are. Whether one of them is how much easier his life would be if I caught a bullet.

I stop at the door to Steve's floor, half expecting Sam to order me through it.

"Keep going," he says. "All the way."

"Somebody's keeping an eye on Steve, right?" I ask.

"You saw the security down there."

"Yeah," I say, "but I got past it with a cell phone, a badge, and some lousy French. You think Hydra can't do the same?"

"Then we'd better finish our business fast."

I set my jaw and keep climbing.

The roof door is unlocked. I go through it first. The machine wants to turn around and hit Sam in the face with it, but I tell it to shut up and keep moving. It's easier now, with Bucky driving. Me driving.

That's going to take some getting used to. I haven't been myself in a long time. It feels like putting on a new suit that doesn't quite fit. Every thought chafes.

I walk to the middle of the roof and stop.

"Turn around," Sam orders, and I do.

He's still giving me that funny mental-math look. And he's still got the gun trained on my chest. I wish I'd worn the stinking body armor.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

"Visiting hours," I say. "I got a friend in the hospital."

"Not much of a visit. I leave for ten minutes, you're in and out. Why?"

"It's personal," I say tightly. No way am I going to tell him about the machine.

"And that little show in the lobby? What was that about?"

"Guy was lookin' at me funny. We done now?"

At first, he looks like his mental equation has added an exponent or two. Then he smirks and lowers the gun.

"I can't tell if you're crazy or not," he says, "but you're sure as hell from Brooklyn. Guess that'll do until Cap can vouch for you. I don't think Hydra's got a New York attitude in their brainwashing program."

"Thanks," I say. "I think."
"So what do I call you, Sergeant Barnes? I don't think 'Sarge' is gonna work so well."

"Most people call me Bucky," I tell him. Then I think about it and add, "Most people I like, anyway."

"And that's gotta be a short list after seventy years, huh?" He's holding the gun loose in his right hand. Like he hasn't finished his math yet.

"I got a few openings on my dance card," I say.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I feel kinda weird calling a grown man Bucky in this century. How'd you get the name, anyway? Thought your mom named you James."


"Uh-huh. Okay." He's nodding. Another variable solved, I guess. "And now you got your name back. That's good. How're you handling the nightmares?"

I start sweating under the jacket. "The what?"

"The dreams." Sam looks me up and down. "I've seen the look before. You sleep, but you don't rest, right? Even when you sleep on the ground like you're used to."

Cautiously, I nod.

"It's only been a couple of days. You got a lot of stuff to sort through, am I right?"

I shrug, but I can see he's not fooled. And I can see why.

"How long?" I ask.

"Two tours," he replies, and his mouth quirks. "Your friend asked the same question. Exact same words."

That makes me smile a little. Smiling hurts, though, and not just because the Hydra op got in a lucky shot at my jaw.

Sam nods again. One more variable. "I used to know a guy like you, Bucky. I liked him. I'm gonna put the gun away now. And I just want you to know that none of that means I'm sure of you."

Another quirk-smile. "But if you go psycho up here, well ... I don't think Cap'll be too happy."

I swallow hard and nod. Sam tucks the gun inside his jacket. Shoulder holster. Explains why he had the bomber on indoors, I guess. He's not taking a lot of chances.

Good.

Sam folds his arms. "Tell me what's going on. You know what Hydra's doing here?"

I let my arms drop—the right one thanks me for it—and shake my head. "But if I could find this place, they can. They're not just gonna leave Steve alone."

"How did you find this place? Twitter?" Sam arches an eyebrow.

"Map," I say. "I hit all the hospitals on this side of the river, starting with the closest."

Sam frowns. "The closest to—? Oh." Recognition dawns. "You pulled him out of the water. That's
how you knew. I wondered how he got out."

"Couldn't just leave him there."

"But you did leave him," Sam points out.

"I called an ambulance. I think. My memory's a little spotty."

"And you were leaving again just now because—?"

I don't answer.

Sam's face clouds over. "You remember the part where I don't trust you, right, Bucky?"

I don't move or speak. I just wait.

"You're not exactly building trust here, either."

"Telling you won't help anything," I mutter.

Sam gives me a flat look. "You really want to leave this up to my imagination?"

I realize I'm chewing on the inside of my mouth, and I make myself stop. It's not Sam's fault I'm twitchy. And he's right—this is something he ought to know. Just in case I can't keep the machine in check forever.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Steve ..." I shake my head and start over. "He knocked something loose in my head. Made me start remembering. Who I was, how I knew him. The war."

I pause to see if Sam's going to interrupt, but he just stands there listening. Patient.

"But it doesn't replace what's already in here." I tap my temple with a finger for emphasis. "I don't know what they did to my mind. I see things, remember things—I don't know what's real and what's their machines." I shiver.

"Hydra's machines?" Sam asks.

I nod. "Yeah. I'm still finding out what's in there. I think it's just old programming, but ..."

"But?" Sam prompts.

I close my eyes and have a short, silent fight with myself. It's obvious that Sam is trying to watch out for Steve—I did that for so long myself that I know all the signs. He needs to know this. But I don't want to get shot.

Then again, if anybody's worth getting shot over ... I open my eyes and lock gazes with Sam. I hope he can see that this is killing me.

"There's a machine in my head," I say. "And it's trying to make me kill Steve."

Sam's eyebrows track toward his hairline. "Did you say there's a machine in your head?"

I rub my eyes. "Machine, program, I don't know. Something Hydra put in me. I was okay while he was sleeping, but once he started to wake up ... it's not something I can fight. So I ran."
"Did you actually—"

"No!" I take a step back in horror.

"Hm." Sam looks thoughtful. "Is this a permanent thing?"

My heart sinks. "It feels like it. It was my last mission, and I failed." Saying it out loud makes it more real somehow. "They didn't like failure."

"Yeah, I met one of their successes. Guy named Rumlow. You know him?"

I nod. "He's a real bastard. Tell me you killed him."

"Nah. He took a helicarrier to the face, though."

"Couldn't've happened to a nicer guy."

That earns me a grin, but it soon disappears. Sam studies me with a worried expression. I am more conscious than usual of the cuts and bruises he can see on my exposed skin and the way my still-stupidly-long hair hangs over my eyes. Even I think I look pretty rough, and I've had two days to get used to it. What the hell do I look like to Sam Wilson?

Finally, I can't take the silence any longer, and I say, "You should probably shoot me or do whatever you're gonna do pretty soon. Steve's not getting any more able to defend himself down there. And Hydra is coming."

"Yeah, but I don't think they're coming for him," Sam replies. He slips a hand into his jacket pocket and pulls out a phone. Its screen glows with some kind of map, light green gridlines on a dark field. A brilliant green pip glows, pulsing gently, in the middle of the screen.

"What's that?" I ask, feeling dumb.

"Dunno exactly," Sam says. He glances at the screen, then at me. "I took it off one of the Hydra agents you flattened downstairs. The first one, in fact. He had it in his hand. You didn't notice?"

I shake my head. "It's not a weapon, is it?"

"Boy, have you got a lot to learn about the twenty-first century. These things can be a lot worse than a .45. Thing is, though—you see this little blinking light?" He points, as if I need the help.

"Yeah. What is it?"

"Well, when I picked it up, this little dot was standing in front of a downstairs elevator in the lobby. Then it went up the stairs, and now it's on the roof. What does that tell you?"

My jaw drops. "That thing is tracking us?"

"Of the two of us here, which one is a valuable Hydra asset with fifty pounds of advanced technology welded to his shoulder? I don't think it's tracking us, Bucky. I think it's tracking you." He passes me the phone. "Know anything about it?"

"If I did, would I have led them here?"

"Good point. So what are we gonna do?"

I stare down at the screen. My brain spins. "I don't know. But I can't go back." I grip the phone so
"We are at a hospital," Sam points out. "Maybe we can get the tracker dug out of you."

"You know where it is? I don't."

Sam shakes his head. "I used to have a pit bull that was microchipped, but I don't think Hydra works the same way. I got nothin'."

"Then I've got to run," I say, looking up from the phone. "And you've got to let me."

Sam snorts. "I don't have much of a track record when it comes to stopping you, man. That's Cap's department, and he's not here right now."

The words sting. I try not to show it.

"I'm going to need a favor," I say.

"I only had the one car," Sam says immediately.

It takes me a second to figure out that he's kidding. How long has it been since I joked around with people?

"Not the car," I say. "Just don't tell Steve I was here. Keep him off my trail for a while."

"What are you talkin' about? The man damn near died saving the world and you. And he isn't gonna ask me about the planet when he wakes up."

I move to the edge of the roof, looking for escape routes. "If he knows," I say, "he'll try to find me, and this time I might actually kill him. You want that on your conscience? I sure as hell don't."

"He's going to try to find you no matter what. You know that."

"But you can give me a head start." I look back at him. "Please, Sam. I know you don't know me from a hole in the wall, but—"

Sam puts up a hand. "Stop. I can't handle a begging Bucky Barnes on top of everything else today."

He sighs heavily. "What's your plan?"

I shrug. "Run. Try to fix this." I point at my head. "Lose my scaly green tail. It's not exactly a plan."

"Okay," Sam says. "On one condition."

"Name it quick."

He pulls a small notebook and pencil out of a pocket, scribbles on a page, rips it out and hands it to me. I take it, see a string of digits. Phone numbers have gotten long.

"You check in once a week," Sam says. "I don't care where you are or what you're doing, you call that number at least every seven days and you tell me you're still alive. Pick a code word and get it to me somehow. You miss your check-in, I tell Captain America everything and we both come looking for you."

I scowl. "I don't need a babysitter, Sam."

"In fact, you do. Anybody with a killing machine in his head does. And if Hydra's better than you
think they are, I want a little warning before I have to fight the Terminator again."

I have no idea what he's talking about. "What's a—?"

"Google it. Run fast, stay safe, check in. And get back as soon as you can. You got a friend that needs you. Don't go dying on him again."

"Thanks." It's a sobering thought. I don't want to make Steve face the future alone. Hell, I don't want to face it alone. I've been awake in the future for two days, and it's already making me nuts. I look up at Sam, really seeing him for the first time. He's a small, wiry guy, no match for Steve or me in a fight. But he's got that steel inside him that I remember from the old days in Brooklyn. I guess he'll do.

"Look out for him, Sam," I say quietly. "One more favor—watch his back. Like you said, he needs a friend, and I—I can't be that guy."

That crooked, cocky grin spreads across his face. "You super-soldiers are nothin' but trouble, you know that?" He puts out his right hand. "No matter what you think, Bucky, I'm glad I met you. The real you."

The handshake happens automatically, like before. But this time I mean it. When it's over, I take a step back and snap a salute. He returns it, back straight.

Ten minutes later, I'm back on the Indian, engine roaring as I blast down an interstate. I make a mental note to get myself a helmet. Maybe some goggles.

The wind really makes my eyes water.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if anyone else noticed the green apple on Steve's bedside table in the movie, a twin of the apples in the bowl in Pierce's kitchen, but that's more or less where this chapter came from. I notice apples. I don't explain why.

Sharp-eyed readers will recognize a line or two from the comics. That's intentional.
Bullets and Pancakes

Chapter Summary

Geoff the Navy Vet returns, Bucky gets pancakes, and we find out more than we ever wanted to know about autumn in Buenos Aires. It's a nice time of year, except for the murder.

Chapter Notes

Wow, you guys. Not a lot of hits or comments, but everyone is super kind and supportive. I and my PTSD both thank you for your awesomeness.

And now, here's more angsty Bucky. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's getting dark by the time I pull off the highway again. I use the last of the twilight to dump out my duffel and bedroll and start dividing things up. This is the problem with stealing from Hydra; it gets you on Hydra's radar.

I'm almost certain that the tracking device is somewhere in my body. It would make sense; Hydra had me drugged and wired into the machine for years, so it would have been easy to implant something. Hell, they implanted an entire arm—for all I know, the tracker's built into that. And Sam had a point about that pit bull, though he probably didn't realize it. Microchips are cheap enough that people can implant them into pets in case they get lost. How easy would it be for Hydra to inject a tiny GPS bug under my skin? As valuable as the Winter Soldier was to them?

The shower at Pierce's house showed me I'm covered in scars. I don't remember getting most of them. I wouldn't know where to start looking for the bug.

But there might be bugs in my stolen Hydra gear, too, and I can at least get rid of those. I make two piles: bug-worthy and not. All this stuff belonged to the head of Hydra, so he wouldn't have superiors tracking him, but he'd want his people to find him if he went missing against his will. He worked with SHIELD, too, and I'm sure they had policies on this stuff.

The Winter Soldier armor and boots I can keep for now; any bugs in that stuff will go along with the internal tracker, maybe make them think I'm still at least semi-programmed if I'm still using my gear. The basic equipment—the cash, the bedroll, the food, the fake IDs—all that can stay. I'm pretty sure the clothes are okay, too. I'm not too sure anyone can bug a T-shirt or a pair of socks. The jacket is more of a risk, since the reinforced seams could be hiding anything, but I decide to roll the dice. I want to feel like I gave Pierce a black eye, at least. The jacket stays.

The other pile has all the suspect material. The phone. The laptop. The guns. All complicated objects, all easy to impregnate with bugs and sensors. The first-aid kit, too. I'll have to get one from a store.
I repack what I'm keeping and leave the contraband by the side of the road. Let Hydra waste their time tracking it down. I consider trying to trap an animal and putting the phone on it, but, funny as it would be to send Hydra agents crashing through the woods after a raccoon or a possum, it's not worth putting an animal through that. Being hunted is already making me twitchy; I don't want to inflict it on some other poor bastard.

I switch the phone to flashlight mode and spend twenty minutes combing the bike for trackers. There, at least, I have an advantage—there's very little wasted space on an Indian, and twenty-first-century tech really sticks out on a World War II motorcycle. I find two boxy radio transmitters and a little pip that the machine tells me is a GPS dot. I throw it all into the woods. Let them think I ditched the bike.

As I repack my surviving gear and swing back into the saddle, I wonder who's chasing me at the moment. Hydra, obviously, but who is Hydra now? Pierce is dead and SHIELD is being broken up as I blast down I-95 on a hot bike. Who's in charge? And why, when they're under attack from all sides, are they bothering to chase after one loose asset? Is it just because I can be tracked, because I'm an easy capture? Am I being being blamed for the destruction of the helicarriers? Do they think I'll reveal Hydra secrets or compromise their operations?

Or is it simpler than that? Do they just want their trusty attack dog back on the chain?

My right hand is cramping up, and I realize I'm white-knuckling the Indian's grips. Ease up, I tell myself. Don't take it out on the bike. You spent two years hunting and being hunted across half of Europe. You survived that; you'll survive this.

Except I wasn't on my own then. And if I want to get technical, I didn't survive, either. I died.

Yeah, but that trick never works. It's mostly me thinking, now, but I can still hear the ghost of Bucky's voice in the sarcasm. It feels strange now to think of him as separate from me. Another thing to thank the machine for. It must have made Hydra's job easier to lock my real personality away before replacing it with someone more pliable. Now I have to dig myself back out.

And break every last Hydra operation into a million pieces. I'm definitely going to do that. My first boxing coach, Father O'Malley, used to tell me that revenge is a fool's errand, but I'm pretty sure he never had his brain rewired to make him a murderous lunatic.

Though that might explain a few of the things he yelled through the ropes when I was fighting, especially in the all-city championships. For such a nice old guy, he took his fights really seriously.

I'm getting tired again, and it's well after midnight, so I pull off the road once more and walk the bike about half a mile into the woods. If Hydra is close enough to track me down while I'm sleeping tonight, I'm screwed no matter what I do.

As I lay out the bedroll, I realize I haven't set up a code word with Sam Wilson. Out here in the dark, capture seems a lot more likely. And I haven't replaced the Hydra phone yet, so I have no way to contact him. What happens if Hydra catches up to me tonight?

