No Man Is an Island

by thegraytigress

Summary

A year after SHIELD's collapse, Steve and Sarah have hidden themselves from their enemies. Their new life is destroyed, though, when Viper sends an assassin after those closest to Captain America to lure him out into the open. Faced with losing everyone he loves, Steve sacrifices himself only to learn that facing his problems alone is never the answer.

Notes

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RATING: T (for language, violence)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is the last major part of the One Life series, which began with "The Road Not Taken" and continued in "The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea". I recommend
you read the first two stories, particularly "The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea", before starting this one, but you can probably still follow along without it. Once again, this story will feature a lot of Avengers as family, particularly some strong Steve and Tony friendship. Also we have a big dose of Steve/Natasha, as suggested by the end of the previous story, and, as usual, a lot of Tony/Pepper. Finally, we'll see some AoS characters again. This story is not exactly following the MCU (as you've probably know from the previous installments). Events in the movies have happened a bit differently, and things will be a combination of MCU canon, comic canon, and my own imaginings.

Alright, everyone. Please read and enjoy! I was a tad inspired by tumblr and bearded Chris Evans for this first part (I make no excuses!).
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of chainsaws echoed through the woods. It was an otherwise quiet autumn afternoon, a tad chilly but thankfully not as wet as they had been recently. Still, leaves clung to work boots and jeans, and hard hats were damp with fallen rainwater from the boughs far above. The distinctive whine of motors and the hum of the saws biting through trunks were near constant as the small team of men worked, felling trees two at a time. They came down with a cacophony of cracks, breaking trunks and snapping branches, huge giants that had reached into the sky for years now coming crashing down to earth. It was hard work, dangerous work, but the men were careful.

“Cleary!”

Despite having lived almost a year with that as his last name, it still took Steve a beat to realize Hammond was talking to him. It was hard to hear with the headphones (well, hard for the other guys – he faked it), so that thankfully covered up his lapse. The loud roar of the equipment died with another tree down, so he took his headphones off and came over where the boss was standing next to the skidder. Hammond was a nice guy, older and weathered, a little ornery and classless, but he’d been doing this all his life. Furthermore, he hadn’t had any qualms about hiring a total stranger with no experience in logging or forestry a year ago. He’d taken one look at Steve and his size and the muscles of his chest and arms and immediately signed him onto his company before Steve had even promised to be a fast learner and a hard worker. For that alone, Steve was grateful and willing to do just about anything, including heavy labor. Hammond gestured to another log that was prepped for moving to the dirt road that led this deep into the Oregon woods. The limbs had been stripped, the trunk had been sectioned, and it was ready to go. “Get that one up!”

Steve nodded, slipping his headphones back on and grabbing his gloves from the back pocket of his jeans. He walked over to the log. Barry, a loudmouthed, arrogant barrel of a man, was behind the controls of the skidder, and he watched Steve impatiently, chewing on something (probably a wad of tobacco). Even though Steve could lift the log (the entire thing whole) without a lick of help, he waited for Aiden to come over and help him move it away from the thicker area of trees so that the skidder could a hold of it. Aiden was his age (well, his age biologically) and a really nice guy. He’d started on with the company right after Steve had, so they’d trained together on the ins and outs of logging. Aiden was good at it and in good spirits almost all the time, even when everyone else was complaining about the weather or the work. Steve had to admit that it was unpleasant sometimes; it was blustery cold and snowy in the winter, sweltering hot and humid in the summer with mosquitos and flies thick in the air, and more often than not wet and miserable. This had been the only job he could find, and it was alright. They labored long hours, cutting down trees, stripping them, moving them out of the deep of the forest where they were permitted to log, and getting their harvest onto trucks where it was transported to the local mills. It wasn’t the best with Sarah. Thankfully, he was so good and efficient at it (for reasons that the guys didn’t realize and he could never let slip) that Hammond tended to let him have more a bit more free rein with the hours he worked, so that made up for the fact the conditions could be lousy and he had to spend every minute of every workday on his toes to make sure he never let it show that this strenuous job wasn’t actually all that hard for him.

Like now. “Ready?” Aiden asked, crouching and grabbing the other end of the log. Steve nodded. “One. Two. Three!” Together they hefted the thick maple log. Aiden strained with it, teeth bared with effort, and Steve tried to somehow bear most of the weight without looking like he was doing it. He’d gotten good at that, too. Acting. Lying. He didn’t always feel the best about it, but this
was his life now, and there were no choices. He tipped the log a little toward him, letting gravity shift the weight of it onto his hands, and put on a show of struggling with the burden as much as Aiden was. They walked through the muddy forest floor, crushing the autumn leaves beneath their boots, and dropped the log some half a dozen yards closer to the skidder.

Once it was down with a thud, Aiden sat on it a moment, breathing heavily. “You alright?” Steve asked.

“Sure,” he responded. “Hate mud.” He flicked a streak of it off his jeans.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. He reached down a gloved hand, and the other young man grasped it and let Steve haul him up. “Another day almost done, though, right?”

“In it for the money,” Aiden quipped, and Steve laughed good-naturedly as they headed back to the rest of the team. The money was okay but varied a lot depending on the market, as Steve had learned. Thankfully the work was steady enough. He got the impression that that wasn’t always the case. Still, most of these guys loved this life. It was rugged, dirty, and definitely taxing, but there was a simplicity to it. Steve could see the appeal, even if being here, all the way on the other side of the country, so far from his family and friends, from who he had been, was still unsettling.

It had been a year since he’d taken his daughter and run from HYDRA. In the first month or so since SHIELD’s collapse and HYDRA’s resurgence, they’d roamed across the country, never truly stopping, never staying in one place for more than a few days at a time. It had been just the two of them practically living out of an SUV. More than once they’d slept in there, Steve clutching Sarah tight to his chest in the back seat, his hand never far from a gun as he kept watch all through the night. HYDRA had chased them like fugitives. Like prey. Just as he’d feared when everything had fallen apart, there were agents everywhere. SHIELD had been powerful, far reaching, and deeply embedded into the law enforcement structure of the world, and thus so were his enemies. They were disguised as cops, as doctors, as common people who seemed nice. He was learning not to trust anyone. He’d been followed, watched, hunted all across New York into Pennsylvania and Ohio and then deeper into the Midwest. He’d seen his face on wanted posters, on the news, never a name attached (obviously HYDRA didn’t want the truth leaked as to whom they were chasing). Every time he’d thought they were safe, there’d always been something to unsettle him, something that drove him into running again. By some miracle, they’d only been caught once. It had happened outside a rest stop near Toledo, Ohio. Construction had forced him off back roads and onto the interstate, and when he’d stopped in the middle of the night to get gas, HYDRA had been waiting. He’d recognized the members of the STRIKE Team coming at him, five of them, all too ready and eager to finally catch Captain America and haul him back to their superiors. To Viper. They’d been so excited about it, in fact, that they’d be sloppy, and the fight had been over in a blink, fast and brutal with Sarah screaming in the car. When their attackers had been moaning on the ground around him, he’d thrown himself back into the SUV. “Keep your eyes shut, baby,” he’d said. He’d been saying that a lot, chanting it in his head as he’d raced away without even getting gas. They’d run out further west as far as they could. Steve had barely managed to pull off and into one of the area farming towns before the car had completely given out on them. He’d pushed it into a field, gathered up their bags, and taken Sarah into his arms, tucking her tear-streaked face into his neck. “Keep your eyes closed. Hang onto me.”

He’d walked for almost a day until he found a place outside Toledo where they could lay low. They’d hidden there for two more days after that, holed up in a small motel, barely emerging even for food. Every night Sarah had clung to him, crying and terrified, and he’d hated himself for letting this happen to her. When she’d finally fallen asleep, he’d cried, too, for everything he’d lost. Tony. Natasha. Clint and Thor and Bruce. Pepper. They had all been very far away and deeply in trouble of their own in dealing with HYDRA. He was so alone, and despite that, despite knowing he’d
done the right thing to get away from the team to keep both them and Sarah safe from Viper’s vendetta, he hadn’t been able to shake how much it hurt. That had been the closest he’d come to calling Tony for help, for reassurance at the very least. Tony had told him the StarkPhone he’d given him was untraceable, but Steve hadn’t been certain of anything. In the end, he’d breathed through it all, waited until he felt safe again, and gone on. He’d never made the call.

That turned out to be the worst of it. He’d spent a chunk of the money Tony had given him on another car. He wasn’t a spy, but he knew how to hide when it came down to it, and he’d managed to drum up a convincing enough story about being out of work and looking for a new place to live after his girlfriend had left him and their daughter. Clint had had the foresight to stick a few fake IDs in the bag he’d made before they’d left (obviously pilfered from SHIELD; why the archer had had them at the Tower, Steve would never know, but he was infinitely grateful he’d had them all the same). Forcing himself to be calm and strong, he’d driven on and promised Sarah it would be okay. After all Sarah had gone through, he wasn’t about to let her see that he was frightened out of his mind and totally at a loss for what to do. Even when he’d became fairly certain that he’d lost his tails and slipped through whatever nets HYDRA has cast, even when they’d made it all the way out here, the furthest west he’d ever been, way on the other side of the country in a small logging town in woodsy Oregon… Even then it had been difficult to let go of his fear and paranoia. It had been difficult to stop. Run. Run and don’t look back. That had been the only thought in his head for what seemed like forever. Time stretched and distorted, long hours of anxiety and low-level fear punctuated by brief periods of sheer terror, and he’d forgotten what it felt like to be free.

Needless to say, when he’d taken a moment to actually look at his surroundings rather than simply assessing them for security and danger, he’d found that there was pretty much no place further west to go, so he’d stopped. Colburn, Oregon was a quiet town, a nice place, principally built around the logging industry but not so much so that it had collapsed during the recession when the price of lumber had plummeted. A few thousand people lived there, just enough that he could hide but not so many that he felt lost. He spent a couple of days doing reconnaissance from the town’s one and only hotel, looking for obvious signs of HYDRA (of course, that was one of the problems. HYDRA wasn’t obvious at all). The place had a calming feeling to it, remote and secluded, and he liked that. He felt secure here, protected by distance and anonymity, safe for the first time in weeks. That had been when he’d made the call to Tony to let him know they were okay.

And that had been when he’d found out the Avengers’ fight against HYDRA was not going as well as they’d hoped. Tony hadn’t offered details at the time, and he hadn’t let Steve ask. All he’d said was that he needed to keep laying low, to stay away and hide. Steve had been more terrified in that moment than even when HYDRA had found Sarah and him in Toledo. Tony had found a way to wire him more money and new IDs. If Steve was going to settle here, he didn’t want there to be any chance SHIELD could track him, so that had fairly effectively ruled out using anything Clint had pilfered for him. He’d tried again to press for information about the Avengers, about Natasha, but Tony had refused, only swearing that everyone was okay. He’d promised Steve they’d handle it, promised him that he’d let the team know he was safe, and then he’d hung up.

Steve had discovered what had gone wrong, of course. This place was pretty remote, but news still got there, albeit slowly. Apparently HYDRA’s interest in SHIELD had focused on more than just the Centipede serum and finding the means to stabilize it. Just as they’d feared, the infestation in SHIELD’s infrastructure was massive, and it had been for the bigger purpose of getting HYDRA’s fingers into something called Project: Insight. These three next generation helicarriers, funded, designed, and built by SHIELD to serve as first strike weapons in the war for world peace and security, had been HYDRA’s true intention. They’d had the capacity to identify threats to HYDRA’s new world order using some sort of algorithm, a program that used people’s pasts to predict future outcomes. With this, HYDRA could pre-emptively track and identify threats. It had been really bad news. Stopping HYDRA at the Triskelion had seemingly only delayed the
inevitable, and with the remains of SHIELD, the real SHIELD, in tatters, the Avengers had been hard pressed to stop Project: Insight from killing millions. They’d managed to, though, in a highly televised battle over New York City where the helicarriers had risen from the harbor under the control of HYDRA from SHIELD’s old headquarters in Time Square. It had been a near thing, but with help from Coulson’s team and with Tony’s expertise in all things technological, they’d managed to hack the Insight algorithm and turn the massive ships on each other. Before they could complete their mission and decimate the world’s population, the helicarriers had ended up as smoking heaps of wreckage mostly contained in the harbor.

Still, the loss of life, both for HYDRA and the civilians caught in the crossfire, and the damage done to the city had been significant. In the wake, the support the Avengers had in times past enjoyed from the public and the US government alike had been lacking. SHIELD’s recent outing as evil and its less than graceful implosion had been mostly internal; the public didn’t know what had happened, only that the former allies of SHIELD and the Avengers were on opposite sides now. This seeming betrayal had shaken the foundation of world’s trust in its mightiest heroes. Unfortunately with HYDRA embedded in Congress as well as other branches of the media and government, there’d been very little in terms of concrete evidence of what Project: Insight had been meant to do. HYDRA controlled so much: secrets, information, resources, people. There was no way to prove anything, not that HYDRA existed or that SHIELD had simply been its cover, and conflicting theories and stories had swirled like a storm, building and building until no one knew what to believe. The facts were twisted around so badly that there was no clear story. Worse, without Captain America, the face and voice of the Avengers that the world trusted the most, to lead the team through battle and through the aftermath, doubt had absolutely soared. People had demanded to know where Steve Rogers had gone, why he hadn’t been there. If he was alright. If he’d approved of this battle which had cost hundreds of lives and millions of dollars or if his disappearance was a sign of dissolution within the Avengers. And Tony, bless his heart for shouldering this disaster, hadn’t been able to be truthful. His evasive answers had only fueled the fires of mistrust and dissension, and soon after, despite having saved the world again, the Avengers were hated and feared nearly as much as HYDRA was. Suddenly they were labeled as vigilantes, watchmen with no one overseeing them, wild cards that could mean as much harm as they meant good.

Things had only gotten worse after that. Steve had watched from afar, miserable, horrified, and frustrated, as HYDRA continued in its plots. Project: Insight had been stopped, but that had been only the first of many attempts by the evil regime to threaten the people of the world. This had clearly been planned for decades because HYDRA was so skillfully hidden in the layers of the world governments that the Avengers, even with all their power and strength, were seriously outgunned and completely outnumbered. Without the public’s support, they had met more resistance everywhere they went as they hunted down the dangerous items that had been stolen from the Fridge when it had been overrun. Locals had protested, going so far as to riot. Law enforcement had refused to aid the Avengers as they had in the past. And, with a man down, Tony was struggling to win these battles while protecting the people. That was always Steve’s area of expertise, his tactical mind guiding the team in keeping civilians safe while getting the job done, and without Captain America, Tony could barely keep his head above water. More than once, Steve had called Tony, told him he was coming back, that he couldn’t just hide and do nothing while his friends and family suffered through this. Tony had adamantly refused every time. HYDRA was everywhere, and he had JARVIS and Skye continually monitoring their movements across the globe. Viper was still looking for him, crawling country by country, throwing a ridiculous amount of resources and manpower into the hunt, and that was just what they could see. Everything else might be going to hell but this was one thing that absolutely would not: Tony would keep Steve and Sarah safe, no matter how bad it got. He was the one giving orders now, and he had flat-out ordered Steve to stay where he was.
That had hurt. It had killed him to watch helplessly as everything fell apart. Fight after fight going poorly, at least in the public’s perception. It was hard to tell what was the truth and what was spun to make Tony and the rest of the team look bad. And Tony was trying his hardest to salvage the situation. Steve had seen it on the news, a slew of Iron Man suits – the Iron Legion, the press was calling it – going into battle with the Avengers to try and reduce casualties while providing much needed support. It wasn’t always enough. A particularly bad scrape in South Africa against a team of HYDRA scientists had ended in utter disaster. Bruce had been exposed to some sort of hallucinogenic compound, and Iron Man and Thor had spent most of the fight trying to contain the Hulk while Black Widow and Hawkeye had struggled to shut down the lab. It had almost been a complete disaster. Thankfully, no one had been seriously hurt, but the damage had once again been astronomical. And the unending footage proliferating across the internet and social media of the enraged Hulk running wild on a rampage had put the proverbial nail in the coffin of the Avengers’ efforts. That had been six months ago, and it was the last time the team had fought together.

Tony’s words echoed through his head now. They did a lot, because even still, so long after the team had failed, he couldn’t let it go. “No matter what, you stay safe. You stay where you are. I know you’re a soldier, and you feel like you need to fight, but I can’t risk you, Steve. Not you and not her. Stay where you are!” This was Steve’s fault. The more he thought about it (and being as alone as he was, he thought about it a lot), the more he was certain of it. Sarah was his daughter. HYDRA was his old enemy. Viper was after him. The woman was obsessed, and he had a feeling she’d stop at nothing to get him back. That had forced him to run, which had left the team in the lurch, left Tony to suffer and struggle, and he felt like a coward and a traitor for doing it. He didn’t care what Tony said. He should have found a way to stop this, to help them somehow. Left Sarah with his friends and surrendered himself. It would have killed him (and her), but he was what Viper wanted. If he’d just done that, exchanged himself for Sarah’s safety and the end of the aggressions against the Avengers… Maybe this would all have gone differently.

“Dan?”

Once again, it took him a second to remember that that was who he was now. Daniel Cleary. Bucky’s mother’s maiden name and his own mother’s brother, who’d died in Ireland before she’d come to the States. He figured no one would put that together with him; the only reason he’d known about his uncle was his mother’s old Bible with her family tree in it (sadly, he didn’t even know what had happened to that after he’d been lost during the war), and Bucky’s parents had been married in the old country, so there’d likely be no record of her maiden name here. It seemed as good a cover as any. Steve Rogers was far too notorious. He’d been lucky no one had recognized his face, though he’d grown a full beard and let his hair get longer (which always made it look less blond at least to him). He’d also stopped dressing so like him, searching thrift stores to find well-worn clothes more suited to a laborer, a simple guy who’d picked the wrong woman with whom to have a fling and who’d gotten stuck with a little girl by whom he was trying to do right. That story had worked for him when they’d been running across the country, so there didn’t seem to be a good reason to abandon it. Besides, Natasha always told him the most convincing lies had a shred of truth to them, so there was that, too (only the woman who’d mothered this child with him hadn’t done it in any way remotely resembling the traditional approach, and she’d done it against his will. Furthermore, she was a twisted psychopath, the great granddaughter of his worst enemy, and apparently at the head of the worst, most vicious, and most evil organization this world had ever seen, but why split hairs?). Shoving those bitter thoughts down, he made himself focus. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“You seem like you’re a million miles away,” Aiden said. He gave a weak smile. “You’re not still thinking about her, are you? Because she’s not worth it.”

*Which “her” do you mean?* Steve managed a grin. “No.”
“Good. Let her go, man. You always get this look in your eye when get all sad about her. Stop carrying her torch.”

“I know.”

“Right. So whaddya say, then?”

They finished walking back to the other men. “About what?”

“Dude, you’re terrible at listening. Tonight. Going out and getting a drink.” Steve turned away to hide his dismay. Aiden was a good guy, but he sure was persistent. It was hard saying “no” to everything all the time. Ever since he’d demonstrated himself as a valuable member of the logging team (and they didn’t even know half of what he could do), they’d really opened up to him and the invitations had commenced. Drinking, mostly. He got the impression that that was what most of these guys did in their free time, hitting the bars in Colburn every Friday night (probably more frequently than that, but that was when they typically invited him). Most of them were single, although a few were married or divorced with kids of their own, and getting positively hammered after a hard week’s of work seemed to be their preferred past time. He always turned down their offers. It wasn’t that he was concerned about getting drunk, which was impossible for him (so he’d have to fake that as well if he did join them). It was mostly that, as much as these guys seemed decent and on the level, he couldn’t be sure they were. All of them, Aiden and Hammond and Sully and Tim O’Malley and Ray Sawa and the lot, seemed like nice guys, rough and tumble and unrefined, but he couldn’t be sure. As long as that was the case, there was no sense in taking the risk.

Unfortunately, Aiden seemed to think the world of him. Steve had done his best to keep to himself these last few months, to be quiet, unobtrusive, and to work hard, but he’d still attracted a few people who very obviously wanted to be his friend, Aiden included. Tony would have made some sort of joke about his magnetic personality or ridiculous good looks. As it was, he just wanted to keep his head down, because this couldn’t last forever. He kept promising Sarah that, even though it had been long enough now that she didn’t clearly remember the home they used to have or the people she used to love. We’ll go home one day.

It terrified him, but this was starting to become home. And maybe it was more suspicious to be so closed in and withdrawn than anything at this point. They’d been living here a year. He’d been working alongside this team for almost all that time, and he was barely on a first name basis with most of them. Perhaps he was being overly cautious, overly paranoid, but he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t trust anymore.

Aiden stepped closer, sighing and shaking his head in disapproval. “Listen, before you say ‘no’ this time, just think about it, huh? One night away’s not gonna be the end of the world. All you do is work and take care of your kid.”

That was true enough. “I feel bad enough leaving her alone during the day as it is,” Steve replied. And that was true, too. He felt horrible about it after everything that had happened. But he’d needed to work. He couldn’t rely on Tony’s help, because it wasn’t right, it wasn’t wise, and it wasn’t a sure thing. Nothing would look stranger than a guy and his daughter spending every waking moment of every day together, somehow surviving without bringing in a dime of their own income. “I just… I ca–”

“Yes, you can,” Aiden corrected. “C’mon. It’s Friday. No work tomorrow. No nothing. Come out with us for just a coupla hours. It’ll do you some good. You know, have a few drinks, a few laughs… Check the girls out at the bar, who are smoking hot, by the way.” Steve smiled good-naturedly. Aiden did, too. “If you need someone to babysit, my sister’s got three of her own. And
she’s been dying to meet you guys.” Aiden lived with his brother and his family, and Steve cringed to think of the guy telling stories about him over dinner. The urge to run came unbidden; it always did when someone got too close inadvertently (it was inadvertent, not some piece of a grand conspiracy to trick him into letting his guard down and revealing himself – it had to be). He swallowed down his apprehension, hoping none of that suspicion had gotten to his face. He didn’t think it had. Tony would be shocked at how good of a liar he’d become. “We’re all going. And you’ll be home in no time. Come on.”

Steve donned a smile, figuring if it seemed forced that would be okay. It was forced, just not for the reasons Aiden (or anyone else) realized. “Okay. Let me think about it,” he promised with absolutely no intention of doing that.

Still, Aiden was satisfied, clasping Steve on the shoulder. “Cleary! Dupree!” Hammond yelled, and Steve could have kissed him for unknowingly saving him from having to come up with another excuse. “Get your asses in gear! I ain’t paying you to stand around and chat!”

The rest of the day went by slowly. Steve worked hard; acting like things were more arduous than they actually were was second nature now. The sky clouded up and it started raining a little, which nicely hid the fact he wasn’t sweating even with all of the cutting, lifting, and clearing. He was thinking all the while, mostly about how to extricate himself yet again from having to go out with the guys without being rude or suspicious. He spent a lot of time trying to do that nowadays. Finding ways to be nobody that stuck out yet somebody who fit in. He’d been relying fairly heavily on everything he’d learned from Natasha and Clint on undercover missions for SHIELD. He’d seen them slip in and out of situations so easily, donning this cover or that persona. Some part of him was a little bothered by how good he’d gotten at it (or proficient at least), because lying and hiding fairly well went against the grain of everything he was. The new him, though, the new Steve Rogers who couldn’t be Captain America… That man would do anything to protect his child, and this was the price he needed to pay. So he turned it over in his head as he lifted logs and pulled branches and cleared paths for the bigger machinery to go deeper into the woods. Some of the larger trees he helped cut, the chainsaw steady in his hands, sawdust and wood particles coating his wet jeans and jacket. The buzzing of the machine in his hands all too clearly mimicked the whirring in his head, spinning thoughts that went nowhere, that never went anywhere except the undeniable truth: isolation was the only way he could keep Sarah safe.

Five o’clock finally lumbered to them, and Steve really hadn’t come up with a valid reason not to go. Thankfully, Aiden was talking loudly with Sully, who was a gregarious guy with a booming voice and an endless supply of crude jokes, so Steve was able to slip away to his truck unnoticed. He walked along the muddy road, leaves still clinging to him, and let himself sigh. Aiden hadn’t followed him. None of the guys had. He felt like a jerk, a really rotten one, for continually acting like this, but this was what it was. He threw his gear into the passenger seat, turned the car on, and headed off before anyone could stop him.

It only took about thirty minutes to get from the logging site to the place that had unceremoniously become home. His path took him through Colburn. It was little more than a few streets lined with simple businesses: some stores, a post office, that old hotel, a couple of bars and restaurants. Some other little establishments. The elementary and high schools, clustered together. A little one-screen movie theater. Enough places to make a few simple streets into a town. Trees still thick with autumn foliage lined the roads, burning red, orange, and yellow in the setting sun, and Steve had to admit it was pretty, this little corner of the world, even if everything always felt a little dull and dark to him now. He followed the path he’d long memorized, driving across the iron bridge that went over a small river, turning left at a stop light, and heading deeper into the forest. It turned a little hillier here, the truck rumbling as he drove along the narrow road that led to a few houses. The second to the last one on the left, a little cottage with a small pond behind it, was his.
It wasn’t much of a place, but it was enough. There were two bedrooms upstairs, his and Sarah’s, and a decently sized bathroom with a shower and a tub. Downstairs there was a small living area with a wood burning stove, a kitchen with old appliances and laminate everything, a dinette, and a tiny closet of another bathroom. It was a little tight, but it was all he could afford. He refused to rely on whatever Tony sent him to make ends meet (the money, along with all his weapons and his StarkPhone, he stored under his bed in the floorboards for an emergency). This lifestyle had taken a little getting used to after coming from the extravagance of Stark Tower where his and Sarah’s suite alone had been two or even three times as big as the entire house in terms of square footage, where their every need and want had been fulfilled perfectly. Here things were colder, poorer, more rundown. Once he’d acclimated, though, he was more reminded of his own childhood, of cramped quarters and making do with what was available. His mother had done it for years, succeeded with even less than this. So he could do it, too, and he did.

He’d made a habit of coming back home first to check things out before getting Sarah. It was a cursory sweep; once upon a time he’d done a more thorough assessment, investigating the woods beyond as well as the house, but nowadays he relied a tad more on instinct and Belle. She was right there, in fact, when Steve jabbed the key into the lock of the front door. “Hey, girl,” he mumbled, pausing to let the dog greet him. She was big, some sort of cross between a lab and something with more fur (a golden retriever, maybe? But darker in coloring). The first thing Steve had done after they’d settled in this place was get Sarah a dog. His reasoning had been two-fold. Practically, he’d needed another set of eyes, and dogs could be phenomenal protectors. He’d seen it during the war, acting as sentries and scouts for the army, protecting civilian houses to the death in the towns of northern Italy and France. More than that, though, Sarah had been so sad and terrified, even in the weeks after they’d stopped running. Seeing her transform from such a gregarious, open, loving child to this withdrawn shadow of her former self killed him inside. The trauma she’d been through, having been kidnapped to lure Steve into HYDRA’s clutches, had been significant. She was too young to know why, to understand who her mother was. Steve hadn’t told her. One day he would need to, but first he had to find some peace with it himself. All that aside, Sarah been so miserable that he hadn’t thought twice. Making good on his promise to get her a puppy was the only thing that made sense. So they’d gone together to the county pound, picked one from a litter of mutts, and Sarah had held the puppy all the way home, smiling brightly the whole time. Of course she’d named her Belle; Steve had bought her a few books and things, which had rekindled her interest in all things princess, and Steve had been glad to see that. It had reminded him of how things used to be not so long ago. A girl name for a girl puppy. It simultaneously made everything feel so close yet so far away.

Belle licked his hands before jumping up to lick at his face. Steve let her do it a moment, petting her. “Everything okay today?” He asked this every day, every time they came back in fact. Not that Belle could answer, but the mere fact she was here and excited to see him always put his mind at ease. There were other things he checked, too. The locks on the windows. The panes of them. He inspected every one of them. The locks on the doors, front and back. He’d gotten rather compulsive, making sure to leave things a certain way every morning, books stacked in particular way and the dishes arranged on the kitchen counter and Sarah’s toys spread just so on the small living room floor. The throw folded in a specific manner on the couch. His eidetic memory took a perfect picture of every detail when he left in the morning, and he compared that to what he saw now. Nothing was amiss. It was safe. He always breathed a sigh of relief at that.

Then he took Belle outside, where she took care of her business and played in the newly fallen autumn leaves for a few minutes. Steve always spent a minute here, too, listening and looking around the woods surrounding their house. The pond was further down, along a little path in the forest, and he could just barely see that the glassy surface of the water that was still now that the rain had stopped. It was completely quiet. That always comforted and unnerved him. Like the strange
relationship he’d developed with time, he’d come into another odd understanding of silence. Silence meant no one was coming. Or it meant he couldn’t hear the people coming. Steve watched a moment more as Belle sniffed around outside before deciding that this was the same stupid, paranoid, pessimistic garbage he thought every day and heading back in the house. It was probably ridiculous (“overkill”, Tony and Clint would say), but he took another mental picture of everything before fishing his keys out of his pocket and heading to the front door. “Come on,” he gestured to Belle, opening it for her. She gleefully went loping out to the beat-up pickup truck while Steve locked up. Then he joined her inside, gave her another grateful pet for keeping an eye on things, and started the car again.

Milly Norton’s was just a little down the road even deeper into the woods. As secluded and embraced by trees as their little place was, hers was even more so, and one could barely see it from the road. He didn’t feel like trying to navigate the disaster of her windy, narrow driveway, so he parked on the side of the road and glanced at Belle. “Back in a minute. You know the drill. Bark if anyone’s comin’, yeah?” The dog tipped her head, friendly eyes seemingly darkening with purpose, and Steve smiled.

His boots crunched on the gravel of Milly’s driveway as he walked up to the old house. This one was slightly bigger than his and maybe in better shape. It was flanked by burning maples, red and golden, and taller oaks that were turning brown and barren. He barely made it to the porch before the creaky, old screen door was opening. “Daddy!” Sarah cried. Like she did every afternoon, she came bounding at him, her little backpack jiggling up and down as she did. He caught her before she could jump too high or too far, tucking her tightly into his chest. “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Hi, baby girl,” he said. Her hair had come loose of its braid, thick, blond, and curly. It reminded him so much of his mother, the way her hair had always looked. Her blue eyes. The shape of her face. He always focused on that, on his mother in Sarah, on him in her, because if he looked too hard, he saw Viper, and that was still too painful to accept. He kissed her temple, jiggling her a little as she giggled. “Have a good day?”

“Yeah, Daddy!”

Milly was right there. She was a nice, old lady, widowed and alone in the world. She owned the house in which they were living. After Steve had found a job, he’d realized he couldn’t make any sort of life (for as long as this was their life) for Sarah living out of a hotel room. He’d located Milly’s ad in the paper; she was looking to rent out the additional house she owned on the corner of the huge acreage of property she and her husband owned. With him having recently passed away and her sons having moved, it was too much for her to handle alone. Steve had contacted her, found her extremely tender, loving, and caring, and he’d almost immediately agreed to rent the place. Almost. As much as he felt like a jerk for doing it, he’d spent a couple of days putting all the espionage skills he’d learned from Natasha, Clint, and his time as a SHIELD agent to good use, tailing the old woman, trying to find out what he could about her from the town’s public records and newspaper archives. There wasn’t much. She’d been born in Portland. Her father had been a GI serving in Italy during the war (he didn’t recognize the name, so he’d probably never met him). She’d worked as a nurse in her youth before marrying her husband. He’d been something of a famous logger, a union guy, and he’d inherited this land from his father. Two sons who’d gone onto bigger places and better things. Her husband had died of a heart attack. There was nothing suspect. She’d considered calling Tony to have him dig deeper to vet her, but there didn’t seem to be a reason to. She was what one would expect of a grandmother: salt and pepper hair swept into a bun, plump face and hands weathered by long years of housework, sweet and compassionate. He couldn’t imagine she was HYDRA.