Sam will come looking, I guess. Sam and Steve. Hell, Steve will drag an IV line behind him if he has to. That mental image makes me smile.

It feels weird to have people looking out for me now. Worrying over me. Mostly I'm used to people worrying that I will show up, not that I won't. Now everything has changed.

That thought follows me as I drift off. The nightmares aren't as bad this time.
They're still horrible, though. I wake up shaking and sweating and feeling like I've been hit by a super-soldier. I give myself a minute to recover, then pack everything up at double time even though my right hand still has tremors.

I ride until I find a town with a Wal-Mart. The machine knows about Wal-Mart. They sell everything there, including prepaid cellular phones. I partially charge one in a men's-room electrical outlet. My first call is to Sam Wilson.

To my surprise, he answers. "Hello?"

"The word is apples," I tell him, and hang up as another voice in the background breaks in. I hear it, though.

"Who—?" Steve asks.

"Wrong num—" Sam begins, and then the line goes dead.

I stand in the Wal-Mart parking lot, staring at the phone. So Steve's awake. I don't know whether to be glad he's getting better or miserable that I can't be there to see it.

I officially hate the future.

I'm getting a headache, and my eyes feel like they're full of sand. I know I didn't sleep very well, and the night before last was even worse. How long is this going to go on? I never had trouble sleeping before the ice. I was a soldier. I could practically fall asleep on command. Now I have no way of knowing how long I'll have to go without real sleep. And every bad night degrades my ability to stay alive, stay free. I'm probably feeling the effects already without realizing it. And I'm still in very unfamiliar territory.

I need a local guide, I think. I remember using them during the war—resistance fighters, partisans, whoever would help us root out Hydra effectively. I need someone who knows the future.

I have exactly three people I know in the future. One of them I'm likely to murder. One's pretending he never saw me. And the third ...

He's a nosy bastard who used to be in naval intelligence. And he doesn't sleep, either.

I pull out Geoff O'Toole's business card and punch the number into my new phone before I can talk myself out of it.

He answers on the second ring. "O'Toole."

"It's Jimmy Dugan," I say. "You said to call if I needed anything."

"Jimmy!" I can hear the surprise in his voice. And the delight, too. "You up for another sundae?"

"Whatever you want, Geoff," I say. "I've got a few questions that I think you can answer for me."

"Anything that gets me out of the house. How about pancakes? I happen to know the best pancake house in the D.C. metro area."

My stomach chooses that moment to gurgle loudly. Nightmares or no, I'm running on an empty tank. Any food will be welcome.

"I love pancakes," I say, and I'm not even sure I'm lying.
He gives me the address. It's about sixty miles away. I offer to meet him in four hours, and soon I'm back on the road.

To my surprise, I find I'm looking forward to seeing Geoff again. Strange, considering that I barely know the guy. But I haven't had a friend for seven decades. Maybe it's just human nature to want to fix that kind of problem. Anything beats being alone.

I like that thought. It makes me feel more human.

It doesn't take me four hours to get to the pancake house. It takes me four hours to wash up in a gas-station bathroom, drive in circles to make it look like I'm disoriented, recon the whole small town containing the pancake house, and finally walk in the door at exactly the time I gave Geoff. It's lunchtime now, and weird as it feels to be smelling pancakes at noon, my stomach seems to approve of the situation. Maybe I'll finally keep something down.

I've spent the whole long drive planning what I'll say to Geoff, but between my shaky English-conversation skills and the fact that I don't know what kind of lie would sound plausible in the twenty-first century, I've decided to just tell the truth. It's less to remember, and it will be hard enough to convince him as it is. I can't handle extra complications.

The pancake house is a little wooden roadside joint with a steeply pointed roof like a Swiss chalet. The inside is all scuffed wood walls and worn leather booths. It feels lived in. Geoff is already ensconced in a back-corner booth when I walk in. He's wearing his Navy windbreaker again, and he looks like he's been here forever. He waves at me as I walk in, and none of the waitstaff blink as I walk past them, unescorted, and slide into the booth with Geoff.

"If anyone asks," Geoff says quietly, handing me a menu, "you're my favorite great-nephew. The pancakes are on me."

"I can pay," I say.

"Indulge an old man."

I don't argue. I thought I had a small fortune in currency until I saw the prices at Wal-Mart. I remember when a cup of coffee was a nickel. And besides, I'm starving.

We order our pancakes—two buttermilk stacks, none of the fancy stuff on the ridiculously long menu. How many kinds of pancakes have people invented?

The conversation stays light while we wait for the food—the weather, Geoff's health, his grandchildren. Then the waitress appears with two plates, piled high with flapjacks, and slides them in front of us. She's younger than I look, blonde, slim. She winks at me. "That your bike outside?" she asks.

I nod, to be polite.

"Vintage?"

I have no idea, so I nod again.

"It's a beauty. We should go for a ride sometime."

I wonder if she's flirting with me. Or are girls just really interested in motorcycles now? It is the future.
"Maybe," I say, and smile what used to be my most charming smile.

She blushes and leaves. Yeah, flirting.

Geoff clears his throat. "Well," he says. "Nice to see you're in a good mood. The guy I met wouldn't've said boo to her."

I sigh deeply, letting out what feels like a century of dust. God, I feel old. And I'm about to feel older.

"That," I say, cutting a wedge of my pancake stack, "is the first girl I've talked to since 1944."

Geoff's eyebrows shoot toward his receding hairline.

I let the story tumble out of me, more than I want to tell but too much to hold in. I tell him about the war. About Steve. About Hydra, and my death, and the machine. About what I did, and what was done to me. About the helicarriers and the hospital and Sam and the little green dot. I talk so much I forget about my food, and around the middle of the story Geoff forgets his too. He just sits there, fork in hand, staring at me as I spill my entire FUBAR life onto a pancake-house table.

When I get to the end, I'm too embarrassed to look at him, so I cut a fat wedge out of my pancake stack, spear it with my fork, and stuff it all into my mouth. I don't even taste the syrup; it's just something to stop the words.

The first thing Geoff says is: "Slow down."

I look up at him blankly, mouth full. "Slow down what?"

"Eating. You're gonna make yourself sick."

"It's just pancakes." The words come out full of syrup. I swallow and cough.

Geoff smiles sadly. "See? You're gonna choke. And did you even listen to yourself? Sounds to me like your stomach contracted. You didn't use it much while they were feedin' you through tubes."

"I don't know they used tubes," I say crossly. "I just ... don't remember eating." Out loud, it sounds dumb.

"Eat slow," Geoff advises me. "I know a thing or two about a thing or two."

Grudgingly, I cut another wedge. This time, I only spear the top pancake-triangle in the stack.

"Good boy," Geoff says. "Now, here's what I really want to know—why are you here? Why'd you call me, of all people?"

"I only know two phone numbers."

"And the other one belongs to the guy backing up Captain America. You say Captain Rogers is your best friend. Why not go to him for help?"

I glare. "Are you even listening? If I see him—"

"You might kill him, yeah, I got it. But what's wrong with an e-mail? Hell, write him a letter. Tell him what you told me. So Hydra's chasing you. So what? They've gotta be after him too. They're not gonna try to kill him any more for helping you. And he can probably do more than I can."
"But you were naval intelligence."

"And he's your best friend. What do you need more, a retired spook or somebody you can trust?"

I say nothing, just take another bite. He's right, of course. The logical thing would be to call Steve. He probably knows people who can fix me. He's already in Hydra's sights. And I trust him more than anyone alive, mostly because I don't trust anyone else. At all.

And yet ...

"It's complicated," I mutter, staring at the tabletop.

"You want to make it right."

I look up. "Yeah. I guess I do."

Geoff shakes his head slowly. "Captain America never seemed like the kind of guy who held grudges. You think you've got something to make up for, but I'm not so sure he'd agree. What you did wasn't your fault."

"No." I pull off my gloves, slowly and deliberately. I see Geoff's eyes widen as he sees my left hand for the first time. The metal glints under the fluorescent lighting.

"You're right," I say. "It wasn't my fault. But it was my hands. And I remember everything I did."

I lock eyes with Geoff, hoping I've made sense. It's the first time I've said what I'm thinking out loud. It doesn't matter who was pulling my strings all those years. I can't face Steve with all this blood, including his, on my hands. And so my best—my only—hope is to stay alive and free until something changes.

I know Steve will forgive me. But I don't want him to. Not when I can't do the same.

Geoff seems to think that over. He takes a bite of his food and chews it so long that I want to ask if he's hit a bone in a pancake. At last, he swallows.

"The way I see it," he says, "every GI owes you and Cap his life, one way or another. So if you won't take anybody else's help, I guess it's up to me to pay the debt." He takes a swallow from his water glass and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "What do you need, Bucky?"

I flash my first real smile since I walked in.

"The first priority has to be getting rid of the tracker," I tell him. "I have no clue where Hydra implanted it, but it's got to come out. You know a lot more about this century than I do. Any ideas?"

"A couple," Geoff replies. "Give it a minute to settle. What's next on the list?"

"Fixing my head. Getting rid of the program or whatever it is. I'll be damned if I let Hydra use me to get to Steve. I need someone who understands what they did and how to undo it."

Geoff grunts. "That one I'll really have to think about. Anything else?"

I smile crookedly. "I need you to do some shopping for me. I've got the money—I think—but I can't let myself show up on the security cameras."

"And what am I buying?"
I tell him. He looks worried.

"I'm not planning anything," I say quickly. "But if Hydra catches up with me again ..."

"You'll need it," Geoff says heavily. "All right. But if something unplanned happens, you've got to promise you'll cover your tracks. I'm too old to do federal time."

"Nobody will know," I promise. "You have my word. Oh, and one more thing."

"What?" He gives me a bleak look.

"I'm gonna need a haircut." I push my fingers through my hair. "The less I look like the Winter Soldier, the better. And I'm sick of looking like a roughneck."

"The less you look like him, the more you'll look like you," Geoff replies. "Do you really want to get recognized as Bucky Barnes?"

"I'd rather be a dead man than a machine."

"You oughta get that tattooed," Geoff mutters. "Okay, next stop, the barbershop. And I'm coming with you."

"It'll save time if we split up—"

"No, it won't," Geoff cuts me off. "You ain't been in a barbershop since the war ended. You could walk out of there with a green mohawk."

"What's a mohawk?"

"See?"

We drive separately and meet up there. I'm second to arrive; Geoff drives like a spy, and loses me fast. The shop is an old-fashioned place, with the familiar striped pole. Geoff says it's where he gets his hair cut. I politely avoid pointing out how little hair that is.

Geoff wasn't kidding about my needing him, though. The barber has three-ring binders full of pictures of every hairstyle I can think of and about a million I can't. I'd never be able to pick. Geoff and I put our heads together, and between my hazy memories of Brooklyn and Geoff's smartphone, we produce a few photos of movie stars and a description that means nothing to me but gets the barber to nod enthusiastically. Next thing I know I'm in the chair.

I almost jump out of it.

The barber's chair feels almost exactly like the chair they strapped me into so the machine could do its work. I find myself flinching every time the scissors come too close to my head. I know it's just a haircut, but every nerve in my body is screaming that the pain is about to start. The barber starts to curse under his breath. I twitch even more.

Geoff steps between me and the mirror and catches my eye. "Jimmy," he says calmly, using the name we've agreed on for when strangers are around. "Look at me and don't look around, okay?"

I take a deep, shuddering breath and lock eyes with him.

"It's gonna be okay, Jimmy," he says. "Just tell me a story. Tell me about the time you made all-city."

Good choice. I must have told that story a million times in my old life. I can tell it in my sleep. I start
with Father O'Malley pulling me out of a schoolyard scrap—somebody pushing Steve around, Steve refusing to back down, the usual—and putting me into training. Then I describe a couple of preliminary bouts, followed by the title match. That part gets a full, lavish description, as it deserves. It was a beauty of a fight. I never heard Steve, or Father O'Malley, or anybody yell so loud in my life. It was like the whole city was cheering for me by the end.

Right around the time I land my final punch, the scissors stop and the barber sweeps a comb across my scalp. I shiver, but I don't flinch. Geoff steps away from the mirror, and I see myself for the first time in years.

It's the first mirror that's felt like a mirror. I finally recognize my own face. Bright, intense eyes—with dark circles, okay, but after all I haven't been sleeping—and a curious, watchful expression that wasn't there when I was part of the machine. My hair is out of my face, too. It's not the Army regulation crop I wore for half my time in the service, though—it's a bit longer and slicked back. I look like I'm about to hit the town. Well, except for the fading bruises on my face.

Hello, Bucky Barnes, I think. It's been a long, long time.

"Didn't I tell ya?" Geoff asks the barber.

"I don't get a lot of call for it these days," the barber says, "but damn if it didn't work like a charm. You're gonna knock 'em dead in New York, Jimmy."

I blink at Geoff. New York? He puts a finger to his lips.

I pay the barber what he asks and tip twenty percent. He gives me a cheery grin and a "Thank you for your service", which mystifies me, and then Geoff's pulling me out onto the sidewalk.

"What the—?" I begin.

"You're my nephew, remember?" Geoff hooks his arm through mine, making it look like I'm helping him walk even as he guides me up the street. "I told him you were a couple months outta the Army and had a job interview in New York. We've been at war for more'n ten years, Jimmy. There's vets everywhere. Guys like him'll do anything to help a soldier out."

"I don't want people thinking I fought when I didn't," I complain. "Hy—" I stop myself before I say Hydra in public. "You know what," I hiss, "ain't the Army."

"You did fight in a war, Bucky," Geoff says, lowering his voice to match mine. "It's not your fault nobody'll believe you when you tell 'em which one. Besides, there's a thing called post-traumatic stress disorder—it's kinda like shell shock—that a lot of the young vets have. Makes 'em act a little funny. People will forgive a lot of twitching if they think you got it serving your country."

"But I didn't—"

"Yes, you did," he cuts me off. "You joined up, and you fought, and you got wounded, and you're still recovering. The rest of it's just detail."

I shake my head. "That's one way of looking at it. You're having fun, aren't you?"

"Are you kidding? I haven't felt this alive since I left the spookhouse. C'mon, let's go commit a felony."

Once again, the first stop is a Wal-Mart. I pick up a first-aid kit, a motorcycle helmet, and some food for the road—beef jerky, dried fruit, a bag of rolls. We move fast, feeling the tick of the clock. Hydra
is coming. I look at laptop computers to replace the one I dumped, but I don't have that kind of cash to spare. I'll have to improvise.

Soon it's time for our last stop, and our first crime.

I wait outside, around the corner, sitting on my Indian and watching for passersby who don't fit in. It's a pointless exercise; everyone in the future looks so strange that nobody stands out to me.

At last, Geoff comes out with a couple of paper bags.

"Had to take what I could get," he grunts as he hands over one bag. "Rounds are in here."

I look inside and read the label on a box. "You got a .45?"

"Only thing he had under the counter. I been coming here for forty years, but times are tough and even Joe won't sell you an entire arsenal without the three-day waiting period. Can you handle a .45?"

"It's perfect," I assure him. "I carried one all through the war. That and a Springfield or a tommygun."

"Those're pretty rare now. Got you this, too." He pulls out something circular and flat, and passes it over.

I take it, mystified. "What is it?"

"A decal. You peel off the paper back and stick it on your car window. Joe had 'em by the register."

"I haven't got a car window."

"No, but they stick to metal, too."

I look up from the decal and frown my confusion at Geoff. Then the penny drops, and I understand.

The decal is the size of my palm, big enough to cover up the red star—Soviet red, Hydra red—on my shoulder. And the design on it is the pattern on Steve's shield.

"I figure," Geoff says, "if you're gonna go knock on Tony Stark's front door, you better let him know whose side you're on."

"Tony Stark? Who's he?" I ask.