But, then again, he’d been wrong about that before.
Still, he hadn’t been this time. Milly had taken to them like a mother cat finding some lost kittens. She’d immediately offered to help them, to cook for them, to help take care of Sarah. Steve hadn’t wanted the charity, hadn’t wanted to trust so deeply again, but he’d realized a few weeks into trying to work that he needed it. His job was too dangerous to bring his daughter with him. Daycare was prohibitively expensive (he had no idea how people handled paying for it), and even if he’d had that kind of extra money, he didn’t trust some random strangers to care for Sarah. He wouldn’t have before, and he especially didn’t now. Milly, on the other hand, didn’t have a malignant bone in her body, and she was very good with Sarah. Sarah liked her, too. Seeing that was all he’d needed to be convinced. He’d ended up taking Milly up on her offer, paying her a little more each month in rent to watch Sarah when he worked. Her place was close to home as well, which made the arrangement even more appealing.

“How was your day, Daniel?” Milly asked. She had a particular tone to her voice and a “we need to talk” look in her eyes.

“Fine, thanks,” he responded worriedly. “What happened?”

Milly stared at Sarah, and now the look turned strictly admonishing, so much so that even Steve felt ashamed and he didn’t even know what was going on. “Your daughter climbed the oak in the backyard.” Steve’s face was lax in shock and alarm and his blood went cold, though not for the reasons Milly surely thought. She was already going on in her tale. “I was raking, and she was drawing on the deck – she has such talent, Daniel, though that’s neither here nor there… And I turned my head for a moment or two to answer the phone, and the next thing I know she’s up in the tree! I nearly had a heart attack! I have no idea how she got up there! The lowest branch is easily six feet off the ground!”

Lord. “Sarah,” Steve said sternly. Sarah just buried her face in Steve’s neck, gripping his coat tighter.

Milly was flushed and flustered with the memory. Of course that had been terrifying. She didn’t know Sarah had the super soldier serum in her body. She didn’t know that Sarah could climb that tree, the whole thing, and probably not even struggle with it. She didn’t know that falling probably wouldn’t have hurt her. She didn’t know. No one did. And Steve desperately wanted to keep that a secret, even more so than he wanted to keep his own powers one. “I nearly called you. Heavens, Daniel, I thought for sure I was going to need to get the police or the fire department…” That was infinitely more terrifying. “But she got herself down, thank God.”

Steve breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t know what to say. “Sorry,” he finally offered.

Milly looked on him kindly. “It’s alright. Just nearly put an old lady in her grave, is all.” That didn’t make him feel one lick better. “Daniel, I don’t meant to pry, but I think you’d do well to find her a mother.” This wasn’t the first time she’d mentioned it. Milly was many things, but subtle was not one of them. He sighed, blushing and wincing. “Children run wild without mothers. She needs one, same as any other. And I know you’re doing your best, my dear, but…” She leaned closer, conspiratorially, like she didn’t want Sarah to hear. “Girls sometimes need a female influence in their lives.”

Steve grimaced, not wanting to talk about this. “I know.”

“It’s been a year. Don’t you think it’s time you moved on? I’d be more than happy to watch Sarah for an evening.”

What is it today? “You make it sound so easy,” he said with a little, nervous laugh, shifting Sarah in his arms.
Milly’s face turned even more sympathetic. “She left you, and it’s her loss, my dear. You shouldn’t punish yourself for it. You’re a handsome young man with a beautiful, smart little girl. Surely there’s a woman somewhere who wants that.” You have no idea. Milly was perceptive and promptly changed the subject at Steve’s crestfallen expression. “And speaking of beautiful and smart… Did you know Sarah’s reading? Reading at four! My word. And not just simple picture books. Whole sentences. Paragraphs even!”

Again, Steve cringed inwardly, shifting Sarah against him anew and knowing where this was going and not liking it any more than the tree fiasco or the advice on his love life. “Yeah, we’ve been working on it together. Right, Sarah?” Sarah nodded. “She picks it up like a sponge.”

“Children are like that,” Milly agreed. “Young minds thrive with attention and flourish with stability.”

Discomfort left Steve feeling tingly with the pent-up need to move. “Well, I hate to cut this short, but we need to be going. Gotta get some stuff from the store before Stan closes it up for the day.”

“Oh, of course. Sorry.” She handed Steve Sarah’s coat and hat. “You will come over for dinner on Sunday, right? I do enjoy having someone to cook for.”

Steve smiled. As much as it made him uncomfortable sometimes, it was nice to eat a meal with real company, and Milly was a great cook (even if she kept shoveling food onto his plate, and he had to fake like he didn’t want it to seem normal and polite even though with his enhanced metabolism he definitely did). “Sure. Thanks, Milly.”

She kissed his cheek, patting it afterward in a once again motherly fashion. He wondered what she would think if she knew he was old enough to have known her father. He wondered a lot about these simple folk who were blissfully ignorant of just how dark and damaged the world was. But he only smiled and told Sarah to say goodbye before carrying her out to his truck.

Belle was wagging her tail like crazy. The dog was extremely close to Sarah (and Sarah was to her, as well), so when Steve opened the passenger door of the truck to strap her in, Belle was immediately showering her with kisses. Steve finished getting her into her booster seat before walking around to the driver’s side. It was turning chilly and gray as the sun set, and it was starting to drizzle again. The cold seemed to seep right through his clothes and skin and settle in his bones. He stood there a moment, feeling lost and hopeless, before gathering up his composure and sliding into the driver’s seat.

Sarah was watching him. She’d changed so much in the last year. Some of it was the serum, of course. She was only four, but she seemed much older. She was reading. And writing. And drawing. And running faster and climbing higher, so much stronger than other kids. Next year she’d probably need to start attending school, and he didn’t know how he was going to deal with that. It wasn’t even just the serum that had changed her. She’d lost so much innocence. That trusting toddler who’d sung Frozen with Thor and played dolls with Clint and looked over science books with Bruce and snuggled with Tony… She was gone, replaced by a child who was afraid a lot. She’d been scarred by what had happened and what was happening still, scarred at her tender age, and Steve knew children were resilient, but out here the two of them were so alone. Getting Belle had helped, but it hadn’t magically fixed the problem. Thriving and flourishing. She needed more than he could give her like this. Safety was one thing, and he wasn’t even sure about that. Stability was fleeting. This was her world, as small as it was. The few people Steve knew and trusted. Milly and their small home and a dog. But if even a hint of a threat came their way… He’d run again, disrupting the meager peace they’d managed to sustain.

That was why they couldn’t take chance. He looked over at his daughter, his heart aching so much
for her having to go through this. He didn’t want to give her this lecture again, but he had to. So much of his life had become that of late. I have to. No choice. “Sarah,” he started. She stared out the window, but he could see her eyes glimmering wetly in the reflection in the glass. He sighed. “We talked about this. You can’t do things like that.” Sarah’s lower lip came out in a pout, and it was trembling a little. “You can’t climb trees and jump high and… and read like that. You can’t.”

“But I can,” she responded softly. “I can. And I wanted to see the squirrels. It was too hard to draw them on the deck. I wanted to see them.”

Steve jabbed his teeth into his lower lip until it hurt. How could he make her understand? He had said it before, many times, but she was only four. Maybe she was smart and perceptive, enhanced by the serum and naturally sharp, but four was still only a child. “You remember what I told you, right?” She finally looked at him, cornflower blue eyes intense and questioning. “You and me… We’re not like other people. We’re not better, but we’re just… not like them.”

“Why?”

She’d asked him that every time they’d had this talk. Why. And he still didn’t have a good answer. He couldn’t explain to her about Doctor Erskine and the super soldier serum and HYDRA and the SSR. He couldn’t tell her about Captain America. He didn’t trust that she wouldn’t repeat it. It was miserable, knowing you were different from everyone else but not understanding it. He knew it well. It was the opposite of how he’d been as child, as she was blessed with too much strength and vitality rather than facing all the health problems he’d had, but the outcome was still the same: being told you couldn’t when you knew you could. “I’ve got something in my blood that makes me strong. It’s in your blood, too, because you’re my daughter.” My daughter. Not hers. Not HYDRA’s. “And there are people who might hurt us if anyone finds out. That’s why we’re hiding.”

Her eyes welled with tears again. He’d seen that too much over the last year, and he hated himself for it. Her happy life, filled with love and toys and treats and constancy, ripped away and replaced with fear, chaos, and loneliness. He shook himself free of those thoughts and leaned across the front seat, Belle trapped between them. “Hey, baby girl. It’s alright. This isn’t going to be forever. And I’m going to keep us safe, okay? You just need to remember to keep it secret. That’s all. There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“You’re scared, Daddy,” she reminded.

Steve didn’t have anything to say to that, instead stroking her mussed blond hair from her face with a sad smile on his face. “C’mere.” She unstrapped her seatbelt and climbed across the seat and over Belle to clamber into his lap. He kissed her head as her arms snaked around his chest. They sat like that for a while. Steve closed his eyes, keeping Sarah tight to him, trying not to think. This was what they had to do to be safe. Safe.

After a bit, he put her back into her seat, strapped her in again, put his own seatbelt on, and they drove to the store. Sarah perked up at that; she liked the store, and Steve let her fill the cart with anything she wanted. Normally he was more careful about what they spent, partly because it wasn’t wise to waste money in their situation and partly because austerity was actually becoming a familiar comfort to him, but he made an exception today. Sarah got ice cream and cookies, and together they picked some things for dinner that week, some of her favorites. He let her buy some new colored pencils, stickers, and drawing paper. On the way home with their load of groceries, they talked about hiking up to the stream not too far from their house tomorrow. There was a little hill there that gave a really pretty view of the surrounding forest. It was perfect for sketching. Maybe they’d go exploring a little further, pack a lunch and make a day of it…

By the time they got back home, Sarah was smiling again, petting Belle and chatting more excitedly
about things. Steve smiled, too, and relaxed into the afternoon, happy to hear her happy. He turned onto the long driveway that led up to their house and stopped the car in front of it.

He immediately froze.

The front door was open. Not wide open, but cracked, like someone had purposefully left it that way. He spotted it instantly, and his heart started pounding. Sarah didn’t notice, reaching down to unstrap herself before going for the door handle. “No,” he ordered. She turned to him. “No. Stay here.”

“Dad–”

“Stay,” Steve repeated forcefully. “Stay with Belle. Get down so no one can see you. Don’t get out of the car.” Sarah’s eyes went wide at his tone, and she nodded, tugging Belle closer to her and sliding down between the dashboard and the front seat. Steve drew a deep breath and stepped out of the truck. The option of simply running flashed across his mind, but… If someone was after them, looking to capture them, why leave the front door open? It only signaled that something was amiss. HYDRA would know better, would know that he’d notice that and bolt, which meant it was more likely to be something – someone – else.

Someone else it was. Steve crept up the porch, muscles loose and stance ready for a fight. He glanced out to the truck once and he could barely see Sarah’s blue eyes peeking out from below the dash. Sucking in another breath, he pushed open the screen door and then the ajar front door behind it.

A slender figure, distinctively feminine, stood in the living room. The woman had her back to him, looking around at Sarah’s art where it was hanging on the wall. She was dressed in a dark wool coat, gray leggings, and knee-high black leather boots. A charcoal gray cap adorned her head. For a moment, Steve’s mind filled him with nothing but fear. Viper. But it was only a moment. He spotted red hair beneath the cap, draping down the woman’s neck, and when the screen door creaked ever so slightly as it closed, she turned.

Relief and surprise left Steve reeling. “Nat, what’re you doing here?”

Natasha smiled that smile of hers, the one he was pretty sure she gave only him, and she was across the small distance between them in two huge strides. Before he even knew what was happening, she was against him, her arms around his neck, her mouth hot on his as she kissed him. Whatever else he’d meant to say was trapped in his throat, dying a happy, humming death as she held him tight and kissed him harder and deeper. Every nerve in his body rushed to life, warm and tingling, and he wrapped his arms around her. She pulled away far too soon, burying her face into the side of his neck. “Missed you.”

God, he’d missed her, too. “You can’t keep doing this,” he whimpered into her hair. It was a half-hearted objection, one completely belied by the heat in his body and the desire in his voice. “This is the fourth time in six months! You can’t keep–” The rest of his words ended in a muffled groan as she kissed him again. It was absolutely possessive, and he surrendered completely, kissing her back with abandon. She took his breath away, quite literally in fact, and when he opened hazy eyes to look down on her, she was beautiful. White skin and plush pink lips and russet curls falling out from beneath her hat. Warm and fervent. “You can’t keep doing this.”

“Sure, I can,” she returned.

He shook his head, flabbergasted. “You’re not staying.”
“Sure, I am.”

“Nat–”

She grinned flirtatiously. “You need a shower, lumberjack. You’re covered.” She wiped her hands down his shirt under his jacket, brushing away the sawdust he hadn’t even noticed before. He flushed with embarrassment and desire in equal parts. “I do kinda like the look, though.” She pulled him down for another kiss.

By now, Sarah had seen who had come to visit. Steve heard the car door open and shut. He heaved a disapproving sigh against Natasha’s lips at his daughter’s disobedience. Natasha grinned wickedly and kissed the corner of his mouth before quickly heading out the front door, the thing banging loudly in her wake. “Sarah!”

“Tasha! You’re back!” Steve turned to see his daughter bounding across the leaves, Belle bouncing beside her. Sarah was laughing and smiling, and Natasha crouched to grab the little girl. She stood, lifting Sarah with her and settling her on her hip, holding a hand out to Belle to allow the dog to sniff her and reacquaint herself with her scent. “You came back!”

“Of course I did,” Natasha turned, kissing Sarah’s head. “*Malyutka*, did Daddy let you go out with your hair like this?”

“Uh-huh. He tried to braid it.”

Natasha glanced over her shoulder at Steve, her lips curved into a smirk. “Well, I think I can do it for you.”

“Are you going to stay a while?” Sarah immediately asked.

Steve shook his head, wincing. “Nat, I don’t think–”

“The weekend again.”

So much for trying to be stern (or in control of this situation). Sarah’s face absolutely lit up, and that was that. If there’d been any chance of sending Natasha away for everyone’s safety before, it was gone now. Steve sighed, shaking his head as he watched his daughter and his girlfriend (there was no denying it – that was what Natasha was at this point) unload the groceries from his truck. Sarah was babbling and skipping and going on about her adventures in the tree that day, and Natasha was smiling widely. She caught his gaze again, lifting her eyebrows at him, and he couldn’t help but smile, too. With the setting sun breaking through the clouds, it set her skin aglow and her hair ablaze with rich color and her eyes were shining and beautiful…

Suddenly, as it always did when Natasha came to them, their lonely world seemed just a bit brighter.

Chapter End Notes

*malyutka* – little one
Chapter Notes

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Thanks for all the comments and support, everyone! Well, this got longer than I anticipated. Here's some angsty fluff (or fluffy angst). Poor Steve and Sarah. They really do need Natasha. Also, special thanks to vbprodz for letting me be inspired by this gorgeous piece of art. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While Steve showered and cleaned up, Natasha cooked. It occurred to him as he stood in the scalding hot spray that he hadn’t let himself enjoy a lazy shower in a long, long time. He was always rushing through getting ready, both because he alone was in charge of getting Sarah and himself out the door in time for work every morning and because he was always afraid if he permitted himself a lax, selfish moment, something bad would happen. Someone would attack them while his guard was down. Someone would come for them and he wouldn’t be ready to stop it. It was probably ridiculous, but hypervigilance was a hold-out from their time on the run that he couldn’t seem to shake. Maybe it was good he didn’t. He knew Natasha could take care of herself (could probably take care of him, too, better than he could), but having her there always heightened his need to be careful. Logically he knew Sarah was safer with two Avengers (well, one Avenger and one… whatever he was now) there to guard her, but in his heart, it felt like he had twice the responsibility. Someone else he loved deeply who was being endangered because of him. Therefore, he spent all of thirty seconds letting himself relax before rushing through washing off the sweat and dirt from the day’s work, drying himself off, and getting dressed with militaristic speed and precision.

When he was done, he headed back downstairs. He could hear Sarah and Natasha talking while they made spaghetti. Natasha was standing in front of the stove, stirring something, and Sarah was right next to her on the little step stool Steve had bought her so she could help him bake and cook. He watched them a moment, Natasha describing how to mix the sauce just so, Sarah responding that that wasn’t the way her father made it, and Natasha explaining that her way was just different but still alright. Sarah wasn’t convinced, making a face. He couldn’t help the warmth that came over him. How complete he felt whenever Natasha came. The looming misery of isolation, of having left all of his old life behind, wasn’t so sharp or painful. She was here with him and with Sarah, and he couldn’t help but think it could all be okay like this.

Of course, that didn’t negate the fact that what they’d been doing wasn’t wise. Or safe. He should have known there’d be no way he could hide from a spy as skilled and powerful as Black Widow. A few months after he’d settled here, just when the pain of it all had started to become overpowering, she’d shown up at his door like she’d known exactly where he’d been all this time and was only now choosing to visit. He remembered the moment so clearly. Late on a snowy night right before Christmas, he and Sarah had been getting ready for bed. The depression of facing the holidays like this, so far from their family, had been hitting them hard, particularly Sarah. She’d also been going through a rather rough bout of nightmares from her ordeal. She didn’t seem to recall the particulars of what had happened when she’d been kidnapped, but her bad dreams were persistent and always focused on one thing: being taken from her father. That had only compounded their already low spirits, so when there’d been a tentative knock on the front door, Steve’s mind had immediately leapt to the worst case imaginable. HYDRA. Viper. He’d gotten a gun and sent Sarah to hide in the downstairs closet, imploring her to stay calm and quiet. She had, crying silently as he’d crept to the
front of the house, weapon ready, heart pounding, brain not even processing the fact that if it was their enemies arriving to capture them, why in the world would they knock? He’d peered out the peep hole into the snow and found he couldn’t have been more wrong about who’d been there.

And he couldn’t have been more surprised when he’d opened the door. Natasha’s name had fled his lips on an alarmed breath. They’d stared at each other, him in shock and her in relief, for what felt like an eternity, blanketed by cold and snow. *Natasha was there. Natasha had come.* Without a word she’d pulled him to her and kissed him and kissed him.

Apparently she’d somehow hacked JARVIS (lord, Tony would be beside himself if he knew that she’d managed to defeat his security measures. Steve still didn’t understand how, even though she’d explained it to him a couple of times now. Suffice it to say Natasha was a lot smarter and more resourceful than anyone realized). With Tony’s AI eating out of her palm, she’d been able to track the money Tony had wired to one Daniel Cleary, realized through her own research that this person didn’t exist beyond the surface validity of a cursory background check, and that had been that. She’d found him. With the Avengers essentially grounded, all but finished in the eyes of public, she’d thrown caution to the wind, slipped into the shadows, and made her way out west.

That had been six months ago. Since then, she’d come back as much and as often as she felt was reasonable while still eluding detection. Steve tended to think *nothing* was safe, and no matter how much he wanted her there with him, how much he needed her like a man thirsting for water while stranded in a desert, this wasn’t smart. If HYDRA was tracking the Avengers (which Tony thought was likely, hence why he’d kept his distance and communications to a bare minimum), they could use Natasha to find him. That was terrifying for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which being the threat to Natasha herself. Even if she was careful and Viper’s spies couldn’t determine exactly where she’d gone, all it would take was them discovering she was regularly disappearing to make her a target. HYDRA didn’t know about their relationship, but anyone with half a brain could connect the dots. Captain America seemingly vanishes and Black Widow regularly and repeatedly leaves for destinations unknown only to return a few days later. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what that meant. The first night she’d been to their house she and Steve had argued about that, and Steve had insisted she *not* come back. It was too dangerous, too risky. She hadn’t disagreed but had rather obstinately decided the risk was entirely worth it, that he and Sarah shouldn’t have to suffer out here alone and cut off from everyone who loved them, constantly afraid for their lives. If he didn’t want her coming, he’d have to go on the run again because now that she knew where they were, he couldn’t keep her away. And she was right. Nothing Steve could say or do made her see reason, though lately his attempts were always half-hearted at best because part of him definitely *did not want* her to stop. She was stubborn, determined to be there for him, to come to him as she knew he needed, and he didn’t have the strength to dissuade her.

And it wasn’t just Steve who needed her. Natasha and Sarah had already grown so close just from these few painfully short visits. Natasha represented a bridge to the life Sarah had had before, to the people who used to be there for her day in and day out. Sarah was so young that the details of who they’d been and where they’d lived were escaping her, but enough of them remained that Natasha could continue to foster that connection. The others didn’t know it, but Natasha was bringing all their love, their wishes and cares and hopes, with her every time she came. Sarah flourished in it even if she didn’t exactly realize it or know why. Suddenly she’d started drawing these pictures she had in her head, brought to life by the memories and stories Natasha told. Tony and Pepper. Thor. Clint and Bruce. Tony’s workshop. His bots. Iron Man. Thor’s hammer. Captain America’s shield. Stark Tower. At first Steve had been more horrified than relieved by it; if anyone saw her drawing these things, these *people*, they’d recognize them in a heartbeat. If anyone heard her talk about it, it would mean disaster. But at Natasha’s gentle prodding, he’d let this one fear go, let Sarah enjoy these memories. Now she adorned their house in drawings, in images of the life they’d left before. It helped them both remember who they were. It helped it feel like home and not a safe
There was more, as well. Natasha was helping Sarah deal with her anxieties. Again, this wasn’t an outward thing. It was quiet and unassuming, but the sadness and tension that seemed to dominate Sarah’s demeanor all but disappeared when Natasha was there. Natasha was so calm, so strong and unwavering, and Sarah was immediately drawn to that. Before SHIELD’s collapse, Natasha had been close to Sarah, but not like she was now. Now there was something deeper there, something intrinsic and sweet. Sarah looked up to her, idolized her, loved her even more than she had before, and that precious bond had formed nearly instantly. It was easy to see why. Natasha was a symbol of things outside their tiny, lonely world where their insecurities and fears festered, where their bad memories and worries were too close on most days. She was an escape, a fun, loving, and exciting one. And that seemed to go both ways. Steve could hardly believe it sometimes, how far Natasha had come since he’d first brought Sarah home to Stark Tower as a newborn four years ago. Back then Natasha had been wary, reluctant, pained by and resentful of the fact that Sarah represented something she herself could never have thanks to the cruelties of the Red Room. This whole experience had been very cathartic for her in a way, somehow healing a pain with which she’d unknowingly suffered for a long time. If one good thing had come from this nightmare, it was that his daughter had finally found someone she loved like a mother, and Natasha had finally found a link to something she’d thought she’d lost forever.

He’d found someone he loved, too. She’d been right in front of him for years and he’d never noticed. Of course, he hadn’t exactly been looking, and the second he’d considered moving on and finding love again, Viper had deceived him and downright ruined his life. If he hadn’t been so foolishly blind so much could have gone differently. He and Natasha had been partners, friends, and teammates for so long that it had actually been difficult to detect the changes between them, to even consider their relationship turning into something else, something more. That one brief, heated kiss they’d shared when he’d fled the Tower a year ago had changed everything. And her showing up on his doorstep had changed everything again. Sarah was so smart. Of course she saw how much Natasha meant to him. She saw it and loved her all the more for making her father happy.

Simply put, this arrangement they had now was set in stone. Natasha was coming, and there was no way Steve could bring himself to stop her. If it would keep her safe, he’d have her stay away from him for the rest of his life. But he didn’t know that would be better, as she kept telling him. She also kept reminding him that it wasn’t his job to protect her, and he didn’t deserve to be alone. HYDRA had marked him, and Viper was after him, but that didn’t mean he had to bear this burden by himself. More than once he’d considered the other alternative: having Natasha take Sarah back with her. Things had calmed down a bit, quieted without the Avengers fighting anymore. Moreover, HYDRA didn’t know Sarah had the serum in her body. She probably wasn’t as much of interest to them as he was, and at the very least she could be safe with the other Avengers. Hiding in plain sight, as it were. Maybe this had all been a mistake, and his selfish desire to stay with Sarah had disrupted (ruined) her life so completely. Sending her back to Tony and the others was the best course. Then he could fight HYDRA.

However, he hadn’t been able to make himself believe that was right, and Natasha had hardly allowed him to drag himself down that awful road. And she’d said she’d take Sarah if he absolutely insisted, if there was no other way, but she didn’t think she should (or that Sarah would leave him). Sarah was Steve’s daughter, and despite everything that had happened, she still needed him more than anyone else needed Captain America. More than Captain America needed to fight. There was no easy answer here, and they were doing the best they could. This was the best they could do. What he could do to keep everyone safe. What Natasha could do for him, because he knew she loved him. She loved them. She’d told him over and over again, every time she could in fact like each precious chance had to be taken because what they had was threatened and tenuous. Each time they saw each other could be the last. This life they led now never felt quite real to him, and yet it
was all too permanent and immutable. Like they were caught in some queer stasis, running without traction or purpose, stuck in a place where there was no future. No escape. No hope of going back.

She was hope, though she never felt quite real either, like if he let himself doubt, he’d wake up alone in his bed upstairs, and everything good would turn out to be a dream.

So there was no point in arguing, not this time or any time. He was outnumbered, and even if he wasn’t, these few sacred days where Natasha was with them were too wonderful to dismiss.

“We’re making dinner, Dad,” Sarah said proudly when Steve finally ventured into the kitchen.

Steve forced a smile onto his face, pushing all his thoughts away. Natasha was here now, and here she was staying for the weekend, so there was no sense in feeling bad about it. This was sort of like when he and Bucky had splurged on a treat when they’d been kids. He always felt bad about being less than absolutely frugal, but Bucky had always reminded him that there was no point in doing it at all if you weren’t going to enjoy it. “I see,” he commented appreciatively, leaning over their pots and pans to kiss Sarah’s head. “Looks good.”

“You’re not the only one who can cook,” Natasha said with a proud smirk. She’d taken her coat off, revealing a maroon sweater that hugged her figure perfectly.

Steve let his hand linger on the small of her back. “Funny how you failed to mention this all the times I got saddled with cooking for everyone.” God, he missed that. The second he said it, he did. He’d give almost anything to wake up back at the Tower and be stuck with making breakfast for the team, for them gathering at the common room table with Sarah on Thor’s lap and everyone happily chatting and teasing one another and being together. He got maudlin without even realizing it.

“Just because I can do it doesn’t mean I like doing it,” Natasha responded. She lifted the spoon from the sauce she was making and cupped her hand below to catch the drips. After blowing on it a moment to cool it (he should not have been watching her lips quite as much as he was, not with his daughter right there, but it was too hard not to), she moved it to Steve’s mouth. He smiled before trying it. “Good?”

“Delicious,” he responded.

She grinned. “You got some here.” Her thumb slid along his bottom lip, probably longer and slower than necessary to wipe the sauce away.

Sarah didn’t seem to notice. “Can I try, Tasha?”

“Sure.” She moved the spoon to Sarah, and when Sarah was done, she smiled. “Yummy, huh?”

“Yeah,” she answered. Then she dropped her voice and leaned closer. “But I still think Daddy makes it better.”

“You little sneak,” Natasha joked. “Can you set the table?”

Steve was already getting the plates and silverware for her, and she hopped down to grab them from him. She struggled with it a little. “Want me to help?”

“I got it, Daddy. I can do it myself,” Sarah said with an exaggerated, long-suffering sigh, and she and Belle went to the old, nicked table.

Steve watched a moment before turning to help Natasha with the rest of their meal. He started slicing up the vegetables for their salad. “You’re the reason she’s so stubborn,” Natasha chided
quietly. “Trying to do everything herself. Taking it all on her shoulders.”

It was remarkable to him that she could joke about it all sometimes. “Very funny.”

“It’s true.” She nudged him with her hip a little, adding some more seasoning to her sauce. “And I like seeing you smile.”

“Hard not to when you’re here.” She nudged him again, and he could have sworn her cheeks colored lightly in a blush. He let a long breath go, trying to summon up the courage to ask what he needed to ask. “How’s Tony?”

Natasha glanced at him, and for a moment, he couldn’t read her. Couldn’t tell if she was going to lie or sugarcoat things so as not to upset him with how bad everything in New York truly was. They’d talked at length about what had happened since the team had fallen apart. Every time she’d come, in fact, she explained what was going on with the fight against HYDRA (which had crawled to a standstill). She’d gone into detail about the remains of SHIELD gathering itself beneath Coulson and Hill coming to help Tony run the Avengers. Then, of course, there was the protracted battle with the public and the government to clear the Avengers’ names, in effect, after Project: Insight and the disaster in Africa. Everything had gone wrong. Steve doubted he could have done better in Tony’s place, what with HYDRA controlling the media (and no doubt a chunk of the government), but he certainly hadn’t done his friend any favors by disappearing like he had. “He’s alright. Trying to find a way to hold what he can together.” Steve’s spirits fell further at that. They always did. Natasha wouldn’t say as much, but he could still picture it. Tony running himself ragged trying to lead in his absence through what was undoubtedly the worst crisis the Avengers had ever faced. Dragged through the mud by the media, spurned and hated by the public, struggling to fight a war against evil nonetheless… Steve ached inside for the situation in which he’d put the other man. “He misses you. He won’t say it, but he really does.”

That hurt. It always did. “I miss him, too.”

“And he worries about you. A lot.” That scrutinizing look in Natasha’s eyes boldly announced that Tony wasn’t the only one. Steve resisted the urge to cringe. “He’s doing okay, though,” she affirmed after a quiet moment. Her lips quirked in a little smile. “Pepper’s pregnant.”

His eyes went wide. “Really?”

Natasha nodded. “She’s in her second trimester already.”

“That’s… that’s wonderful.” Unbidden his mind went back to when he’d first found out about Sarah, how Tony had told him that Pepper had gotten pregnant once before but had had an early miscarriage. He could easily picture how stricken and troubled Tony had been by that. Pepper pregnant. That really was amazing. All at once he felt so warm with happiness for them – Tony’s going to be an excellent father – and hollowed out and miserable because he wasn’t there. Pepper and Tony were the closest he had to a sister and a brother, and he couldn’t be a part of their joy over their first child. He couldn’t be there for them the way they’d been for him. That hurt worse.

“Hey,” Natasha said softly, pressing closer to him, “it’s alright. They know you’d be there if you could be.”

“I know,” he replied with a sigh. “Doesn’t make it easier.”

“I know.” She slipped an arm around him and let him lean into her a moment. So much of what they had was like this. Little and hidden. It was even that way for Sarah, to some extent. As close as Sarah and Natasha were, Steve was always a little wary of reinforcing it too much. What if
something happened and they had to run again? Natasha had told him this over and over again, too. No matter where they went, she’d find them. It was too terrifying to think about, though. Losing this. “And Clint’s doing alright. Recently he’s been working with Coulson. They seem to have buried the hatchet, which is good because Clint was driving me crazy will his pent-up energy. Running missions for Phil’s keeping him busy, at least.”

That was comforting, to know that Clint had made some peace with Phil Coulson’s death and out-of-nowhere resurrection. The archer had taken it hard when he’d learned of Coulson’s demise at the hands of Loki during the Battle of New York. Coulson’s loss had meant so much more to him, both because the older agent had been something of a mentor to him and because his actions that day while under Loki’s control had caused the situation that had led to Coulson’s murder. It had troubled him for months. And his revival, kept secret by Fury and SHIELD because his death had “unified” the Avengers, had struck Clint just as hard. So much had happened so fast during Sarah and Pepper’s kidnapping and in its aftermath that Steve hadn’t had much time to process anything going on in the periphery. Coulson was now the de-facto head of SHIELD, with Maria Hill handling and interfacing with the Avengers. Steve was glad Clint had found a place in that. The archer had never done well with downtime or being still or ineffective. “What about Bruce? And Thor?”