"Your next stop," Geoff replies. "He's an Avenger—that's a super hero like Cap. He flies around in an armored suit that he built himself. Goes by Iron Man. An' he's a technical genius who's practically made of money. Got a bunch of smart guys working for him, too. If anybody can find your tracker, it's him." He taps the decal in my hand. "Cap fought with him in the Battle of New York—don't ask, it was big. I think you can call Stark a friend of a friend, at least. He has a place in New York."

"Won't he tell Steve where I am?"

"Talk him out of it. Charm him like you did that waitress."

"Tony Stark." I roll the name on my tongue. It tastes familiar. I wonder if he's related to Howard Stark, the guy who made Steve's shield. Maybe genius runs in the family. I saw Howard make a car fly once. Well, for a second it flew. Then it crashed. Howard said he'd improve it.
Although I haven't seen many flying cars around now, in the future, come to think of it ...

I look up at Geoff and realize he's still holding one of the two paper bags. The one with the gun in it. And he's giving me an odd look.

"Something on your mind, Geoff?" I ask quietly.

Geoff blinks the look away and shakes his head. "No, nothin'. C'mon, let's get you into the alley and put that thing on your arm." He turns away.

"Geoff ..." I trail off. I don't know what I'm trying to say. I'm not sure I want to know what's going through his head. But damn it, he's an old man. An old soldier, like me. And he's helping me when he could've called the FBI and had me dragged off and shot for being a Hydra agent.

Now that I think about it, though ...

"Why are you doing this?" I ask in a soft voice.

"What're you talking about?" He keeps his back to me.

"You barely know me," I reply.

"You're Bucky Barnes. Everybody knows you."

"Then why are you hanging on to that gun?"

He looks over his shoulder at me, and I'm surprised to see small tears in his eyes.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asks.

Lost, I shake my head no.

"Does the name Henry Vandergill mean anything to you? Hank Vandergill?"

Another headshake. I don't like where this is going, but it's too late to stop now.

Geoff swipes the tears away. More immediately start to form.

"Henry Worthington Vandergill," he says. "He was my best friend, I guess. We served together. After the war, I stayed with the Navy and he joined SHIELD. He was assigned to track down Nazi war criminals—especially Hydra."

I feel like I've been gut-punched, but I keep listening.

"I was in Buenos Aires. Never mind why. I got a call from Hank, asking me to meet him for a drink. We'd swap intelligence sometimes, along with a whole lot of bullshit. I agreed. It was April 4, 1955. Autumn in Argentina. A beautiful night."

He's not even looking at me anymore. I know what's coming.

"I saw Hank from maybe a block away. He was standing under a streetlight, chatting to some señoritas. A real charmer. I called his name, he turned—"

Geoff swallows, hard.

"And a bullet blew a hole in his chest."
I close my eyes.

"He tried to run. He'd ruined the kill shot by turning. I started to run toward him, but then the shooter just walked out of the dark and put a round in Hank's head. I'll never forget his face, or the shooter's. Hank was terrified. The shooter might have been listening to a weather report for all the expression he had. Totally blank. Like killing Hank was nothing. He looked right through me." Geoff takes a shaky breath. "He was a big guy, all in black, with dark hair. And a metal arm with a red star on the shoulder."

"What'd you do?" I ask, forcing my eyes open again. I don't remember any of this. But then, why would I?

"Took a shot. Missed. My hand was shaking. The shooter kind of cocked his head at me, then backed off into the dark again. He didn't care that I was there, that I saw. That was one of the first times anybody got a good look at the Winter Soldier. Most people didn't believe me—first because of the freaky metal arm, then later because he let me live. I never did find out why." He lifts his eyebrows in a question. I shake my head. I don't have any answers.

"I looked for him," Geoff continues. "Hunted him for years. But he stayed a ghost. No confirmed sightings, no evidence that wasn't ambiguous. Eventually I retired, figured I'd just have to live with the mystery. And then I met you."

I want to look at the ground, to avoid eye contact. But I make myself keep watching his face. I've caused a lot of pain. The least I can do is look Geoff O'Toole in the eye.

"At first, I thought you had to be his son or his grandson, you know? Though I couldn't imagine a woman getting near a monster like that. I wondered how to talk to you. And then I saw what you were looking at, and your scar." He points at the half-moon under my eye. "And the pieces just ... fell into place. Bucky Barnes, back from the dead. The Winter Soldier and Captain America's best pal. I thought about trying to kill you then."

"Why didn't you?" I ask. Now my voice is thick.

"Because you looked scared. Just like Hank. Lost and scared. I felt sorry for you. I saw what you did to the bridge on TV. I figured out that Cap must've done something to change you, and I've always had a lot of respect for Steve Rogers. Plus I'm old now. I probably couldn't take you anymore. So I took a chance and bought you some ice cream."

_Steve saves me again_, I think. _It's getting to be a habit._

"What about now?" I ask. "You gonna use that gun?"

He gives me a long look, like he's thinking about it. I guess I wouldn't blame him if he shot me. I don't want to die, not really, but there have got to be a million Geoff O'Tooles out there with a good reason to pull the trigger. Hell, I'd have done it if it'd been Steve who died.

And it would stop the machine. There's that, at least.

Then Geoff sighs, shakes his head, and passes me the bag.

"Dumbass," he says. "It's not even loaded."

I don't move at first. I think I really was expecting a bullet. Geoff finally shoves the bag into my chest. I wince; I think I broke a few ribs when a steel beam fell on me during the helicarrier crash. I thought I was going to die then, too.
"Why?" I ask, taking the bag to stop the discomfort.

Geoff jabs his index finger into my sternum. Now that hurts. I grunt. He ignores me.

"You," he says firmly, poking me for emphasis, "are not the Winter Soldier. That son of a bitch doesn't hit on waitresses, or eat his pancakes too fast, or wonder what a mohawk is."

"What is a—?"

"Shut up. You know who you are, Bucky Barnes?"

Mutely, I shake my head.

"You're the first guy he killed. You told me they stuffed you into a box in your head. I wouldn't have believed you if it didn't make you look like an ass. But that makes you the first victim of a serial killer." His eyes glint. "And the last, too. He tried to keep you dead, and you busted out. As long as you're out here, walkin' around, that metal-armed bastard is in hell. Which is no less than he deserves. I couldn't save Hank, but I can sure as hell help save Bucky Barnes. I'm not gonna undo that."

I just stand there, stunned, trying to take it all in.

"Besides," Geoff adds, "you don't even look like him anymore. Takes all the fun out of it."

And that, for some stupid reason, strikes me funny. The chuckle starts down low and works its way up past cracked ribs and a million bruises until I'm shaking with barely suppressed laughter. Geoff is grinning, too, through his tears. And it gets even funnier when I realize where I am: standing on a small-town street, next to a stolen motorcycle, holding an illegal gun and giggling like a little kid with a crotchety old ex-spook who should've shot me days ago. Then we both bust up.

Who says there's no silver lining?

Finally we both get our breathing under control again, and Geoff helps me pack up the bike. We talk a little about New York, and how to find Tony Stark. Geoff wants me to call when I hit the city.

"People in the twenty-first century are worse than my mother," I tell him, and we laugh again. We slip into the alley so Geoff can stick the decal on my shoulder; I'm too sore to reach it. He hesitates when I slip my jacket off and he sees all the metal, but he peels the decal off the paper, presses it over the star, and gives it a proud slap to seal the glue.

"Thanks," I tell him. "For everything. I owe you one. Or fifty, I might owe you fifty."

"Forget it," Geoff replies. "Just send me Captain America's autograph when it's all over." He smiles crookedly. "And maybe a piece of a Hydra agent. For Hank."

"You got it." We shake hands for the second time. I'm really getting the hang of it. I climb onto the Indian and begin my final check before starting the engine.

"Bucky."

I look up. Geoff's got that poor-puppy look again.

"What?" I ask.

"Just ... don't get cocky," he says. "The Winter Soldier didn't live that long by being stupid."
"I know," I say.

"'Course you do," He forces a smile. "Look at me, tellin' you how to fight Hydra when you've been doin' it longer than anybody else."

"That doesn't mean I'll win," I say. My jaw is tight.

"You'd better, or it's me you'll be answerin' to."

"What, a nosy bastard in a museum?" I try my cheekiest Bucky smirk.

But he's not fooled. "Be careful," he says. "Remember ... remember you're not alone in this. You never were."

I think about that. Between my memory and my injuries and having to leave Steve behind, I've never felt more alone in my life. I don't even have Bucky's voice in my head anymore, now that it's my voice. I haven't been alone in my own skull since the war.

But the nosy bastard is right. I might be the only soldier in my part of the battlefield, but there's an army out there. Steve's counting on me, and he doesn't even know it. And he's not the only one.

"I'll remember," I tell Geoff, and pull my new helmet on. The last thing I hear as I kick the engine to life is an old soldier saying:

"Good."

Chapter End Notes

For those following along at home, comic-book Bucky was on more than one superhero team during the war. He's best known as one of the Invaders, along with Steve and some other guys. But he was also the leader of a group of teenage boys called the Young Allies—boys who started out as patriotic kids fighting spies and such on the home front, then came of age, enlisted, and served in various roles in the military late in the war. They looked up to Bucky and were, aside from Steve Rogers and Toro Raymond, just about the only real friends he had during this period of his life. The original Young Allies were broad ethnic stereotypes, but they were retconned into complex characters for the Captain America: Forever Allies limited series, which saw Bucky reconnecting with his buddies during his time as Cap.

The Young Allies were Geoffrey Worthington Vandergill ("Geoff"), Patrick O'Toole ("Knuckles"), Henry/Hank Tinkelbaum ("Tank"), and Washington Carver Jones ("Wash").

You might notice a name or two popping up in this story. ;)

If you'd like to help me fight fascism (I wish I were kidding), feel free to share this fic and/or come be my friend on Tumblr, where I am onethingconstant. My blog is 90% Marvel goodness, 10% other goodness.
It's a four-hour drive from Washington, D.C. to New York City, three on the Indian if I push it. I know I won't make it before dark, and much as a part of me wants to see Brooklyn again, a much bigger part doesn't want to spend the night in a New York hotel room. Or the subway. I find a wooded stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike, mark it on my mental map, and head for the nearest town.

Two things haven't changed in Jersey since I went off to Europe: the smell and the pawnshops. I find the sleaziest one open, walk in, and plunk down the valuables I stole from Pierce. Watches, rings, cufflinks. Gold and diamonds, but tasteful.

The pawnbroker, a beefy tattooed man with a blond handlebar mustache, gives me a look.

"It was my grandad's," I tell him. "He's dead now."

The pawnbroker slides a ticket across the counter, examines the stuff, and reaches for a checkbook.

"Cash," I say.

"Won't get as much," he grunts.

"Cash."

He counts out the bills. I make a show of haggling, just on principle, and walk out with a ten-percent bonus. Two blocks down is another pawnshop. That one's got a used laptop for sale.

The next job is finding a coffee shop with wifi and doing a little research. I start with Terminator, read a summary, and feel sick, though I can see Sam's point. There is a definite resemblance. After that I get a quick education on mohawk. And then, feeling like I've had a narrow escape, I search for Tony Stark.
There's a lot on him. He's some kind of celebrity—so's Steve, it looks like, except Steve doesn't date movie stars. But Tony Stark is loaded, he's smart, and he's never met a camera he didn't like.

Geoff was right about Stark having a place in New York, though he used to have a house in California too. And according to something called TMZ, he was seen going into Stark Tower in Manhattan late last night with a fashion model on his arm.

That seems weird to me. According to all the gossip sites, Stark quit playing the field a couple of years ago when he took up with his longtime assistant, Pepper Potts. But suddenly, in the last couple of days, it's girls, girls, girls. All young, all gorgeous, all barely connected to him. The tabloids are having a field day with it, but something smells. It's out of character, crazy.

This is the guy I'm trusting to get Hydra off my back: a billionaire genius skirt-chaser who might be having some kind of mental breakdown.

Then again, Tony is the son of Howard Stark. I didn't see much of that guy during the war—and when I did, it was because I walked in behind Steve to finger the toys and flirt with the girls in the typing pool—but he and Tony seem pretty similar. Same brains, same money, same weakness for women. Maybe Tony is what Howard would've been like if the war hadn't given him something important to do.

The light's getting low, so I pack up the laptop and head for my spot off the Turnpike. With the pawnshop cash, I could probably get a motel room, but I want to keep the sky over my head a while longer, to remind myself I'm not in the machine anymore. Besides, I don't trust Jersey lodging.

I dig into my rations—slowly this time, thank you, Geoff—and crawl into the sleeping bag. I don't notice when I fall asleep.

But the nightmares are worse.

I'm not after Steve, not at first, but he seems to be the only one left out. I walk into a small field hospital in Africa and put a bullet in every doctor, orderly, and patient. I'm on a rooftop with a sniper rifle, calmly squeezing off killshots into a mob of protesters in a square below. I set fire to a lecture hall so I can sanction a professor as he leaves with his students. I cut a man's throat in front of a weeping child. I crush skulls and throats, plant bombs, open veins. I fire two shots into Hank Vandergill, and this time I do remember: the streetlight, the smell of autumn in Argentina. I leave Geoff standing over his friend's corpse and I walk two blocks to get into a waiting car. Arnim Zola is waiting for me in the backseat, with a bunch of sensors and a worried expression.

"Did anyone see you?" he asks as he attaches a sensor to my forehead and checks the readout.

"No one important," I say. Because Geoff isn't important. No one who fires at a standing target and misses is important to me.

"Good, good." Zola is frowning at his readouts. "Did you have any trouble? Of any kind?"

"... No." I'm not sure why I don't mention Geoff. I'm not sure why I do a lot of things. I just do them. It's what I'm for.

Whatever Zola sees, it frightens him. Or maybe he's just scared of me. He opens a syringe case, pulls out a needle, and draws a few ccs from a tiny bottle.

"We've got a long flight ahead of us," he says, as the needle pinches the side of my neck. I don't move. "Too long for these readings. Sleep, Sergeant. We'll have you back on ice soon."
More missions hurtle past me, more corpses. Men and women, young and old. Even a few children. And afterward, there's always the machine, the cryo, the cold and the pain.

And then I'm lying on a Long Island hilltop, squeezing a trigger. In my scope, I see a tire explode, and I look up in time to see a red convertible spin wildly out of control, off a cliff and a couple hundred feet down into rocks and the sea. I take my time picking my way down to the water, and I look over the wreckage carefully. Two bodies, a woman and a man, trapped in the twisted wreck. No—one body and one on the way. The man is still moving feebly, still trying to look around and wriggle free. It's hopeless; I can see from where I stand on a boulder that his spine is crushed and he'll never get out without a push from his legs.

He sees me, and his brown eyes get enormous.

"Barnes," he gasps. "What the hell?"

I don't move, don't speak. I'm only here to confirm my kill. I can't shoot him—my mission was to make it look like an accident. But the tide's coming in. I only have to wait.

"How are you—" The man shakes his head. "That's my Ajax you're wearing. I designed that thing. Zola said it didn't work." He laughs bitterly. "Nazi bastard."

I just watch. Standby mode.

"Barnes," the man mutters. "Used to follow Rogers around. What was your first name again—Jimmy? No. Bucky." He raises his voice. "Bucky!"

A twitch runs through me. I think I know the name.

"That's it," the man says. "Whatever they did to your head, it wasn't enough. Bucky, it's Howard. Can you hear me, Bucky?"

I tilt my head to one side.

"You remember me, Buck? I used to work with your friend Rogers. Steve. I helped him. I'm Howard."

I blink a couple of times.

"Good boy." Howard sounds like he's talking to a dog. "Can you pull me out of here, Bucky? Come on, pull me out."

I stay exactly where I am.

"Shit," Howard hisses. "Hardwired. Makes sense. Okay, then ... Bucky, look at me. Look at my face."