Natasha sighed gently. “We haven’t heard from Thor for the last few months. Even Jane’s not certain when he’s coming back. And Bruce… I think Tony’s maybe in contact with him. Maybe. If he is, he’s real hush-hush about it. Makes sense, considering how many people were calling for his arrest after Africa. He’s alright, wherever he is. That much Tony said for sure.”

Steve nodded, guilt prickling him anew. He brushed it aside. What was done was done. He couldn’t do anything from here. “And you’re alright?”

He felt more than saw Natasha quirk an eyebrow. She took her finished sauce off the heat, turning to help him with the salad. “Sure, if you call desperately trying to hunt down the people after the man you love with nothing to show for it ‘alright’.”

“Nat–”

“Or continually searching for excuses to disappear for a few days to get out here without anyone finding out,” she added quietly. “Honestly, though, I think Tony and Clint might be starting to suspect.”

Steve winced. Before he could say anything, though, Sarah called out from the table, “All done!”

They didn’t talk about it any further, instead sitting down to their little dinner together and turning their attention to other things. Sarah had an entire collection of stories to tell Natasha about what she’d done since they’d last seen each other about a month ago. It was all fairly mundane: trips to the store, to the library, once to the ocean (it was only a couple hours’ drive from where they were, and Sarah loved it), and a single outing to the mall in Portland. They’d even been to see a movie when they’d gone. Steve had started taking her out just a little more, realizing that as much as he might have wanted to hole up in their small house deep in the woods and hide, that wasn’t enough for his daughter. It always made him very nervous, and he’d spent the entire time in Portland (heck, even at the library here) watching everyone else to make sure no one was watching them.

Regardless, Sarah had so much to say, and it was nice (as it always was) to hear her excited as she babbled about the books she’d borrowed and read (that was one of the reasons Steve had been pushing her to read: to keep her excited, engaged, and stimulated, to educate her and give her imagination an outlet), about the things they’d done and the hikes on which they’d gone. They talked about doing another one tomorrow, about going up to the little clearing Steve and Sarah had discussed earlier. Sarah got even more excited about the prospect of Natasha coming with them,
practically vibrating with it. Natasha smiled to see her so happy, and Steve did, too.

They ate slowly, enjoyed the comfort food and the closeness, this moment where they were a family. It was a shadow of what they’d had in New York, and the absence of Tony and the others was always a presence in and of itself that Steve had a difficult time ignoring. Natasha’s ardent care for Sarah eased his aching heart. It always did. Afterward, it was dark, and the cold rain was coming in earnest now, drenching their little house. The gloom of it pressed close, but inside, there was warmth and love. Natasha took Sarah upstairs to get her ready for bed while Steve cleaned up. He did the dishes, sleeves rolled up and elbow deep in suds just like he always used to do back in Brooklyn. They didn’t have a dishwasher, but he still got it done most nights quickly enough.

Tonight he lingered, listening to the rain patter against the windows and the roof, listening to the bathwater running upstairs and Natasha’s and Sarah’s muffled voices. He hardly felt the piping hot sink water, hardly noticed himself moving dazedly through his task. His thoughts were aimless, drifting, and useless. How much he missed Tony and the others. How much he hated Viper. He didn’t like to let things fester, to let his feelings get the better of him, but in this case, he couldn’t help himself. Ophelia Sarkissian. Madame HYDRA. A descendant of Johann Schmidt, the Red Skull. She sat at the head of monster, and she’d ordered his DNA stolen so she could engineer a baby with the super soldier serum. She’d deceived him, lying and sneaking into his life and to kidnap Sarah and lure him into her clutches. And he’d willingly gone into them only to learn that SHIELD was HYDRA, that HYDRA wasn’t defeated like he’d thought, that he’d died for nothing. So much worse than that, though, she’d told him that she was Sarah’s mother. Sarah’s mother.

There was still no proof of it, but somehow Steve knew in his heart that it was true.

But he wasn’t going to let himself think about it again (even though he did almost every day). He heard Sarah and Natasha leave the bathroom upstairs, the old floors creaking above him as they did, and he snapped out of his stupor. He finished up with the dishes, drying them and putting them away, before gathering up the wet dishtowels and putting them by the washing machine. He took the clean laundry out of the dryer, dumped it into a plastic basket, and headed upstairs.

Natasha had Sarah in her bedroom. The door was wide open. She was sitting on Sarah’s bed, brushing and braiding her damp hair. They were chatting quietly, and the one little glance Steve had of his daughter showed a pale face, scrunched up with fear. He knew that look well. “It’s too dark in here, Tasha.”

Sarah had night lights, of course. A lot of them. Steve had put one wherever he could in her room, in every outlet and in the closet. She’d never been much afraid of the dark before the kidnapping, but she was now, and she was downright terrified of it. He didn’t know if Viper had kept her blindfolded or locked up alone somewhere without light (the thought made him sick to his stomach), but the long nights she and Steve had spent huddled in the SUV or in a dingy motel hadn’t helped.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Natasha promised. “Here, malyukta, give me the rubber band.”

Sarah hesitated. Steve knew that well, too. Dragging out bedtime. Delaying having to try to sleep.

“There are monsters,” she whispered.

Natasha paused in her work, looking up to catch Steve’s gaze. He swallowed thickly, trying not to feel so cold inside. “Sometimes,” she conceded. She was Black Widow. She didn’t lie when it truly mattered, and she never downplayed the truths about life. “Sometimes there are.” Sarah turned around, and that wet glimmer in her eyes grew more pronounced. “But there are heroes, too, and your dad’s one of the biggest. You know that, don’t you?” Sarah nodded. “So there’s nothing to be scared of. He’s right here with you. He’s not going to let anything bad happen to you, and neither will I.”
Steve didn’t want to listen anymore. He took the laundry to his bedroom just across the hall and set to folding it, once more trying not to think, but he could still hear them talking. “When I was a little girl,” Natasha said quietly, “I was scared of the dark, too.”

“You were?”

“Yes. It’s okay to be scared. There are ways to be brave, though, too. And you can learn them.”

“Like what?”

“Ways to remind yourself that you’re stronger than what frightens you. In Russia, where they taught me how… how to dance—”

“You’re a dancer?”

“Yes. I was.”

“What kind?”

“A ballerina.”

“Oooh. Daddy found me a book on ballerinas.” Steve could hear her spirits lift, excitement creeping its way back into her voice. Excitement and awe. Wonder. “Did you wear pink?”

Natasha’s smile was sweet and soft in her words. “Sometimes. Turn around.” They were quiet a moment. Steve had folded quite a large portion of the laundry before he even realized it. He went back to the hall linen closet to put the towels away. “If you want, I can show you how.”

“To be a ballerina?” Natasha must have nodded. “Really?”

“Sure. You’d be a beautiful one. And you know, learning how to dance helped me not be afraid.”

“How come?”

“Because it was hard. It takes a lot of practice, but when you learn how to do it, you feel so good, so strong, so there’s nothing that can scare you anymore. Not the dark. Not the monsters. You’re strong because you can do anything.”

Sarah seemed to think about that a moment. “Can you teach me now?”

Natasha chuckled. “Tomorrow, okay? When we go out for our hike, I’ll show you the positions. Right now, you sleep and dream about it. Then you won’t be scared.”

He heard the rustling of cloth. Natasha was tucking her in. Then there was the rattle of Belle’s collar as the dog jumped up into her customary spot at the end of Sarah’s bed. “Tasha?”

“What?”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I, malyukta. Good night. Sleep tight.” The floor creaked as Natasha stood. Steve heard her close the door, but Sarah quickly murmured something about leaving it open. “Okay.” A few seconds later, she was creeping silently into his bedroom.

And now all the restraint of the evening absolutely vanished. Natasha was in his arms, the remainder of the laundry forgotten, kissing him passionately. Steve couldn’t help a grunt of surprise, but that
was soon to be replaced with, well, not much beyond thinking about how beautiful she was and how much he wanted her and how good she made him feel. “I missed you,” she said again when she came up for air, like she was adding onto the sentiment earlier. Expanding on it and qualifying it with a series of kisses to his jaw and throat before twining her hands in his hair and holding his face to hers. Her fingers were tight, possessive even. “Missed you so much. So much. I can’t think about anything else. I can’t…”

“I know, Nat. I missed you, too.”

She pushed him a bit, and he let himself be manhandled by her even though he was much taller and stronger. His basket half full of clean shirts ended up spilled all over the floor as he fell onto his bed, the old mattress creaking as loud as everything else in this house creaked. She instantly climbed on top of him, pinning him playfully, folding their hands together. With her added weight, the bed groaned even louder. Like a teenager caught doing something untoward with a dame (not that Steve would know anything about that), he angled himself up to look out the hall. Sarah’s bed was turned in such a way that she couldn’t see into his room and he couldn’t quite see into hers, but with both doors open, she could probably hear them if they weren’t quiet and careful.

Natasha was nothing if not both those things, though, catching his anxious glance and silently darting across the small expanse of his room to close the door. That wasn’t as effective at assuaging Steve’s worries at it should have been, but he tried to forget that (there’s no reason to be afraid) as Natasha returned to straddle him again. She kissed him hard, demanding, desperate, like she was reassuring herself of everything for which she’d yearned in the time they’d been apart. Feasting on him, feeding senses that had had to sustain themselves on fading memories. He let her take, sweeping his hands into her hair and keeping her close. Her mouth turned tender as she coaxed his open, but once he complied, she grew frantic again, kissing him and kissing him until he was breathless and nearly feverish with it. Nearly. “Steve,” she whispered into his lips. “Relax. Stop thinking.”

He sagged into the lumpy mattress, all of the passion building his chest doused cold. “I can’t,” he confessed. “I can’t let myself–”

“Hush,” she implored, her breath a warm, sweet brush against his jaw. She stroked the backs of her fingers through his beard. “It’s alright, you know. It really is.”

It wasn’t. They’d done this before, “made out” (for lack of a better term) in his bedroom here or downstairs on the couch that was almost as creaky and noisy as the bed. Every time she’d visited, in fact, things inevitably turned to this. It got further sometimes. The sight of Natasha’s pale skin, even just the bare, beautiful lines of an exposed shoulder when she’d sat in his lap or a smooth, naked thigh during summer when it had been draped over his while they’d lain side by side right here… Steve had to say those were the most enticing things he’d ever seen, and they were a mere hint of what she was offering him. But it had never gone “all the way”, even though they both wanted it to. Part of it was definitely Steve’s sensibilities. His mother had taught him better than to do something like this, be intimate with a woman to whom he wasn’t married. Maybe that was old-fashioned and silly, but he couldn’t shake his traditional upbringing. Still, these were unimaginable circumstances, and he knew that, and he loved Natasha more than he’d ever loved anyone, more than he’d loved even Peggy. If things were different… They’d be different.

But they weren’t different. He was alone out here, hunted and haunted, and he couldn’t let down his guard. More than that, though, he didn’t want his first time to be something rushed or stolen, something tinged by the fear constantly percolating in the back of his mind. He didn’t want their first time together to be like this.

Natasha was more understanding, more patient and more giving, than he deserved. She constantly
surprised and amazed him. He’d been such a fool to have never seen just how extraordinary she was until it had nearly been too late. She sighed slowly but not in irritation, her lips warm and soft now as she sunk down onto his chest and kissed the hollow of his throat. “You and your morals.”

He held her tight, rubbing his hand up and down her back, frustrated and weary. “It’s… It’s not just that.”

“I know it’s not.”

“I want to do right by you. By Sarah. And I can’t do anything right like this.” *It’s the best we can do.* She’d said that to him so many times, just like this, in fact. In his arms. A soft acceptance of this awful situation, pressed like feather light kisses to his neck. He stopped her before she could say it now. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

The wind moaned outside, blowing the rain harder into the window pane of his bedroom. She leaned up, propping herself on her elbow, to look down at him with depthless eyes. “It doesn’t have to be,” she reminded. Again, he knew what she was going to say before she even said it because, *again,* this was something they’d talked about in the past. *Always talked,* because no matter how much they both wanted it, it was impossible. “Let me stay here with you.”

He closed his eyes. He didn’t know if his heart could take the battering again. “Nat–”

“The Avengers are finished, Steve. And whatever HYDRA wanted… They’re quiet now. They haven’t made a move in months. There’s no reason I need to be in New York or anywhere else.” She stroked her hands up his chest, unbuttoning his shirt as she went. Once she was done, she slid her fingers beneath the well-worn fabric, laying her palm flat on the cotton of his undershirt over his heart. “There’s no reason I can’t be here. And there’s absolutely no reason you have to do this by yourself. Let me stay. We can come up with an explanation. Something convincing. We can…” She smiled, breathless with what she was feeling, excitement abruptly bright in her eyes. “Never thought I’d say something like this, but we can get married.” He swallowed through a thick throat, willing himself to stand firm. He didn’t think she knew how much he wanted that. “I love you.”

Her soft words were followed by the brushing of her lips over his sternum. “I want to be with you. Forever.”

“I know. I want that, too, Nat. More than anything.”

“Then let me stay. You’re suffering out here. I can see it. I see it in your eyes. I hear it in the way you talk. *I feel it,* Steve. You’re dying out here.” She kissed him again, slowly and reverently, and Steve let himself drown in it. “I can’t let that happen. I can’t let you suffer, not you or Sarah.”

He shook his head. “I’m alright,” he insisted, trying to force bravado into his voice. “I can handle this. I can. I have to.”

“You shouldn’t have to, at least not like you are.” Natasha’s fingers were still so light and worshipful as she caressed his face, her thumb sliding across his forehead before tracing down his cheekbone to drift across his kiss-swollen lower lip. “You don’t have to be alone.” Hesitation left him aching. She saw it, setting her jaw a little. “If you don’t want me to stay with you, then you come back with me.”

“They’re hunting me, Nat. I know they are. She’s not going to stop until she gets us back.”

“Let her try. We can protect you.” She said that with so much confidence. Maybe they could. There wasn’t much left of the Avengers with Thor and Bruce gone. Maybe Tony, Clint, and Natasha could keep them safe. But, even if that was possible, he couldn’t bring HYDRA’s wrath
down on them. He refused to. If Viper was looking for him, if HYDRA had its attention on finding him and not on hurting other people… He needed to keep it that way.

Natasha grew more insistent, like this time would be successful as opposed to all the other times she'd tried to convince him over the last six months. Steve was terrified that one of these times she would be, as tantalizing as it was. As she was, green eyes and red hair and fire and love. “Come back. Pick up your shield. I’ve kept it safe for you. I’ve kept it for you. Be Captain America again.” Steve grimaced. God, she made it sound so simple. So alluring. Again the backs of her fingers slid along his jaw. She quirked a flirty smile. “I’d miss the beard, though.”

It was too painful to consider the impossible, so he smiled instead, kissing her fingers as they teased along his mouth. “Captain America can have a beard if he wants.”

She dipped her face lower again, nosing his chin upward to nibble along his jaw and throat. “Can’t imagine it,” she purred playfully. He laughed, trying to keep his brain in gear and making the decisions rather than other parts of him. She teased a moment more, tested, tortured more like, but ultimately she respected him far too much to do anything more than that. She’d never pressure him, and he knew that. Not to sleep with her. Not to leave. Not to let her stay when he was so worried about her safety. She settled back down against him, kissing him slowly, languidly. Peacefully, despite the rain thundering down outside and all the darkness surrounding this little heaven. Finally all of that silenced their desire, and she let her head fall to his shoulder. She curled around him, draping an arm over his chest, and sighed deeply. “No man’s an island, Steve. You don’t have to go it alone.”

He closed his eyes and wished that was true.

They lay like that for quite some time, listening to the rain abuse the house, listening to each other breathe. Steve felt himself start to drift. He jerked himself awake, drawing a deep breath. “Nat?”

Obviously she’d been dozing as well. “Hmm. What?”

“You, uh, probably shouldn’t sleep here.”

“Still?”

Steve flushed a little in embarrassment. “Almost every night.”

Natasha leaned up once more. There was worry in her eyes, worry that she tried to hide with an arched eyebrow. “After everything she went through, if she wants to sleep with her daddy, let her.” Sarah was probably a little too old to be sleeping with him, but she did. It was practically like clockwork that she’d have a nightmare or come wandering into his room. It broke his heart, and part of him felt like he should do something to correct it. A larger part of him just did as Natasha said: he let her. He let her do it, let her find her comfort and security in him. Honestly, he found a great deal of comfort and security in it, too. She was only four, and four was still a baby, right? And even if it wasn’t, Natasha was right. She deserved to sleep however and wherever she wanted to.

Natasha climbed out of his bed. “It’s no problem,” she said, stretching a little. “This bed is way too firm anyway. I prefer the couch. Sinking down in the middle is always the best way to sleep. Plus it’s so nice and warm down there.”

Steve sat up. “Nat, I’m sorry.”

“Just teasing, Rogers.” She went to the closet and found herself extra blankets and a pillow. She came back a moment later, giving him a kiss that started out as a little peck but quickly evolved into
something deeper and longer. Finally she broke away with a tender smile. “See you in the morning?”

“Of course.”

“Night, Steve.”

“Goodnight.”

The next morning started early. Sarah had come in with him during the night, of course, and she was bouncing on Steve before the sun was up, begging to go down and wake up Natasha. Steve tried to keep her quiet so Natasha could sleep a little longer, and it worked for a little while, but it turned out he didn’t need to. Natasha crept into their bedroom, a huge smile lighting her face, and without much ado climbed right into bed with them. Sarah squealed in joy, sandwiched between them and thus susceptible to all sorts of hugs, kisses, snuggles, and kisses. Steve watched the two of them. Natasha was beautiful all the time, but there was something about her in the morning, something rare and precious. Unguarded. Her hair was mussed and her make-up was faint and she was dressed in old, faded pajamas. It was more than that, too, that gave him pause. These moments… Fantasy touched reality, and he could almost picture what it would be like. If they could be married like they dreamed about. If they could be a family somewhere, just the three of them. Some place far from this cold, wet, lonely nightmare. Some place safe from harm. These were the moments he let himself indulge in that, Natasha gathered up to his side, Sarah between them, everything warm and cozy and perfect.

Eventually they did get up and get the day going. Steve got dressed in the bathroom while Natasha and Sarah petted Belle in his bed. Then Natasha joined Sarah in her room while Steve went downstairs and did the rounds, checking locks and windows, assuring himself the positions of things again to be certain nothing was moved (it was crazy and obsessive, but he couldn’t shake the need to do it, even though Natasha had slept right here last night and would have surely heard an intruder). Sarah came bounding down with Belle, the both of them thoroughly excited about the day. Steve watched her take the dog out the back door as he started breakfast. It was a stunning morning, the woods around them colorful, peaceful, and quiet. The rising sun was dousing everything in gold. The leaves and grass were wet from the rain the night before, and the world glittered as though littered with diamonds. Belle ran around, Sarah tossing her ball a few times. Natasha came down not long after, donned her coat with a grin, and went out to play with them.

Not long after they gathered for eggs, bacon, and pancakes. Natasha slyly made a comment that the only reason she kept coming here was for his breakfasts. If Tony and Clint knew she was still getting his blueberry pancakes… They ate quickly. Steve packed up a picnic lunch while Natasha helped Sarah gather her colored pencils and sketchbook in her backpack. Then, of course, came the obligatory hunt for one of Sarah’s gloves that had somehow gone missing. They found it under the couch. It was stupid but that made Steve worried. It always did when things were out of place. He was starting to think he’d developed a rip-roaring case of PTSD or anxiety at the very least. Natasha seemed to sense his irrational concern, offering up a comforting look while she slid her arms into her wool coat and put her own hat on. She placed Steve’s Seahawks cap on his head, pulling the brim down lower than necessary. “Everything’s fine. Come on.”

They piled into the truck. It was a bit of a tight squeeze with Natasha there as well, but they weren’t going far, just up the road a bit to the hiking trail. Steve shouldered the pack with all their supplies (including the guns he’d stuffed into the bottom wrapped up in a sweater) and Natasha helped Sarah get her backpack on and her coat zipped. Their breaths were jets of vapor as they stood in the crisp autumn morning, beholding the path that wound up through the golden and auburn woods.
“Ready?” Natasha asked brightly.

“Ready!” Sarah enthusiastically answered, Belle obediently waiting beside her, panting and eager.

“Then let’s go.”

Off they went. Steve and Sarah had hiked this trail before a few times. It was a long one that wound through increasingly dense forest while heading up a sloping mountainside. They’d gone about as far as the stream that eventually fed into the pond near their house. A little beyond that there was a small clearing on a hill. It took about an hour at a leisurely pace to get there. Belle loped alongside them, and Sarah talked. It was all about ballet, about the book she’d read about it (a children’s book about a young ballerina who had magic dance shoes). She asked Natasha if magic dance shoes really existed, and Natasha said no, but if you believed in yourself, any shoes you put on were magic. Sarah thought that was pretty amazing, because that had been in the story, how the young ballerina lost her magic shoes right before her recital but because she’d practiced and found the courage to go on anyway, she’d danced beautifully. Steve worried about how loud Sarah was, even though he was thrilled to see her so open and happy. He didn’t think anyone could find them out here, but he knew with satellite technology (which SHIELD had had in abundance) he could never assume they weren’t being watched. The Insight satellites alone had been powerful enough to track people with stunning accuracy, according to Tony. Someone could always be watching them.

*Shut up.* He could never turn his brain off. He was really starting to despise it. *Really.*

Natasha knew him better than he did. She drifted closer to him as they walked through the woods, and her gloved hand wove through his. “Stop thinking,” she chided again. “Everything’s fine.”

They hiked for a while after that, and Steve forced himself to relax and enjoy it. They were two Avengers (*right, two of us, not just you needing to protect more. Natasha can fight, even better than you can, so stop it. Everything’s fine*). Eventually they reached the stream, and they turned west. It wasn’t much further to the clearing.

Belle ran ahead, Sarah chasing her. Natasha breathed a little appreciative murmur of wonder at the view. It really was stunning. For miles and miles there was nothing but uninterrupted forest, all red and orange and yellow in the morning sun, rising and falling over the surrounding hills and mountains. Beyond there was a valley of sorts and a small lake, undiscovered, uncharted territory. The sky was blue, the sun bright and bare of clouds. It was amazing.

They sat for a while, having a snack and some water. Belle and Sarah went to her favorite drawing spot: a rock down the way just a bit. Steve and Natasha stayed where the grass was taller. She sat in his lap, leaning back into his chest and enjoying the warmth of the sun contrasted with cool morning mist and the gentle breeze. It pulled strands of red hair across her face, loose now that she’d taken off her hat. Her cheeks were flushed a pale rose in the cold. Her pupils were constricted in the daylight, little dots of black in a sea of green and blue. Steve couldn’t stop staring at her, at how radiant she was. She was here, with him. *Here.* He wrapped his arms around her and let go of his worries with a long breath and a kiss into her hair. “I love you,” he said, realizing then that he hadn’t told her that since she’d shown up yesterday. He shouldn’t have been so remiss, so lost up in his own worries.

She smiled, pert, pink lips turning upward. “I love you, too.” He leaned down to kiss her.

“Tasha! Tasha!” Sarah was running back. Belle came rushing over, tail wagging wildly, and licked Steve’s face. He groaned, wiping the dog slobber away. *Not the kiss I was hoping for.* “Tasha! Can you show me ballet now?”
Natasha laughed, levering herself up from Steve’s embrace. “Here? Now?”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

Belle wasn’t too shy about taking Natasha’s place, sprawling her heavy form across Steve’s lap before he could escape. He groaned again, rubbing her furry tummy as she rolled onto her back and crushed his legs. Natasha looked over her shoulder where Sarah was dragging her to a flatter spot, laughing at him. “Okay, malyukta. Okay. Let’s see. This…” Natasha took off her wool coat, dropping it into the grass, and stood with her feet at particular angles with each other. “This is first position.” Sarah mimicked her. “And this… is second position.” She shifted her feet and arms. Sarah followed, far less precisely. “And third position. Very good!”

They worked at it a while, Natasha showing Sarah the basic stances and positions. They stood facing each other, Sarah trying very hard to copy Natasha’s movements. Quite often, Natasha came over to correct her and redirect her, all the while a wellspring of compliments and enthusiasm. Pretty soon Sarah could execute something called a plie and something else called a releve. Pleased, Natasha commented on how quickly she was picking it up (which was probably thanks to the serum). “Can you show me a ballet you did?” Sarah asked, a bit breathless after all that work.

“Oh, I don’t know if I’d remember,” Natasha replied, actually flustered. That was a rare occurrence.

“Sure, you do,” Steve teased, knowing exactly how smart and enhanced Natasha was. She remembered everything. And she gave him the stink eye, to which he only grinned. “Come on. Show us.”

She hesitated a moment further, her cheeks colored with more than just the cold. “Fine.” Sarah went back and sat in Steve’s lap now, Belle obediently making room (not getting up, though. Oh, no, he still had seventy-five pounds of dog fluff on him, just pushed over to one side). Natasha smiled at him, leaning down to take off her boots and socks. When she straightened, she wriggled her bare toes in the cold, slightly damp grass. “Don’t expect the Bolshoi. I don’t even have the right shoes.”

Not surprisingly, that didn’t stop her. She was moving a moment later. Her body danced through the grass, lithe and long, quick and fleet. There was no music, of course, aside from what she was remembering, but Steve could practically hear the melody in his head, the beats obvious, the swells and crescendos clear from her leaps and twirls. She was so graceful, dancing on a make-believe stage for a private audience, beautiful in a way he’d never seen until now. Bending. Spinning. Arms aloft, legs stretched, the lines of her body perfect, the arc of her back, the way her hair wrapped around her elegant neck. She was ethereal. That was the word for it. Yes, ethereal, but not just that. Powerful.

Sarah smiled and looked up at him. “Wow, Daddy.”

“Yeah.”

The dance slowed to a stop. Natasha seemed to snap out of a trance she’d been in, one deep with concentration and effort, and she turned to look at them, grinning like she was embarrassed. “I can’t remember any more than that.”

Sarah clambered from his lap and ran at her, laughing and clapping. “Teach me more! Teach me!”

Natasha laughed and lifted her up to set her on her hip. “In a little while, malyukta. Need a breather.” Sarah bounced around as Natasha put her boots back on. Steve tossed her a water bottle before gathering up their things. He took a moment to look at what Sarah had drawn, marveling at her use of color (at four – she was drawing better than he had at that age, that was for sure). Then he
helped her repack her colored pencils and sketch book, and on they went.

They walked another hour or so until they found a nice, secluded lake. Belle went for a swim, fetching the sticks Sarah was tossing into the water before paddling back. Natasha dug in the pack for their sandwiches; if she noticed the guns at the bottom of it, she didn’t say. And she wouldn’t say. She was probably armed herself somehow (although he couldn’t see it, given how her jeans and sweater were hugging her). They ate their sandwiches. Sarah had a million and one questions about the ballet, and Natasha patiently answered them all, leaving out parts of the story (like how she’d been trained as a dancer to hide that, in truth, the Red Room was training her to be an assassin). Steve found himself drifting not long into their conversation, keeping a sharp eye focused on their surroundings. They’d never been here before, so there was no guarantee they were alone. It seemed like it, the shore deserted except for them and a few birds. Still, he couldn’t relax. He didn’t know why, but he felt like someone was watching them. That niggling sense of disquiet that always plagued him was louder, more pronounced and insistent, and he couldn’t ignore it.

Once lunch was finished, they packed up their stuff again and walked the shore a little. The lake was beautiful, silvery in the sun, placid and untouched. Overhead, geese flew south in a “V”. As they explored, they caught sight of a few deer in the forest. Steve took Sarah closer, so light on his feet despite his size. Nary a twig cracked as he carried her on his shoulders up to them. “Wow,” Sarah breathed. She’d seen deer before, of course, but not this close. They got startled and ran, but she got a really good look before they did, and she made plans to draw them later.

It was early afternoon when they decided to head back. Sarah had gotten tired, and Steve opted to carry her so they could make better time. She still sat atop his shoulders, wearing his Seahawks cap with her hands in his hair, pointing the different types of trees out. An endless, running commentary filled the quiet about the things she saw and the stuff she knew (and she read a lot, so she knew a lot, again at only four). Steve and Natasha shared knowing looks and they headed back along the hardly visible trail that neither of them had any trouble finding thanks to training and enhanced senses. They could tell she was really getting tired when her chattering slowed and finally stopped. By then, they were nearly back to the truck. And by the time they got there, she was almost asleep, wavering atop Steve’s shoulders. He got her down and into the car. “Tired, baby girl?”

“Yeah,” Sarah replied.

“Then take a nap.”

She did before Steve even finished loading up the rest of their things and Belle. The truck rumbled down the secluded road back to their house. Once he pulled into the driveway, Natasha got out and immediately gathered Sarah against her. “You want me to–” Steve started.

“No, I got her.” She carried Sarah up inside, fumbling with the lock a moment. Steve exhaled as he watched. Then that prickling sensation of eyes on him made his gooseflesh stand on end. It was so strong he whirled, looking around carefully, but it was quiet and there was no one. Of course there was no one. This is stupid. Belle licked his hand, drawing his attention, and he petted her head a few times before taking their packs into the house. He made certain to lock the door behind him. And he checked everything twice before starting to put their belongings away.

Natasha came down the steps like a cat, silently and stealthily, and she grabbed him from behind in the kitchen. “Nat, what’re you–” She didn’t give him a chance to say anything more, hands ridding him of his jacket and his sweater as she dragged him over to the couch. He laughed, staggering clumsily. “What?”

“You have no idea what it was like, watching you watch me dance,” she mumbled against his lips, not pulling away for a second like a second was too long.
He laughed again. “Well, you don’t know what it was like, watching you.”

“Show me.”

They ended up on the couch, her in his lap again only with a very different mood in the moment. All the curtains were drawn, so it was dark and shadowy. They were safe, too, and Steve tried to banish all his concerns as she ruck up his t-shirt. Her hands danced now, intricate patterns and deft moves along the muscles of his stomach. He pushed up her sweater in turn, just as eager to explore. An expanse of creamy skin was there, smooth under his calloused fingers, and he could hardly catch his breath, let alone think. “You do know I have no idea what I’m doing, right.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s cute.”

He thumbed her hips. “That’s not helping, being told that my, um, inexperience is cute.” She giggled, rising up a little to pull her sweater completely off. Steve’s eyes went wide at what he saw, at what was happening. He felt like… Well, like he was a teenage boy again, getting his first glimpse at a magazine he shouldn’t have been looking at. Bucky had found it somewhere, and their mothers would box their ears if they caught wise… He swallowed thickly, equal parts panicked and aroused beyond the pale, as he took in the satin of her bra.

“Holy cow.”

“Is this a war between Black Widow’s wiles and Captain America’s morals?”

“Yep.”

“I’m not going to win, am I.”

“Nope.” Her mouth was hot and sweet as she leaned over him, claiming his lips in a searing kiss. He was done for. Absolutely. And what was wrong with that? All his reservations from the night before, the hesitation that always clung to him whenever she came, was gone, blasted away by the heat of her mouth and the strength of her grip on him. This was okay. It was. They loved each other, and HYDRA couldn’t take that away…

His thumb brushed against skin just above her hip that felt different, and suddenly all his doubts surged back because that felt like a scar. A big one. He leaned up, gently pushing Natasha with him. “What’s this?”

Her eyes were glazed with want, so it took her a moment to shift gears. When she leaned back, he could see it was a scar. The darker pink ridges were almost star-shaped, right above her left hip. His fingers drifted carefully over it, and he recognized what it was. “You were shot?”

“Oh. Yeah.” She pulled his hand away. “It was a long time ago.”

“How long?”

“How long after I joined SHIELD.” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Are you trying to ruin the mood?”

He flushed with shame (because he partly was – he couldn’t lie). He shook his head. “Just curious.”

“Oh-huh.”

“I want to know everything about you.”