I obey. It doesn't conflict with my mission.

"You and me, Buck," Howard says. He's gasping for breath now. Water is lapping at his chest. "You and me, we're gonna stop these sons of bitches. I know who they'll target next. And you're gonna be my spanner in the works."

I twitch my head a little. It might be a nod.

"Can you talk, Buck? Do they let you talk?"
"Yes," I say. The sound makes him blink.

"Okay," he grunts. "Okay, okay. Say something for me, then. Say, 'Peggy.'"

"Peggy," I say. The word tastes familiar.

"That's right. Peggy Carter, she was. Steve's girl. Peggy. You remember Peggy?"

I remember something. Brown hair. An accent. A red dress. A woman smiling, but not at me ...

"She." I lick my lips and swallow. "She wouldn't. Wouldn't look at. Me."

"Not 'she'," Howard gasps. "Peggy. Say it."

"Peggy," I repeat.

"Good. Now, with me out of the way, Peg'll be all alone. They'll get rid of her next. They'll want to use you, but you listen to me, Bucky. You're not gonna hurt Peggy. No matter what they tell you, or program into you, Peggy lives. Say it. Peggy lives."


"Good man. Again. Say it."

"Peggy lives."

"One more time."

"Peggy lives."

"Good. God, I hope that holds. Now, to push my luck ..." He twists around in the wreckage to get a better look at me. "Tony. Repeat."

"Tony," I say.

"That's right, my son, Tony. He's gonna be a pain in your masters' asses, and I won't be there to protect him. So here's your last set of orders, Sergeant. Protect Tony. Say it."

"Protect. Tony."

"Again."

"Protect Tony."

We go on like that for maybe an hour, alternating Peggy lives and Protect Tony. I don't know what I'm saying, not really, but it's like an internal spring winding me up. As long as Howard is talking, I'm repeating after him. Peggy lives. Protect Tony.

Howard dies before the water covers him. I walk to my extraction point. More readouts, more checks. Pierce is there. I give my mission report.

I say I found two bodies.

It's not the first lie I've told. Maybe they know and maybe they don't. Either way, cryo is waiting.

I stand in the chamber, passive, as they close the door. The condensers start to hum and I feel the drugs kicking in. I have just enough time to hear Pierce say:
"What's the kid's name? Tony?"

*Protect Tony,* I think, and then the lights go out.

I wake up in the woods, shaking. At least I don't throw up this time, though I feel like I came close. I crawl out of the sleeping bag, put my head between my knees, and make myself breathe.

*Howard Stark,* I think. *I killed Howard Stark. I kinda liked him.* Of course, the Winter Soldier didn't like anyone. That was Bucky talking to Howard in his last hour alive, whatever was left of Bucky. And Howard, genius that he was, found a way to use Bucky to reprogram the Winter Soldier. Just a little bit—just enough to save two lives.

I saw a display about Peggy Carter in the museum. It had a date of birth, but no death date. She's old, but she's alive. So's Tony Stark. If Hydra ever sent me after either one, I failed. Howard did it. *We* did it.

It doesn't make me feel any better, but it gets me on my feet. The sun's coming up, and I need to be in the city asap.

Traffic into New York has gotten ridiculous since I left, and none of the streets and bridges quite make sense, but I make it into Manhattan and find a place to park the Indian. I find a gas station and wash up as much as I can. It won't do to walk into Stark Tower unshaven and smelling like New Jersey.

I take a couple of minutes to stash most of my gear in the saddlebags, lock down the bike and figure out my approach. I consider claiming to be a journalist, but I haven't even talked to any reporters since 1944 and I don't know what kind of credentials they carry now.

In fact, pretty much everyone seems to carry identification. Geoff flashed a driver's license when he paid for the pancakes. As I walk down the sidewalk, keeping my senses alert, I see people holding out phones, flashing cards, showing ID to do almost everything. It's like being in Berlin and having to show your papers. But I don't have any papers.

I've got Pierce's, though. I'll have to try the thumb-over-the-photo trick again and hope for the best.

The tower is visible from blocks away. I tug on my gloves to make sure they're secure and smooth down my jacket to make sure the .45 at the small of my back hasn't created a bulge. I wonder if Stark's got weapons detectors. But those would probably pick up my arm, too, and it's not like I can dump *that.* I keep walking, with the gun.

Most pictures of Stark Tower focus on the helipad and penthouse on the roof, but at street level it's just another building, lots of glass and steel and potted plants in the lobby. I duck in behind a gang of photographers who are following a stunning blonde in a red minidress. One of them pushes the door open wide enough that I can slip through behind him. No hands; good.

There are four or five receptionists handling all the people. I pick a smiling Asian girl in a pink blouse who's not currently busy, and I flash Pierce's badge at her.

"Jameson Pierce," I say. "FBI. Here for my appointment with Mr. Stark."

"Let me just confirm that," the girl chirps, and starts typing. Her monitor flickers rapidly from one screen to the next. I wonder how she reads any of it.

She frowns and looks up at me in confusion.
"Sorry," she says. "You're not on the list."

"Call Mr. Stark," I reply, with my most charming smile.

She turns beet-red. "Oh, I can't do that! But I'll message his PA and—"

The elevator doors open, and there's a subtle shift in the lobby noise. Reflexively, I turn to look.

Tony Stark has just stepped out of the elevator. He's alone, which seems odd; doesn't he have bodyguards? Doesn't matter, though. I head toward him.

"Mr. Pierce!" the girl calls after me, and Stark's head turns.

Damn it. I used the surname Pierce because it was on the ID. By itself, though, it's going to get noticed. Alexander Pierce is all over the news.

I'm right between Stark and the steel-fronted reception desk, so I keep my smile in place. Nothing to worry about here, Tony, just a former super-assassin who killed your dad and needs a favor ...

Then I realize Stark is looking right past me. He holds out both arms.

"Emilia!" he cries. "I couldn't believe it when I got your message!"

I look over my shoulder. The blonde is glowing. The cameras are clicking. Tony is here for her.

Terrific. The last thing I need is my face in the tabloids. I turn my back to the paparazzi, trying to think of my next move.

"Tony," Emilia purrs as Stark walks past me to embrace her. "It's been such a long time! I thought you were off the market."

"What can I say?" Stark flicks off a pair of designer sunglasses and slips them into the pocket of a silver-gray silk suit that's probably worth more than my bike. "I'm the don't-fence-me-in type."

"Mmm." Emilia rises on tiptoe to kiss Stark. I can feel my odds of survival dropping by the second. How am I going to get around a distraction like this?

"There's something I've been wanting to say to you since I first met you, all those years ago," Emilia murmurs.

"Don't say you're not a natural blonde," Stark warns.

"No," Emilia giggles. "Hail Hydra."

I'm already spinning around before the photographers pull out their guns. Stark takes one step back as Emilia produces a little .22 pistol. In slow motion, I see the rest of the Hydra kill squad take aim with semiautomatics.

And that's when I hit Stark in the side in a flying tackle. I don't remember getting Steve-level enhancements, but my body does, and my right shoulder hits Stark in the gut like Captain America punching a heavy bag. We both grunt in pain as we sail out of the line of fire, hit the marble floor, and slide behind a decorative pillar. Just in time for the Hydra guns to open up.

Protect Tony. Thank you, Howard Stark. Some programming I don't mind keeping. Stone chips fly everywhere.
Stark tries to wriggle out from under me. "Who the hell're—?" he begins to gasp.

"Down." I put my tingling right hand against his chest—damn, it still hurts—and shove him back to the floor. I draw the .45 with my left.

This is incredibly bad. I've got one clip in my gun, a spare in my jacket pocket, and a combat knife in my right boot. There are six shooters plus Emilia. And I've got to get a squirmy genius into the elevator before he gets his brains blown out, because I really need those brains.

"Do you have any idea—?" Stark starts over.

This time I clamp my fingers over his mouth. I lean out around the pillar and take one shot at the advancing Hydra agents. Emilia drops. The reception desk looks deserted; everyone must be under cover. Good. The other visitors must've run while the door was clear.

But the receptionists are still potential hostages. The shooters are advancing, laying down covering fire.

Stark slaps my hand away. "What is going on?" he demands. "I didn't order a Tarantino movie in my lobby!"

I don't know what that means, so I lean out and take another quick shot. A photographer collapses.

"They're Hydra," I tell Stark. "Basic kill crew. Don't see 'em much in this country. Too noisy."

A burst of gunfire makes Stark cover his ears.

"Yeah, got that!" he yells. "Who are you?"

There is no good answer to that, so I settle for, "The guy saving your ass!" as I peek around the pillar again. A shot explodes near my face, and shrapnel bounces off my cheek. Something stings. Just what I need—more scars.


"Robots? Who trusts robots with security? I saw every Terminator movie!"

Finally, a reference I understand. I'm really getting a feel for the future. I squeeze off another shot. A second paparazzo falls. For one hand and an old pistol, I'm doing really well. Something to thank the machine for.

There are four shooters left, though, and I don't like my odds of getting them before they get me. I realize I'm muttering under my breath. It's a Hail Mary. I guess Father O'Malley contributed some programming of his own.

"We can't stay here," I tell Stark. "I'll draw their fire long enough for you to make the elevator."

"I've got somebody coming. Thirty seconds."

"We don't have that."

"I strip off the jacket. I'm wearing one of the flannel shirts underneath, but my metal wrist glints between the shirt cuff and my glove. I see it, and a quick look at Stark tells me he does, too.

"When I say run," I tell him, "run like hell."

He nods.
"And take the jacket."

I get a dirty look for that, but I don't care. I'm too busy getting ready for pain.

That's one thing Hydra gave me. They're all about force and pain. It's no way to live, but it's a good way not to die. Survive long enough, and pain can't stop you.

I switch the gun to my right hand, pull the knife with my left, and put my left arm up to block as much of my upper body as possible. *Where's a vibranium shield when you need it?*

"Run!" I snarl, and charge out from cover.

For the first couple of steps, the Hydra agents are too surprised to shift their aim, but that doesn't last. The first few rounds are good center-of-mass shots, and they ping off my arm nicely. I'm moving faster than they expect, too, and their fire lags behind me even as I run for the reception desk and Stark bolts for his elevator.

I run right past an agent, putting a round in his heart as I go, and jump up onto the desk. I know it's nuts, but I'm supposed to be the distraction here. Showboating is part of my half-assed plan.

My boots barely touch the desk before I push off again and I'm turning over in the air, letting my machine-brain do the math for me. Rotation, airspeed ... Three bullets. Three kills. The elevator door thuds closed. I hope Stark's okay. And now I'm finishing my turn, falling toward the floor again.

I land harder than I expect, and stagger forward. And that's when I hear the rockets.

Not RPGs. A bunch of small rocket engines, like the maneuvering jets on a VTOL aircraft, but littler and higher in pitch.

I hit my knees on the marble floor and look up. The cavalry has arrived.

I've seen pictures of the Iron Man suit, but they don't do it justice. It's like a full-body version of my arm, souped up like a sports car and painted the flashiest colors imaginable. Right now it's hovering on its jets, balancing like a tightrope walker as it scans the room for threats. But it's just me now. Me and seven dead Hydra agents and a group of whimpering civilians behind a steel-shielded reception desk.

I feel lightheaded all of a sudden, and I look down at myself. Maybe I got hit. Maybe I'm bleeding.

I see the front of my shirt half-shredded and blooming with red stains that are growing as I watch. One red circle, two ... I lose count as I pitch forward onto the floor. My face hits first, so hard it bounces. The .45 slips out of my nerveless fingers and slides to the floor with a muffled clatter.


The thought of Steve stiffens my spine, and I try to push myself up off the floor. Too bad only my left arm is working, and I collapse sideways into a heap. The pain rolls through me in waves.

The cold sets in then, and I know it's shock. I don't have long. I see a pair of red metal boots land in front of me, blowing rocket exhaust into my face. They walk toward me, clanking with every step.

I'm too tired to watch them. I let my eyes close. I'll just take a little rest. Yeah. Sleep fixes everything.
A nice nap in the cold ...

I know I'm lying to myself, but I don't care. I don't care about anything anymore, with one exception. One thought as I drift off into my last sleep:

_I'm sorry, Steve._

Chapter End Notes

VTOL = Vertical Take-Off and Landing.

Yeah, I'm gonna be in trouble for this one, aren't I?

*hides behind Agent Carter manuscript*
Chapter Summary

"I think I've got it figured out. Everyone in the future is completely nuts."

"Not bad. Most people take years to work that out."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time I wake up, it's a surprise. Or it would be if I woke all the way up. I open my eyes slowly and take a while to focus. Coming out of cryo was always like this: assembling pieces of a puzzle until I figure out that the puzzle is me.

When I start to think I'm alive, I notice that I'm lying on my back, and I look up. There's a tangle of pipes and wires above me, and a bright light in my eyes. It looks almost familiar ...

_We are not bound by the Geneva conventions here, Sergeant. Cooperation is your only hope of survival._

Krausberg. I'm back in Krausberg, I think, with Zola. I'm alone behind enemy lines and I'm going to die on some Hydra scientist's table. The hell with that!

I try to sit up, but there are straps across my limbs and torso, immobilizing me. I twist, try to wriggle out, but it's no good. I've got no leverage.

"Subject has regained consciousness," a crisp voice says over a PA system. It has a British accent.

Wait. I've got my left arm. It doesn't need leverage, not as much. I flex the fingers of my left hand, hear the whir.

"Bionics rebooting," the PA voice announces.

Something's not right. Something about Krausberg and my arm. Figure it out later. Escape now. I pour all the strength I've got into my neural relays, and my arm comes to life with a click and a hum of servos. Get it together ... get ready ... and pull.

My left arm squeals with the stress and my entire chest is on fire, but I wrench myself over to my right and my left arm rips its restraints out of their housings. Bits of leather and metal fly across the lab. I'm not ready for the pain that shoots through my ribs and down my spine, and I let out a sound that's half roar and half scream. Then I reach over and tear the straps off my right arm.

I'm just getting a grip on the straps across my torso when someone runs up to my table and a face swims into view. But it's not tubby, bespectacled Zola. This guy's got dark hair and eyes, sharp cheekbones, a trimmed mustache and beard.

_Stark? Howard?_

"Easy," Howard says. "Easy, big guy. You don't have to break my stuff, Lucky. You're gonna be
Who the hell is Lucky? I think, but I don’t really care. I'm not staying on this table for another second. As Howard leans over me, I rip more straps away, sit up fast—my abdominal muscles scream in protest—and headbutt him as hard as I can. Our skulls collide with a satisfying crack, and I see colorbursts.

"Ow! Damn it, Lucky!" Howard staggers back. I sit up more and tear away a strap pinning my hips down. Just my legs to go now, and I'm out of here. Zola will be sorry he touched me.

"JARVIS! Protocol five!" Howard yells. His voice sounds thick and nasal. I must have broken his nose. Good. I reach for the straps on my legs.

Then it all goes weird. Well, weirder.

I hear the hum first, and then two robotic arms rise up from under the table. They're even faster than I am, and the one on my left clamps a padded, three-clawed hand down on my head, stopping me in mid-lunge. I reach up with my left arm to shred it, and I feel a sudden pinch on the right side of my neck.

I can't turn my head, but in my peripheral vision, I see the other arm pulling back, a syringe in its mechanical hand.

"Protocol five engaged," says the PA voice, and suddenly I feel dizzy. My head lolls forward and I slump into the arm's grip. I get one good look down at my chest, and see that it's covered in gauze and bandages, before my eyes slide shut. The arm pushes me backward, and I feel hands—human hands—on my chest and back, lowering me gently back to the table.

"That's it," Howard murmurs into my gathering mental fog. "You just take it easy, Lucky. We'll try again in about four hours. How does that sound?"

Something's still not right, but I'm too tired to care anymore. Just this once, I'll listen to Howard, I decide. And I sleep.

If I dream, I don't remember it later. It's the best sleep I've had since Steve brought me back.

*

The second wake-up is slower, gentler. I drift into consciousness and lie still for a minute or two, my eyes still closed, just listening. There's a hum nearby that sounds like an air conditioner. I hear the slow, steady beep of a heart monitor. And close by, closer than either of those sounds, there's a soft rustle as someone moves. Not a big movement—more like a fidgeting in place. Super-soldier ears. Best in the world.

"Good morning," says a man's voice. "Or should I say good afternoon?" He's got an American accent.

So much for playing possum. I open my eyes. I'm lying on my back again, but the surface under me feels softer than the table did, and all I see overhead is a smooth metal ceiling with a light panel in it. The light makes me blink, but it's not painful.

"How are you feeling?" the man asks.

I consider the question. My brain feels like it's been wrapped in cotton, and the rest of me aches in about a dozen different ways—especially my chest and stomach for some reason.
"Ow," I say, understating my case. "Did anybody get the number of that tank?" My voice is a croak.

The man chuckles. "What tank?"

"The one that ran me over."

That earns me a little laugh. I turn my head to the side and take my first look at the guy I'm talking to. He's not much to look at. Somewhere in his thirties or forties, medium build, with curly dark hair going prematurely gray and a face with a couple of premature lines in it. He's sitting in a metal folding chair, holding a pair of eyeglasses in one hand, like he's just taken them off, and a little tablet computer in the other. And he's wearing a dark green collared shirt, khakis, and loafers. I've never found a guy in loafers very threatening. Except Pierce.

Pierce didn't smile like this guy, though. Not at me. I'm not used to being smiled at. Friendly as the smile is, it's a bit unnerving.

"Who're you?" I ask.

"Doctor Bruce Banner," the guy says. "Call me Bruce." He pauses as if he expects me to know the name.

I don't, so I just say, "Hi."

"Have you got a name?" Bruce asks. "Because all the ID you had says you're Alexander Pierce and," he smiles again, "I don't think that's you. We can't just keep calling you Lucky, either."

"Who the hell is Lucky?" I ask. "And who's 'we'?"

"'We' is me and my friend Tony," Bruce says. "He's been calling you Lucky because you are. Not a lot of guys survive ..." He consults his tablet. "Let's see. Four bullets in the chest and abdomen, cracked ribs, a punctured lung, a fractured arm and skull, hairline fractures of the pelvis and one femur, assorted internal bleeding, and the loss of a couple of pints the old-fashioned way through the bullet holes." He points his glasses at my metal arm. "Plus whatever happened there. Honestly, I think it's the arm that got you the name. Tony used to have a three-legged dog named Lucky, and, well, missing limbs ..." He trails off sheepishly.

My head's still in a fog. I look around. Bruce and I are in a nearly featureless metal room. There's Bruce and his chair, the heart monitor, and some kind of gurney that I'm lying on. And that's it. I'm not tied down this time, but that doesn't make me feel any more at ease. This room has one door—steel, reinforced—and no windows. It feels like a cell.

"Where am I?" I ask. I might be disoriented, but I know when I'm being snowed.

"A recovery room," Bruce answers. "You were in surgery for six hours to get those bullets out. Don't move too fast, by the way, or you'll pop your stitches."

I peel the heart sensors off my chest. The heart monitor flatlines. Beeeeeeep.

"Uh, you don't want to do that," Bruce warns. "You're really not in any shape to—"

"This is a lab," I say.

"No, it's a recovery—"

I'm off the gurney before he can finish the sentence. One good lunge takes me into range. I grab
Bruce by the throat, his chair goes over backward, and we hit the floor together with me on top. My metal fingers lock in place around Bruce's windpipe.

"We're gonna try this again," I growl. "You're gonna tell me where I really am, and who's in charge. And you're gonna call Howard in here to tell me what the hell is going on."

"Howard?" Bruce gags. "Who's Howard?"

"Howard Stark!" I bark. "I saw him! He's here, and you're gonna get him or Agent Carter in here right now, or I'm going to bring this entire Hydra lab down around your ears, because—"

"Let go of my friend, Lucky."

I glance over my shoulder. The door to the cell is open, but the doorway is full of red and gold metal. A man in an armored suit is standing there, one gauntleted hand out like a policeman stopping traffic. A bright circle of blue light glows in his palm.

"Get Howard Stark," I say, "and I will."

"Howard's not here right now," the armored man says. There's a click, and his faceplate lifts up to reveal the face of the man I headbutted. I can tell it's him because the bruise is still there. "I'm his son, Tony. Can I take a message?"

Tony. The name and face cut through the fog. My last few memories fill themselves in. The fight in the lobby. My dumbass stunt. A lot of blood ...

I look down at Bruce. The penny drops.

"Bruce," I say. "Banner."

"Hiya," he croaks.

"Yeah, you should probably let him up," Stark says. "He's going to turn green on you otherwise."

"I'm fine, Tony," Bruce rasps.

"Yeah, you say that and then somebody big and Hulk-shaped breaks Manhattan. Let's not push it, okay?" Something in Stark's suit begins to hum. "Let him up, or I'll liquefy your brain right in your skull, Lucky. I've got a full battery charge and a real curiosity about how my new repulsors work on living tissue."

Terrific. I saved my genius, and now he wants to shoot me. This is going to get tricky. I pull my hand away from Bruce's throat, raise both arms in surrender position, and stand up.

"Turn around," Stark orders. I do it. We get our first good look at each other. I can see how I mistook Tony for Howard at first. There's a strong resemblance, though Tony's a bit taller and a lot scruffier. Or maybe that's the armor and the bruise talking.

"You got a name?" Stark demands. "Or am I just going to call you Lucky the One-Armed Hydra Agent?"

I glower at him for that, and both my hands curl into fists. "I'm not Hydra," I say.

"Really? Because your new ink didn't fool anybody." He nods at my left shoulder. I glance over. The decal has been half peeled away, revealing the Hydra star.
"I saw the pictures from Washington," Stark says coldly. "Did a little research on you while you were out. Winter Soldier, huh?" The whine gets louder. "Captain America might be the stiffest guy I know, but he's also a friend of mine. So what's the Hydra assassin who tried to blow his head off doing saving my life?"

"It's complicated," I say.

Behind me, Bruce's dropped tablet beeps. I hear him pick it up.

"Tony," Bruce says. "There's something you ought to see."

"In a minute, big man," Stark replies.

"No, now." Bruce stands up. He puts a hand on my flesh shoulder. "Do me a favor, okay?" Now he's talking into my ear. "Tell him your name before he does something we all regret. Your real name."

I work my jaw in frustration, but I really don't want to get liquefied. Even if it means knuckling under to somebody who named me after a dog.


Bruce shows me what's on the tablet screen, then flips it to show Stark. His eyes get huge.

It's my service record. Date of birth, vital statistics, height, weight, race, hair and eye color, enlistment information, tours of duty ... and a black-and-white portrait of me in full dress uniform, plus a grainy candid of me in the field with the other Howling Commandos.

Oh, and a big red stripe across the bottom of the screen that reads **Missing In Action.**

"Fingerprints came back," Bruce says. "The right hand, obviously."

"Obviously," I echo.

"Son of a bitch," says Stark.

"Leave my mother out of this," I reply.

The light in Stark's palm goes out. He lowers his arm. I put mine down, too. I can feel Bruce's sigh of relief.

"Did Steve send you?" Stark asks.

"Actually," I say, "your father did. More or less."

"This I've got to hear. C'mon, let's get out of here. Do dead Howling Commandos drink cappucinos?" He turns to leave.

"Maybe in a minute," I say. "I need a favor first. Hydra's after me. I think they implanted a homing device. To be honest, when they showed up in your lobby, I thought they were a retrieval squad. Word is, you're as smart as your father was. Can you find the tracker and get it out of me?"

Stark stops, turns back, blinks at me, rubs his eyes with a gauntlet, and exchanges looks with Bruce.

"Seriously?" he asks the air. "I can't believe this. Barnes, if you're going to trash my lab and half-
strangle my friend, there's one thing you ought to know about me."

"What's that?" I ask.

"I make my dad look like the cast of Jersey Shore."

"Who?"

Stark rolls his eyes. "You and Steve Rogers. You're like his shorter, darker, more violent clone. It's adorable." He points at me. "Stay here, I'll be right back." He clanks out of the room, slamming the door as he goes. Then he opens it again and leans back in. "Don't murder anybody while I'm gone!"

The door slams. I stand there, wondering whether I should be insulted or relieved.

"Don't worry," Bruce pipes up. "You probably couldn't kill me if you tried."

"I think I've got it figured out," I say. "Everyone in the future is completely nuts."

Bruce laughs. "Not bad. Most people take years to work that out." He leans against the wall and taps his tablet screen. "You know, Mr. Barnes, you've got a pretty interesting file for a dead man."

"Bucky," I say. "Mr. Barnes is my father."

"I always wondered if people really called you Bucky. Kind of an odd name. Like something a little kid would have." He's still reading.

I frown over my shoulder at him. "I got it as a kid. Nobody ever complained. Or if they did, I could just punch 'em." Then something occurs to me. "What do you mean, 'always'?"

"Hm?" Bruce looks up at me. He flicks his glasses open and puts them on.

"You said you always wondered," I say. "Like you wondered before today. Is that the kind of thing people read about now? Am I in the history books or something?"

"Ha. No." Bruce swipes something on his screen. "Even Steve is barely in there. It was a big war, and front-line soldiers don't get a lot of attention once it's over."

"Ain't that the truth," I agree. "So ...?"

Bruce makes a face. "I ... was part of a project," he says. "We were trying to recreate the super-soldier serum. Make another Captain America."

"And you made the Hulk instead." I nod. "I read up."

Bruce winces. "Yeah. But before ... you know ... we studied all the SSR files we could get. Steve's was the hot ticket, obviously, but I spent some time on a different theory. About you."

"Me?" I snort. "Sorry to waste your time. I wasn't a super-soldier." I flex my left arm. "Not until this, anyway. And before you ask, no, you don't want one."

"Not what I meant." Bruce taps his tablet off. "You knew Steve when you were kids, right?"

I nod.

"He have any other friends? Other kids he ran around with?"
I shrug. "Neighborhood kids, I guess. Same as everybody. Your street was your gang." I'm lying, but it feels better than admitting I was Steve's only friend. I don't remember everything, but I remember that he deserved more.

"But nobody special. Nobody he was really close to." Bruce folds his arms. "If he got arrested, his phone call would be you and nobody else."

"Steve never got arrested, but yeah, I take your point. We were best friends. So what?"

"So I think you might've been the key to Captain America. To making him Captain America."

He looks so serious that I start to laugh. It makes my ribs hurt worse, though, so I stop. "I don't know where you did your research," I tell him, grimacing, "but I wasn't even there when it happened. I was —"

"Already in the Army," Bruce supplies. "He first tried to enlist the day you reported for the draft."

I shrug uncomfortably. "We went to the recruiting office together. Us and a million other guys. Army took me and not him. So what?"

"So he kept trying. And he signed up for Project: Rebirth the day you shipped out."

I don't like where this is going. "Look, I might've gotten him a little drunk that night, but I didn't—"

"You know what he was doing after the experiment? Why he was sent over to Italy in the first place?"

Now I really don't like this. "Selling war bonds," I mutter. "Wearing tights."

"Yeah. Until he heard your unit had been captured." Bruce is studying me intently now. "Then he went AWOL, seduced a field agent—"

"Seduced?" Now my ribs are really killing me.

Banner ignores the interruption. "He talked a top weapons designer into stealing a plane, flew deep into enemy territory, jumped out of the plane without parachute training, took out an entire Hydra factory, liberated four hundred prisoners ..." He smiles thoughtfully. "And left them to fight their way out while he went looking for you."

"Brooklyn breeds 'em tough," I say shortly.

"Very tough," Bruce agrees. "But the fact remains—he joined the SSR trying to be like you. He went into combat for the first time, against orders, trying to save you. And after you went missing, he pretty much took Hydra apart. Almost died doing it. You ask me, he gave his life trying to avenge you."

I really wish Stark would come back. "Is there a point to all this?" I ask.

"I was just getting to it. Erskine had a theory—crazy, if you ask me. He thought the reason his serum would work one way on Steve and another on the Red Skull was because they were such different people. Different psychology, different ... souls, I guess. Like I said, crazy. I'm a scientist."

"You're gonna say but," I guess.

Bruce nods. "But I turned into a big green rage monster when I got the serum. The Red Skull—well, you saw him. But Steve just got bigger. And I went out and broke Harlem, the Skull declared war on
the entire world, and Steve Rogers—he went out and became an inspiration. He saved people, starting with you. Just like you used to save him on the schoolyard."

"So?"

"So maybe Erskine was right. Maybe it really is about who you are before the serum. Steve obviously had something unique about him. Maybe what Steve had that none of the others had ... was Bucky Barnes."

"Well," I say, blinking. "That's a theory, anyway. But I used to get A’s in science, and I remember something about scientists needing evidence."

"How’s this? Steve’s been out of the ice for almost two years. In all that time, he took initiative just once. Little fight with some aliens here in town, and he practically had to be dragged into it. Then you come out of the cold, and in two days he takes down the world's most powerful intelligence agency and Hydra, and he tells the whole planet we need better heroes. Like he got his missing piece back."

"What are you saying?" I ask, warily.

"I'm saying that Bucky Barnes made Steve Rogers a super-soldier, and Steve Rogers made Bucky Barnes a Howling Commando. Now the gang's back together and Steve's a full-fledged hero again, and you ..." Bruce gestures at the decal hanging off my shoulder. "Obviously something's going on. I'm looking forward to seeing it."

"But I'm not a super-soldier," I say. "Or a Hulk. I'm just a soldier." I look down at my arm. "Not even that anymore." I glance up. "Your theory doesn't apply to me. I didn't get any serum, did I?"

"No, the file says you didn't," Bruce agrees. "Except ..."

"What?"

"I ran your blood work. And I saw your X-rays. You heal pretty quick for a 96-year-old. You're strong, you're fast ..."

"That was all Hydra," I say.

"Yeah, but Hydra now or Hydra then? Wasn't the Red Skull in Krausberg? And his favorite project was ...?"

"You can't prove anything," I warn him. "Even I don't know what they did."

"Relax." Bruce takes off his glasses, huffs on them, and wipes the fogged lenses with his shirttail. "All I'm saying is, if I'm right and if you were the key to making your friend who he is ... then it stands to reason that he can do the same for you. You got mad when Tony called you a Hydra agent. You wouldn't have covered up that mark if you were proud of it. Just remember that you don't have to let it define you. You don't have to be a lunatic or," he smiles, "a monster. You've got something the rest of us didn't have."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Brooklyn breeds 'em tough."

I shake my head. "You're not exactly contradicting my everyone-in-the-future-is-nuts idea." I head toward the door. "I'd better check on Stark."
"Actually, you'd better stay put."

I stop, look back. "Why's that?"

Bruce flicks a hand at the metal ceiling. "This room's a Faraday cage. It's actually an old pressure chamber, but all the metal around you blocks radio and EM waves. Can't even get a cell signal in here. I wouldn't have been able to run your prints from in here if my tablet didn't have a stupid amount of memory. So as long as you're in here with the door closed, Hydra can't see your homing beacon. You're invisible."

"Is that why you put me in here?" I look around at the bare walls and floor. "I thought it was a holding cell."

"Well, it's that too. You broke some expensive equipment the first time we woke you up. Everything in here is expendable or too tough to break."

I smirk. "Which one are you?"

"Me? I'm the nice guy. Tony figured you might not break as much stuff if you had someone to talk to."

"Guess that didn't work out so well, huh?"

Bruce shrugs. "I don't know. When SHIELD first woke Steve up from the ice, he decked a strike team, broke out of his recovery room, and went running into traffic in Times Square. I think you're ahead of the curve."