“Do you?” He nodded, trying a smile. She raised his hand, kissing the fleshy part of his palm. Her lips were teasing, drifting along his thumb. “There’s not much to tell. I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran…” She shifted herself over him, and he groaned, heart pounding and all of his
blood abruptly going south again. “And someone shot out our tires. Car went over a ravine…” She
moved her hips again, kissing the tips of his fingers. Oh, God. “I pulled us out. I was covering my
engineer, so the assassin shot him through me.” He didn’t know whether or not to be worried or
turned on. He was both, in all honesty. She smirked, nibbling his fingers more. “Happy?”

“Who was he?”

“The assassin?” she purred. She grabbed his other hand and held them against the back of the couch
on either side of his head. It let out a pathetic whine as her weight shifted (and so did he, truth be
told), and she smiled. “The only assassin you should be caring about right now is me.” He grinned.
“And why do you assume it was a ‘he’?”

That dampened his spirits. Viper. She saw it in his eyes. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t think–”

“It’s fine,” he quickly assured. He really hadn’t meant to completely ruin the mood.

She let go of his hands to cup his jaw. “It wasn’t her. It was a man. Or a ghost.” Her eyes
darkened slightly. “The intelligence community calls him the Winter–”

“Daddy!”

Steve sprung up from the couch, Natasha skittering off him as he did. His heart leapt into his throat.
Sarah. He was running after that, sprinting to the staircase, bounding up the steps three at a time.
Thundering down the short hallway, he burst into her room, nearly tearing the door of its hinges in
the process. “Sarah!”

He’d expected HYDRA agents, the STRIKE team, black ops soldiers with guns at the ready.
Viper. It was stupid, but his mind had immediately gone to that. And of course it wasn’t the case.
Belle would have been barking like mad, but she was just watching from the foot of the bed with
worry in her big, brown eyes as Sarah thrashed. It was a nightmare, nothing more. Nothing more.
He could have sobbed in relief. Instead he flew across the room, gathering Sarah up in his arms.
She was wailing, half asleep it seemed but aware enough to get her arms around his neck and hold
on tight. “Shh, baby girl,” he said into her hair, cupping the back of her head. “Shh! It’s alright!
It’s alright! I’m right here…”

“Daddy, daddy,” she cried. “Daddy!”

“I’m right here, Sarah,” he assured again, rubbing her back, squeezing her as much as he dared.
“Baby, I’m here. It’s okay. Nothing’s gonna hurt you, I swear.” He heard footsteps and saw
Natasha rush into the doorway, dressed again and looking pained. He caught her gaze, his own eyes
burning. “It’s alright. It’s alright.”

“You weren’t there…” Sarah whimpered. “You weren’t there!”

Steve closed his eyes, hating everything so much. He kissed her head frantically. “I’m here now.
No one’s gonna take you…” He couldn’t make that promise. He’d given it to her before, and Viper
had made a liar of him. He’d hurt Sarah by lying. God, this couldn’t go on. He looked at Natasha,
knowing his eyes were filled with tears. “Nat, take her back to New York. Please.” Sarah was
awake enough at this point to cry harder, nearly hyperventilating against his neck. He felt so damn
helpless, and he just couldn’t stand it anymore. “Take her back to Tony. You can protect her. Keep
her safe. Get her…” He winced. She needed a doctor. A therapist. Someone to help her with the
trauma she’d endured. I can’t handle this. I can’t. I’m making it worse. I can’t… “Get her help.
I’ll… I can fight then. Surrender if I have to. I can–”
Natasha came closer. “Let’s get out of here.”

She didn’t understand. “I can’t let her hurt Sarah! Or you! Go back to New York. You can go back, get her to the others, and I’ll… I—”

“Steve, I meant let’s go out. Go get dinner. Go shopping. Get out of here.” He couldn’t make sense of that for moment. Natasha sighed, crouching beside where Steve sat on Sarah’s bed, one arm around his shoulders, another around Sarah. “I saw it all day. You were on edge, terrified. Jumping at everything.” Steve flushed with shame. He didn’t know why. She only shook her head, like that validated her worries. Her face fractured in sympathy. “You two are trapped in this little house all the time, reinforcing each other’s fears. It’s a wonder you’re as sane as you are. Both of you. Your world’s reduced to hiding, and that’s no way to live. What you need is to get out and forget for a while.”

“That’s not enough.” Steve shook his head, holding Sarah even tighter to him. Possessively. Protectively. “And it’s not safe. It’s not.”

“Yes, it is safe,” she insisted firmly. “It is. And it may not be enough, but it’s a start. We’ll go out for the evening. We’ll go away from the town here so people won’t recognize you.”

It was weak and irrational, but he felt stripped bare and whittled down. “What if they do? What if they recognize you? What if they ask questions? What are we gonna tell them?”

“Steve.” He made himself focus on her. She smiled knowingly. “I’m Black Widow. I know how to lie.”

Sarah had calmed herself to soft, irregular hiccoughs. “Daddy says lyin’s bad,” she murmured, peeking out at Natasha over Steve’s arm.

Natasha smiled, brushing Sarah’s blond hair away from her eyes where it had come loose from its braid. “Alright then. I’ll just bend the truth. That’s okay, isn’t it? I’ll make something up. Just like when you play make-believe.” Sarah nodded, lifting her head a little. Natasha wiped her tears away. “There. It’s alright, okay?” Sarah nodded again and smiled. It was small, weak, but a smile nonetheless. Steve couldn’t stop a smile from reaching his face, too. Just as small and weak. But he inhaled deeply, held it until he felt calmer, and let it out. Again. And again. Natasha leaned over him, threading her fingers through his hair and pulling him close enough to kiss his forehead. When she pulled away she held his gaze, strong and sure, making him stronger and surer. “Let me handle keeping an eye out for an evening. Trust me. It’ll be fine.”

He trusted her. He did. He trusted her with his daughter, with his life. With his heart. And he trusted Tony and Pepper. He trusted Thor, Clint, and Bruce. He could still trust.

He just didn’t know if he’d ever trust anyone else again. Not like he had.

For Sarah’s sake, though, he knew he had to try. “Okay,” he finally said on a long breath. It’ll be alright. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

malyutka – little one
They drove to Plymouth, which was about forty-five minutes west and bigger than Colburn. Steve had been there before a couple of times. It was a nice place, big enough to have more restaurants, shops, a movie theater, and even a couple of chain stores and such. Even better, it was far enough away that the townsfolk from Colburn didn’t typically come here, which meant he had the added advantage of relative anonymity. The ride was quiet, despite Natasha’s gentle efforts to prod Sarah into conversation. She was practically clinging to Steve, sitting as close to him as possible. Natasha had braided her hair again before they’d gone, talking more and more about ballet, but nothing seemed to relax the little girl. The nightmare had shaken her, shaken them all, and Steve could hardly stand it. He felt so miserably guilty every time this happened, and it happened too much, too often. Natasha kept glancing at him, not out of judgment or frustration of course, but it felt like it. She was worried.

By the time he parked the truck in town, though, the prospect of going out had eased Sarah enough that she was getting a bit excited. She looked around the well-lit street, blue eyes wider, and she smiled timidly. “You want to go shopping?” Natasha asked. “Maybe find some new clothes?”

“Really?” Sarah asked.

“Sure,” Natasha replied. Sarah beamed. Steve didn’t often buy her new things unless he really needed to, once again to conserve money and reduce the attention of others. Sarah didn’t seem to remember the days when her Uncle Tony had spoiled her continually, so this was a treat. Furthermore, Steve’s sense of fashion was atrocious on a good day, so having Natasha there, who had a fantastic eye for what looked good, was a blessing. With any luck, Natasha could get her a few outfits to get through the next few months. She was growing like a weed, so nothing lasted very long. “Come on.”

They got out of the car. Sarah was feeling comfortable enough now to take Natasha’s hand instead of his, but she still wouldn’t cross the street until Steve had locked up the truck and joined them. It was Saturday night, so more people were out than normal. That was a blessing, he supposed, because they could slip right into the crowd. “Daddy?” Sarah asked, holding out her hand to Steve. “Coming?”

Steve realized he’d lost himself looking around for any signs of threats. And there weren’t any. Just people walking on the streets, going about the activities of the evening, heading to restaurants and stores and chatting happily. God, he needed to get control of himself. No wonder Sarah was so troubled with anxiety. She was learning from him. It was only when Natasha was here that he really saw how he was, how bad he’d gotten. “Sorry, baby girl,” he murmured. He managed a smile for her. “Let’s go have some fun, huh?”

They walked down the street, heading to a girls’ clothing boutique. Natasha shot Steve a little smile when she finally caught his wayward gaze, tipping her head a little before her, and Steve read her mind. “Ready?” Natasha announced, and Sarah looked back just a second before she was counting. “One…” They both gripped Sarah’s hands tight enough to ensure she was well secured, lifting her off the sidewalk and swinging her forward teasingly. “Two…” Again they did it, this time a little more forward, and Sarah’s eyes glittered brightly. “Three!”

Now they really swung her (well, they were of course holding back, given how strong they both
were), and Sarah squealed and kicked her legs out as she went forward and then back. Steve relaxed more at seeing his daughter’s joy. It was hard not to. It was sweet and infectious, and she threw her head back and laughed when they swung her again. And again. “Higher, Daddy!” Steve and Natasha did as she asked, and she squealed louder. As always, his ever-present anxiety rippled at the volume, at how noticeable they were. But before he could glance around yet again, Natasha gently shook her head.

“It’s alright,” her eyes said. “It’s alright. Don’t worry.”

They walked down to the store. There were clothes in the window on mannequins, pinks and purples and bright blues, and Sarah let go of their hands to run up. She immediately pointed at a coat, talking excitedly about the little sequins sewn into the fabric. Natasha crouched beside her, smiling broadly, and Steve could do nothing but watch. Watch as yet again the woman he loved made his daughter shine. She’d done it a million times today. Their hike. Her dance. This morning in his bed. And she’d done it a million times before. He marveled at the way Natasha fit into their lives, even with their lives as they were. Sarah pointed, and Natasha commented on how pretty she’d look in it. “You want to come in?” Natasha asked as she stood again, holding Sarah’s hand. She wrinkled her nose a little, almost playfully. “You don’t need to. Might even be fun to have some girl time.” Sarah giggled excitedly. “Wouldn’t it, malyutka?”

He ignored that stupid voice of worry. “As long as it’s okay.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Please.” Suddenly she leaned in and very boldly kissed him. They’d never kissed in public before (heck, they’d never gone out together before). They rarely even kissed like this in front of Sarah. He stiffened; it was hard to relax, hard to let himself go, even as Natasha sweetly deepened the kiss, reaching up her free hand to gently cup his cheek. She smiled as she pulled away, pulling the brim of his cap down again. “I think we can handle it.” Natasha looked down at Sarah. “Right?”

Sarah looked infinitely pleased, even at her tender age. “Right,” she firmly answered.

Steve smiled. “Okay. I’ll be out here.”

Natasha grinned, giving him another kiss, the one shorter and a bit more chaste. “Could be a while,” she warned.

“Take all the time you want.”

They went inside the store. Steve watched through the windows for a moment, smiling still to himself as Sarah tugged Natasha to the nearest rack of clothes. His heart swelled, seeing the two of them together, seeing the way Sarah looked up to Natasha and the way Natasha cared for her, so tenderly and lovingly. As Sarah started to pull her somewhere else, Natasha caught Steve’s gaze. She rolled her eyes and waved him off. Blushing, he raised his hands in defeat and backed away.

Despite the extra activity in the town, it was a quiet, peaceful evening. Steve stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and walked along the sidewalk, listening to the quiet conversations from the people on the streets. It was brisk, chilly with the autumn night, and the smell of hot food was heavy on the air. There was a pizza place down the street a little further with people outside on its patio. It seemed warm and inviting, and the food smelled delicious. Maybe that would be a nice place for dinner. He wandered a little further down the way, for once feeling good despite being out in the open. Natasha had kissed him. Here. And no one had cared. No one had noticed. For the first time all day, that feeling that he was being watched was gone, a distant concern that he could actually forget, and he did.

He stood on the corner, the pleasant cheer and warmth of the restaurant behind him, and looked around. The cool air was pleasant in his lungs, and he breathed deeply. He looked around, not for
anything in particular, not even afraid for once to be caught doing it. A loud peal of laughter from the restaurant behind him made him turn momentarily, but it was just a group of people getting rowdy over a couple of beers. There were six friends sitting close, sharing a pizza pie. Some of them were bigger, brawnier, some smaller and obviously the more intellectual type, some quieter and some louder. All fairly disparate but immensely enjoying each other’s company. Coworkers and friends. Teammates, maybe. Giving a little rueful grunt at that, he turned away.

Something across the way caught his attention. It was a storefront tucked into the corner of a brick building. Like so many others that lined the street, it was lit, but it was done in such a way that the contents glimmered brightly. With his sharp eyes, he was immediately drawn to the gold and silver twinkling in the window. Curious, he waited for a truck to pass before heading across the way toward the little place. Sure enough, when he got there, he found exactly what he’d thought he’d seen.

Steve had never been a big believer in coincidences. The last few years had taught him that things happened for a reason, and often during the darkest times of the prior months when he’d feared for his life and Sarah’s safety, he’d put his faith in someone watching out for them, in everything working out because good things came to good people. Well, here he was, standing in front of this exact place at this exact moment, with his wallet heavy in his coat pocket because he’d brought extra money because he’d felt he’d needed to, with his eyes set on what he knew he needed to buy, with his heart steady. This was the right thing. He wasn’t sure of much anymore, not what he was doing or even who he was, but he was sure of this.

Not fifteen minutes later, he was walking out of the store, wallet significantly lighter but his heart lighter as well, so he figured it was an even trade. His purchase was safe in the inner pocket of his coat, pressed against his chest, and he breathed deeply to quell the excited fluttering of his stomach. For the first time in a really long time, he couldn’t stop smiling. He headed back. His mind was a million miles away and racing with so many thoughts that he didn’t notice at all when a familiar face stepped out in front of him. And he kept going even though that someone called his name (well, his fake name). “Dan? Dan! Hey, wait up!”

Steve’s blood went cold when he realized his mistake and colder still when he realized who had found him. Oh, no. No, no, no. He stopped, even though every muscle in his body throbbed with the need to continue. Easy, bade his mind. It’s alright. He summoned up a smile and tried to fall into his role. “Aiden, hi,” he said, turning around to face his coworker.

Aiden was flush-faced from having run after him a bit. “You were pretty zoned out there,” he declared with a smile and a huff. He’d obviously come out of another of the stores. Behind him was a pretty blond woman and three small kids, the youngest a girl about Sarah’s age and the oldest maybe ten. “You okay?”

Steve floundered a moment before he caught himself. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. What are you doing here?”

“Well, you know, doing my uncle duties.” He smiled. “I should ask you that, though. Man, never thought I’d see you out of Colburn. Where’s your daughter?”

As if on cue, Sarah and Natasha exited the clothing store down the way a little. Natasha was carrying a couple of bags. Steve tried to catch her eyes, tried to give a subtle shake of his head. Aiden had never met Sarah and had certainly never met Natasha, so they could just go the other way and he’d never even know they were with Steve. It could simply not become a problem. But Sarah had already spotted him, and she didn’t know any better. “Daddy!” she cried, and she was running
down the sidewalk immediately, blonde hair flying and cherubic face aglow with happiness.
“Daddy! Daddy!”

Steve swallowed down his pounding heart, crouching to catch Sarah as she threw herself at him. He lifted her up. Aiden smiled. “Well, I guess that answers that. Wow, she looks just like you.”

Normally Sarah would have been chattering away at this point, but the second she spotted Aiden, a complete stranger, she clammed up tight. Steve could feel her stiffen, her little hands balling in his coat, and her face went right into his neck. “This is Sarah,” he introduced because he had to. And it was a mighty risk using Sarah’s real name, but he never thought he could rely on her to remember to respond to a fake one. “She’s, uh… shy.”

Aiden smiled good-naturedly, thankfully not off-put. “That’s okay. Takes after you then, I guess.”

You have no idea.
“This is my sister, Kate.”

Kate came forward. She was pretty, maybe older than Aiden, with wavy honeyed hair pulled into a loose ponytail. She wasn’t wearing much makeup, and she had what seemed to Steve to be a perpetually tired expression. That made sense, given she had three kids and no husband as he understood it. Still, she looked friendly and sweet. She held out her hand, smiling brightly. “Hi. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Steve shook her hand. Again, he had to. “Likewise.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you from Aiden,” Kate said. “These are my kids. John’s the oldest, then Jeremy, and finally Jessica. She’s five.”

Steve glanced down at Sarah, but she immediately clung tighter like she thought he was trying to move away. “Sarah’s four.”

Kate seemed to recognize that Sarah had an issue with strangers (even if she had no idea why or just how much). She smiled more, dropping her hand to her daughter’s head. “Did you hear that, Jessie? She’s just about your age.”

Jessie didn’t look convinced. Her brown hair was done up in a neat ponytail, and she was smaller than Sarah was. “Whassa matter with her?” she asked, forcefully but not unkindly (though it could have been heard that way, Steve supposed, but he knew kids often had no concept of social graces).

“Nothing,” he answered, maybe a little defensively. “She just doesn’t like strangers.”

Kate and Aiden shared a look that Steve could only consider as concerned, and he wondered in annoyance just how much they discussed him and how little he exposed his daughter and himself to life outside their home. He could practically hear the disapproval, even if it was only in his imagination. Thankfully, before anything could come of it, Natasha was there. She came up behind Steve, smiling a downright gorgeous smile, before very comfortably grabbing his shoulders (Steve practically froze in fear) and pushing into the conversation. “Hi!” she greeted. She stuck her hand out to them. “I’m Nat.”

Aiden was positively flummoxed. His brow furrowed, eyes steeped in confusion that this beautiful young woman was there with the guy he’d long figured for a recluse. And then Natasha brazenly put the nail in the coffin of any other explanation or lie. “I’m Dan’s girlfriend.”

Flummoxed went straight to shocked. Aiden grasped Natasha’s hand slowly, and a knowing, teasing grin came to his face. “Uh… wow. Okay. Dude.” He looked to Steve. “Obviously you’ve been shoveling a pile of lies.”
Kate looked cross. “Aiden, come on.”

“No, it’s fine,” Natasha replied. She set her hand on Sarah’s back, both for comfort and to lend credence that she was as close with them as she claimed without being forceful or overly obvious about it. “I travel a lot for my job. When I can get out here, well…” She smiled disarmingly, her cheeks coloring in embarrassment. 

“*How is she so good at this?* “I kinda like having him all to myself.”

Talk about shoveling a pile of lies. Aiden bought every one of them. “But you’re not…”

It was obvious what he was asking, and Kate gave him another stern glance for his lack of manners. Steve was used to his innocent pushiness, but he froze yet again, completely dumb over what to say. Thank God for Natasha. “No. No, no.” She laughed lightly. “This little pocket of sunshine had Dan’s heart long before I got a piece of it. She’s so sweet to share.” Natasha stroked Sarah’s hair, and the little girl looked up just a little. Steve could feel a timid grin against his shoulder. “We knew each other before, during high school out east. And we just happened to run into one another about six months ago when I was out here on assignment.”

“Oh, what do you do?” Kate asked.

“I’m a journalist. I came to cover the effects of the economic downturn on the logging industry. We ran into each other right in Colburn of all places, and one thing led to another…” *The best lies are always the ones wrapped around a nugget of truth.* She was amazing, acting the part of a sweet, sincere, infatuated girlfriend. And this gave them a history, mirroring their own lives enough that the emotions would seem genuine. “You work with Dan?”

“Yeah,” Aiden answered, even though Natasha knew that. She’d also probably checked him out before once Steve had told her about them, though she’d never said anything about it to Steve. “Yeah, I do. Was kinda afraid he was a hermit or something–”

Steve gave him a withering look. “Ha ha.”

“–but I think I’ve been pretty soundly proven wrong.” Natasha beamed. “What’re you guys up to? Because we were just about to get some dinner. Maybe you’d like to join us?”

The mere concept was terrifying, simply put. A whole dinner spent in close company with people who were complete strangers? Having to keep up this act, this ruse, this *lie* under that kind of scrutiny? Thinking on his feet constantly, never feeling comfortable, never relaxing, being dishonest and feeling rotten about it… And not to mention who *else* could be watching. That feeling that someone was had come back in force. Maintaining their cover story was going to require his attention, so he wouldn’t be able to keep a decent eye on their surroundings. So his answer was immediate and automatic. “Oh, no. No, that’s alright. We were going to–”

“Oh, come on,” Aiden interrupted. “What excuse could you possibly have this time?”

None. He really couldn’t think of a single one. He glanced at Natasha for help, but she just shrugged. “I don’t mind sharing,” she declared, and Steve tried not to glare. She wasn’t very subtle with her ulterior motive. Well, not to him. “Just this once. If it’s not a bother.”

“Of course not.” Kate appeared pleased, pulling her kids closer. “We were thinking pizza. How does that sound?”

“Sounds wonderful to me,” Natasha agreed. “Sarah, baby, you want pizza?” Sarah gave a little nod against Steve’s neck. “Okay. Honey, don’t choke Daddy quite so much.” She said that with
enough of a laughing, light-hearted tone that Sarah actually obeyed, letting go enough that Steve felt it was okay to put her down. She said nothing, staring at the other kids, Aiden, and Kate like she didn’t know what to think. Natasha handed Steve the shopping bags and took her hand instead. She walked up to Kate, gently leading and guiding Sarah closer. “So nice of you to invite us. Really.”

“It’s our pleasure. Aiden says so many nice things about Dan, and…” They walked off, chatting, and just like that, Natasha had charmed her way into acceptance without question.

Steve stood on the sidewalk, watching them go, stupefied at this sudden turn of events. Aiden came up to him, shaking his head in lingering surprise. “Guess I was wrong about you,” he commented. “Heck, if I had a girl that beautiful coming to see me, I don’t think I’d leave the house either.”

Steve rolled his eyes, blushing, and for once he just felt like a normal guy getting ribbed by a friend. Same as he used to do with Tony and Clint and Thor. He smiled and pushed Aiden after the others. “Let’s go.”

Dinner turned out to be a wonderful time. For all his worry about keeping up the lie, it was surprisingly alright. Of course, it would be with Natasha there, silently shouldering the responsibility of it. He marveled at her, at how easy she made it look, weaving together this story about their past. Apparently they’d been high school sweethearts back in a little town in western New York. College had separated them. Steve (or Dan, anyway) had been the quiet, athletic type, and Nat had been something of a bookworm who coveted information and had aspirations to work in media. Dan had gone on a football scholarship to a bigger state university. Nat had gone somewhere to cultivate her mind, a smaller private college. How unlikely was it that they’d found each other again? She’d gone through all of this, fabricating and elaborating so naturally, probably making it all up on the fly without even the slightest hint that it was all false. Not only that, she subtly planted seeds for Steve to add in his own embellishments (which he did, albeit shyly and reluctantly). She was a master at this.

Pretty soon, even Steve was fooled by her act, getting into it, almost forgetting he was lying. She sat next to him, magical in the dimmed lights of the restaurant, stunningly beautiful. It seemed like everyone in the place was watching her, listening to her, entranced by her as she worked through her story and dazzled anyone who thought twice about it. Pizza came, and Natasha went about helping Sarah with her dinner. Kate and Aiden were talking about themselves, too, and Natasha delved into it, asking about the kids, sweetly interested in them and everything they had to say. Jessica got more curious about Sarah as Sarah relaxed, and pretty soon the two little girls were chatting about princesses and ponies. Steve kept half his attention on their conversation, just in case Sarah accidentally blurted out something she shouldn’t. Mostly Sarah was talking about her sketches and how Natasha had taught her ballet, and while that might have thrown someone else, Natasha rolled with it, explaining that she’d danced in college. At one point in time, she’d dreamed about making a career of it, but money and practicality had ruled it out. Kate had agreed that they always did and went on to talk about how she’d wanted to be a doctor before her husband had passed away in a car accident a few years ago. Buried under student loan debt and with three kids on her own, she gratefully looked at her brother and remarked she didn’t know what she would do without him. Knowing how hard it was to be a single parent, she was also extremely glad Dan had Nat to ease his loneliness, and she said as much. Natasha flushed with joy at the compliment and held Steve’s hand on the table.

Pizza was devoured. Steve had to remember to hold back his appetite; nothing would look stranger than someone consuming four times what a normal man ate. The kids laughed and talked, Aiden obviously a good, fun uncle to them, and it was so nice to see Sarah join in. This, too, reminded him of the Tower, of Clint’s jokes and Bruce’s patience and Thor’s laughter and Tony’s love. Sarah was
nearly back to normal. All of her misery from the nightmare was gone like it had never happened. She enjoyed her pizza enthusiastically, giggling with the two boys and Jessica, and Steve watched and wondered anew what he was doing to his daughter. This was one of a very few number of times she’d socialized with other children, and while she was doing alright with it, she’d struggled. Even now, despite the fact she was talking pretty freely, she still seemed a tad uncomfortable, a tad anxious. She kept checking with Steve and Natasha, little glances like she wasn’t confident enough to keep going if they so much as looked away. Everything that she’d tried not to think about that evening came rushing back. How much had he damaged her with this life? She should be at parks, at preschool, playing with other children, not having nightmares and spending her life hiding in their house. The guilt was almost too much to bear.

Natasha didn’t let him bear it. As much as she was staying on top of their charade, keeping an eye on their surroundings, and ensuring Sarah was feeling comfortable and having fun, she was also there for Steve. She pressed close to him, purposefully steering the conversation in such a way that she knew he could be more himself. She controlled everything, engineering it almost so that his natural personality could come through, gently drawing him out without him even realizing it. Her hand was on his hand or under the table on his thigh like she was anchoring him, reminding him of exactly what Kate had said: he wasn’t alone.

The evening wore away quickly, a couple hours easily passing at the restaurant filled with good food and good cheer. After Steve and Aiden split the bill, they headed out into the cold, autumn night and walked the streets, window shopping and talking. A little ice cream place was still open, apparently serving patrons even into the autumn months. The kids bounced excitedly at the prospect of a treat, all jabbering at once, and Natasha scooted Sarah into the group. Steve and Aiden acquired ice cream cones for everyone, and they stood around in the nippy air, enjoying a last touch of summer. The adults chatted some more while the kids ran around the little lot next to the shop, the two girls playing some sort of imaginary hop scotch game while the boys rambunctiously re-enacted a scene from one of their superhero shows. Aiden and Kate talked a lot about their childhood. Steve learned more about the other man in the matter of thirty minutes than he had over the past year. It was nice to listen, truly listen, to someone else, to take it in without worry about being hurt or discovered. The last time he had, he realized, was when Viper had lured him out on that false date a year ago. That had been the start of the nightmare.

Eventually the kids tired, and Kate decided it was time to get hers to bed. Steve was inclined to agree; Sarah was wearily leaning into his legs, worn out from the hike in the morning, the anguish of the afternoon, and all of the activity and excitement this evening. They thanked each other for the fun time, however unexpected and impromptu it had been, and promised to do it again soon. Promised to do it again. Steve couldn’t fathom that, having a real relationship with other people. Even though he saw Milly often, the age difference was enough to make that feel like something else. This was a connection to friends, other people his age (well, biologically, anyway) with whom he could relate and share his life. The idea left him nervous and tingling and feeling, well, a bit high, if he could feel such a thing. They said their final goodbyes, and Steve carried Sarah back to the truck, Natasha leaning into his side unabashedly. That wasn’t at all for show.

They drove home quietly. Sarah was asleep almost instantly, her head tucked onto Natasha’s lap as much as it could be with her strapped into her booster seat. Natasha remarked that it had been a nice time, and Steve had to agree. It had been nice. He’d felt normal, just a young guy out with his daughter and his girlfriend. And that was odd, because normal hadn’t been his life before. He’d been Captain America before, leader of the Avengers, SHIELD agent, best friends with Iron Man and Thor, with Hawkeye and the Hulk and Black Widow. Then he’d been a single dad but still Captain America. What was normal? Not feeling threatened. Not feeling lost.

Having a home. He looked over at Natasha as he drove. She was watching the road, stroking her
fingers through Sarah’s now unbound hair. Her face was placid, bathed in the headlights of oncoming traffic. He’d nearly forgotten it with everything that had gone on that evening. He smiled, turning back to driving, thinking he’d stolen the moment. He hadn’t. Her hand reached over Sarah, taking his from the steering wheel. Their fingers wove together on his leg, her thumb caressing slowly over his knuckles, and he exhaled slowly. “Thanks,” he said softly.

“You’re welcome,” she responded. The corner of her lips quirked into a smile. “For what?”

He lifted her hand and kissed it. “You know for what, Nat.”

She grinned but said nothing. He dropped their joined hands back to his leg, squeezing tighter rather than letting go, and she went back to watching the road.

It was well after nine o’clock by the time they got back to the house. Steve parked the truck. Natasha gathered the clothes she’d bought Sarah, and Steve gathered up Sarah herself. They went inside. Steve carried his daughter up to her bedroom. She was half asleep, murmuring little questions like “are we home yet?” and “is Tasha staying?” while Steve took off her coat, shoes, and clothes. He worked her pajamas onto her little body, answering her with “yeah, baby girl” and “of course she’s staying”. “Love Tasha, Daddy,” Sarah declared around a yawn as Steve tucked her in.

“Yeah?” he asked with a smile, brushing her hair from her face. “Me, too.”

Belle hopped up on Sarah’s bed, taking her place at the foot of it, and Steve reached over to give her an appreciative pet. He was distracted enough by that that Sarah’s next question completely took him by surprise. “Is Tasha my mommy? Like Jessie has her mommy?”

Steve wasn’t even sure Sarah was awake. He wasn’t sure what to say. Truth be told, for being so smart and inquisitive, Sarah had never asked about this before. Today had been her first real experience with other children, with other children and their mother, so it was only natural to be curious, he supposed, about why she was different. Still, his heart throbbed before sinking right down into the bottom of his stomach like a lead weight. Maybe he should lie. There were things about this she couldn’t understand, that he didn’t understand, and there was no sense in hurting her. But when he went to speak, he couldn’t muster it. “She’s not your mother, Sarah. Not your real mother.”

Sarah’s sleepy blue eyes watched him intently. “Where’s my real mommy then?”

Tonight of all nights he hadn’t expected this. It had been bound to happen. And, again, it made sense for it to be now. But… He sighed, brushing her hair back again. “She’s gone.”

“Dead?” Sarah knew what death was. Unfortunately, she’d seen it.

“No, baby. She’s not dead. She’s just…” He swallowed the pain in his chest. “She’s not a good person. We have to stay away from her, okay? But don’t think about it. You don’t need to worry.”

Sarah’s eyes glazed. Clearly she didn’t fully understand that, but she thankfully didn’t push any further. “Can Tasha be my mommy then?”

Steve smiled, wondering yet again about signs and coincidences. “Do you want her to be?”

“Uh-huh. Then we can go home.”

Again, that took him aback. “You still remember home?”
Her pictures were evidence enough that she did, but this was the first time she’d ever directly mentioned it. “Uh-huh. And when we get home, I wanna be a ballerina.”

Steve leaned in to kiss her forehead. “I’m sure you can be,” he promised. “You can be anything you want.” He nuzzled her face. “G’night, baby girl.”

“Night, Daddy. Love you.”

He gave Sarah a final kiss and Belle another pet. “Love you, too.”

Back downstairs, Natasha was tidying up. She turned from unfolding the throw on the couch, getting her “bed” ready, when she heard him come downstairs. “She asleep?” Steve nodded. Natasha smiled. “See, I told you it would be okay. And good for you two. You can’t live like this. It’s driving you crazy.”

All he could do was nod again. For some reason, he couldn’t speak. He couldn’t think. He didn’t need to, really. Natasha came over. She slid her hands up his chest, wrapping them around his neck and gently pulling him down to plant his face into her shoulder. Her fingers were tight in his hair to keep him there. “It’s going to be alright, Steve. Whatever happens, we’ll do it together. You’re not alone.”

I don’t want to be alone. Suddenly he was falling, dropping down to his knees before her. In the dimmed lights of the small living room, her hair was as dark as rust, and her eyes were deep. “What…”

He reached into the pocket of his jeans where he’d moved the ring. Pulling it out, he lifted it to her. It wasn’t anything fancy. He couldn’t afford fancy, not anymore, and that wasn’t him anyway. It wasn’t her, either. It wasn’t them. Their whole romance had been conducted in secret, stolen moments and hidden intimacies. Neither of them liked the spotlight, and they both were pragmatic and practical. She was a spy, and he was a soldier. They were Avengers. So what he’d chosen was modest, plain, a simple gold band with a diamond solitaire. It was not large, but it was good quality, and it sparkled in the light as he offered it. He drew a deep breath to calm his racing heart. Now the words came, and they came easily. “Natasha, will you marry me?”

She just stared at him. He could tell she was surprised; she wasn’t doing much to hide it. What he couldn’t tell was if it was surprise out of, well, surprise or surprise because he was crazy. The silence that followed was terrible with tension. Steve had felt so sure about this all night, and they’d talked about it before, last night even, but never in any great detail. Maybe he’d been wrong. Or maybe she’d never meant what she’d said. Now that it came down to it, she was having second thoughts. After all, he was in a heap of trouble and a single parent aside, and by doing this he was asking her to share in all of that with him. Who’d want that? To become HYDRA’s most wanted? To get in the way of their vendetta against him? He had so much baggage.

Just as he was about to go out of his mind with panic, though, she smiled. “Yes.”

He gasped. “Yes?”

“Of course, yes!” she returned, and he was on his feet, kissing her and kissing her. She kissed back, tangling herself around him, hands in his hair and legs around his. She felt perfect to him, perfect in every way, and he lost himself in her lips and hands and the way that she fit so gloriously well against him. He pulled away for a breath, knowing he was grinning like an idiot, before raising her left hand and slipping the ring onto her finger. “It’s beautiful.”

“Poor lumberjack’s salary,” he said by way of an excuse.
“I told you before. I like lumberjacks.” She swept her thumb over his lower lip, skirting along his beard. “I like the rugged look.” She kissed him again, hotter and deeper, and he could feel just how excited she was, how happy. “Are you sure, though?”

“Absolutely,” he breathed. “It’s the only thing that makes sense to me, Nat. The only thing I know.”

She grinned (if there was a glimmer of wetness in her eyes, he wisely was not going to say). “You want me?” she whispered.

“You know I do.”

“Your wife.” She said that like she was testing it. Tasting it. They stumbled over their feet to his couch, and he laid her down there, kneeling in between her legs. She sighed, a shivery, gusty thing against his hair. “I could be that. A lumberjack’s wife.”

“Think so?” he asked.

“Know so.” She grinned again, and so did he before pushing up to kiss her soundly. She trapped him between her legs, cupping his face to hold him exactly where she wanted him. Steve closed his eyes and let himself go, let it all go, let this be the moment where he felt alive. She wanted him, too. And she loved him. She was going to marry him. “Is… um…” She grinned devilishly, slyly cocking an eyebrow as her dark, heady eyes traveled down his chest to where their hips were pushed together. “Is this close enough for you and Captain America’s morals? My plighting my troth to you?” He laughed. “Or do you want to wait until our wedding night?”

Hesitating, he rubbed his thumb over the ring on her finger where her hand was in his shirt, twirling the diamond around. “What do you want to do?”

“I’ve wanted this.” She kissed him hard. “With you.” And again. “For forever.” Steve groaned into her mouth, all his blood going south in a hurry, when she not so subtly demanded he open his mouth to her (and who was he to deny?). She pulled back, her eyes heated with desire. “If you want to wait, we can—”

“No.” Not anymore. Not for this. Not for you. He didn’t know what was going to happen. Not to him and not to Sarah. Not with this difficult life they were living. But he knew he couldn’t do this alone. It was killing him and hurting his daughter.

And he wanted to be selfish for once. He pinned Natasha to the couch, leaning down to kiss her hard. Suddenly clothes were coming off in a hurry. She was pulling his shirt over his head. He was divesting her of her sweater. His fingers were shaking with uncertainty, and he felt so stupid about it, but he couldn’t stop himself. She only smiled, stilling his hands against his own chest before reaching behind herself to undo the clasps of her bra. He swallowed, staring at her. She was beautiful. All of his nerves were positively burning, alight with fire and hesitancy and fear and so much undeniable want, and suddenly his complete lack of experience was mortifying because this was happening.

Like always, though, Natasha was there to save him. “Come here,” she whispered. She drew his hands away from him, now, and to her own body, gentle and mindful to be slow and careful. “No need to be nervous.” She kissed him, whimpering a little when finally he touched her.

“Easy for you to say,” he joked lamely. “You’re not a virgin who’s going on a hundred.”

She laughed lightly. “Technically, you’re only, what? Thirty-three?”
“Thirty-two. And that’s not really any better, even with Captain America’s morals.” Natasha chuckled again. Steve licked his lips, trying to stuff his nerves while she held his hands on her. “You think it’s weird that I have a four year-old daughter but you’re the only woman I’ve ever… that I’ve… Nat…”

“ Weird, no,” she whispered. She closed her eyes, leaning back into the couch and arching into his touch. “It’s… It’s you. Who you are. And you’re perfect.”

Everything about this moment was that and so much more. When she guided his mouth down to her neck and shoulders and then lower, he threw reservation to the wind, doing whatever felt good and more importantly what made her feel good. He let her sighs and whimpers direct him. She dug her nails into his scalp when he kissed his way down her stomach, pausing a moment at the sight of the scar above her hip. He kissed that, hating whoever had hurt her, before working her pants off her legs. He leaned back to look at her, to take all of her in, everything she was offering him.

“Steve…” She leaned up, unhappy with the distance, and grabbed at his belt. She undid it in a hurry, her fingers deft and quick, and the button and zipper of his jeans followed. He could barely breathe, frozen with equal parts absolute terror and unfettered desire. She pushed his pants down and reached for him. “Steve… I love you.”

Unfortunately, it was over much faster than he wanted.

Fortunately, though, the super soldier serum had some, well, unintended side-effects, and he was able to give it another try very quickly. This one was more far, far more successful, and Natasha, as patient as she’d been, was left shivering with pleasure, clutching him and panting into his shoulder as he collapsed wearily atop her. She hummed appreciatively, weaving her fingers through his sweaty, mussed hair to keep his head to her chest. She was uncharacteristically clumsy as she fumbled for the blanket that had been on the couch, unfolding it somehow despite being fairly well pinned by the dead weight of his body and draping it over them both. Steve closed his eyes and caught his breath.

“That was…”

There really weren’t words, so she just murmured, “Yeah.”

They lay there for quite some time. The house was completely silent, save for soft breaths and slowing hearts. Steve felt like he never had before, loose and happy and tired, spent in a way even the lengthiest, most strenuous battle loaded with physical exertion didn’t cause. Satiated, he supposed. Complete. There didn’t seem to be much reason to move for once, even though he needed to check the house over before bed (and get changed and cleaned up, of course). He was too bone-dead exhausted and comfortable.

“I’m not going back.” Natasha’s soft declaration was thunderous in the quiet. Steve lifted his head from her. She stared at him, resolute. “I’m staying with you.”

“No, Nat, you–”

“I don’t want to leave you. There’s no reason.” Before he could protest, she kissed him. They spent a few long minutes like that, exploring with a shadow of the passion and hunger they’d had before but no less love or respect.

Steve breathed deeply when they pulled away, but he didn’t lay his head back down. “I need you to go back,” he eventually said. Natasha frowned in displeasure, but this time he was the one who didn’t let her object. “You can’t just disappear on Tony. He’s suffered enough with losing so many of us. I think… I think they should know that you’re safe. That we’re safe. At least that we’re together.” He gave a crooked smile. “And I think Clint would kill me if I took you without you saying goodbye.”
Natasha smiled, too. “Probably.”

“And I’d like you to double-check everything. Make sure it’s okay. If there’s even the slightest hint Tony needs you…”

“I know. We’ll wait.” She ran her hand up and down his spine, languidly and gently. It was so soothing that all he wanted to do was fall asleep. “And we should move, as long as you’re okay with that. Somewhere where we can reestablish with better names – I can’t call you ‘Dan’ for the rest of my life – and a better backstory. When I go back, I’ll get everything we need to relocate. New IDs. Papers. Money. The usuals. We’ll find a new home together and make a fresh start, a better life for Sarah.” He grunted his assent. There was nothing for them here. No future. Nothing to lose. And he’d like to be Steve again, at least, even if he couldn’t be Steve Rogers. She seemed to read his mind. “As much as I’d like to be a lumberjack’s wife, I think I’d like to be Captain America’s wife more.” That hurt, and for a moment, it was so, so tempting to go collect Sarah and Belle, pack up some stuff, get into their truck, and drive. Go home. He didn’t know what to believe anymore. “But that’ll come.”

“You think so?” Steve whispered. It seemed impossible.

“Yes. When it’s safe.” She kissed his forehead. “When it’s time. We’ll go home together. And we can all be a family again.” He closed his eyes, letting the image wash over him. All of them gathered at the Tower. Tony and Pepper and their baby. Thor and Jane. Clint. Bruce. He and Natasha and Sarah. Their family. Together and safe. “Sleep for a bit. I’ll get us up in a little while.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, kissing his forehead again. With her warmth enveloping him and with that dream dancing in his mind, he drifted away.

As much as Steve wanted Natasha to stay another day, there was no sense in it. Now that they were engaged (engaged! He still couldn’t quite get over that), they were both anxious about going ahead right away. Months and months of what was for all intents and purposes a long distance relationship had worn away their patience. So while she’d originally planned on leaving Monday, she decided to go back Sunday so she could start doing what she needed to do. This, of course, was extremely upsetting to Sarah. It was probably a mistake to sit her down first thing in the morning and start the conversation with Natasha leaving (although, in their defense, Sarah leapt to that conclusion first and immediately started crying). However, once they explained to her that Natasha was going so she could come back for good, so she could marry daddy… Well, her reaction changed drastically. She practically jumped for joy, excited beyond words, throwing herself at Natasha and babbling her enthusiastic approval. Natasha hadn’t been overly concerned about Sarah accepting her in a more permanent capacity in their lives, but Steve could tell she’d still been a little worried about it. There’d been no reason to be. Steve hadn’t seen his daughter this happy in a long time.

Of course, they sat Sarah down and reminded her that this had to be kept secret for a while. She didn’t understand, but she was used to following instructions that didn’t necessarily make sense to her, so she just nodded. Then she ran upstairs to her room, leaving the two of them smiling and confused, and came tearing back down the stairs a minute or so later. “Daddy gave you a ring,” she said breathlessly. “I wanna give you these.”

She had Steve’s dog tags that he’d given her on her third birthday, right before everything had turned into this nightmare. Steve had taken them with when they’d fled New York, and he’d given them back to Sarah to keep in her room once they’d settled here. It was a small reminder (the only one
they had, in fact) of who they’d been before. The only thing with Steve’s real name on it. “Sarah,” Natasha said as Sarah draped the chain around her neck, “I can’t take these. Daddy gave them to you.”

“We can share,” Sarah said. She grinned at Steve. “Right, Daddy?”

Steve nodded. “Sure, you can. I’d like that.”

It was more than obvious Sarah was beyond happy to give Natasha something and that Natasha had taken it with a promise to come back. She might not completely comprehend everything, but she knew that the ring Steve had given her was the same, so she wanted to make extra sure. It was touching, and Steve held them both on the couch for a while, again feeling certain for the first time in a long time that he was doing the right thing.

They had breakfast, some waffles and eggs. Natasha took Sarah out to play with Belle for a bit in the crisp morning sun while Steve cleaned up. It was a beautiful day, bright and cheery, and he felt like he was literally on cloud nine. He watched them and yet again let himself drift in his thoughts, picturing a bigger, nicer house, a home somewhere near Tony and Pepper, and everyone behind him, chatting as he cooked. It was so vivid he could almost hear the conversation, Thor’s deep laugh and Clint’s dark humor and Bruce telling them all they were ridiculous but trying not to smile. Pepper’s gentle hands. Tony teasing. God, he missed them. Someday. Natasha had promised that. When we’re ready. When it’s safe.

After they were done, they drove Natasha to the bus stop, just like they had every other visit only this time the depression that had always threatened with the thought of her leaving and not knowing when she’d be back was gone. Steve’s mind was silently racing with possibilities as Sarah and Natasha chattered. They’d already made some tentative plans. They’d move as soon as she returned in a week or two. Find a new town maybe down in California somewhere so that Natasha could find work easier. And they’d get married right away, as soon as Natasha drummed up some fake documents. With JARVIS’ help, she was certain she could manufacture anything they needed. There had to be a little church somewhere where they could do it quickly and without much fuss. Then they’d hide together as a family until HYDRA was gone. It still wouldn’t be an easy life, but with the two of them protecting Sarah, it would be infinitely better than what he had now. He was feeling so good about that that he didn’t hold Sarah back from hugging Natasha out in public in front of the bus like he had every other time. And he didn’t hesitate to kiss Natasha goodbye, kiss her long and hard and properly even though people could be watching. He didn’t care anymore. He loved her and he was going to have her as his wife and he wanted the world to know it.

With Natasha on the bus to Portland to catch a plane back to New York, Steve took Sarah home. They were quiet, but not sad really. Pensive and fully aware that things were about to change again, this time for the better. When they returned, the tiny house felt bigger and emptier without Natasha’s light and her voice and her presence as it always did, but it wasn’t so unbearable. Already Sarah was asking when she’d be back, and Steve smiled and promised “soon” where he’d always sadly replied “I don’t know” in the past. They read for a while, Steve pulling out a few new books from a stack he kept stored away for special days. Sarah sat on his lap, breezing through texts meant for grammar school-aged kids with no trouble at all. They had a quick lunch of sandwiches before playing with Belle in the backyard again. Sarah and the dog jumped and scampered in the leaves while Steve raked them (in vain, mostly, but he didn’t care overly much about wasting his time). The sky clouded over while they did that, and the afternoon threatened rain. They went back inside, and Sarah colored and watched TV for a bit while he went upstairs. He fished the box out from under the floorboards beneath their bed and counted their money. He also checked their weapons, the stash of guns and ammunition he still had, before pulling the StarkPhone free. He swept his thumb over the surface of it, breathing deeply to calm his anxious heart. Natasha had said she’d just come back,
and no matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he missed her already, it was dangerous to call. Still, he put the StarkPhone in his jeans pocket just in case.

They had supper with Milly just as they’d planned before Natasha had shown up. The older lady made a delicious casserole of some sort, full of vegetables, noodles, chicken, and cheese, and she’d freshly baked a loaf of bread. They sat and ate happily, and Milly immediately started teasing Steve about the rumors about him. Apparently news traveled fast (though with Aiden’s tendencies to be a busy-body, it wasn’t surprising, and Milly had just as many tendencies on top of that). Smiling in relief, she grilled Steve about his girlfriend, wanting to know all about how they’d met, who he was, where she lived. Thankfully the memories of what Natasha had said the night before at dinner were fresh, so it was easy to chat about it again. Plus he wasn’t so worried about inconsistencies; moving soon meant a blank slate of sorts, so anything he got wrong now didn’t really matter. Milly was just so pleased, asking Sarah what she thought, and Sarah was all too eager to go on about how wonderful Natasha was, how she was teaching her to be a ballerina, how she colored with her and loved her daddy. Steve simply let her be overjoyed and excited.

It wasn’t until they pulled back into their driveway later that evening with a cold rain descending that things dramatically shifted. Steve knew instantly yet again that something was wrong. His breath caught in his throat as he stared at the open front door of their house. Twice in as many days. Déjà vu worked its way over him in an unpleasant tingle. It couldn’t be Natasha. At least, he didn’t think it would be. It was almost midnight on the East Coast. She’d be getting home now if her flight was on time. Even if it was her, there was no reason to take a chance. “Stay here,” he said to Sarah.

“Dad–”

“Sarah.” The soft, stern note in his voice stilled her. Steve gripped the steering wheel tighter, his mind spinning with worry and dismay. Before he could get out of the car, though, the front door opened all the way. Steve’s face shattered in surprise. “Kate?”

As crazy as it was, Kate stood there. She was dressed very differently than she had been last night. It wasn’t combat gear, but it was definitely a uniform of some sort. Black and formfitting, it resembled what the agents of SHIELD used to wear before the organization’s collapse. And she was armed. There was a gun on her thigh.

The second he spotted that, horror rushed over him. Anger that he’d been so stupid. He fumbled for Sarah’s seatbelt, ripping it loose instead of bothering with the latch, and pulled her into his arms. He kicked open his door and made to run.

Aiden was there behind him. He was also wearing a combat uniform, and he was also armed. No! Steve gritted his teeth, his brain already running through the series of moves he’d need to disarm his opponent and escape. He could do it even if he got shot, and he would. He tucked Sarah against him, preparing to ram Aiden head on (there was no way a lone couple of HYDRA agents would be able to take on Captain America), only Aiden raised his hands in surrender and stepped back.

“Whoa! Whoa. Easy! This isn’t what it looks like!”

The cold drive to do anything to protect his daughter was hard upon him. “Get away! Get back!”

“No, no,” Aiden, or whoever he was, protested gently. “Captain Rogers, please.”

Steve went cold. “You knew? All this time?” Aiden glanced at Kate, who was behind him now. Still neither of them had drawn their weapons, but they were trying to corner him against his truck like some sort of skittish animal. Steve practically growled. If that was what they wanted, he had no problem with acting like one. He’d attack if they got any closer. And they’d never catch him when he ran. “Get away from us!” he demanded again.
“We don’t mean either you or Sarah any harm,” Kate insisted.

“Who are you?” Neither of them answered right away, sharing another look that made Steve’s blood boil in frustration. “Who?”

Kate calmly stood her ground. “I’m Agent Thirteen. This is Agent Hal Richards. We’re with SHIELD Special Service.”

Steve’s eyes flashed in warning, and he tucked Sarah’s shaking body closer to him. “HYDRA?”

“No,” Kate – Agent Thirteen – responded. “No, sir. SHIELD Special Service was tasked with one thing and one thing alone: protecting the lives of SHIELD’s highest operatives.”

Steve darted his gaze among the two of them, taking another step back. Run. Every muscle in his body was poised to do just that. They couldn’t stop him, and they knew it. Still… something about Kate seemed familiar now in a way it hadn’t before. Something about the way she carried herself, the way she talked. It gave him pause when it probably shouldn’t have, and he found himself hesitating. “SHIELD and HYDRA are two sides of the same coin,” he reminded lowly. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because they’re telling the truth, Cap.”

That familiar voice grabbed his attention, and he turned to look at his house. There, standing in the doorway, was Nick Fury. He was dressed in black jeans and a black leather jacket over a gray sweater. His hands were in his pockets. As always, he had an eyepatch over his blinded eye, and his face was impassive and cool as if he hadn’t been gone for over a year. Not just gone. Dead.

Steve could hardly believe his eyes. It didn’t seem possible. “They killed you,” he murmured in shock. “You were assassinated.”

Fury let the screen door rattle shut behind him. “Yeah,” he responded with a sigh. “They tried. And it hurt pretty bad, but it takes more than a little impromptu evil resurrection to put me down.”

Steve wasn’t in the mood for games. He felt rattled to the core. “How are you here?”

“We all are who we are,” Fury said. He walked through the drizzly air over to Steve, his shoes rattling the leaves in his path. “Even you.”

All the things Fury had done. Lied to him about SHIELD taking his blood samples when he’d been unconscious from the ice. Failed to support him when there’d been so much contention about Sarah’s fate. Used Coulson’s death as a catalyst to bring the Avengers together and then kept his survival secret for years. And letting HYDRA grow like a parasite inside SHIELD, causing the deaths of hundreds and the world to flounder in the wake of so much disaster. Now he was here? Why? Steve narrowed his eyes reproachfully. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he snapped.

Agent Thirteen came closer, donning the same open, sweet smile she’d had last night. With make-up on and her hair smoothed and dressed as she was, she seemed like a completely different person. All they’d done to perpetuate their act. For months. Those kids, even. Nothing was real. “Do you want to come with me, Sarah?” she asked quietly. There was only openness and warmth in her eyes, but Sarah recoiled from her touch and put her face into Steve’s neck. “My name’s Sharon. It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not alright!” Steve yelled, backing up again. “She stays with me!”

“Cap, easy,” Fury said. He raised his hands a little in acquiescence. “It might be better to talk about
what we need to without her listening is all.”

He didn’t give a damn. “You don’t touch her. You hear me? No one touches her.”

Fury’s hands went up even higher, this time in surrender. “Alright, alright. Suit yourself.” There was a subtle nod to the two agents, and they backed off. Steve breathed just a tad easier. A tad. There was nothing about this situation he liked. “Mind if we go inside, though? The weather sucks here.”

Steve figured he probably didn’t have a choice unless he wanted this to end in some sort of altercation. Once inside they were inside the house, he held Sarah tighter and looked around quickly. Everything seemed fine, which made him wonder even more how many times these people had infiltrated his home without him noticing. “Where’s my dog?” he coldly demanded.

Fury sighed. “She’s fine. We just muzzled her so that we could wait for you. She wasn’t too fond of us coming in.”


The master spy gave a little nod. “You got it.”

Richards disappeared, heading to the backyard. Steve watched him go carefully, keeping his back to the front door. They let him stay close to the exit almost like they were humoring him (or at least trying to keep the peace). Fury looked around, appraising his home openly. “I have to say I’m rather amused that you and Romanoff thought you could carry on some secret love affair without me knowing.”

Feeling naked and utterly exposed, Steve wrapped both his arms around Sarah even more tightly just to keep himself still and to hold onto his temper. “You tracked me down through Natasha?”

“No. Agent Richards has been watching you… well.” Fury smiled sadly. “You know how long.” Almost a year. God. He’d never been hidden at all. All this time he’d thought he’d been living in secret, apparently he hadn’t been. Fury had found him almost immediately after he’d settled here and sent “Aiden” in to try and befriend him or at the very least keep an eye on him. It could have been before that even. How would he even know? If Fury had ways to get into his house, his life, without him knowing… Did HYDRA know where he was, too? He felt violated and betrayed. Terrified, even. This was hard to swallow and harder still to accept. “I embedded both him and Agent Thirteen here to protect you. Keep an eye on you. Keep HYDRA off your tail as much as they could.”

Belle came running quickly back into the house, making a beeline for Steve’s side. She didn’t jump on him like she normally did, instead parking herself defensively in front of her owners. She stared at their intruders, nearly baring her teeth, trying to decipher if they were friend or foe. That mirrored how Steve felt far too well. Still, getting upset accomplished nothing. “Nice to know I never fooled you, I guess. But what the hell do you want?”

Fury sighed slowly, taking his hands from his pockets. “Easy.”

“I asked you a question. Answer it.”

He could practically feel Agent Thirteen and Richards share an uncomfortable glance, but he never so much as glanced from Fury. Didn’t even blink. Fury lifted his chin but softened his expression. “We need you, Cap.”

He said that so simply. Steve shook his head. “I’m not Captain America anymore.”
The genial look in the other man’s eye disappeared. “You have to be.”

“I have to be, huh? Is this you, trying to restore the Initiative?”

Fury’s gaze was even. “Yes.”

Steve walked over and roughly grabbed the blanket off the couch. Their house was always so drafty, and Sarah was shivering (he wouldn’t let himself think it was anything else than the cold, damp air). “I’m not sure that I care, honestly. Not after everything you pulled.” Fury had the decency to look ashamed or at least avert his eyes (Steve had always had a difficult time reading him, so maybe shame wasn’t it at all). Anger went through him again, hot and awful, as the memories of Sarah and Pepper being kidnapped and all the terror they’d suffered as HYDRA had attacked came back fresh and vicious. “Where were you? They took Sarah!” Sarah flinched. “And they took Pepper. And beyond promising to help, SHIELD did nothing to stop it.”

“It wasn’t like there was much I could do with a helicarrier blowing the life out of the Triskelion,” Fury argued.

“What about after then?” Steve snapped. “Tony’s been left hanging out to dry!”

Once more Fury’s expression softened. “That couldn’t be helped. Any assassination attempt on me had to look successful to get HYDRA off my tail, and I needed time to regroup and rebuild. For better or worse, the Avengers’ struggles and you going on the run provided a distraction.” Steve couldn’t quite fathom his audacity. Whittling down all the misery they’d gone through over the last year to a convenient diversion made his bones throb with ire. “Look, I know you think I betrayed you. On some level, maybe I did. But the tactician in you knows I needed to play the long game. And that’s what I’m doing. Playing the long game.”

“And how many lives were lost while you were doing that? How many were destroyed?” Steve’s voice roughened, but he couldn’t hold it back. “You don’t get to come back now and fix what you ruined.”

“I didn’t know about HYDRA,” Fury insisted gently.

“Make me believe that,” Steve challenged icily. “Make me believe you didn’t know when they stole my DNA and sold it to my enemies.”

“You know I can’t make you believe anything, Captain. I never could. You hope for the best and make do with what you get.” For some reason, that cooled Steve’s rage. He felt his muscles relax just a bit. He curled the blanket tighter around his daughter, covering her head protectively. Fury sighed. “I need your help. There are things happening now. Bad things. HYDRA’s on the move. I don’t have the eyes and ears like I used to, but what I do know is whatever they’re planning, it’s something big. And bad.”

In the silence that followed, Steve could hardly stand to wonder. Part of him immediately wanted to act: find out more and make a plan to stop it. It didn’t matter what it was. He was a soldier, and it was his job to fight against evil. He’d been made to fight evil. “How big?”

Fury’s jaw clenched. “Massive. They’re doing something. Word is they’re recruiting, far and wide. Thugs and soldiers. SHIELD defectors. Like we did, they’re regrouping and reorganizing. Building an army maybe.” That sounded ominous. “More than that, though, they’re requisitioning all sorts of parts from all over the world. Snatching up components similar to what Erik Selvig used to build the portal during Loki’s invasion.”
“What?  ‘They’re building another portal?’”

“Seems that way.”

“To where?”

Fury shrugged.  “No way to know.  I don’t have anyone on the inside of Viper’s operation.  I do know she’s overseeing this personally, so it must be something incredibly important.”

None of this sounded good.  Another portal?  The last one had brought an alien army bearing down on them.  Manhattan had almost been destroyed.  Tony had almost died.  But…  “The Tesseract is back on Asgard.  How are they going to power it?”

“I don’t know.  I’ve been talking to Selvig in secret.  He claims that with the data he was able to collect on the Tesseract and on the Convergence, it might be possible to generate the right amount and frequency of Gamma radiation in conjunction with the right equipment to briefly simulate the power they’d need.”

“How briefly?”

It was Agent Thirteen who answered.  Her face was placid, but Steve could see she was deeply worried.  “It would be minutes only, if Selvig’s calculations are correct.  And the portal would be significantly smaller.  Maybe big enough to send through a person but not much more than that.”

Steve couldn’t make sense that.  “They’re trying to send someone somewhere?”

Fury cocked an eyebrow, folding his arms across his chest.  “Or bring someone here.”  Steve went even colder with that.  He absentely rubbed his hand up and down Sarah’s back.  “There was a highly experimental Gamma generator in the Fridge developed by some Japanese nuclear scientists a few years before Banner had his accident.  Very small and very potent, but more than that very unpredictable.  That’s why SHIELD took possession of it.”

Richards went on.  “It hasn’t been recovered from HYDRA’s siege.  Agent Coulson’s had people on it, but so far there’s been nothing.”

Steve didn’t want to hear any of this.  He couldn’t deny that he was interested and concerned, but there was nothing he could do.  “Why are you telling me this?”

Fury was unwavering.  “I told you.  We need you.  I need you.”

“Tony’s leading the team.”

“He’s led it into the ground.”  Steve’s eyes flashed in warning, inwardly bristling, but before he could say anything to defend Tony, Fury was going on.  “Thor’s back on Asgard.  Banner’s in hiding.  Barton’s running errands for Coulson.  You’re here, and you’ve got Romanoff coming to you every other weekend like a love-struck teenage girl.”

That was it.  “We’re done talking.  Get out!”

Fury didn’t get out.  He went on like Steve’s rage was nothing.  “There is no team.  That’s why I need you.”  Boldly he took a step closer.  “Stark’s a good man, the best they come.  I never thought it would happen, but he’s turned into more of a team player than anyone dreamed he would be.  And he’s tried to hold it together.  I know he has.  We left him in a terrible situation, and he’s done the best he could.  But he’s not you.”
“I can’t help you,” Steve returned firmly. “He’s the best you have, so I suggest you crawl in front of him and beg his forgiveness. He damn well deserves it. And didn’t you hear me? I said: get out.”

Fury was exasperated. “No. You’re Captain America! You know what that means to this world. People listen to you. People follow you, and I’m not just talking about the Avengers. SHIELD is in shambles. HYDRA’s corrupted the media and the government. People don’t know what to believe, and by the time they find out they’re in danger, it’s going to be too late. I can’t let that happen! The public trusts you. I need you to lead us and them.” Steve gritted his teeth and looked away again. The silence that followed was tense, miserably so. Fury deflated slightly, his shoulders slumping. He took another step forward. “Look, I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye. But I also know that we want the same things.”

“I want my daughter safe, Nick. That’s all I want.”

“Do you think she’ll ever be safe with HYDRA out there?” Now Steve was the one who dropped his gaze. His heart ached bitterly, and he wanted to close his eyes and his ears and his heart to this. “We can keep her safe. I swear to you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Steve warned quietly.

“I’m not. I know I’ve given you plenty of reasons not to believe me. I know that, and I’m sorry for it. I really am. And I won’t say this to manipulate you…” Steve gave an incredulous laugh at that. “I’ll say it because it’s true. Natasha trusts me.” Anger and surprise knifed through him in equal parts, and Steve glared. Fury didn’t back down. “She does. She always has. And I know you trust her.”

“Don’t use her against me,” he seethed, rebelling against his own emotions. They were a tumult inside him that he could no longer tame. “Don’t.”

Fury sighed. “It’s like I said, Cap. You are who you are. There’s no escaping that. You can run from here until eternity, and you’ll still be Captain America. And HYDRA will still come after you. The people of this planet need the Avengers. They need you.”

“Come back. Pick up your shield. Be Captain America again.” Natasha had said that to him. She’d kept his shield safe for him. Would she even bring it now or entrust it to Tony? He couldn’t quite picture it, despite how flawless his memory was. How it looked. How it felt. How it felt to be Captain America.

Sarah sobbed quietly into his neck. This was too much. He couldn’t endanger her, couldn’t let anything threaten or hurt her. He couldn’t go back. He’d promised her. He’d promised himself. “I…” God, his heart hurt. “I can’t—”

Suddenly something rang. It was such a loud, unusual sound that Steve didn’t recognize it at first, even though the left pocket of his jeans was vibrating. Alarmed, he traded Sarah’s weight to the other side and fished the StarkPhone out of his pocket. Sure enough, it was shrilly proclaiming an incoming call. An incoming call from the Tower. Steve looked at Fury, wide-eyed. The ex-SHIELD Director shrugged helplessly and shook his head. “Don’t look at me. I don’t have anything to do with that.”

Worried, Steve thumbed the phone’s touch screen to take the call and held it up to his ear. “Hello?”

“Steve?” It was Tony, of course. He hadn’t heard the other man’s voice in months, but he could tell from just that, from just his name, that something was terribly, terribly wrong. “It’s me. Thank God you picked up.”

There was no greeting. No relief. Nothing but pain. “Listen. Listen to me now. You need to come home.”

“What?”

“Was Natasha with you? I know it sounds crazy, but I need to know—”

*Oh, God.* “Yeah. She was. What happened?”

“You need to come home. I don’t know if you’re safe where you are anymore. I – I don’t know anything!”