"I wrecked the Smithsonian," I say.

"Okay, maybe not that far ahead."

Running footsteps outside the room make me freeze, listening intently. The door opens, and Stark steps inside. He's not in armor anymore; instead, he's wearing denim pants and a T-shirt that says Black Sabbath on it. Something else for me to look up, I guess.

"Hold still," he orders, and points something at me that looks like a toy raygun. Very Buck Rogers. I wonder if anyone's heard of Buck Rogers anymore.

I'm good at holding still, and it only takes half a minute for Stark to point his Buck Rogers gun at me from every possible angle. The machine hammers on the back door of my brain, trying to tell me it's a real gun he's got, but I ignore it. I'm getting good at ignoring it.

"Oh-kay," Stark says when he's done. "I've got good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?"

"Bad news," Bruce and I say in unison.

"The tracker's in your brain, or next to it. Base of your skull. Honestly, I'm amazed you survived getting it put in. No way you'd want to risk the surgery to take it out."

"What's the good news?" I ask incredulously.

Stark glances at his reader. "There's two, and the other one's below your right shoulder blade, right under the skin. It's the size of a grain of rice and you could probably cut it out with a spork." He looks up. "And that's the new one."
"How new?" Bruce asks.

"Cutting-edge. Maybe three, six months old. You, my friend," he waves the Buck Rogers gun at me, "got a big upgrade recently. Somebody really didn't want to lose you." He frowns. "Why did you switch sides?"

"I didn't," I say. "That wasn't me on the bridge. Or ... it was ..." I sit down on the edge of the gurney and rest my head on my right hand. "It's not a short story."

"But my dad's in it," Stark says.

"Yeah. That part's gonna be hard to hear."

"My dad ... and a Hydra assassin. The Winter Soldier. And Bucky Barnes." He sounds like he's thinking it over. Then he looks up at the ceiling. "JARVIS, cancel my appointments for the day."

"All of them, sir?" The voice—crisp, British-accented—seems to come out of nowhere. I nearly jump out of my skin.

"Yeah. Tell 'em—tell 'em I've got food poisoning. Bad sushi." Stark sets the Buck Rogers gun on the gurney beside me and sits down in Bruce's chair.

"Sir, you had chicken for lunch."

"Okay, salmonella. Don't bother me unless it's a Level Seven emergency." Stark folds his arms and crosses his legs.

"Understood, sir."

Bruce coughs. "Well, I've got tests to be—"

"Stay," Stark and I say at the same time.

Bruce huffs. "Okay. But I'm getting another chair." He leaves, comes back with a duplicate of Stark's.

"In your own time," Stark tells me when Bruce returns. "But start with how you ended up wearing my dad's old Ajax prosthetic. He told me it didn't work."

"That's just what Zola told him," I reply, and it's as good a place to start as any.

I watch Stark's face all through the story. It's not like talking to Geoff. This is all personal to Tony Stark, and I know it. I worked with his father, I served Hydra, and I was the one who killed Howard. I can't imagine what's going through his son's head.

Bruce gives me a couple of clues, though. When I talk about Zola pulling me out of the ice, he nods like he's understanding something. When I try to explain what it's like to have the machine in my brain, he makes a strained, sympathetic noise in his throat. The longer I talk about the Winter Soldier years—the brainwashing, the memory wipes, the walking nightmares that were my missions—the more I can read the horror on his face. I tell him both all the details I can recall of Howard's death, and Stark's face just gets more and more blank. Finally, I tell him about the past week. About Nick Fury, and the bridge attack, and the helicarriers. About what I did to Steve, and what he did for me. About running.

When I'm done, Bruce waits a few seconds before saying, with feeling, "Holy shit."
I don't answer. I'm waiting for Stark to speak.

But he doesn't. He pushes back his chair, stands up, and walks out of the room. Bruce takes one look at me and follows.

They close the door, but they don't lock it. I wait a while for them to come back, then lie down on the gurney and try to sleep. I've felt weak since I woke up. Probably the blood loss, though God knows it could be anything else. I have actually lost count of the ways I've almost died in the last few days. Fire, water, falling, beating, shooting ... maybe Bruce is right about the serum. Maybe that's how I've survived everything that's happened.

Or maybe I didn't survive at all. Maybe I'm in hell.

It's a weirdly comforting thought. I drift off on it.

Maybe it's exhaustion, or maybe I've still got Stark's drugs in my system, but I sleep a long time, and I don't dream much. Just a few fragments, nothing too grisly. The only one I remember later is one where I'm walking with Steve—down a Brooklyn sidewalk, across a French orchard, through forests and castles and cities and fields. We're not in a hurry, not going anywhere in particular, not even talking, really. Just walking. Two guys walking, with nowhere much to go and nothing much to say. Walking together in the quiet.

It's a nice dream.

Every dream ends, though, and this one ends with the clank of the door opening. I open my eyes. Somehow I've ended up curled on my left side, with my head resting on my bionic arm and my right arm draped protectively across the bandages on my stomach. I've got my back to the door, so I roll slowly over onto my back and sit up gradually, letting myself feel every ache and twinge. My head feels swollen.

Stark is standing in the doorway. He's still got that perfectly blank look on his face. Belatedly, I realize why the look unnerves me. It's the face I used to wear, for far too long. The face of someone doing a nasty job and not thinking about it. I wonder what his job is today.

"Sorry," I say, wincing as I push myself upright. "Didn't mean to check out on you like that."

Stark waves it off. "Good to see you didn't break anybody."

I start to say something sarcastic, but I swallow it. "Guess I deserved that," I mutter.

"You really don't want to be talking about what you deserve," Stark replies.

I nod. "Guess I don't."

Stark sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He looks exhausted. I wonder what time it is. And what he's been doing while I was asleep.

"I'm an alcoholic," he says. "In the forties, that'd be a drunk. Officially I'm in denial, and I drink anyway. Less now, though, for various reasons. But they say you never stop being an alcoholic, whether you're drinking or not."

I nod my understanding. I have no idea where this is going.

"I've done some stupid things drunk," Stark continues. "I almost killed my best friend in a stupid fight. And you know what the worst part was?"
"What?" I ask, knowing a cue when I hear one.

"He forgave me. I cut back—didn't even actually quit drinking—and he never brought it up again. Not even to rub it in. I chose to get smashed, I chose to put on the armor, I chose to ... it's a long story. Point is, I was an ass and he was the bigger man and I really kind of wish he'd just punch me. Or somebody would. At least then there would be some kind of ... I don't know. Cosmic justice." He touches the bruise I left on his forehead. "That'd be better, I think. But we don't always get what's better."

"No," I say. "We don't."

Stark gestures at me. "Now you, Barnes ... with you I have the opposite problem. I took a look at your X-rays. You know that implant you've got in your head?"

"The tracker," I say.

"The old one. It's got some other uses, too. It's old, old tech. I mean, you've got transistors in that arm, but this thing's pretty old too. Near as I can tell, it's a memory port. They stopped using them in the eighties, never got them out of beta. The idea was, you'd plug a cable ..." He shakes his head. "Never mind. If you don't remember, you're better off. Short version? Somebody used your head like a hard drive. Wiped the data whenever you got full up or corrupted. And this tech is so crude that they'd have to do it over and over. There shouldn't have been anything left of your old data except individual bytes."

"What kind of old data?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"You. Bucky Barnes should just be ... pfft. Gone." He stares at me. I notice dark shadows below his eyes. "I don't know how I'm even talking to you right now."

I do, I think, but I just say: "Brooklyn breeds 'em tough."

"I don't know about Brooklyn, but you, my friend, are completely impossible. Which brings me to my problem."

"Which is?"

"I did something idiotic, and nobody blames me because ... I don't know, they don't expect any better. But you, Barnes, you did a lot of terrible things, and a lot of people including me would like to see you fry for them ..." He sighs. "But that little bit of Stone Age tech in your head tells me you didn't have a choice. You're lucky to be tying your own shoes, let alone saving my sorry ass. And that sucks, because people are going to blame you for things that you didn't choose to do, because you couldn't have chosen. And they're gonna do that because they expect better from you. You're Bucky Barnes."

I don't see what he's getting at, so I just shrug. If I cared what people thought of me, I wouldn't have become pals with Steve Rogers.

"Here's the problem," Stark explains. "There is a way to disable a memory port. Just burn it out, and the tracker with it. It might even help you handle those voices you told me about. But."

"But?" I repeat.

The shadows under Stark's eyes have gotten darker. "But it means running enough current through your skull to cook the thing. More than they used to wipe you or program you. That'd probably kill a normal person. You, well, you might live. But there could be other side effects. Memory loss,
cognitive damage—it's uncharted territory. And even if you survived with your brain intact, the pain alone ..." He stops. "I kind of want to do it just for my old man's sake. That's how bad it is."

I think about Howard Stark. About my own parents. I think about how much pain I'd want to inflict on whoever took them away.

But I say, "Will it kill the device? Shut it off for good?"

"Yeah, but it might kill you, which is—"

"Do it." I hear myself speak before I know I've decided. "Whatever it takes. Do it."

Stark studies me for a moment, his blank expression slowly turning into one I recognize. Sadness.

"That," he says, "is what I thought you'd say."

An hour later, I'm strapped down again, this time too tightly even to move my left arm. There are wires and cables everywhere, sensors stuck all over me to monitor my vital signs. Stark and Banner are taking no chances. It's all I can do not to give in to claustrophobia.

"Are you sure?" Stark asks, for the twentieth time. "What do I tell Steve if this kills you?"

"Tell him I'm with him to the end of the line," I say. "Do it."

There's a click, and a hum. Then pain.

This time, I hear myself scream.

Chapter End Notes

More lines cheerfully stolen from the comics, mostly the one about liquefying Bucky's brain right in his skull.

Fun fact: I used to know a guy who worked at PARC in the eighties, when they had contracts with the CIA and NSA, among others. He was in on some ground-floor work in artificial intelligence, and told some scary-ass stories about tech that never saw the light of day. This chapter may or may not reflect those stories.

Next chapter: there is a kitty. And that's all I have to say.
It's Been A Long, Long Time

Chapter Summary

Bucky wakes up.
There is a kitty.
There is also a fight and some Chinese food.
And Steve. Did I mention Steve? This is the other chapter with Steve.

Chapter Notes

Wow, didn't take long to get to the end of the volume, did it? This ending was a bit rushed because I was running out of pages, but I think it came out okay. My original plan was to end with Bucky still on the run, but about halfway through, the Stevie in my life made a personal request for a Brooklyn Boys reunion. She also requested hugging.

Everything else, you can blame me for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I wake to the sound of purring.

Cautiously, I open one eye. There's a calico cat curled up on the pillow next to me, watching me through slit eyes.

I think I'll make a checklist of things to look for when I wake up in a strange place. Lab tables and scientific equipment? Bad. German accents? Terrible.

Pillows and purring cats? Pretty good.

I'm lying on my left arm again—I don't know how I sleep on that thing since it's literally as hard as tempered steel—so I reach over with my right to scratch the cat's ears. I haven't petted a cat in ... actually, I don't know how long, so it must have been a while. I've forgotten how soft they are, but something in me remembers what to do. The cat leans into my fingers, purring even more loudly and closing its eyes.

And I notice three things. First, my right arm doesn't hurt anymore. Second, there's an IV line running into a vein in my hand, taped down so securely that I'm going to need my combat knife to cut it loose. And third, the way the sheet on top of me slides around when I move my arm tells me I'm not wearing a shirt.

I lift the sheet and check. Interesting. I drop the sheet.

So wherever I am, I've been out for a while, because my ribs are only taped, not bandaged to absorb any leaks from the bullet wounds. And although I've got a pillow and a cat, I haven't got any pants.
This could get awkward.

I take in the room. It's got two doors, and it has that spare-bedroom look, only in a twenty-first-century style. The bed's big enough for two, though there's only me and the cat in it, and covered with a beige bedspread. From where I'm lying, I can see a nightstand, a chest of drawers, and a chair in a corner, all in light wood and steel, with a white throw pillow on the chair. It looks like Stark's taste: sleek and modern and slightly sterile. The IV drip beside the bed looks out of place. I wonder what's in the bag.

Memories trickle in as I wake up more. The last one makes me wince. Stark wasn't kidding about the pain. It must've knocked me out for a while. Nothing hurts now, though. I rub the cat's jaw. It nuzzles my hand. Somehow I never saw Stark as a cat person.

I suddenly realize I need to pee, and sit up, figuring the cat's not going to tell anyone about the no-pants problem. The IV's got to go, though. No way I'm dragging that around. My knife is missing along with my boots, so I bite the tape, and between that and the metal ridges on my left hand, I manage to shred the wrappings until I can slide the needle out and fling it away from me. If I never see another needle again, it'll be too soon.

The first door I try leads to a bathroom, and I use everything in it, including the shower and the shaving kit on the counter. I've got a couple of days' stubble, at least. How long was I out?

Someone has left a black silk dressing gown on the back of the bathroom door. It's not a pair of pants, but it beats being naked. I slip it on.

When I step back out into the bedroom, the cat is sitting in the middle of the bed. It meows at me. "What?" I ask it.

It meows again. I don't know what it wants. I've never been a cat person either. I try picking it up, and it settles into the crook of my left arm and starts to purr again.

Terrific. Now if I get into a fight, I can start by throwing a cat at my opponent. That'll help. I try the second door, find it unlocked, and step out into a hallway. It looks like a hallway in an office building. Am I still in Stark Tower?

I wander for a few minutes, passing smartly dressed people in business attire. Nobody seems surprised to see a barefoot guy in a dressing gown carrying a cat in his metal arm. I don't talk to them. I'd rather figure out what's going on by myself.

Finally, I hear a familiar voice, and stop.

"—completely under control," Stark is saying from behind a door marked Main Lab. There's a biohazard sticker on the door.

"I don't think you know the meaning of the phrase, Stark." A woman's voice, strong and sharp.

"Sure I do. I just never apply it to myself."

"You have no idea what's going to happen—"

"My preferred state of being. Hand me that screwdriver. No, the other one." I can hear him smirking.

The woman is unimpressed. "You hired me to consult on your security—on global security. You've got a Level Six security risk sleeping in your guest room! Do you have any idea who the Winter
"Soldier is?"

"Yeah. He's Captain America's sidekick, he did me a solid, and he's standing right outside that door holding my cat. Come in!" The door slides open.

I blink, dazed by the sudden brightness. The lab has floor-to-ceiling windows, and it's about two p.m. to judge by the sunlight streaming in. There's a half-assembled chest plate on Stark's work table, and he's got both hands inside it. Standing next to him is a tall, slim brunette woman who's wearing a gray suit and glaring at me with equal parts hatred and alarm.

"Barnes, this is Maria Hill," Stark says without looking up. "Hill, this is James Barnes. Bucky if he likes you, which is, surprisingly enough, up to him now. Say hello to the nice former SHIELD agent, Barnes."

"Ma'am," I say, nodding.

Stark looks me up and down. "I see what you mean, Hill. He's pretty terrifying in my dressing gown."

The cat begins butting its head against my chest. Hill is still glaring at me, so I stroke its ears and try to look harmless.

"You're looking nice and vertical, Barnes," Stark comments. "How's your head?"

"Better so far," I say. "Hope you weren't worried about your cat. I just found him when I woke up. I don't know how long he was in there."

"Four days, which is how long you were in there. Speaking of which—here, kitty, kitty!" Stark turns back to his armor.

The cat butts me one last time, then starts to wriggle free. I let it go, and it drops, still purring, to the lab floor. It trots over to the table, weaves around Hill and between Stark's legs, and springs onto the tabletop. With one last look at me, it pads over to a glass-topped box that looks like part of a flatbed scanner and sits down on the glass, which flashes blue for an instant.