“Tony—”

“Listen to me! You need to come home *right now*. They came after her.”

Steve’s heart simply stopped. It was just like it had been before when they’d taken Sarah. A call from a horrified friend. A cry for him to come right away. The beginning of a nightmare. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t think. He could hardly breathe. “Is she okay?” There was no answer. “*Is she okay?*”

“I – I don’t know. I… Steve, she’s… She’s been shot. It’s bad. It’s really bad. I know she’s alive, but I can’t say anything else. You need to come home. Steve? Are you there? Hello? Steve? Steve!”

The phone slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

*malyutka* – little one
Steve didn’t want to trust Fury. In fact, every bit of common sense screamed that he not trust Fury, but there was no choice. Fury had the capacity to get him back to Manhattan faster than he could get there himself. And, no matter what the ex-SHIELD Director’s angle was, he was protection Steve desperately needed right now. There was simply no way he could make the trip across the country quickly, not with HYDRA potentially gunning for him, not with his mind descending into a tortured haze of horror. So he had packed quickly, stuffing a bag full of clothes for him and Sarah, filling his backpack with money and guns. Then with Belle’s leash in one hand and Sarah tucked up against him, he followed the two SHIELD agents and Fury into the black SUVs they’d hidden down the road.

Now they were flying east, streaking across the darkening skies toward New York. Richards was manning the jet, Agent Thirteen in the co-pilot’s seat to help him guide the jet through the thick clouds of bad weather. Steve sat on the one of benches in the back, Sarah securely against him in his lap. Belle was beside him on the floor, close to his thigh, and she was rattled, looking around widely with every burst of turbulence that struck them. Sarah was terrified, too. She’d hardly moved her face from Steve’s side, her little fingers curled tight enough into Steve’s jacket that he thought it would tear when they were jostled. She absolutely refused to let him go, and that was fine with him. He was holding her just as tightly. Fury sat across from them, watching him with an unreadable expression on his face. Steve was so scraped raw, so tormented by fear and worry, that he couldn’t look at the other man with anything other than spite and anger. There were things he wanted to say. So many things. Accusations. Questions. He was so enraged about everything, utterly lost in his anguish, that he couldn’t look at the other man with anything other than spite and anger. There were things he wanted to say. So many things. Accusations. Questions. He was so enraged about everything, utterly lost in his anguish, that he could barely think to speak, though. The thought of what had happened… He couldn’t get the awful images from his head. Natasha shot. Blood. Her dying, alone and suffering… It was too much, a sob tightening his throat. Fury had contacted loyal SHIELD agents across the country on the drive to the airport to find out what he could, but there wasn’t much information to be had. The few things they did know were all over the news. Thankfully Natasha’s identity hadn’t been released, but that small pittance was about the only comfort to be had. She’d apparently been attacked at O’Hare during her connecting flight. A gunman (whose features either weren’t known or hadn’t been made public yet) had let loose on a crowd of people in one of the terminals, causing mass hysteria. There’d been some sort of fight; details were sparse, but Fury had solemnly declared that Black Widow must have engaged her attacker. Witnesses had seen her battle him, run from him, attempt to lead him away from the civilians caught in the crossfire. She’d been shot multiple times, but everything was so chaotic that at this point, all they knew for sure was that she was alive.

The jet hit a particular rough spurt of turbulence, and Sarah whimpered into his shoulder. Steve squeezed his eyes shut and grasped her tighter, his stomach roiling in panic. He knew he needed to keep it together. For Sarah’s sake. For Natasha’s. He had to be strong now, had to pull himself up and stay calm. No matter how his heart was pounding and his lungs were failing him and the pain was leaving him reeling, breathless, and so miserably cold. This damn jet shaking and dropping
sharply and being manhandled across the sky by the weather was not helping matters. He was already so threadbare that memories that hadn’t troubled him for years were pushing to the surface of his mind. He felt like an exposed vein, bleeding and throbbing. He’d asked Natasha to marry him. He loved her more than he thought he’d ever love anyone, even more than Peggy. He’d sent her back to New York. He’d put her on the bus that had taken her to the plane that had in turn taken her to Chicago. And she’d been terribly hurt. Natasha was hurt, maybe dying, and it was his fault.

Steve grimaced, grabbing for one of the handholds on the bulkhead of the jet to steady him as the aircraft dipped violently again. “Sorry,” Fury said once things had stabilized.

Steve opened his eyes to glare at him, but the other man seemed annoying composed. “You’re sorry?” He could hardly contain his vitriol. “That’s it?”

Fury’s eye narrowed. “Equipment’s a little rundown,” he explained, glancing around the jet. He was true to his word; the quinjet looked worn, disorganized, sparsely stocked with supplies. It was rattling a lot more than Steve remembered from his time as a SHIELD agent, like it was in need of a thorough check-up with a mechanic or two. He supposed with SHIELD as torn about as it was, resources were hard to come by and harder still to maintain. It was fortunate Fury had a jet on hand at all to get them to New York like this. He knew he should be grateful.

He was anything but, though, and that blithe comment about the sad state of things only stoked his ire further. Before he could say anything, though, Fury was sighing and rubbing a hand over his scalp. “It’s not your fault.” It was almost as if the other man had read his mind. Natasha always told him he was transparent, wore his heart on his sleeve, but he’d thought his time on the run, lying and acting to stay alive, would have improved his ability to keep his feelings under check. Apparently it hadn’t. Or Fury was just too good at what he did. “It’s not, Cap. Don’t blame yourself.”

Anger burst through Steve. He could barely stay calm. He felt more riled, more off center, than he could ever recall feeling. More than he had when he’d woken up to find himself seventy years in the future and everyone he’d loved old or dead. More than when he’d learned about Sarah even. This was worse. Those moments had turned into wonderful things, helped define him as a man. He’d met the Avengers, people who’d become his friends and family. He’d become a father. But nothing good could come of this. Nothing. “You have no idea what I’m thinking,” he seethed lowly, “or feeling. So I’ll damn well blame myself.”

“Seems like that’s been a common problem with you,” Fury remarked. “You take it all on your shoulders. You listen to your heart far more than you listen to your head.” Steve’s eyes flashed in anger. “I should have realized this would all come crashing down at some point. Back on that day Coulson’s team brought her to the helicarrier, I should have seen it.” Sarah flinched. She knew Fury was referring to her. “When you stood in my office and threatened to quit so you could be her father. I knew then and there that Captain America was finished.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Steve snapped. “Knowing what you know now, would you have wanted her in your hands? Locked up in one of SHIELD’s labs so HYDRA could get exactly what they want? She has the serum, you know.”

“I know.”

For some reason, that surprised him. It angered him even more. “Then what, Nick? What should I have done? Huh? If you have all the answers, tell me! Tell me what was the right thing, because I’ve spent the last year of my life tearing myself apart and living in constant fear that my enemies are coming for me! That my friends and my daughter were in danger because of me!” Sarah flinched again. “I did what I did to protect everyone I could.”
“I know you did. But you can’t protect everyone. You never can.”

Logically that was true. Logic, however, was a poor shield against just how badly he hurt. Another kick of turbulence to the jet’s belly left it rattling. Fury was unfazed, like he always was. He appraised Steve evenly, not bothered by all of the pain and darkness radiating from one of his greatest assets, and said nothing. And Steve couldn’t untangle how he felt. He knew it was wrong to let himself be so outwardly affected. He’d been a soldier. He’d been a hero and a leader.

*Captain America.* He wanted to declare, *to believe,* he wasn’t finished, but he felt further from the shield than he ever had before. “I asked her to marry me.” He hadn’t meant to say that. The words just sort of slipped out, jostled loose by his world shaking around him, by the storm of terror and pain and anger inside him. He snuggled Sarah closer, stroking his hand through her hair for his own comfort as much as hers. Memories came unbidden. Fresh and new and so very agonizing.


If Fury was surprised by this turn of events, he didn’t show it. Furthermore, if he’d been watching Steve as long as he claimed, he’d probably already known. “Congratulations,” he said softly.

Steve’s eyes had glazed with tears, but he focused now, blinking the blurriness away as his anger burned hot and bright again. However, Fury was only earnest. He wasn’t being sarcastic or cruel. He was sincere. Sad, even. And why wouldn’t he be? Again, Steve didn’t know much about him, but Natasha cared about him. Trusted him. She wouldn’t do that if he was anything less than trustworthy. That tempered his rage enough that he could breathe just a bit easier, so he did. “Look, Cap, I know this is hard. Romanoff…” Fury sighed, and his face softened further. There was nothing but compassion in his eyes. He glanced at Sarah, and it was more than obvious he was changing his mind about what he wanted to say. “HYDRA doesn’t quit. You know that. And you had to run. But whatever happens now, you need to remember who you are.”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut until his head hurt with the effort. Who he was. Who he was had gotten Natasha shot and ruined Sarah’s life. Who he was had broken the Avengers. Who he was had HYDRA tormenting the world. He could practically hear the unspoken implication in Fury’s words. *Use this as a warning, as a reason. Fight. Be Captain America again.* Hiding hadn’t worked. Hiding had done nothing but prolong the inevitable. He’d left the team to keep Sarah and his family safe. In the end, he’d protected no one. “I don’t know who I am,” he murmured, swallowing down the pain in his chest. “Not anymore.”

The quinjet rattled roughly a moment before seemingly falling out of the sky. Sarah squealed, and Steve held her tighter. Belle pressed close to his leg, looking around wildly as the turbulence batted them about the clouds. An alarm started to keen. “Sir!” Agent Thirteen yelled back from the cockpit. “We need to land!”

One glance at the dark scowl that claimed Fury’s face was all Steve needed to know about his opinion on that. Frankly, it wasn’t far from his own. “What’s the matter?” the spy demanded. “Damage?”

“Weather!” Richards declared. Steve craned his neck to look out the cockpit window. They were trapped in a late autumn storm, one with huge clouds ahead. Rain pelted the glass, and the jet shook violently again. “Sir, I’m sorry, but we can’t fly through this! Chicago airspace is completely closed because of the attack! There’s no way to go around!”

What? It had been a few years since he’d flown missions with SHIELD, but he distinctly recalled facing weather situations like this before. Worse than this, even. Yet they’d never aborted, rarely even altered their flight plan. It was par for the course. Fury knew this better than anyone, and he shook his head. “Like hell we can’t! Get us to New York!”
Agent Thirteen looked concerned. “Sir, if Richards says we need to land, we probably do. He was one of SHIELD’s best pilots.”

“I know exactly what he is,” Fury hotly returned. It was obvious this was a huge inconvenience to him. *Inconvenience? I need to get to Nat!* Before Steve could even object, though, Fury was making the decision. Begrudgingly he stood, holding tight to the jet’s interior as he leaned into the cockpit. “Is there someplace safe we can set down?”

Now Steve couldn’t stay quiet. “No. We keep going!”

Richards proclaimed, “There’s an airfield right outside of Minneapolis! We’ve got a SHIELD station attached to one of the private hangars. We can land, refuel, and give the weather a chance to dissipate!”

*No!* It was more than obvious what he wanted wasn’t going to factor into this decision, however. He needed Fury, needed his help to get back to New York. Even if they spent an hour or two here while the storms blew over, it would still get him to Tony and Natasha and the others much faster than he could have traveled himself. Fury scowled, shaking his head in disdain. “Alright.” The other man sat back down. He sighed irately, shaking his head. Steve was glaring. He couldn’t stop himself. “Can’t be helped, Cap.”

There was nothing to say. Steve looked down, breathing deeply through his nose to stay patient. The quinjet quickly descended. He simply breathed through it, trying to find some semblance of his composure. “Daddy,” Sarah whispered. “Daddy, what’s happening?”

“Nothing, baby girl,” he assured. He smoothed her hair away to kiss her forehead. “Nothing. We’re just going to land for a bit.” Fury was watching him with another unreadable expression on his face. Disgust, maybe, that SHIELD’s most prized asset and soldier had been reduced to this. A frightened father. A person who was so rattled and uncertain that he seemed no better than a weak tree in a violent wind, bending to the point of breaking. Or it was sadness in his eye, sadness that everything had worked out the way it had. Regret. Surprise. Steve didn’t care to think about it. He didn’t care to feel shame building in his heart where it was mixing in with his panic and fear and anger. He didn’t care if Fury was judging him or disappointed in him. All he cared about was getting to Natasha and keeping Sarah safe.

A few minutes later, the quinjet broke through the ceiling of clouds and zoomed down to the dark world beneath. It was very black outside, given it was how late it was. Steve saw the blurry lights of the airfield ahead, rapidly growing larger. Richards capably guided them down, though the jet still shook and quaked. He flipped a few switches on the console. The jet lurched as it switched to the twin rotors rather than its powerful engines, and that transition Steve recalled being much smoother. Richards swung them around as they neared the airport, and not long after that, they were on the ground.

Steve sat still even as Richards and Agent Thirteen shut everything down in the cockpit. Richards was talking to someone via his headset, requesting a fuel truck. Fury stood stiffly, grimacing as he did. He secured a few things before unabashedly grabbing a gun and sliding it into the holster under his leather jacket. He turned to Steve. “You planning on just sitting here?”

Steve bristled. “How long are we going to be here?”

“How long enough,” Fury replied. “You might think I’m responsible for everything that’s gone wrong, but the weather is still beyond my ability to control.” He pressed his thumb to the rear ramp release. Outside it was absolutely pouring. “Come on.”
This didn’t feel safe. Or smart. Every part of him was railing against stepping out of that jet and risking himself and Sarah. But Fury was waiting, not quite balefully but obviously not pleased with his reluctance to do something so simple as walk outside. Steve checked the gun in the back of his jeans and the second on he had on a shoulder harness under his coat. Then he lifted Sarah against him, drawing her hood up and over her face. He put his cap back on, pulled his own hood up, and slid the backpack over his shoulders. Then he grabbed Belle’s leash and wrapped it around his wrist. “Come on, girl,” he coaxed. She, too, was unwilling to leave, tugging back stubbornly. “Come on.”

“Not sure they’ll take dogs,” Fury commented. He’d been unhappy about Belle’s presence since they’d left Colburn.

“If these agents are as loyal to you as you think they are, they won’t care,” Steve coldly returned. Belle practically growled at the ex-Director. She was very clearly upset with the sudden change, but Steve wasn’t about to leave her behind. She was basically the only soul on this jet right now he trusted. “Come on. Please.” Sarah lifted her head a little to look at the dog, and finally, albeit reluctantly, Belle obeyed.

Fury wasn’t nearly as graceful or fleet as he’d once been as he led them through the teeming rain to the building on the other side of the tarmac. Steve had noticed him limping before, the sort of handicap that heralded an injury that had only healed as much as it could. He felt just a bit rotten for being so short with the other man; obviously he’d been badly hurt during HYDRA’s uprising. That didn’t sustain him much, though, not when that cold rain and wind blasted over them, obscuring his sight. Nothing about this felt right, so he picked up the pace, jogging (which was much faster than Fury was managing to run) to the building. That awful feeling of being watched was back, sharper and more disturbing than ever before.

The building looked like a private aviation company. It was small, neither luxurious nor in need of repair, with a nice lounge that had leather chairs and a flat screen television. A long desk lined the other side of the area, manned by a couple of people who nodded to Fury at his entrance. Steve didn’t know if they were embedded, undercover SHIELD operatives or allies in another sense. The television was playing the news, and the news was covering the shooting at O’Hare. Oh, God. It was a major security breach, and the anchorwoman was relaying the state of the investigation. The airport was shut down. Both the FBI and the TSA were on the scene, and a massive hunt was underway for the shooter. There was no description other than a man dressed in black clothes with shoulder length brown hair. Steve watched, horrified, as grainy security footage was replayed to the left of the image of the anchorwoman and the reporter relaying information from the scene. The footage was poor and at a distance, but there was a woman with red hair running. There wasn’t much more that could be seen of her, and the press still didn’t have her name. A man in black was chasing her. People were screaming and fleeing in terror as the assailant caught her, grabbed her neck, fought with her. Oh, God. Oh, God! She fought back. She fell.

“Daddy,” Sarah whispered.

God, he was squeezing her tight. “Sorry.” He forced himself to look away from the television.

“I’m all wet. And I have to go potty,” Sarah murmured. She was soaked, and so was he.

Steve took a deep breath, gathering himself as much as he could. Fury was speaking with the people at the desk. Everything else was quiet. With the bad weather and the late hour, it made sense. Down the way a little there was a tiled hallway that probably led to the restrooms. Steve tugged Belle with him and went there. He pushed the door of the men’s room open and went inside.

It was empty. There were three stalls, one handicapped, so he went into that one to have more
room. He grabbed a bunch of paper towels from the dispenser near the sinks and set Sarah down inside. He gestured at Belle to come in. She was dripping water all over, and she shook, spraying them both. Sarah made a face and pushed the sopping dog away as Steve secured the door. Silently he helped her use the toilet. Then he peeled her wet coat off and then her wet clothes. His mind was a million miles away as he fished in the backpack for something dry for her to wear. Those few seconds of footage from the airport were haunting him. No matter how he tried to ignore them, they came right back, interspersed with Natasha’s kiss and her hands on his body and her eyes on his. It was torture, not knowing. Torture being away from her now. *Torture.*

“Daddy, you’re crying.” Sarah’s soft whimper cut through the hell in his head, and he blinked away the tears burning in his eyes so he could see. He’d gotten her dressed again on automatic pilot, and now he was using the paper towels to dry her hair. Her eyes were huge and blue and filled with fear and tears of her own. “Daddy…”

“It’s alright,” he swore. He sniffled, wiping his cheeks and beard with the back of his hand and managing a smile. That hurt. He had to be better than this. Better for *her.* He was starting to fear he didn’t have anything else left. “Everything’s fine.” He didn’t know who he was promising. Himself or his daughter. “Everything’s fine.”

“Where are we going?”

“Home.” He forced his smile to be bigger. “Just like we wanted. Back home to Uncle Tony.” He shook her coat dry. “You remember Uncle Tony. And Aunt Pepper. We’ll be there soon.”

Sarah frowned. “Who’s that man? That man who’s dressed like a pirate?”

Steve had to laugh a little at that. One-eyed Nick. About as honorable as one, too, it seemed. “Nobody, sweetheart.” She did not need to know about his less-than-stellar dealings with Fury and SHIELD. “Someone I used to work with. Someone I used to trust.”

She didn’t seem to understand that, and why would she? “I don’t like him.”

“I know. Me neither. But we need to get home, and he can get us there.” Belle came over and licked Steve’s face, as bothered by the tears that still kept coming as Sarah was. Steve pushed the dog away gently, clearing the frog from his throat and trying yet again to gather his composure. “It’s gonna be fine, okay?”

“No, it’s not,” she moaned. “You’re scared, even more than before. We’re running again.”

“No, we’re going home,” he insisted, like that meant something to her. Like that was any safer.

Tears spilled from her eyes. “I’m scared,” she admitted.

He cupped her face. Still his hands were so big, dark and sinewy against the paleness of her smooth skin. The pads of his thumbs whisked the wetness away from her cheeks. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “Whatever’s going to happen, we’re in it together.” He smiled faintly. “You and me, right?” She managed a nod, and he tugged her close. He buried his face into the tiny place between her shoulder and her head, breathing deeply, drawing comfort from her. The way she felt. The way she smelled. It was hard to move and harder still to keep going. It was hard even to think beyond this. His brain was too numb to make sense of all the contradictory thoughts raging inside. *Just get home.*

Eventually he pulled away, despite how tired he was and how much he hurt. He felt a bit better, so when he smiled now, it was less feeble and more genuine. He helped her get her coat back on.
“Let’s find something to eat, okay?”

Sarah nodded. He kissed her forehead before rising to his full height. His jeans were uncomfortable they were so wet, and his own coat was still nearly dripping with rainwater. He hadn’t wanted to remove it for fear someone would see he was armed, so his shirt was fairly soaked. There was no one else here, though, so he took his jacket off and shook it dry. Sarah stared at the gun but said nothing. Belle stood again, panting and wagging her tail expectantly. “Go ahead, Belle,” he said with sigh. “I know you want to.” The dog shook again, sending water spraying, and Sarah squealed from behind Steve’s jacket. Belle poked her cold, wet nose into Steve’s hand afterward, and he stroked her fur a few times despite how damp it was. Then he put his coat back on and held his hand out to his daughter. “Come on.”

They went to go wash up. Just as they were finishing with that, the door opened. Steve immediately lurched into a defensive stance, pushing Sarah behind him. It was Aiden. Richards. Whoever he was. It was completely disconcerting, seeing the amiable young man he’d known for almost a year dressed like a SHIELD operative. He had his normally unruly hair slicked and gelled into place, and all the good cheer was gone from his face. “Captain,” he greeted with a small, solemn smile.

Steve said nothing. He held Sarah behind him. He knew his paranoia got the better of him sometimes, but something about this just felt… wrong. Richards made no move toward either of the stalls, washing his hands instead. He wasn’t quite looking Steve in the eye. Maybe Steve had never known this young man in front of him at all, and everything, from his easy, innocent friendship to how he’d seemingly cared for his “family”, had been a deception, but his tension now was blatant. Richards sighed. “I, uh… I just want to tell you I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I never wanted to lie to you.”

Steve swallowed through a dry throat. “Thank you.”

“When Director Fury approached me about the job, I had to say yes. There was no choice. Somebody had to make sure we knew where you were and what you were doing. Captain America can’t disappear.”

“I guess not.”

Richards went back to the sink, lathering his hands unnecessarily thoroughly before rinsing them, again too thoroughly. A long moment of uncomfortable silence passed, and Steve held Sarah’s hand tighter before gathering up his backpack and making to step around the other man to leave. “Excuse me.”

“It’s really unfortunate sometimes.”

Steve stopped. “What is?”

Richards’ shoulders slumped just a bit as he heaved a sigh. “Having to follow orders.”

What? Shock barely registered – he’s a HYDRA sleeper agent! – before the door to the men’s room banged open. A slew of armed soldiers – five, six, no, twelve! – came thundering inside. Steve jolted in terror, backing up and pushing Sarah with him. She shrieked, scrambling away, and Belle started barking wildly. Steve swung the backpack at them, smacking the closest across the face hard enough to bust his jaw. He had no chance to do much else, though, as he was swarmed and tackled. He hit the floor hard on his back, crushed under the weight of three huge, burly thugs. They’d brought muscle, a lot of it, because they were trying to capture him, not kill him. The thought left him panicked as they immediately grabbed his arms, pinning him down spread eagle. Someone practically sat across his chest. Hands fished under his coat, yanking his gun from the holster. Steve
howled in fury, struggling wildly, bucking and squirming. His foot rammed into the chest of one of the assailants, sending the man flying, but there was another to take his place almost instantaneously. They crowded him, bearing magnetic cuffs. “Sarah!” he screamed. “Sarah, run! Run!”

They’d gone over this before many times. If something like this ever happened, she was supposed to run, to leave him and find some place safe to hide. So she ran, and she was fast. The couple of men not busy trying to hold him down scrambled for her, but she was already gone, smartly darting back into the stall and crawling underneath the dividers. Belle blocked her escape further, baring her teeth and snapping at anyone who came close. Richards dove after Sarah as she slipped under the stalls, but she was strong, too, and she practically knocked him aside as she stood and ran for the door.

“Grab her! Grab her!”

The moment of distraction his daughter provided gave Steve a much needed opportunity. Just as they snapped the cuff around his right wrist, the weight on him shifted in a frenzied effort to stop Sarah. Steve yanked his left hand free. He punched one of the men over him, and the heavy brute went right up into the ceiling. The panels were smashed, sending chunks of debris and dirt down. The soldiers were reeling with that, and he attacked. He brought his knee up, knocking the man on his chest off, and snatched another about the wrist before flinging him into the counter. The granite shattered, and water sprayed everywhere. Steve gave a cry, slamming both his heels on the floor hard enough to crack the tiles before flipping himself up. He carried a couple of the men with him, the fools not smart enough or quick enough to release their holds in his clothes. His shirt ripped as he whirled, landing a roundhouse kick into the midriff of the closest. The thug crashed into the dividers between the stalls, bending the flimsy metal and knocking it right off its mounts. The other soon guy followed him, elbowed in the face before being tossed like nothing. Belle snarled and attacked, biting at a thug trying to reestablish his grip on Steve. The man yowled, pulling out his gun and aiming at the dog, but Steve was already landing a few hard blows that dropped the guy to his knees in the puddle of water.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” one of the men gasped. “HYDRA’s–”

Steve growled, smacking the man right across the face. Someone had drawn another gun, and he heard it go off behind him. He dropped into the debris that had been the stall, and the mag cuff on his wrist immediately attached to the metal of the fallen divider. Frustrated and furious, he yanked the rectangular slab right off the rest of its fastenings, spinning and bringing it up like a shield. It wasn’t nearly as strong as his actual shield, and the bullets punched right through it. One clipped his arm and another bit into his side. Gritting his teeth, he charged forward, ramming the man with the gun and crushing him into the opposite wall hard enough to pulverize tile and drywall. And bones. He kicked at the others behind him, sending one crashing into the toilet and the other into the wall. The soldier under his would-be shield squirmed, and Steve drove him into the wall again, harder. He went down at Steve’s feet, limp and moaning.

Steve planted his shoe against the divider and pulled harder. The strength of the cuff actually bent the metal rather than releasing him, and he shook with the effort of overcoming the magnetic force. *Come on. Come on!* It did give, though, and he yanked his wrist free.

“Rogers!” Steve whirled. Richards was there. He was alone, the only one left standing, and he had his gun on Sarah. He held her against his legs. Obviously he’d gone to capture her, knowing she was the best way (*his only chance!*) to control Captain America. “Rogers, hands up! Surrender yourself!”

And obviously he had no idea just how far Captain America would go to protect his daughter. “Let her go,” Steve warned. “Now.”
Richards looked pained. “There’s no way out. Don’t you get it? We all have to follow our orders.”

“Let her go,” Steve seethed.

“Even if you get past us, he’s out there!”

“Sarah, baby.” Sarah’s eyes went right to his. Steve stayed completely calm, anchoring her. He reached behind himself, slowly. He knew she knew what was back there, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Steve turned his glare back to Richards. “Let her go. Don’t make me do this.”

“There’s no way out,” Richards said again, agitated and increasingly jittery, and Steve didn’t know if he was talking about himself or warning him. He jabbed the muzzle of his gun rougher into Sarah’s head. “Surrender! There’s no choice!”

No, there wasn’t. Faster than could be stopped, he pulled the gun from the back of his jeans. He ripped it up, aimed in a split second, and pulled the trigger. Richards wailed, struck in the shoulder, and before he’d even finished reeling, Steve was plowing him over. Sarah cried out, shoved aside by her father, and Steve batted the gun away. Rage burned over him, bright and ugly, and now he felt just like he had last year, when Garrett and Viper had nearly ruined his life. He grabbed Richards’ jacket, hauling him back up, and punched him across the face. “You bastard!” The pain was too much, too much, and he couldn’t hold it back. So much betrayal. This monster – he didn’t care why he’d done it at all – had been watching him and his daughter for months, waiting to strike! And Natasha… “Did you rat her out to Viper? Huh? Did you?”

“Daddy!” Sarah screamed. “Dad!”

Stop! Richards’ face was bloody and beaten, and Steve caught himself, pulled himself from the fugue that had come over him. Horror left him throbbing, and he dropped Richards’ nearly unconscious body to the floor. He shuddered, eyes wide and the room closing around him. Run. He jumped over Richards and reached for Sarah where she was hiding in the corner. “Keep your eyes closed,” he ordered. “And hang onto me. Don’t let go. Do you hear me?” She nodded, terrified and sobbing, throwing her arms around his neck. “Don’t worry. It’s alright.” He lifted her with one arm. “It’s alright. I promise. Belle! Come!” He rushed out of the men’s room, the dog running after him.

With the gun out in front of him, he surged into the lobby. No one was there. Steve glanced about hurriedly, swinging his arm around and ready to shoot, but there was nothing. He stood there a moment, heart and head pounding. What is this? Fury was gone. There was no sign of Agent Thirteen. Were they both in on HYDRA’s plot as well? Had they betrayed him, betrayed Natasha? There was no time to wonder, and he really didn’t care at any rate. Go.

He hardly made it a few steps into the lobby before something outside exploded. His mind belatedly realized it was the quinjet, but by then the windows of the building were already shattering with the concussive force of the blast. Sarah screamed again, and Steve ripped around, the glass and debris striking his back. The deafening boom of it lasted for what felt like a while, heat and rain and sharp shards slamming into them. Then Steve stood, panting, eyes wide with horror. The quinjet was burning outside, burning hot and powerfully despite the deluge crashing down upon it. Lighter billows of smoke poured upward, hampered by the weather, and the flames were providing just enough light to see that the jet had been completely destroyed.

Go!

He didn’t waste another second. “Come!” he yelled at Belle, glancing only a moment behind him to see that the dog was with him before barreling out of the building through the shattered glass double
doors. The cold rain immediately drenched him again. He skidded to a stop.

“Captain!” someone – Agent Thirteen – yelled, and suddenly she was sprinting out of the shadows, soaked to the bone, and coming right at him. He lifted his gun again, aiming at her, but the heavy cracking of a rifle somehow rose above the din. The SHIELD agent rammed him, pulling him down and to the left behind a brick fence. Bullets ripped into the tarmac at his feet, nearly striking him before he was yanked to safety. With gunfire ripping everything apart around them, Belle bolted.

“Belle!” he cried. “Belle!” It was too late. Belle was gone and there was no way to go after her.

“Get down!” Agent Thirteen demanded as she pushed him to the wall. She tucked Sarah’s head to her own chest as bullets pounded into the bricks. When the roar of it stopped, Steve opened his eyes and frantically glanced over the top of the wall. The jet was burning, though already less violently with the rain pounding onto it. Where were their attackers? It was so dark it was nearly impossible to see.

“I’m sorry,” Agent Thirteen gasped after a moment. She grimaced, letting Sarah go, and Steve saw blood on her shoulder.

Steve ducked down behind the security of the wall again. “Did you know?” he hissed, grabbing her wrist hard enough to hurt. “Did you?”

“No,” she gasped, her voice firm despite the pain she was in. She didn’t struggle. “No, I didn’t! I’m so sorry! I thought he was one of us! I’m so sorry!”

Steve lingered a moment, trying hard to trust. He didn’t know why, but that same thing about her from before made him believe her. That familiar look in her eyes. Even though she’d been working with Richards, she wasn’t HYDRA. He just felt that. So he let her go. “Where’s Fury?”

“No!” she groaned. “I couldn’t stay with him. They came at us, and we took out most of them, but someone’s still out there. I don’t know if Nick’s alive or—”

The ground on the other side of the wall exploded, raining dirt and brick down on them. Steve covered both Sarah and Agent Thirteen – Sharon, she said her name was. The RPG hit so close that his ears rang for a long second. Once that faded and the debris settled, he leaned up to look over the wall again.

There was a man coming at them, a man bearing the rocket launcher. He was dressed in a black combat suit, one that was so soaked it glistened in the rain. Long, wet hair stuck to his head. He wore a metallic face mask so only his eyes were visible, eyes that were rimmed in kohl, narrowed, and empty. Soulless, in a way. It instantly reminded Steve of Mike Peterson, the poor soul HYDRA had turned into Deathlok through experimentation and coercion. Was this another of their weapons? It certainly seemed that way. And the way this man walked, all violent, murderous purpose… The black outfit and the shoulder length brown hair. The man who shot Natasha.

They needed to run. Now.

“Hey!” That was Fury’s voice. Another gun was firing, the muzzle flashes winks in the driving rain. Steve saw him to the left near a truck, wet as a drowned rat, leather shining in the dying light of the fire and the illumination from the building. “Come on! Come on!” The assassin turned, bringing the RPG launcher to bear at Fury. “Run, Rogers! Go!”

Steve didn’t waste a second. He hauled Sarah up into his arms again and grabbed Sharon’s hand, pulling her from the cover of the partially destroyed wall. There was another explosion behind them,
not far from where Fury had been standing. In the smoke, rain, and the pitch black of night, Steve couldn’t see if the Director was okay. *Doesn’t matter! Go!* He turned to do that, to use these precious few seconds to his advantage and get away. He *needed* to do that.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t leave Fury to die. Not because of him.

Wordlessly, he handed Sarah and the gun to Sharon. “Get her out of here!”

“Daddy! *Daddy!*” He didn’t listen to his daughter’s cries. He couldn’t. *He couldn’t.*

Instead he sprinted through the pelting rain, heading right for the assassin. The man had his back turned, surveying the fiery mess of whatever vehicle had blown up in the explosion. Steve was unbelievably fast and among the best martial artists in the world, but he couldn’t take this guy by surprise. The assassin was turning before he even reached him, raising his arm to block Steve’s blow, and in a breath and a blink they were engaged with each other. Steve jumped back, absolutely shocked at his opponent, as all of his strikes were deflected, dodged, and returned. This was no ordinary person; a few harried seconds into the fight it was obvious they were evenly matched, matched in speed and strength, matched in skill. His brain rushed with frantic thoughts. *Who is this? Who?* The man drew a knife, and it was singing through the air, slicing through the rain, stabbing toward his neck. Without his shield, this fight just became infinitely more dangerous. He caught the man’s wrist, shoving back and returning with a punch that was easily avoided. The knife switched to the other hand and screamed at him again, this time to his lower left side. Steve darted out of the way but not before it sliced across his midriff. The burning pain didn’t slow him down, and he finally landed a mighty kick into his opponent’s chest that sent him skidding back. That should have incapacitated if not mortally injured a normal man, but *this* man was barely fazed, landing gracefully and rolling immediately back to his feet. Steve grimaced, shaking his head. “Who are you?”

The assassin only charged, knife flashing wickedly. Steve let himself fall into instinct, letting himself *fight* like he hadn’t in a year. He barely side-stepped a kick and snatched the assassin’s boot as it careened by his ear. Curling his fingers to hang on, he twisted, spinning the other through the air. The assassin fell with a thud, but he was on him again instantly, landing a hard blow against his solar plexus that Steve couldn’t block in time. He tumbled onto the wet tarmac, nearly dazed from the power of the hit. Through the blinding rain, he caught a glimpse of a streak of silver jutting down on him, and he rolled just in time to avoid being crushed. Over the booming of his heart he heard the ground shatter beneath the assassin’s fist. Sputtering on the rain splattering in his face, he flipped himself back to his feet. The man turned to glare at him, eyes narrowed with vicious intent. Rage rushed over Steve, and he didn’t stop it. This was the man who’d hurt Natasha. No wonder she hadn’t been able to fight him off. This man, *this monster*, had hurt her to get to him. *He knew it.*

With his emotions hot in his blood, he threw himself back into the melee. Another flash of silver betrayed the knife coming at him, and this time Steve got both hands around the man’s left wrist. He squeezed hard, twisted harder, used all his considerable strength to try and break the limb. It didn’t give. *At all.* His shock proved costly, and the assassin smoothly broke free of his hold. A boot rammed into Steve’s back with enough power to break the spine of anyone else. He couldn’t keep a cry inside as the force of sent him spinning through the air.

Pain spread over him like fire, the air rushing from his lungs. He thought he heard Sarah scream and Sharon shouting. The world was a smear of shadows and rain, and he hit something hard. *The wall.* He sagged there, every part of him throbbing in agony. There was no time to recover. Once more it was only the glint of silver that betrayed the assailant’s approach. Steve ducked, panic tight in his gut, and the stab that was meant for his neck hit the wall instead. The blade broke, and the man let go of the useless hilt. Steve knocked him away. Gritting his teeth, he whirled, landing a
series of hard, fast strikes. The man grunted behind that face mask, falling back against Steve’s onslaught. Steve grabbed him and roughly flung him into the wall. The bricks shattered and crumbled with the impact, and the man staggered. Still, though, he came back quickly and violently. They traded blows again – *his arm’s metal!* – wickedly fast and brutally powerful. The assassin was positively ruthless. Steve had fought some of the world’s worst threats, some of the best martial artists and deadliest fighters, and he’d *never* faced anyone like this. This man was the perfect killing machine, it seemed, his eyes empty and emotionless, his moves precise and meant to murder. He seemed to anticipate Steve like he *knew* him, but that couldn’t be. The realization was chilling.

Steve side-stepped a kick faster than the other man anticipated, but his moment of advantage slipped away because another knife came from somewhere, drawn from the shadows. Once again he found himself flailing to avoid getting skewered. His foot slipped in mud near the wall where the tarmac ended, and he went down. Sarah screamed again. *God, get her out of here!* Why wasn’t Sharon *running*? Where was Fury? There was no time to wonder. He slammed both of his hands into the assassin’s where he was thrusting the knife downward. The razor-sharp tip danced just above the hollow of Steve’s throat, and a horrific contest of strengths ensued. Steve had no traction in the mud, already practically on his knees, and the knife jerked and shivered closer. He shook with the strain, finally, *finally*, finding the extra ounce of effort to shove the other man away. Back on his feet, he rammed his shoe into the assassin’s leg right at the knee. His opponent actually cried out, his stance ruined, and Steve twisted around, holding onto the man’s wrist to flip him. They struggled in the mud and rain for forever, a tangle of muscles and limbs, until the assassin wriggled loose and kicked Steve hard enough in the chest to crack his ribs. Until he drew a gun and pointed it at Sharon and Sarah.

Steve moaned, dazed and hurting. He panted, sinking into the mud in surrender. The assassin grabbed Steve by the arm and yanked it behind his back. Steve barely lifted his head as another mag cuff was snapped around his other wrist. He heard Sarah screaming, saw her pull away from Sharon, saw her coming for him. *No! “Sarah,”* he groaned. *“Sarah, no!”*

The assassin turned to the child running at them. Steve struggled wildly, but the man behind him activated the cuffs and bound his arms together. The muscles of his arms bulged as he tried to yank them apart, and he tore himself away from the other man, squirming on his knees. Sarah threw herself against him, crying loudly, arms tight about his neck. Steve shuddered, soaked and hunched over to protect her as much as he could. “Take me,” he gasped out raggedly, “but let her go! Please! *Please! Take me!*”

But the assassin didn’t. He didn’t move. He did *nothing*, and as the seconds escaped, Steve opened eyes he’d sealed shut. He twisted to look behind him only to find the man wasn’t staring at him at all. He was staring at Sarah. At Sarah’s blue eyes. At her face and her blonde hair. He was still, shocked, seemingly, into some kind of stupor. Then he looked at Steve, *really* looked at him, and his eyes widened with horror.

And that was it. He ran.

Steve watched him go, watched him disappear into the shadows. He was absolutely stunned. *What? Why?* It didn’t make any sense! The assassin had obviously been sent to capture him, and he’d been completely at his mercy. *Why run away now?* It was only Sarah sobbing loudly in his ear that snapped him from his thoughts, and he pushed himself forward again, fighting against the cuffs. “Sarah. Sarah, are you hurt?” She couldn’t seem to stop crying. Steve struggled more, pulling his wrists apart with everything he had. Damn it, they were too strong!

“Easy, Cap.” That was Fury, and his hands were on Steve’s shoulders. Steve looked up at him in the teeming rain, saw him bloodied and winded. “Easy. Help’s coming.”
Sharon was there then, too, rubbing a hand down Sarah’s back. “Are you okay, sir?” she asked.

He shook his head to her concern. “Don’t bother with me! Make sure Sarah’s okay!” he demanded. He turned a harried gaze to Fury. “Who was that? Why did he—”

The rest of his question was cut off by the sound of an aircraft blasting over them. Steve looked skyward as the wind rapidly picked up only to see lights shining down on them. Horror left him reeling – God, no more – and he shrugged away from Fury to curl over Sarah again as much as possible. As it turned out, though, there was no reason to be afraid.

The sound of hydraulics working resounded above the rain. The aircraft was monstrous, far bigger than a quinjet. It was the size of a 747, and it barely fit on the airfield. The Bus. Its rear ramp was opening as its massive engines flipped vertical to hover. It rotated to land a dozen feet or so behind them, barely fitting in the space. A dark figure ran down the length of the ramp, pausing at the end and glancing about frantically. Steve squinted at the bright light bathing the person before he recognized who it was. Clint.

Clint spotted him and ran out, bow drawn and arrow nocked. “Cap! Sarah!” His combat boots splashed through the rain as he rushed toward them. Another man followed, sporting a beard and a similar combat outfit. It was Ward. With him was a young woman, hair cut short in a bob and dressed in dark jeans and a leather jacket. Skye. Steve couldn’t process any of that, though, because Clint was right in front of him, grabbing his shoulders. “Steve, are you okay?”

Clint. It’s Clint. His relief at seeing his friend was immeasurable. “I’m okay,” he gasped.

“We need something to disable mag cuffs!” Clint shouted to Ward, and the other man headed back into the jet. Clint pressed his hand to his ear. “May, are we secure?”

“The man responsible is still out there!” Fury declared. He was clearly running out of energy, sagging on his feet. Immediately Sharon went to his side, helping him stay upright and declaring they needed to get him safety. Fury was still refusing, as stubborn as he was. “HYDRA’s probably sending reinforcements!”

Clint’s eyes shot to him, widening slightly. But he didn’t question. “Sir, you and I need to have a discussion about trust,” he snapped over the din of the aircraft. He set his hand to Sarah’s back. “Sarah, honey, it’s Uncle Clint. Honey. Can I hold you?” He went around to Steve’s other side so she could see his face. “Sarah? See? Uncle Clint.” Sarah refused to even lift her head. “Sarah—”

“Just get me loose,” Steve groaned. His wrists were stinging and he could feel the warmth of blood slipping down into his palms as he tried again and again to break his bonds.

Ward was back, Skye at his side. “Hold on,” she said, calm despite the frantic chaos. “Hold on.” She was fumbling with some sort of tool at his wrists. Steve couldn’t really see what. “Grant, right there.” Although it felt like an eternity, it took only a second or two more to free him. The cuffs released and detached from his wrists.

Steve wasted not a second, wrapping his arms around Sarah and standing. “Let’s go!” Clint ordered. “Come on!”

They ran to the jet. “Daddy,” Sarah whimpered as they pounded onto the ramp. “Daddy, Belle…”

Steve stopped and went back down, looking around wildly. “Belle!” he shouted. There was nothing but the whispers of the smoldering fires and the pouring rain. “Belle! Come on!” Nothing. Come on, where is she?
Clint ushered Sharon and Fury onto the jet, both of whom were limping badly. “Steve, come on! We need to go!” Skye and Ward rushed past, Ward with his gun drawn to protect their escape. Clint shook his head, reaching for the ramp controls. “May, wait!” he barked into his communicator. “Steve!”

She was probably dead. With all the gunfire and the grenades… “Belle!” he cried again, his voice loud and likely damning if the assassin or anyone else heard him. Fury was right; reinforcements were probably soon in coming. They couldn’t wait. But the thought of Sarah losing anything else she loved… “Belle, now! Belle!”

Suddenly, a wet, brown blur came thundering through the rain. “Come on, girl!” he beckoned, his voice cracking in gratitude. “Here she is, Sarah. Baby girl, she’s right here. Come on!”

Sarah lifted her soaked head to watch as Belle ran closer to them. She jumped up onto the ramp, clearly and miraculously unhurt, and Steve turned back. “Let’s go,” he ordered.

Clint nodded, raising the ramp. “May,” he said into his communicator. “We’re clear.”

The massive aircraft shuddered once before taking to the skies again. And Clint wasted not a moment more, wrapping his arms around Steve and hugging him tight.

They were pretty lucky. Under Coulson’s orders, Clint’s team had gone to Chicago to hunt down what they could on Natasha’s attacker. Therefore, when Fury had called them, suspicious as he was of Richards’ sudden “inability” to fly them further than Minneapolis, they’d been able to come in a matter of minutes. Now they were again flying west, flying faster and safer in SHIELD’s biggest remaining resource. Steve hadn’t quite fathomed he’d be back aboard this massive vessel. Everything was still in its place. The labs and sleeping quarters. The command center and empty brig. The amazing layout of this flying fortress. Like the other quinjet, though, things looked a tad rundown.

So did the people aboard it. Coulson’s team. Agent May, flying the jet, coolly greeting him with that seemingly implacable, empty expression that Steve found impossible to read. Agent Ward, who obviously had recovered from his ordeal a year ago. Recovered and seemingly redeemed himself. After what he’d done, Steve found it hard to simply trust him now, even if everyone else (including Clint) did. Still, that felt to be more his hang-up (and considering his trust issues, probably expected) than real. Ward, too, moved with a bit of an old limp, though whether from the wound he’d sustained stopping Garrett or from something more recent, Steve didn’t know. He was bearded and battle-weary. Worn. Skye stuck close to him, and even though she was as smart-witted and friendly as she’d been before, it was tempered, not quite as genuine. And Agents Fitz and Simmons. They seemed… older, far beyond how a simple year should have aged them. They were all tired and a bit haggard and much more hardened. Steve had no idea what trials and tribulations they’d faced as SHIELD had collapsed. The battle against HYDRA hadn’t been easy for them, either. Friends, good friends and colleagues, had been lost. There’d been a great deal of betrayal. These were scars that were difficult to hide.

Still, they were all together. Skye and Ward went to the command center to work through the latest data they’d gathered. Fitz and Simmons labored together, donning pleasant smiles and encouraging words, as they patched up Steve’s myriad injuries. He told them it wasn’t necessary, but they insisted, after they’d dealt with the bullet in Fury’s leg and the gunshot wound to Sharon’s shoulder of course. With the two other agents patched up and gone, Steve sat there on the bed as Simmons cleaned the injury on his side, listening as Clint explained what they knew.

“Tony’s got her back at the Tower,” the archer quietly said. It was clear just how terrified he was,
even though he was putting a great deal of effort forth in hiding it. Clint’s eyes were filled with pain and fear, and he kept fidgeting. He never did that, not unless he was really upset. “He and Phil went out there to have her transported back. I, uh… I don’t know, Steve. I don’t know if she’s okay. I haven’t seen her, and Tony hasn’t called. I – I don’t…”

Steve shuddered, and not because Simmons was cleaning his wounds with antiseptic (unnecessary, but if there was one thing he remembered about her was that she liked to be useful when things went wrong). He swallowed through a dry throat. Sarah was with him, out like a light on the bed at his side. She’d finally cried herself to sleep not long after taking off. And she was completely unharmed, thank God. Steve had a hand on her hip, rubbing her side almost compulsively. Belle sat beside them, eyeing Clint warily. Clint who was slowly but surely losing his cool. “I’m sorry, Clint,” Steve finally whispered. “It’s all my fault.”

The statement hung in the silence for a moment. Clint swallowed, giving an angry grunt to hide how he was cracking. “We needed you.”

Steve closed his eyes. “I know.”

“I know you had to go. I know that. But it’s not easy. Tony’s trying. He’s trying so damn hard. But… There’s not much left, Steve. You can see it.”

I can’t do this right now. I can’t. “Did you know about Fury?”

Clint shook his head. “I knew Phil was working with someone, but I had no idea… Hill’s probably been in on it, too. I guess that all makes sense Fury would come back, with HYDRA doing whatever they’re doing. But it seems like nobody trusts anyone anymore.” That was spoken with such heavy bitterness. Steve flinched, trying not to hear it. Clint shuddered through the silence that followed, again trying to get control over his emotions. Trying and failing. “Why didn’t she tell me what she was doing?” he asked. There was accusation in his tone, not for Natasha being hurt, maybe, but that this whole thing had gone on for months without him knowing. “Why didn’t she tell me she was with you? I could’ve–”

“I told her not to,” Steve answered. The black ocean of guilt inside him felt deeper and deeper, and he was barely treading water. “I told her it wasn’t safe.”

“Well, you were completely right,” Clint barked.

“Clint, I–” It didn’t matter. Clint was already up and walking away. Steve jabbed his teeth into his tongue until it hurt. He should have expected this. He tried to be logical about it, tried to tell himself to take this punishment quietly because Natasha was Clint’s best friend and what had happened to her was his fault. His fault. Of course Clint should blame him. I deserve that. His heart pounded and all the wounds and bruises littering his body throbbed and he could barely breathe. Natasha’s hurt because of me.

“It’ll be alright.” Simmons’ soft voice was unbearably loud in the quiet. Steve opened eyes that he’d again squeezed shut to find the young woman finishing with bandaging his side. She looked up at him with big brown eyes that were nothing but sincere. “I know it’s not my place to say that to you, but… It will be.”

It won’t.

Another twenty minutes passed. Panic set in again, the closer they drew to New York. Steve couldn’t keep still, pacing the command center, waiting and waiting to set down. Around him Fury was talking to Sharon, Skye, and Coulson remotely. They were discussing something about
HYDRA’s plans, about tracking down the Gamma Burst Generator that hadn’t been recovered. Ward had information on it. He’d infiltrated a HYDRA cell in Eastern Europe a few days ago, and they were saying it had been relocated to a safe house outside Paris. However, he hadn’t been able to get details on where or why. Skye was tracking the whereabouts of Viper and other known HYDRA leaders, but all to no avail. According to Selvig, HYDRA had nearly everything they needed to build a portal. When and where, though, were something of a mystery.

“And why,” Clint muttered darkly, tensely, as he looked at the data streaming by on the displays. “What the hell are they up to?”

No one had an answer. Steve couldn’t even focus on the question. His eyes were glued to the tiny section of the screen displaying their ETA to JFK, and his heart was with Natasha. He should have been better than this. It was clear they were all looking to him for orders, for direction, for leadership. He had nothing to give them.

Finally they landed. Steve collected Sarah’s sleeping form and rushed to get into the SUV in the cargo bay of the Bus. Without a word, Clint joined him, and they backed out into the heavy night. Clint drove like a maniac, and Steve was too burdened even to think to chastise him. The two of them were silent, each suffering with his pain and sorrow. And finally they reached the Tower.

Home. In his dreams, he’d come back here so many times. Safe and sound. Loved. In his worst nightmares, though, he’d never imagined it would be like this. Everything was a blur Steve couldn’t care to consider as he gathered Sarah after Clint parked in the garage, the same garage from which he’d fled a year ago. Where he’d hugged Tony and struggled to say goodbye. He and Clint now ran to the elevators, a partially awake Sarah squirming unhappily in Steve’s arms. JARVIS bid them a solemn salutation. “It is good to see you again, Captain Rogers.”

“JARVIS, please,” Steve gasped, his voice cracking again. “Please just take us up!”

Up they went. The floors flew by. Steve’s heart was pounding, aching, breaking. The doors slid open to reveal the infirmary and out they thundered. They ran. This was familiar, the way the Tower looked and smelled, the way everything was. Home. Where he belonged. He should never have left.

And there was Tony.

Stark stood at a computer near the entrance to the infirmary. He was working at the holographic station, pouring over data. His face was so pale, thinner and older than Steve remembered, and he was haggard. Exhausted. Lusterless brown hair stood up in a mussed disarray. His clothes, normally stylish, were unkempt and disheveled. The weight of it all, of what he’d done, was so obvious, so terrible. Tony seemed crushed by it, carrying such weariness and pain in eyes that were ringed in lilac and without vigor. The second they burst into the infirmary, he raised his gaze from the computer, and his eyes widened. The meager burst into the infirmary, he raised his gaze from the computer, and his eyes widened. The meager color drained from his cheeks. “Steve.”

Steve’s eyes stung. “Tony.” The inventor raced over. There were so many things Steve wanted to say, that he needed to say. So much for this man who he loved as his brother, who’d stood by him no matter what, who’d been his friend when he’d needed one the most. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m sorry you were hurt. I’m sorry! None of that came out, though. Instead, he gasped, “Tony, where is she?”

Tony looked absolutely horrified. He shared a worried glance with Clint before grabbing Steve’s arms, pushing him back a little. “Steve, just… It’s… She’s alive, okay? She’s here, and she’s alive.”
That was no consolation, and Steve wasn’t listening, anyway. He couldn’t. Panic pulsed through him freely now, the panic that had been building forever twisting his stomach into painful knots and jolting across his nerves until he could hardly stand it. The world was spinning and he couldn’t breathe. He tucked Sarah closer to him, trembling bad enough that he was shaking her. She was nearly on the verge of tears. So was he. He couldn’t wait another second. He couldn’t. “Tony, please…”

“Steve–”

“Just tell me where she is!”

His voice echoed in the silence that followed. It was rough, laden with desperation and terror. He probably should have been ashamed at how he was acting or at least embarrassed. He wasn’t, though, not even when Sarah cried quietly into his neck and clung to him even tighter. Yet again all he could think about was Natasha. Her voice. Her eyes, blue in some light, green in others, always so beautiful. Her strength and courage. Her determination. The way she touched him. The way she kissed, always so respectful, always so tender. He swallowed, trying to keep the harsh pounding of his heart under control. “Tony, please.” Somehow Tony went even whiter. “Please…”

Pepper suddenly appeared, rushing down the hall. His shout had been loud enough that she’d probably heard it. Her arms were wrapped around the slight bulge of her belly, and despite everything, she looked radiant and beautiful. When she saw Steve, her face collapsed into a weeping smile. She gave a shuddering exhale. “Steve… Oh, God! You’re okay!”

He wasn’t okay. They didn’t know what was going on. They had no idea what had happened, how far things had come between Natasha and him. So much had changed. Pepper was pregnant. Tony was beaten. Clint was shaking beside him, vibrating with worry. And he was… “Please… I have to see her. I love her.”

“Yeah, I’m seeing that,” Tony said, grasping Steve’s shoulder. “Take me to see her. Please.”

It was quiet for a moment more. Tony stared at Steve. There was a silent, desperate plea in his gaze, a plea that Steve stay calm, cool. Collected. That more than anything alerted Steve to just how bad this situation was. He’d known, but now he knew. That didn’t make sense, but that was how he felt. And he felt sick and weak, so cold. He tensed every muscle in his body to stifle a shudder. “I don’t think…” Tony tipped his head toward Sarah. Steve shivered through a sigh. “You’re gonna have to show me, darling. And here’s Auntie Pepper. You remember her, don’t you?”

Despite how rattled she was, Pepper donned a sweet smile. “Hi, honey. Do you remember me?” Her voice was soft, nonthreatening. She watched Sarah where the little girl had her face buried into her father’s shoulder and neck. Blue eyes barely peeked out, assessing the two people in front of
her. Pepper’s smile grew softer. “I used to braid your hair, remember. Like Elsa? We colored and played dolls? You remember us, don’t you?” Steve prayed Sarah would remember. She’d been barely three the last time she’d seen Pepper or Tony or been in the Tower. Asking her to recall anything from that time (especially given the amount of trauma around its end and especially right now, with her world coming apart again and after the nightmare earlier) seemed a tall order.

But Sarah always surprised him. Despite all of her anxiety issues and the scars on her heart, those vague memories she had of their old life were obviously enough to convince her this was okay. How strong her bond with Pepper was, Pepper who had braided her hair and colored with her, who’d rocked her and fed her and changed her as an infant. How much she loved Tony, who’d pampered her and let her fiddle with his inventions while he explained them to her on his lap, who’d let her play in his workshop and who loved her dad so much… Sarah gave a small nod, and Steve nearly melted from relief, sliding his hand comfortingly up and down his daughter’s back. Pepper grinned. “What do you think about coming with me for just a few minutes? Daddy needs to do something with Uncle Tony and Uncle Clint and it’ll be easier for him if you come with me.”

Sarah’s fingers curled tighter into his shirt. Pepper noticed, patient, coming close but not touching just yet. “I think we have ice cream downstairs. If I remember correctly… Oh, right. Your favorite flavor was vanilla, wasn’t it?” Sarah shook her head. “Oh. Strawberry?” Sarah shook her head again, lifting it a little more. “Wrong again? Wait, let me think. It was pistachio, wasn’t it?”

“Chocolate,” Sarah murmured.

Pepper smiled. “Oh! How could I ever forget? Chocolate. Well, I think we have chocolate. You want some, sweetheart? Because I could really go for some right now.”

Sarah hesitated a moment more. She lifted her head all the way, looking at Steve for permission (or confirmation that this was alright — Steve didn’t know which). He nodded, trying to seem braver and more composed than he felt. Thankfully, that was enough. Sarah squirmed to get down, and once Steve set her on the floor, she timidly went over to Pepper. Again, Pepper didn’t push, but she held out her right hand. “Wow, look at you. You’re so pretty, Sarah. And so big.” The little girl smiled timidly at the compliments. Maybe she didn’t directly remember Pepper, not who she was in any specific context, but it was clear she sensed enough to feel safe. She took Pepper’s hand. “Okay, honey.”

“Is there chocolate syrup?” Sarah asked as they went down the hall to the elevator.

“I’m sure there is,” Pepper promised, “and I’m sure…” Their voices faded.

Steve watched her go, horrified to let his daughter out of his sight for even one second given what was happening, but he didn’t have a chance even to think, much less deal with the twisted tumult of emotions churning inside him, because Tony was grabbing him by his coat and hauling him into his embrace. “God, Steve,” the inventor gasped around a sob. “It’s good to see you!” Despite his desperation — his need to see Natasha — Steve wrapped his arms around his friend and hugged back. Hugged back hard and tight. “I wish it wasn’t like this!”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut against tears. “Me too,” he murmured. “Me too!”

“I missed you,” Tony said. “I really did. And I screwed everything up.”

Not now. Please. “No, you didn’t. No—”

“Oh, God, you have no idea how bad—” Tony cut himself off, like he realized Steve couldn’t handle it, like he was saying too much, going into something that didn’t need to be explored right then. He heaved a short, quivering sigh, pulling away and staring into Steve’s eyes. Angrily he wiped at his
own and sucked his emotions down deep with his next, ragged breath. “I don’t know what to say.”

Steve wasn’t as successful at keeping his control. “Just tell me she’s okay,” he pleaded. “Tell me that, Tony.” Tony looked away, looked at Clint, and Clint’s eyes finally bled tears. Terror spiked through Steve. It was raw and brutal. “Where is she?”

Tony swallowed hard. “Down the hall.” Steve was moving before the other man even finished talking. “Steve. Steve, wait a minute! Wait!”

He didn’t listen. His sneakers squeaked on the tiled floor as he raced down the short corridor. There was only one room with its lights on, and he burst inside. All his fears, all his guilt and rage, none of it had prepared him for what he found.

“Oh, God,” Clint moaned. He closed his eyes and looked away, wiping roughly at his cheeks. “Oh, God, Nat…”

Natasha lay in the bed. She was completely motionless, deeply unconscious, kept alive by the ventilator swishing to the left. Other machines surrounded her, displaying her vital signs, beeping in time with the slow pace of her heart. An IV ran from her wrist to a pole near the bed, and blood and other fluids slowly dripped down. She looked so small and weak. Fragile. There were bruises all over her face, her lips cut and marred where the tube of the respirator was parting them and taped into place. The marks around her neck were even worse, angry purple splotches that were evidence of the deep and violent struggle. Bandages clearly encircled her chest, her stomach, and her right calf. Her left arm was splinted and her hand wrapped tightly. She was… Dying.

Steve couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. He couldn’t move. His heart was breaking. His soul, shattered. This couldn’t be real. All those doubts and fears he’d fought to keep at bay… They paled in comparison to this.

Time ceased to exist as he stood there and stared at her. Just yesterday she’d been with him, happy and healthy, flirty and laughing, beautiful. Just yesterday she’d been okay. Just yesterday she’d said she loved him, told him she would marry him. And he’d let her go, despite all the anxiety and apprehension twisting in his gut, despite that miserable feeling that something bad was about to happen… He’d made a horrible mistake. He should have never let her come to him, never let her keep coming to him. Never!

There were sounds in his head. The thunder of his pulse between his ears. His own labored breathing, weak and useless. And there were sounds beyond that in the condensing, shrinking world. Someone was talking. Tony. “She was shot twice, once in the chest and once in the stomach. She…” The inventor faltered, though it wasn’t clear if it was because the story was too terrible or because he didn’t want to hurt Steve further. “She nearly bled out on the operating table in Chicago. They didn’t think she’d make it. They still… They don’t think…” He sniffled, shaking his head. Steve hardly saw it out of the corner of his eye. Grunting, Tony cleared his throat. “I put a call into Bruce. He doesn’t answer too often these days, but I’m sure he’ll come once he checks his messages.”

None of that made sense. None of it. Steve couldn’t look away from Natasha’s battered face. The cheeks he’d tenderly touched, now welted and bruised. The lips he’d kissed, dried and split. The hair through which he’d run his hands, soft as silk… It was lusterless and limp. The eyes into which he’d gazed, so deep and luminous… Closed. Tentatively he laid his fingers over Natasha’s left hand where it was limp on the bed. She didn’t respond. Her skin was smooth and cold. He wove their fingers together, a ragged sob bursting through his lips. “He did this to her,” he heard himself say. His voice was so rough, so alien to his own ears. “The same man who attacked us back there. He did this to her.”
“Who was he?” Tony asked.

Steve’s free hand balled into a fist at his side, his knuckles still bruised from the fight. “I don’t know.”

“We didn’t find anything in Chicago,” Clint declared. He, too, was taut with icy rage now that the shock was wearing. “The cops there are useless. All we learned from them is what the press is saying. A man dressed in black. Messy shoulder length brown hair. But Skye was able to clean up a shot from the security footage at the airport and… Well, you’re not going to believe this. Whoever this guy is, he has a metal arm.”

Tony’s brow furrowed in confusion. “A metal arm?”

“Yeah. Steve?” Steve nodded in confirmation, images of silver punching at him and grabbing for him and beating him down flashing through his head. “Skye’s already running through our database of bad guys, trying to find a match. People we know are affiliated with HYDRA. So far nothing.”

“Ballistics?” Steve whispered.

Tony shook his head. “Nothing useful. Two Soviet slugs. No rifling.”

“Soviet?” For a crazy second, Steve wondered if he wasn’t wrong about this whole thing. Perhaps this wasn’t about him and Sarah. Perhaps… “Maybe a Red Room connection?”

Tony sighed, struggling again with something, and closed his eyes briefly. He shook his head once more. “No. I wish it was.” He stepped closer to Steve, his face filled with pain and sympathy. “About thirty minutes ago, this was sent to every communications channel SHIELD and the Avengers used during the fight against HYDRA. It has to be from… from Viper.” He handed Steve his smartphone.

Steve took it. He didn’t want to. Lord, he didn’t want to, but he looked down at the screen all the same. “You should know better,” it read. “You can’t escape me. You can’t run. You can’t hide. You’re mine.” His blood turned to ice water. “Come out, come out, wherever you are...”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tower was quiet, incredibly so. For the first couple of hours Steve had spent in the infirmary, everything was new again. The way things looked. The way things felt and smelled. Even the way things sounded. The soft whoosh of the air recyclers. The ever-present hum of electricity. The low whir of the computer systems that were a part of every room, every place. It took him back to the first few weeks he’d lived there. He’d never lived anywhere with noise like that before, the constant soft background buzz of technology. With his sharp senses it had taken some getting used to. Now even that felt novel and distracting again.

Not distracting enough, though. Not lulling enough to ease him into any sort of peace. He was so tired, sore and aching from the fight it had been to get here and from his own breaking heart, but he couldn’t rest. Not like this. Not with Natasha like this.