"Good girl," Stark says, rubbing the top of the cat's head with a finger as he glances at the screen. The cat purrs. The screen fills with scrolling data.

"What is that?" Hill asks, looking from me to the cat on the scanner and back with renewed suspicion.

"FLMD," Stark replies. He's reading the screen. "Feline Life Model Decoy. I call her Patches."

"The cat's a robot?" I ask, blinking. "Why do you have a robot cat?"

"It's easier to clean up after," Stark says. "Plus she's incredibly useful. Congratulations, Barnes. Your life signs and brain activity are all back to normal. Well, normal for you. I'll have Bruce check all this over, but it looks like you're over the hump."

"The cat told you that?" I ask. "And did you say four days?"

"Yes and yes." Stark has his nose in his chest plate again. He twists a tiny screw out of a plate. "After your last round of shock therapy, you were a little bit, uh, comatose. Once everyone got done hyperventilating, Bruce guessed that you might get better if we just left you alone to hibernate. Steve did something similar after we stopped an alien invasion."
"He did?" I don't remember him doing that in the war.

"Oh, yeah. He took out a squadron of these ugly gray things with too many teeth, lost a lot of blood. Afterward, we went out for shawarma and he damn near passed out at the table. Hawkeye practically had a heart attack before Black Widow noticed Cap was snoring. Poor guy was out for a whole day."

"What's shawarma?" I ask.

"According to Thor, the main course in Valhalla. Anyway, Bruce and I figured you might be trying to regrow the brain cells we fried, so we hooked you up to an IV so you didn't get dehydrated, set Patches to monitor your vitals, and put you in the room you seemed least likely to wreck. Oh, and we hid your weapons, just in case." He smirks at Hill. "Bucky doesn't like waking up in labs for some reason. Me, I feel pretty good waking up to the smell of fresh solder, but apparently he had a couple of bad experiences. You don't know anybody named Alexander Pierce, do you?"

"What?" I'm instantly on alert. Hill is connected to Pierce?

Hill gives Stark an even nastier glare. "Secretary Pierce fooled a lot of people, Tony. Even Nick Fury."

"Meet the one guy he didn't fool." Stark points a fine-point screwdriver at me. "Pierce had to torture and brainwash Barnes to get his help. I'll show you Bruce Banner's report. Talk about nightmare fuel. So maybe you should point that righteous indignation where it belongs." He snaps his fingers. "Oh, wait. You can't, can you? Pierce is dead, Fury's dead, and that just leaves you."

I am profoundly confused. I wish I had a program for whatever verbal sparring match is going on. Or a gun. Or at least some pants.

Hill mutters something under her breath, shoots one last glare my way, and stalks out past me. The door hisses shut behind her. Patches stands up, stretches, and mews plaintively at me.

"Kitty likes you," Stark says. "You'd better do something."

I weave around scattered lab equipment to reach the table and hold out my right hand to the robot cat. Patches sniffs it disinterestedly, then jumps onto my shoulder and picks her way, claws digging delicately through the fabric and into my skin, across to my left side. There she balances for a moment, purring, and flops down, her hindquarters resting on my neck and her forepaws kneading rhythmically into the metal of my bionic arm.

"How does a robot cat like anybody?" I ask.

"Well, she is a cat," Stark replies. "I was going for realism, and I got weirdness. But she seems to be a pretty good judge of character, so I keep her around. Plus she's hypoallergenic. I'm thinking of licensing her to hospitals."

"I'll write you an endorsement." I rub the cat under the chin with my metal index finger. "What'd I do to Hill?"

"Your evil twin shot her old boss. Guy named Fury. Ring any bells?"

"Nope."

"Don't worry about it. She's working for me now that SHIELD's gone, and I have very strict rules about shooting my houseguests."
"That's good." Not that it puts my mind at ease. I switch to rubbing the cat's jaw. "Thanks for defending me. You didn't have to do that."

"Maybe I did." Stark sets down his screwdriver, folds his arms, and gives me and Patches a pensive look. "You know, she's never taken to anybody like this. Patches, not Hill. I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"Barnes ... do you like animals?"

"Dogs, sure. Cats if they like me. Why?"

"Just a thought. You're the first person to meet Patches without knowing she's an LMD. You thought she was a cat."

"So?"

"LMDs learn. This is as cat-like as I've ever seen her, which is kind of odd. Maybe she's acting more like a cat because you treat her like one. Food for thought."

I don't say anything for a while. I concentrate on scratching all the spots real cats like having scratched. Patches never seems to get tired of it. She purrs so hard that she vibrates the metal skin of my arm. I feel Stark watching us.

After a few minutes, I say, "That friend of yours. The one you had that fight with. You see him around much?"

"Rhodey. Yeah, he pops up. Why?"

"Just thinking about things. Growing brain cells, maybe. Did we kill that memory port thing?"

"Dead as disco. You can look up disco later. Maybe you should get a notebook, start writing this stuff down." Stark swaps his screwdriver for a soldering iron and pulls on a pair of goggles. He leans over his chest plate. Something begins to spark.

"I can hear you thinking, Barnes," he says after a moment. "What do you need?"

I rest my metal hand against the side of Patches' head. She starts rubbing.

"A phone," I say. "And my gear. And a pair of pants." I think over the list, then add: "Pants first."

"Bruce's lab is downstairs," Stark says. There's a flash from inside the armor. "He's been hanging on to your bike and duffel since we pulled 'em out of an impound lot. And he's always got an extra pair of pants around."

Patches licks one of my fingers. "Why's that?" I ask.

"Anger management," he says. There's a pop and a sudden smell of ozone. Something inside the armor starts to crackle loudly. "In fact," Stark adds, "why don't you go see him right now?"

I don't need telling twice. I keep my left hand on Patches' back so she doesn't slide off my shoulder. She keeps purring as we leave, and doesn't seem bothered by my walking. Maybe she's got magnets in her paws. With a robot cat, who knows?

Once again, nobody looks twice at me as I search for the stairs and finally settle for an elevator. I still hate being shut up in a box, but it's hard to get really upset with a blissed-out cat purring in your ear.
I ride down one floor with a couple of skinny guys in T-shirts whose nametags identify them as Information Technology staff. Once again, a wandering super-soldier in a dressing gown with a metal arm and a robot cat on his shoulder attracts no particular attention. I wonder what kind of freak show normally walks the halls here. I almost wish I could stick around to see.

Bruce Banner's lab is in a corner of the floor below Stark's, away from load-bearing pillars. There's a radiation sticker on the door. I'm starting to get the joke. I enter without knocking.

Bruce is reading on his tablet while a bank of screens behind him flashes through some kind of test results. I can't read it, but there's a lot of green. Bruce looks up as I come in.

"Well, if it isn't Sleeping Beauty!" he says with a big smile. "Nice to see you out of that bed."

"It's nice to be out of it," I answer. "Thanks for leaving me alone. Stark said you had my bag?"

"Right here." He reaches under a table and pulls out the duffel. "Found it locked in one of your saddlebags. The impound fee's on the house." He smiles awkwardly. "I figured you'd want it back when I saw what was in it."

"It's mostly not important," I say, pulling the duffel across the tabletop and unzipping it. "Just a change of clothes."

"Ah, the siren song of pants," Bruce agrees. "I know it well. My other half isn't a fan of them." He nods at the bag. "It's not just pants, though, is it?"

"No, I need this, too." I pull out my burner phone and charger and go looking for an outlet.

"Who're you calling?"

"Guy named Wilson," I reply. "He's my contact. I check in with him every so often or he calls out the dogs." I plug the phone in and check its screen. "Damn."

"Dead battery? Use mine." Bruce holds out a device. "Latest Starkphone. It can even program a DVR."

"A what?" I take the phone and tap out a quick text to Geoff: I made it okay. Stop worrying, nosy bastard. Then, to Sam: How do you like them apples?

"You can use a cell phone, but you don't know what a DVR is. How is that even possible?"

"Mission parameters." I hit Send for the second time and pass the phone back. "They needed me up-to-date on equipment. I can use a cell phone, an ATM, the internet, everything I might need for a Hydra mission. But two people have called me the Terminator in the last week and I had to Google it."

"At least you can Google." Bruce checks his phone's screen. "I had to teach Steve to do that. Tony gave up trying after Steve started talking to the mouse. He was calling the operator." He frowns. "Did you just prank-text somebody on my phone?"

"Code phrase," I explain. I rummage in the bag until I find a spare pair of pants. Then I gently lift Patches off my shoulder and set her on the table. She meows her frustration, but I ignore her. I pull the pants on, let the robe drop, and shin into another of Pierce's T-shirts. I've really got to get my own clothes, but other things keep taking priority.

"So what's the plan now?" Bruce asks, stroking Patches. She arches her back into his hand, but
keeps one eye on me.

"I don't know," I admit. "Getting out of here, definitely. I like your boss okay, but I hang around him too long and somebody's going to get stabbed."

"You know," Bruce says quietly, "I can think of one place you could go."

"Yeah?" I start stuffing things into the duffel. Patches paws at my hand. I ignore her. "How's that going to work? I go back to the hospital, maybe take out the ICU?"

"He's out of the hospital."

I stop packing and look up. It hadn't even occurred to me to ask. I guess it makes sense, though. If I could heal a brain injury and everything else in four days, he'd have to be up and around by now.

"Where is he?" I ask. "What's he doing?"

"Looking for you," Bruce tells me. He hands me his tablet. It's got a flight plan on it. "Two days ago, he borrowed one of Tony's jets and flew to Europe. He's been in Kiev ever since."


"Why? What's in Kiev?"

"Something Steve should never see. Shit. What's Sam thinking, letting him go there?"

"Probably that you won't actually be in Kiev." Bruce points at my metal arm. "You're pretty much earthbound with that thing. No way you'd get it through airport security."

"Shit!" The tablet creaks warningly as my left hand clenches. I put the device down before I can break it. "Why can't he just go fight Hydra like a normal person?"

"Says Bucky Barnes, currently in an undisclosed location," Bruce supplies.

I shoot him a glare.

He raises his hands in surrender. "Don't shoot the messenger, pal. But you know better than I do that there's only one way to stop him once he sets his mind to something. The guy tried to enlist five times before he got a mad scientist to take him, and you think he's gonna give up looking for you just because you ran away?"

I scowl, but I know he's right. Steve was a stubborn punk even before he got the serum. Afterward, he was impossible.

"Tell me you've got a plan," I say. "I could really use a mad-scientist plan right now."

"Angry scientist, not mad. And since you ask ... yeah." Bruce reaches into my duffel and pulls something blue out of the bottom. It's the peacoat from the Smithsonian.

"I'm not gonna like this plan," I sigh. "Am I?"

* *

"Banner, next time I see you, I'm gonna shoot you," I growl.

"Unless this works," his voice crackles in my earpiece.
"Unless it works," I admit. "You told Sam what's up?"

"For the ninth time, yes. He's ready in case anything goes wrong. Which it won't. You're going to be fine, Buck."

"It's not me I'm worried about."

"I know. Now stop talking to yourself. It's showtime."

I stand in the hangar doorway in my borrowed blue coverall and watch the little jet taxi to its spot. Stark's got good taste in aircraft, I'll give him that. The turbines practically sing as they power down.

Then it's time to go. I tug my cap down lower over my eyes and start walking toward the plane, trying to stay near the middle of the group of ground crew. At least I've got an excuse for long sleeves and gloves. The sun's going down, and the wind is starting to nip.

The door on the side of the plane opens when I'm about fifteen feet away, and I get a quick look before I duck my head. Two men. The big one's in front, reaching out for the stairs one of my companions is pushing.

Steve.

"—can't get it out of my head," he's saying.

"You gonna go there again?" Sam Wilson asks from behind him. "You'll make yourself crazy."

"I can't help it. You saw the file. You saw that—that place. It was worse than the Hydra factory I pulled him out of."

Sam sighs. He sounds exhausted. "How many times are we gonna go round on this? It wasn't him back then. He wasn't even awake when they kept him there."

I follow the stairway guy and pretend I'm locking the wheels. It gets me close but keeps my head down. I don't mind Sam seeing me—he'll need to if this goes wrong—but nobody needs to see the look on my face right now.

He's right about one thing. Kiev was where Hydra used to keep me between missions. But he's wrong about something else.

Hydra only thought I wasn't awake. Sometimes they were mistaken.

"I don't like just leaving it," Steve complains as he comes down the stairs.

"You're not leaving anything," Sam insists. "Hill's got new intel. We'll meet her in the morning. Something Banner dug up, which is good enough for me. The guy is practically Mister Super Soldier."

"You just want to meet another Avenger."

"Damn right I do. Another check off my bucket list." I hear Sam's breath catch suddenly, and I look up. He's looking down at me over the railing of the stairs. One hand drifts toward his back, under the bomber jacket.

I make eye contact, put a metal finger to my lips, and give the okay sign with my other hand. No machine so far.
"Voice check," I mutter into my comm.

"Confirmed," Bruce replies. "Your readings look good. How about visual?"

I look at Sam and I hesitate. I really don't want to do this. Not here, not now, not where it could go wrong. I've spent my whole life looking out for Steve Rogers. I don't want to break that streak.

"Bucky?" Bruce asks.

And then I hear Steve's footsteps stop at the bottom of the stairs.

"Sam?" he asks. "You okay?"

Sam has to look away, or Steve will catch on. So he does, and he shrugs, and says, "Fine—"

And I lean just far enough out of the shadows to get my first good look at Steve's face.

I hold the look for as long as I can. *God, he looks beat.* The lines in his face look like canyons, and there are deep shadows around his eyes. But he's awake, and he's alive ...

And the machine is silent.

"C'mon," I hear Sam say. "Dinner's on me."

Steve makes a face. "I'd rather just go home—"

"With TMZ camped out in front of your apartment since your address got dumped on the internet? You're not facing that on an empty stomach." Sam jogs down the stairs.

"I've got reading to do," Steve complains. "And I've got to pack some more—"


Steve snorts. "You mean you try."

"I'm serious, Cap. Take a night off. Bucky will still be there in the morning." He puts a little too much stress on the words *be there.*

"I know, I know." Steve sighs and follows. "It's just ...

"What?"

"I hate thinking about him out there. He's alone, Sam. And I know he'd hate that more than anything."

"He's not alone," Sam says. "He's got you."

I don't hear the rest of their conversation. I stand under the wing of the plane and watch them walk away. When they're out of sight, I say:

"Son of a bitch. Visual check."

Bruce's whoop is so loud it makes me wince. I sign off, take my earpiece out, and unzip my coverall. Patches pokes her head out of the opening and mews.

"Thanks," I tell her. I would never have agreed to Banner's test if I hadn't had a portable sensor package to monitor my brain and send Bruce the results. Now, though ... I rub the robot cat's ears.
Now I know what to do.

Sam's going to keep Steve busy for a couple of hours at least. He knows as well as I do that some things have to happen in private, and privacy takes preparation.

I wait for Sam and Steve to leave in a cab—poor Sam hasn't had a chance to replace the car I wrecked—and then I ride the Indian into DC. I would know where I'm going even if I hadn't been there before as my other self. SHIELD was paying the rent on Steve's place, so the address is online with all the other secrets.

I'm not the first person to think of that, though. Just as Sam predicted, there's a small mob loitering on the sidewalk across the street from the building. Paparazzi, of course, and fans. But not just them.

I put my earpiece back in and switch it on as I survey the crowd. "Hey, Banner, you awake?" I park the bike behind Steve's building and stick my head back around the corner.

"More or less." I hear him stifle a yawn. "What's up?"

"I need to clear a path. How are you with Twitter?"

He laughs.

It takes an hour, but it's worth it. Ten minutes in, people start pulling out their phones to check them. Anyone who makes a living selling celebrity photos will have Twitter alerts set up. Alarms go off when something tabloid-worthy pops up.

Like, say, Tony Stark getting into a fender-bender in an expensive sports car a mile away. With a famously married starlet in the passenger seat.

"Photoshop and Instagram," Bruce sighs in my ear. "Like peanut butter and chocolate."

Of course, there's no car, no beautiful woman, no Avenger within twenty miles of the building. But Twitter doesn't know that, and as I watch, the real paparazzi slip away, one by one, to trade a slim-chance shot of Captain America on his Harley for a sure-thing shot of Iron Man cheating on his girlfriend.

"Pepper's gonna kill us," I say.

"Don't kid yourself," Bruce advises. "She was the one who set up that sting in the lobby. Easy way to take out the first Hydra squad they sent after Tony. Pepper's fine."

"That was a setup?" I ask. "I got shot four times. Some genius trap."

"Yeah, well, the chatter was that Emilia would try to poison the champagne. Our bad."

"You're pretty casual when you say that."

"Hey, I'm bulletproof, remember?"

I grin. I haven't had this much fun on a mission in a long time.

With the press corps gone, I'm left with just a few diehard Cap stalkers and what looks like the local chapter of his fan club. I see a lot of stars-and-stripes T-shirts and a couple of sweatshirts with Steve's shield on them. Autograph hounds, chasing my pal from the old neighborhood. And now half his groupies are men. Welcome to the twenty-first century.
I switch off my earpiece mike. This will get loud.

I put my hands in my pockets and stroll out of the alley, whistling. A couple of heads turn my way, but I'm too short and too dark to be Steve, so the attention fades fast. Who's going to recognize Bucky Barnes the dead soldier on a dimly lit D.C. street?

So I get up close enough to the group and say one word, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Sputnik."

My handlers were assholes, but they were smart assholes. They only let me out of cryo for a few days at a time, once every five years or so. I never had a chance to build working relationships with other Hydra agents. I never built trust with the men who served as my support crew on missions. I needed a way to command instant respect, to insert myself seamlessly into whatever unit or cell needed the Winter Soldier's help. So they gave me a passphrase, and every Hydra agent learned it. There were half a dozen of them, each designed for a single use. Someone shows up and says the word, and if you're Hydra, you obey without question.

"Sputnik" is still good. Of course, with Hydra command in chaos, there's no guarantee that any given set of agents will obey the word now. But that's okay. I don't need to give orders.

I just need all the Hydra agents in the crowd to turn my way. And they do. And that's when I go crazy.

I start by kicking the nearest Hydra agent in the ribs. He goes flying, and the rest of the squad converges on me. Weapons come out—handguns and knives, mostly, though one's got an honest-to-God sword—and the fight kicks off from there. This is fun for me. I break teeth, wrench arms, knock heads. I dodge bullets and snatch guns out of hands. The sword blade bites through my left glove and shatters on my metal palm. The fanboys—the real ones—take off running. I see one pull out his phone to call 911. I yell something threatening after him in Russian, then punch a Hydra agent in the neck.

Thirty seconds later, the street is empty except for a few unconscious Hydra goons and a couple of groaning ones who wish they were unconscious. And me, of course. I tap my mike back on.

"Bruce," I say. "Seven Hydra agents in front of Steve's place. Not going anywhere. Send the FBI."

"You got it. They alive?"

I flip him the bird, even though he can't see me. "Obviously," I say.

"Just checking."

I pick up my duffel and head inside without a backward glance. It feels strange to be leaving Hydra agents alive—especially when I spent a whole war killing them every chance I got—but this is about clearing a path, not avenging my own honor. I can't have cops hanging around a crime scene right outside this building. I don't know how Steve's going to react tonight, and I don't want to worry about eavesdroppers. Or a peanut gallery, if we end up fighting.

God, I hope we don't end up fighting. I am sick to death of fighting my best friend. Plus he fights as dirty as I do. Those headbutts hurt.

I slip into the lobby and take a quick look around, just in case I do have to fight. It's a comfortable old building, the kind Steve and would recognize. Dark wood furniture and wall trim, patterned rugs on the lobby floor instead of wall-to-wall carpeting. There's no one in the lobby at this hour, but the
little conversation circle to one side suggests that people do spend time here. There are four squashy armchairs, a low coffee table, and an old upright piano. Everything looks lived-in, gently used. I guess Steve's got real neighbors that he actually sees.

A painting on the wall above the piano catches my eye. I find myself looking at a long line of trees on a sunny afternoon. It's a nice little landscape, but there's something odd about it. Something familiar ...

I recognize the style as soon as I spot a half-eaten apple lying at the foot of a painted tree.

Looks like Steve went back to art after he defrosted. I walk over to inspect the painting. I don't know a lot about art, but I know Steve and I know what I like. Nobody else captures an image like he does. I can almost see the leaves on the trees stirring in the wind—his pictures always look like they're moving. Super-soldier eyes, maybe. He's always watching his environment, always checking for motion, always doing the math in his head in case he has to throw his shield. Must make painting easier.

He's got a good memory, too. This is the French orchard where I threw that apple at him. Where he talked about marrying Peggy and settling down. Where he thought he was going to have a nice, quiet life after the war, and never be lonely.

*The super probably hung it up because it's pretty, I think. If he only knew. We never did get to eat those apples.*

That does beg a question, though. Why is the painting here? To anybody but Steve and me, it's a nice picture of some trees, but to him it's got to be awfully personal. Why walk past it every day?

Then I get it. I ease the fingers of my right hand under the frame and lift the lower edge away from the wall. I can just see the back of the painting. Someone's taped a key there.

I grin. Steve's been losing his house key for as long as he's had one. Never any other keys, oddly—not the ignition key to his Harley or anything. Just his front-door key. I think he holds the Guinness record for the number of times he's had to break into his own home. I finally made him stash a spare key where I could find it for him. Usually it was under a brick on the stoop.

Of course, a classy building like this wouldn't have a stoop, let alone loose bricks. And I haven't been around to help him get home. It looks like he improvised. Good. I wasn't too keen on breaking into his place anyway.

I take the key, head upstairs, and take a deep breath before I unlock the door and let myself in.

The place smells like Steve. Steve, and soap, and lemon oil. His ma raised him to keep a clean house.

I walk through the apartment in the dark, just taking it all in. All the furniture and stuff is new—I don't know what happened to Steve's belongings when he went into the ice, but even Peggy wouldn't have hung on to his mama's kitchen table—but it looks old, somehow. It looks like stuff he'd recognize. I spot a chair in one corner, by the record player, that looks like one my dad sat in every night. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to make this place homey for Steve. Too bad it's about a million times nicer than any place he ever lived in before the ice.

He's not planning to stay, though. There are piles of boxes in every room, the bookshelves are empty, and there are little holes in the walls where pictures used to hang.

*I've got to pack some more,* he told Sam at the airfield. He's packed a lot already. And in the living room, I see how. There's a note taped to the top of the box.
Dear Steve,

Whew! Did anybody ever tell you you've got a lot of books? Well, they're all boxed up now. I think I got almost everything, but I left the bathroom, the footlocker, and the stereo, alone, just like you asked.

See you Saturday for the heavy lifting! Payback!

-Sharon :)

I read the note a couple of times. I guess Sharon's moving, too—whoever Sharon is. She does the packing and Steve does the lifting. Makes sense.

She's got nice handwriting. I bet she's pretty. I have a vague memory of watching this place and seeing a pretty little blonde in scrubs. Maybe that's her.

Good for you, Steve. I wonder if she's got a friend.

I drop my duffel on the floor and unzip it. I've only got as long as Sam can keep Steve busy at a steakhouse. On the plus side, Steve can eat half a cow when he's hungry. On the minus side, it's impossible to get him drunk. That limits my window, but I've worked with less.

And Sharon didn't pack up the stereo. That gives me an idea.

Two hours later, I'm stretched out on the floor in front of Steve's couch when I hear the growl of a Harley in the alley. I take a quick look around to make sure everything's in place. I get up, drop the needle on the record, and lie back down.

I use the record Steve left on the player. The song's pretty new to me—according to the label, it came out in 1945, after I went missing—but the title strikes me as funny, under the circumstances.

The song's called "It's Been A Long, Long Time".

The volume's as high as it'll go, so there's no way Steve won't hear it. I lie still and wait.

Halfway through the record, the window to the fire escape slides quietly open. I listen for the soft sound of a shoe coming down on the floorboards. One foot ... two ... he's in, and looking around to see who's waiting for him ...

I toss the key up. It arcs high over the back of the couch. There's a faint thup noise as he catches it. Just like the apple.

"You know," I say into the dark, "one of these days you've gotta start hanging on to that yourself. It's getting embarrassing."

And I stand up so he can see me.

He just stands there, still holding the key, and his mouth falls open. I'm wearing the peacoat from the Smithsonian—which is a little tight, actually, but after all it's only a replica—and I keep my hands down at my sides so he doesn't have to look at the metal one. For this moment, I want to be as much like the old Bucky as possible. The Bucky he remembers.

I really don't want to fight him again.

When the silence drags on too long, I say, "I already took out the trash. But I couldn't find your shoe polish."
That unsticks him from whatever mental loop he's in. "Oh, my God," he whispers. "Bucky."

"Yeah," I say. "'S'me."

"Bucky!" He vaults over the back of the couch and throws his arms around me faster than I can react. It's weird that we're close to the same height now, but I forget about that as we end up hugging each other so hard I wince. Next thing I know we're pounding each other on the back, laughing and crying at the same time, patting each other down and trying to make sure we're both real. Steve hugs me again.

"Ow!" I push him back a little. "Enough!"

"What's wrong?" His face, what I can see of it in the dark, is all concern. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, you're just really strong. And I kind of got shot a couple of days ago. Just watch the ribs, okay?" I can't stop smiling.

"God, Buck, you scared the hell out of me!" Steve grips me by both shoulders and looks me up and down.

"Me? You shoulda seen yourself in that hospital bed!" I blurt. "I thought you were dead!"

Steve is still staring at me. "I thought you were smaller."

That starts us both laughing again. Seventy-year-old inside jokes are the best kind. At some point Steve looks down and realizes he's standing on the couch cushions, which I've carefully put on the floor, just like when we were kids, and that makes him laugh even harder.

When we can both breathe again, I say, "I'm sorry, Steve."

He snorts. "For what? You've got nothing to be sorry for."

"How 'bout I start with almost killing you? Twice?"

He grins like he's about to make a joke, but he sees my face and stops.

"I'm just glad you're alive," he says, and his voice creaks a little like it used to in Brooklyn. "Nothing else matters. Not anymore."

I can't quite see him anymore, my eyes are so wet. And it's pretty dark, but there's a little bit of streetlight reflecting off part of his face where it's wet, too. We're seventy years out of time, hundreds of miles from Brooklyn, and about a million light-years from anything we know. But we're standing in the dark, crying like a couple of little kids, and for the first time since we put on uniforms, it feels like we're home.

"You're a punk," I say, and put my arms around him. The servos whir.

"Jerk," he says in my ear. He hugs back.

My ribs hurt. He winces a little. But neither one of us lets go for a long time.

Finally, we both have to breathe, and we step back apart. Steve goes to turn on a light. I don't stop him. He's going to have to get used to seeing the arm anyway. I peel off the blue peacoat.

"You hungry?" Steve asks as he flicks light switches.
"Starving," I say. "What's in?"

"A lot of nothing. I'm moving out on Saturday, and I didn't expect to be back until then. You still like Chinese?"

"I think so."

"I know a place." He pulls a phone out of his pocket snd dials. I don't catch everything he says because half of it's in honest-to-God Cantonese, but it sounds like he orders half the menu. I guess Sam didn't make him eat a cow after all. Steve keeps an eye on me as he talks, like he's worried I'll disappear on him if he blinks. I walk around, looking at the labels on the boxes. Sharon wasn't kidding about the books.

At last, Steve hangs up. "Did you say you got shot?" he asks. "How'd that happen?"

"It's not a short story," I say.

"So?"

So I tell him as much as I remember, as much as I can stand and a little bit more because it's him. He doesn't say much, just lets me talk and asks a question or two whenever he doesn't understand something. The food arrives at some point, and I'm surprised to find I really am starving, though I'm careful to eat slowly. The talking helps with that. After I run out of words, Steve takes a turn. He tells me about the war after I went missing, and about his own disappearance. He talks about the Battle of New York and the other Avengers. I tell him about meeting Stark and Banner. We both agree that the future is kind of a disappointment.

"I was expecting jetpacks and flying cars," I say.


"Typical." I gulp down some lo mein. My left hand turns out to be better with chopsticks than my right. "So where are you moving to?"

"Back to the neighborhood," Steve says. "SHIELD's not paying my rent anymore, and I miss the old place. Then again, I miss a lot of things."

"Not polio," I say quickly. Steve and one of my sisters both had that.

"Nobody misses polio." Steve leans back against the couch. We're both sitting on the cushions on the floor, by unspoken agreement. "I don't know what I'm doing after that, though. I'm out of a job, and I guess I don't have to look for you anymore."

"I've been thinking about that." I poke my chopsticks into a box, looking for broccoli. "You saw Kiev."

"I did." Steve's face is stone.

"There were other places like that," I say. I avoid looking up at him. "I can probably find them again. I was thinking about, oh, burning them to the ground." I find the broccoli, pinch it with the chopsticks, and toss it into my mouth. "And then," I say, talking as I chew, "I think I'll take apart every Hydra cell I can find."

"I'm in," Steve says immediately. "And I know some people who can help."
I swallow and cough. "You don't have to," I say. "I can get by on my own."

Steve just smiles. "I know," he says. "But the thing is, you don't have to."

I smile back. It's getting easier to do that, smiling. It's getting easier to do a lot of things. Maybe I'm just getting more practice, but then again ...

I think about apples. I think about Tony Stark's robot cat. What was it he said? *Maybe she's acting more like a cat because you treat her like one.*

Maybe I'm like that stupid cat. I was a machine for a long time, surrounded by people who treated me like a machine. Pierce saw me as a tool. Stark seemed to think I was halfway between a person and one of his armored suits—though, to be fair, he *does* treat machines better than people.

But Steve, from the moment he saw my face on the bridge, never called me anything but Bucky. Never saw me as anything but a friend. Even when it nearly cost him his life. To Steve, I was always human.

I'm not sure he's right about me. But I want him to be right. I want to be human. And if that means hanging around Steve Rogers for a while ... well, there are worse ways to live. I ought to know.

I look at Steve as he picks up an eggroll with his fingers. It comes apart in his hand, and he laughs as he shakes cabbage onto a paper plate.

I blink, and just for an instant, I see red.

I shake the flicker away. Steve goes on pulling bits of eggroll off his fingers. He hasn't noticed. Color returns.

Yeah, there are worse ways to live. And some prices are worth paying.

I pick up the bottle of hard cider I've been ignoring. It was all Steve had to drink in his fridge. Neither one of us can actually get drunk, but we both still like the taste of alcohol. I hold out the bottle.

"I'm with you to the end of the line, pal," I say.

Steve drops the eggroll and grabs his bottle. "To the end of the line," he echoes, and taps it against mine.

We drink. Just two super-soldiers who can't get drunk. Just two guys who haven't had a drink together since 1944. Just two kids from Brooklyn.

We've barely finished the bottles when Steve looks toward his bedroom and frowns.

"What?" I ask.

"Did you hear something?"

"Like what?"

"It sounded like a meow."

Chapter End Notes
Well, that's it, I guess. No more Dead Man Running.

Except, uh, I wrote another volume. Which should start up soonish. It's called Halt and Catch Fire, and it's got lots of fighting, and explosions, and more than a bit of romance, and Steve narrates half of it, and Bucky teaches an AI to say "fuck", and there are two Invaders cameos, and there may or may not be a dance number.

I regret nothing.

Follow me on Tumblr (onethingconstant) to get lots of MCU silliness and help ruin a fascist's day.

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