He was at her side. He hadn’t much moved from there for the last twelve hours until now. Pepper had brought Sarah back. He met her out in the hall, refusing to let his daughter see Natasha like this. Someone had brought Belle from the Bus because the two of them (and Tony, who tried to joke about how Sarah had finally wrangled him into getting a dog) returned with her. The infirmary wasn’t the best place for an animal, but no one said much as Steve took Sarah to the room next to Natasha’s. Sarah was exhausted, having hardly slept since the night before. It was evening now, and she looked miserable. Steve laid with her on the hospital bed, rubbing her back and shushing her down into slumber. Thankfully she was sufficiently tired that she went to sleep without much trouble, which was good because he didn’t think he had it in him to be strong for her right now. It was hard to remember sometimes with how mature she was that she was only four. Only a small child. There was no way she could understand what was happening.

He wasn’t sure he wanted her to. And he wasn’t sure he could himself.

Once Sarah was sound asleep, he gently scooched out from under her and tucked her in under her blanket. He stared at her a moment, hating himself all the more for what had happened, for everything that had happened. Belle nudged his hand with her cold nose, and he sighed, petting the dog’s head lethargically for a moment. He knew he needed to go back to Natasha’s side, but finding the courage was difficult, so he lingered. That seemed to be all he was good for nowadays. Lingering. Hiding. Not knowing what to do. How had he lost his way so badly?

“She’s changed a lot.”

The soft voice from the other side of the room drew his attention, and he turned to find Pepper standing in the doorway. She appeared a strange cross between radiant and burdened. The swell of her stomach was apparent beneath the sweater she wore. She was cradling it a little as well, which pulled his attention to it even more. She was the same otherwise. Same pretty face and perfect make-up. Same strawberry blonde hair neatly and elegantly styled. Same soft voice and comforting eyes. Not the same, though, too. There were burdens there that hadn’t been there before. Tony’s burdens. The burdens of having their family torn asunder. Pepper smiled faintly. “So have you.”

He felt incredibly ashamed at that. “I know.”

Pepper came inside the room. Sweet, steadfast Pepper, who’d always been the voice of reason, a sisterly presence in his life. She’d helped raise Sarah from her first days in Steve’s world, helped him
so much when he’d had no idea what he’d been doing. He felt very far away from the man he’d been in those days, the man who’d do anything to stand up for the things in which he believed. “Tony’s missed you so much. So have I.” He didn’t know if he could stand to listen again. “They hunted you across the country?” He nodded, not trusting his voice. Pepper smiled and cupped his face, her thumbs sweeping the wetness from his cheeks. “Well, that’s over at least. You’re home now.”

It didn’t feel like it. And he doubted it was. “I know,” he lied. He dropped his gaze to the swell of her abdomen. “Congratulations. I know it’s not… not a good time, but…”

“Thanks,” she said softly, meaningfully.

He sighed. “I know how much Tony wanted this, even if he never said it.”

Now she gave a genuine smile. “Life goes on, right?”

*It doesn’t feel like it.*

She kissed his cheek and pulled him into a tender hug. “Congratulations to you, too,” she said into his ear, “about… I know this is definitely not the right time. But I’m glad Natasha found you.”

Steve had to fight not to stiffen. Everybody knew now that he’d asked Natasha to marry him but for the worst reasons imaginable. He’d discovered almost immediately after the horror and shock had worn off that the assassin – whoever he was – had taken Natasha’s engagement ring. And Steve’s dog tags. They were both gone, stolen from her battered body after the fight had ended. The security feed of the fight at O’Hare had caught the moment on camera, where the man with the metal arm had stripped her of everything Steve had given to her. It had to be Viper’s doing, Viper’s orders. Richards had likely been watching him somehow, watched him buy the ring. Fury had been able to find out that HYDRA had gotten to him a long time ago, before Steve had even run, before SHIELD had been overthrown. He’d been lying in wait all this time. Of course, the implication was clear: if Richards had known all this time that Dan Cleary had really been Steve Rogers, why had Viper let him be?

The thought was more than disturbing. He knew the answer, even without the necessary information. HYDRA had something big planned, and whatever it was, Viper wanted him to see it. Or be a part of it. *Or worse.* She’d had her hands on him for months, and she’d let him think he’d been safe, let him suffer out there, *toying* with him. Now he wondered if those nights where he’d thought he’d heard something in their little house, where he’d stayed up until dawn with his hand on a gun and Sarah tucked to his side while she’d slept, where he’d been *certain* someone had been watching them… Someone had been. And not just Fury. Viper had had him right where she’d wanted him for a year. And she’d sent this assassin to kill her competition. To capture Steve now and bring him to her.

Disturbing didn’t quite cover it.

Pepper rubbed her hand down his back. “It’s going to be okay,” she promised. Even if he didn’t believe that, the comfort, the *contact* with someone who cared about him, was too much to deny, and he sagged into her embrace. “It will be. We both know Natasha. She’s a fighter. She’s been through so much, struggled to be who she is. She’ll make it through this.” Tears burned his eyes, but he forced himself to nod. Pepper pulled back, and she cupped his face again. “You look good with a beard,” she commented with a little smile. “It’s not you, though.”

Steve couldn’t help a little laugh. “That was the point.”

She laughed, too, brushing away the trace of wetness from his cheeks. “I’ll stay with Sarah. You
should sleep, Steve. You really look like you need it.”

“Can’t,” he whispered. “I should... I need to go back to her.”

Thankfully, Pepper didn’t argue. Steve could see she wanted to. She’d always looked out for him, loved him like a little brother of sorts. Tony had joked about that once or twice, and it was entirely true. “Alright.” She kissed his cheek tenderly again before letting him go. Then she went to the bed and laid down beside Sarah (which obviously wasn’t as easy for her as it had been before, not with the bulge of her belly). Belle planted herself on the floor right at the foot of the bed, watching him with confident eyes as he finally made himself leave.

Steve wiped at his face and took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself as he walked the few feet down to Natasha’s room. The door was open, and there were voices inside. Clint and Tony. And some others. “–Banner’s coming, but I don’t know when. Can’t imagine it’d be sooner than tomorrow at the earliest.”

“Will she survive that long?”

“It’s impossible to say.” That was Agent Simmons. Her soft tone with its delicate British accent seemed monumentally loud. Steve paused, closing his eyes. “The bullets caused massive internal damage. She’s showing signs of organ failure. Her heart’s struggling. Depressed respiration, with one lung on the verge of collapse. A lacerated liver. One kidney has stopped functioning. She’s in shock. Even…” Simmons sighed, like she was trying to keep her voice steady. “Even if the blood transfusion does some good, I don’t think… The chances aren’t good.”

“And you’re sure about all this?” Clint said in a hiss.

“Agent Barton, Jemma knows how to read someone’s chart.” That was Fitz, if the brogue was any indication.

Even hiding out in the hallway, Steve could hear the wrath in Clint’s voice. “I don’t care what the damn chart says! There’s gotta be something we can do. She’s not dying like this! She’s not!” The pain in his chest got stronger, tighter and tighter like a vise being twisted around his heart, and he couldn’t breathe. Clint was desperate, coming apart at the seams. “Tony, is Bruce going to have anything else?”

Tony’s voice was quiet and defeated and very much not like him. “I don’t know. I know he was working on Extremis more, trying to stabilize it after the Centipede fiasco, but–”

“Extremis?” Clint latched onto that like a lifeline. Steve did, too. “That could save her, right? It helped you, helped Pepper and all those people with disabilities–”

“Yeah, it could help. But the side effects are still killer. It’s poison.” Tony sighed. “We managed to disable both the Centipede serum and Extremis, but we never fixed any of the underlying problems with either of them.” He paused. “I don’t know that there’s anything that we can do at this point. Frankly… The only serum we’ve got that can work like a magic band aid without throwing the baby out with the bathwater is Cap’s, and we all know the problem with that.”

In the heavy silence that followed, a machine beeped a few times and then settled into a monotone whine. Steve opened his eyes, disgusted at himself for being yet again so damn weak, and made himself keep going. He stepped inside the room, and all eyes turned to him. Tony and Clint, the former in grief and the latter in anger. Coulson. Steve hadn’t even known he was there, and he was troubled, extremely so. And Fitz and Simmons. Simmons had latex gloves on her hands, and she was adjusting the bags of liquid on the IV pole. The alarm wasn’t anything other than the IV
machine running out of blood. Simmons pulled the empty bag away, and when she moved, Steve’s eyes immediately went to Natasha. She looked the same as she had when he’d left her a little while ago. Pale. Fading. “Oh, Captain Rogers, it’s good you’re back. When you can, I’d appreciate it if you could give more blood. We’ll be running short soon.”

Without thinking, Steve nodded. He’d already offered up a supply some hours ago, since of them all, he was the best universal donor they had. He came into the room more. This happened every time he saw Natasha. He just couldn’t tear his eyes from her. The absolute stillness of her bandaged body, of her bruised face. It was devastating, and he couldn’t snap out of it. Couldn’t do anything but drown in his guilt. Before he even realized what he was doing, he was at her bedside where he’d spent hours in a useless vigil, reaching for her hand again. Her barren hand.

Because Viper had taken her ring. Because she’d gotten in Viper’s way.

“She wants me.” Steve balled his hands into fists at his side. “She’s not going to stop until she has me. She could have taken me before, and she didn’t because she wanted this. This time. This circumstance. Until all… all the pieces are in place. She wanted to make a show of it. I don’t know why. If she finds out Sarah has the serum–”

“She won’t,” Tony replied firmly. “There’s no way she could know.”

Steve looked up at his friend, forcing himself to focus. “I keep telling myself that there’s ‘no way’ with HYDRA.” No way they could be back. No way they could get my DNA. No way they could destroy everything SHIELD stood for. No way they could find me. “They seem pretty damn proficient at finding a way.” Like this. Like Nat dying because she dared to love me. He could barely breathe again, barely make his lungs pull oxygen into his throbbing body. You should have never come to me.

Clint’s anger had been building since the night before. Steve tried to think it wasn’t directed at him, but he was becoming less and less certain of that. “We need to stop them. Go after them. Something.” Now this was definitely aimed right at him, aimed with Hawkeye’s deadly precision. “Stop hiding. Stop running.”
“I won’t argue with that,” Coulson said. He looked among the three men, all that was left of the team he’d died to create. A broken soldier, an exhausted inventor, and a raging assassin with no target. “Hopefully the others will track down some information. In the meantime…” He sighed, turning his sullen gaze to Natasha. “I… really hesitate to say anything. Fury swore me to secrecy before, and since he’s here… Well, we’d need to go through him.”

None of them was in the mood of games. Clint’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Phil, what are you talking about?”

“TAHITI.”

Steve vaguely recalled that he’d said that before, the night they’d been reunited when HYDRA had kidnapped Sarah and Pepper. He’d declared it had been some sort of magical place, some way in which he’d been restored after being killed by Loki right before the Battle of New York. Steve frankly hadn’t thought anything of it at the time. Tony’s look of surprise suggested he hadn’t either (or had completely forgotten it, most likely). Clint, however, was nothing but irritated as if he’d been exposed to this (what was it? Some running joke?) more since then. It made sense, given he was working with Coulson now. “What the hell does that mean? And don’t say it’s a ‘magical place’ or anything else like that. I want a real answer.”

Coulson looked genuinely reticent and regretful. Steve straightened, folding his arms across his chest and staring at the other man. If he knew something… “So during all the disaster last year, I, uh… discovered SHIELD had been conducting a… morally questionable project known as TAHITI. Terrestrialized Alien Host Integrative Tissue Initiative.” Steve and Tony shared a confused look. What? Coulson sighed and explained further. “In 1945, shortly after you went down, Cap, SSR confiscated an alien corpse from the hands of HYDRA. They really didn’t know what it was, like a great many of the things they took from Schmidt’s people. SSR logged it and hid it away. Eventually, SHIELD came into possession of the body, which we came to call GH.” That earned another puzzled glance. “Guest Host. And, eventually, after poking around at its tissues for some time, we discovered its bodily fluids contained some… extremely potent properties. In particular, one type of fluid, dubbed GH.325, conferred massive cellular growth and regeneration.”

“Wait, wait, hold on,” Clint said with a frown. He looked completely flummoxed, which probably wasn’t far from the truth. It certainly wasn’t for Steve. “You’re telling me aliens crash-landed on earth in 1945–”

“Much earlier. In ancient times.”

Clint grimaced and shook his head. That was neither here nor there, really. And it probably shouldn’t have been so surprising this had, once again, turned into a plot from a science fiction story. Considering the number of times that had happened to Steve since he’d let the SSR pump his body full of Erskine’s super soldier serum… I really miss the days when the weirdest thing science ever created was me. “You’re telling us that HYDRA got a hold of an alien body and SHIELD was experimenting on it?”

Coulson nodded. “Yes.”

“And…”

“It saved my life.” Coulson looked modestly ashamed. “Project: TAHITI. It saved my life. The project was designed in 2009 to heal a mortally wounded or dead Avenger. Director Fury decided to use it on me. It healed my body, regrew damaged tissue and repaired organs.”

The room was silent save for the steady beeping of the equipment monitoring Natasha’s pulse and
the swish of the ventilator. Steve didn’t participate in the round of shocked looks this time. Instead his eyes were on her, on everything that hung in the balance. This time he did take her hand, rubbing his thumb down the length of her fingers before settling where the ring had so recently and briefly been. Clint was exasperated and angry, of course. “What are we standing around here for then? Get this – this GH Three-twenty-whatever and let’s use it on her!”

Coulson raised his hand to still the tension. “Clint, it’s not that simple unfortunately. First, after all the chaos last year, there isn’t much left. It was used to save me, to save Skye when she got shot, and tested on a few other people during the course of Project: TAHI TI. While you guys were facing HYDRA back after the Triskelion fell, we were embattled with trying to keep things like this safe, or if that wasn’t possible, to destroy them. GH is gone.”

“But there is some,” Tony said.

Again, Coulson reluctantly sighed. “Yes, but like I said, not much. And we’d have to go through Fury. He has it. But, to be honest, that’s not the biggest problem.”

Clint looked dismayed. “Then what is?”

“The side effects are… serious.”

At that, Steve looked up. “How serious?”

Coulson’s jaw clenched. Whatever this was, it was personal. It had happened to him. “Psychosis. Obsession. Cognitive deterioration. Mental instability. Insanity. Degeneration that has led to death.”

Tony grimaced. “God.”

“Yeah. About as bad as Extremis’ side effects.”

“Wait, Phil, I don’t get this.” Clint shook his head, eyes narrowed, stricken and confused by all of this. “You said this saved you and saved Skye. You’re both… not like that. Not crazy. So—”

Now Coulson really hesitated, but he pushed on despite the dolor in his gaze. “It’s complicated, but we believe the serum causes memories from the alien itself, from GH, to be integrated into the neurons of the recipient. That is what eventually leads to the psychosis. Scrubbing the subject’s memories is the only way to prevent it.”

Tony looked aghast. “Scrubbing the subject’s…”

“I found this out the hard way.” Coulson gave a small, apologetic smile. “Apparently I headed up Project: TAHI TI. I was in charge of it. I led the team on it. And I made the call to shut it down when we realized the risks and side effects were too large.” Steve couldn’t process that a moment. Then it snapped into ugly realization. SHIELD had altered his memories. Coulson had forgotten all about this, about his death and recovery. About how he’d been the head of this project. SHIELD had fabricated a story about him recovering on a beach in Tahiti of all places. They’d changed his past, maybe leaving most of it intact, but just because they’d done that for him didn’t mean they couldn’t have done much worse to someone else. Erased entire lifetimes. The thought made Steve sick again. Every time he thought SHIELD’s shaky morals couldn’t be any more disturbing, he was proven wrong. “Director Fury made a different call,” Coulson eventually said. His grin turned rueful. “I guess it’s lucky for me he did. Lucky for me and Skye. And maybe…” His gaze settled on Natasha, and they all turned to her.

And Steve closed his eyes again. Suddenly this was somehow worse. Faced with another
impossible situation, it was clear a decision had to be made. Steve didn’t know Phil Coulson as well
as Clint or Tony did, but he knew he was a good man. A decent man who cared a lot about his team
and about Natasha and Clint, who both respected him deeply and considered him a mentor. He
wouldn’t be offering this option unless he thought there was no other choice and unless he believed
there was a chance it could work. “Tony… does Nat have much of a chance on her own?” His soft
voice was booming in the quiet. There was no immediate answer, so he tried again, even louder.
“Does she?”

Tony looked addled and helpless. “Steve, I’m not the one to be asking. Bruce’ll know more when
he gets here.”

“Simmons already said no,” Clint replied. His desperation was nearly a tangible thing, pulsing in the
room like it was urging the computers monitoring Natasha’s vitals to beep faster and faster. Driving
him to accept the very thing he’d decried moments before because now he needed evidence in favor
of action. “The better question is this: is there any chance Bruce could fix this serum? Get rid of the
side effects?”

Tony lightly threw his hands up in exasperation. “You know there’s no way I can answer that. I’ve
hardly talked to Bruce in weeks. Months, even. He’s been on the down low since… You guys
know what happened. He said he was coming, but that was it. He didn’t even say how long it
would take him to get here.”

“But if he could reduce the side effects or remove them completely—” Clint said.

“Clint, don’t even. Seriously. There’s no way to know that,” Tony cautioned. Clint went rigid with
This. She’s enhanced, too, with what the Red Room did to her, so that’s a further layer of
complication on top of it all. It’s unknowns heaped on top of more unknowns. It always has been.”
Tony tightened his jaw in frustration. “What I said before is true. Steve’s serum is the only
one that hasn’t had problems like the rest of these have. And people have been trying to figure out why
for seventy years. Is there an answer?” Again, Tony lifted his hands helplessly. “I can’t even tell you.
You know what I think of science. Well, science has magnificently failed on this front for decades.”

Coulson added, “Simmons has been studying GH.325 as much as she can. She hasn’t found a way
to ameliorate the bad parts.”

“Well, with all due respect to her, she’s not Bruce Banner,” Clint snapped. Coulson didn’t look
pleased, and he still had enough clout with Clint for that stern, disapproving look to cow him. Clint
averted his gaze again, staring at Natasha. He had no qualms about taking her other hand. “Sorry.
Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I just…” He closed his eyes and swallowed stiffly,
like he was trying to force down a lump in his throat before it choked him. “She can’t die. Not like
this.”

Not for this. The archer didn’t say that, of course, but Steve thought it all the same. And he flinched
as if the words had been spat at him, each one full of acid and venom. The room fell into a tense
silence. Steve couldn’t tear his eyes from Natasha again. All the consequences of his choices laid
bare before him. All the evidence of his mistakes. Undeniable and unbearable. Eventually Coulson
went on. “If… If this is something we want to try, I think I can make it happen. Like I said,
TAHITI was designed to save a mortally wounded Avenger. Sad to say, but this occasion warrants
it. Even with the side effects—”

“Will they happen right away?” Clint asked.

Coulson sighed. “No. And it varied from individual to individual. But they happened, no mistake.”
“Fine,” Clint conceded. “They might happen. They will happen. But if we use it we can prolong her life until Bruce gets here. It’s her only hope.”

Hesitation crossed over Tony’s face. “Hold on. Can we even make this decision for her? I mean, it kinda seems like it’s something of a bum deal, and SHIELD playing God has never sat well with any of us.” Playing God. Saving a life, as Fury had done with Coulson. Creating a life, as HYDRA had done with Sarah. Absolute power wielded absolutely without care or concern for the consequences. The damage SHIELD had done to the world had perhaps been unintentional, damage done with the best hopes at heart, but it was damage all the same. Damage to what and who they all were. Damage to what they’d wanted to achieve. Could they risk damaging who Natasha was in order to save her?

Who were they to decide this?

“Steve?”

Steve looked up again. Tony was watching him. Waiting for him. “You’re her…” Tony didn’t finish. He, too, swallowed like his heart was in his throat. I’m her what? Her boyfriend? Her lover? Her fiancé? Steve shuddered through a breath. I’m the one who did this to her.

Now Clint said it. All these things that had been lurking in the shadows, teasing them and tormenting them… He said them. “Why is this his call?” His voice was tense, sharp. He stared at Steve. His expression was fairly placid, calm and cool, but Steve recognized it as nothing but hateful. Resting murder face. Tony had always joked about that, back when things had been bright and clean, that Clint always looked like he wanted to kill someone. Steve wanted to wither under it. “What gives you the right? Why is it your decision?”

Guilt stronger than anything he’d felt so far left the world collapsing around him. Tony was saying something, but he couldn’t hear what it was. Something to defend him, it seemed, because in the vacuum of that collapsing world, he could hear Clint arguing. And he should argue. He should stand up for Natasha, his partner and closest friend, and her best interests. Clint had every right to be furious, to question every decision Steve had made. I ran. I ran like a coward. If I’d never done that… HYDRA would not have hunted him. This war might not have gone on so long. The Avengers might not have fallen apart. Sarah wouldn’t have been scarred by fear and loneliness.

And Natasha would have never gotten in the way of Viper’s vendetta.

“What choice did we have, Clint? Huh?” Tony’s tone was harsh, ringing with barely controlled frustration and pain, and just like that, this tenuous situation was crumbling under the weight of it all. The last of the team was surrendering in this room, crowded around a fallen Avenger, a dying friend and lover. They were splintering, staggering, cracking apart. Everything felt like it was spinning, and Steve couldn’t stop it. “What should we have done? You have answers now? Because I sure as hell don’t!”

“All I know is we’ve spent the last year acting like we’ve all been on the run.” Steve was too ashamed to so much as look at Clint. It was all going to come out now, the anger and grief and frustration, the vitriol for what he’d let happen, and he damn well deserved it. “We’ve had our tails tucked between our legs for months! And for what? Because HYDRA got their hands into the public’s head? Because they’ve been letting loose lie after lie? Because we didn’t win when SHIELD went down?” He shook his head. “The world’s never going to believe we’re the heroes unless we show them we are!”

There was this thing about Tony that hadn’t changed, it seemed, and probably wouldn’t ever change. He had a vast and unerring ability to deny the painfully obvious. “I’ll ask you again,
Barton,” he seethed, his eyes flashing. “What choice did we have? HYDRA was everywhere! In everything! In case you forgot, they took down the organization you were working for! That’s not on me! Over and over again SHIELD screwed things up!” Clint’s eyes narrowed into a look of barely contained rage. This was even worse than moments ago. Steve had never quite seen him like this. He had a feeling too that this argument had happened once or twice in the past when things had gotten bad, after Project: Insight had nearly destroyed New York and after Congress had condemned the Avengers and after Bruce had almost leveled part of South Africa. After the Avengers had split. He’d been about as useful then, all those times, as he was now. Their captain and leader. What a joke.

And Tony was going on. “SHIELD got us into this mess. We have been trying to fix it on our own. You tell me what else we should have done! We have been playing catch up with HYDRA for seventy years, in case you haven’t noticed! Cut off one head, and two more shall take its place? Damn apropos. And we have acted like heroes! Despite all the bad stuff that’s happened, and there’s been a lot, we’re still fighting.” Again, Clint looked away, ashamed and so low. Tony gave a short, aggravated sigh. “SHIELD has done nothing but put the world in danger over and over again. Coming from a master button-pusher, they have pushed too many buttons, screwed around with too many things they didn’t understand. And I gotta tell you plain and simple: I’m not a fan of trusting anything coming out of them ever again.”

“Well, we need to trust this,” Clint retorted, finding his footing again. “Natasha deserves any chance we can give her!”

“Even if the cure’s as bad as the disease?” Tony replied. He was playing Devil’s advocate. Steve could tell. Now wasn’t the time and this wasn’t the place.

And Clint clearly didn’t have the patience for it. “So we let her die?”

Tony turned back to Steve. “I think it’s your call. She… She loves you. She’d want you to decide. Maybe… I didn’t know what she was doing. But I knew that, even back before everything went to hell.” Clint opened his mouth to object, but Tony silenced him with a look. His voice softened, though. “You know it, too.”

Clint looked like he wanted to argue, and that alone felt like a knife in Steve’s back. Still, he didn’t, dipping his head and nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, she does. I… I know that.” He breathed through the next couple of moments, visibly trying to compose himself. Eventually he gave a long sigh, one of defeat or submission or acceptance or approval. Steve didn’t know which, and it mattered. It mattered so much. But there was no way to know. “Alright then. Fine.” Clint stared at him. “What should we do, Steve?”

He couldn’t face this. Not this. Not on top of everything else. Tears blurred Natasha’s limp body. That awful tube jabbed between her lips. The spread of her lusterless hair across the pillows. The paleness of her face. Bandages and blood. White and red. And Tony and Clint and Coulson… Sarah… They were looking to him to lead them. He didn’t think he could.

There was no chance to say anything, however. “Sir, Director Fury is requesting your presence in the command center. It is extremely urgent.”

The three Avengers were frozen in surprise for an endless moment. Then they were going, rushing from the room with Coulson tight on their heels. Steve ran to where he’d left Sarah. Belle immediately sat up, ears rising. Pepper lifted her head slightly, Sarah still soundly sleeping beside her. Steve finally found his voice. “I have to–”

“Go,” Pepper whispered.
He turned and sprinted to the elevator. The others were waiting for him. Everyone was tense and troubled, terrified of this somehow getting worse. “What now?” Tony whispered as the lift arrived. “What now?”

The ride upstairs lasted only a few seconds, and it was spent in silence. When the doors opened, they went down the hall to the command center. JARVIS opened the glass doors, revealing Coulson’s team and Fury standing before a wall of holographic displays. Steve squinted at them. “What…” he murmured. The others turned to look at him. Ward and Skye, the former with regret and the latter with concern. Fitz and Simmons, both aghast. May, cool and calm but not without worry. Fury, nothing but stern as if to say: this was bound to happen. I told you it would.

And it was happening. Lord, it was happening.

“Oh, my God,” Tony whispered. Horror didn’t begin to describe it. Dozens of videos were playing from all around the country. Los Angeles. Miami. Minneapolis. Here in New York. It was hard to look at one thing with the concurrent feeds, all filled with violence and misery. Terrorist attacks. Bombings. Hijackings. Destruction and chaos. Buildings burning. People screaming in panic, running for their lives. People dead. “How many?” Clint asked softly. His voice was a shade of its normal strength. “How many are dead?”

Skye was pale as she brought up some data. “It’s not clear yet. This all happened at once about fifteen minutes ago. According to preliminary reports, at least twenty.”

At least twenty. Twenty more innocent people caught up in this nightmare. Of course, as Steve numbly stared at the news reports, he humored a moment of doubt. He had to because anything else would be too terrible to accept. “Are you sure it’s HYDRA?” The nature of the attacks should have been evidence enough. Something this well-orchestrated and wide spread could only be meant to send a message.

But HYDRA had never been subtle. Skye tapped a few places on her tablet. “This is broadcasting across all radio frequencies and network television stations. It’s all over Twitter, all over the internet… It’s everywhere.”

Steve didn’t know why he was surprised. Viper had sent an actual message. Another one. Tony’s voice was grave and low as he read the words on the screen. “If Captain America does not surrender himself, more people will die. Every hour on the hour.” She turned to Steve, but Steve’s mind was gone from him. People were dead because of him. More people. More innocents. “There’s more,” Skye softly announced. “This came in on the same channels as before. It’s another message with coordinates. They’re just outside the city, down in New Jersey. And…” She raised the tablet so Steve could see it.

Steve slowly took the computer, breath locked in his chest again. And, again, he had to read what was on the screen. “You thought you could live happily ever after with her? That’s not your place. You belong with me and our family. It’s time. Come to me, or I’ll kill them all.”

Tony was reading over his shoulder. “God. What family? She’s crazy. Absolutely nuts.”

“Sarah?” Coulson ventured.

“There’s no way she could know,” Tony insisted again. “That information is sealed and locked down here.”
“She might want her anyway without the serum. Obviously she thinks you can a family make together,” Fury said. “Sarah and any other children.” Steve felt sick. Fury’s eye appraised him with sadness and sympathy. Even he, with all of his years of experience and control in the face of the disastrous, sounded perturbed. “And obviously HYDRA’s prepared to burn the world to get you.” He looked around the room. “I doubt she means it’s time in the long-time coming sense. They’re going to make a move. We need a response team on this. The Avengers. We need Captain America. Whatever they have planned—”

“Does that even matter?” Clint hissed. “We’ve got nothing to go on, and this is clear and present!”

May’s expression hardened. “They know they can’t get you here.” She turned to Steve. “Not you or Sarah. They can’t attack the Tower.

Ward nodded. “They’re trying to flush you out. You can’t—”

But Steve already was.

Tony chased him of course. He didn’t hardly make it out into the hallway before his friend was there, grabbing his arm and trying to make him stop. “Wait. Wait! Steve!”

Steve yanked away and raced toward the elevator. “Don’t!” he snapped in warning. His voice cracked, like his heart was cracking and shattering inside. “Don’t, Tony. Don’t try to stop me.”

Anger flashed across Tony’s face. Anger and betrayal. “I can’t believe we’re here again. Doing this. And you’re running.”

“You think I’m running?” Steve hissed back. “I’m going to turn myself in. That’s what I’m doing.” He’d tried to be gentle about it, but he was too rattled to stop himself from wrenching his arm away now. He headed back toward the lift, but the thought of having to wait for it was too much (also the thought of being trapped in that small elevator with Tony, but he wasn’t going to focus on that). Heart pounding and feeling so damn ill, he threw open the fire escape door and started quickly down the stairs.

Tony was doggedly following, even as worn as the last year had left him. “Of course that’s what you’re doing! Wait! Stop, damn it! Listen to me!” It was physically difficult to do that with all the distressed energy crackling over him, but he did, drawing to a sudden halt on a landing between the command center and the infirmary, staying stiff with his eyes planted firmly on his feet. His pulse was racing, his lungs aching with every breath like he was sucking in poison. He could hear Tony panting behind him. “Not all of us have super perfect serum, Spangles.” God, it felt like eons since Tony had talked to him like that. Since he’d teased him with a nickname he’d once hated but had grown fond of, grown to appreciate and even like, over the years. “And I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Don’t you see I have to do this?” Steve asked, finally turning to face his friend. Surprised at the intensity in his eyes and the self-loathing in his voice, Tony took a step back. “That I made this worse?”

Tony sighed in a gust. “You know, I still know what you’re thinking. I know you, Steve. I know exactly what thoughts are going through your head right now.”

“That I made a mistake running away?” Steve snapped, finally turning to face his friend. Surprised at the intensity in his eyes and the self-loathing in his voice, Tony took a step back. “That I made this worse?”
Tony held his gaze firmly. “Maybe you did,” he conceded. “What? What do you want from me, Steve? Answers? Absolutes? I can’t give you any. I couldn’t when they found Sarah. I couldn’t when you decided to keep her. You made choices, the best ones you could at the time. We all did. That’s what life is. Choices upon choices, and you never know if they’re right. You do what you can.”

“That’s not good enough,” Steve returned quickly and certainly.

Tony’s expression tightened into something not quite a scowl. “It is what it is. And you want to talk about what’s not good enough? This.” His sharp eyes turned into a scrutinizing glare. “You. Right now. Giving up. Again.”

His anger rose up, and his control was so compromised at this point that he just couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I’m not doing this now,” he snarled. “I don’t have time. I’m going. I gotta—” His voice failed him for a second. “I gotta say goodbye to Sarah. I gotta do what I can for Nat. And then I have to go.”

“God, Steve!” Tony grabbed his arm, but Steve was already going again. He didn’t care that it was childish and petulant and damn well beneath him. “What the hell happened to you?” Tony’s voice echoed through the stairwell, increasingly loud and increasingly sharp with unrestrained ire. Steve ignored him. “Huh? What happened to the man who did the right thing no matter what? What happened to the man my old man loved so much that he spent my childhood trying to find him? What happened to the man who taught me how to be a good father?”

That hurt too much. “What, Tony?” he shouted, staring up the way where he’d left the other man. “What do you want from me?”

“Don’t do this!”

“What choice do I have? Sarah… God, you have no idea what I’ve done to her. She can’t sleep. She’s terrified of everything. She’s had her whole life ruined because of this. I can’t bring myself to tell her the truth, not about any of it. Who I am. Who her mother is! And…” He choked on a sob he refused to cry. “Nat’s dying because of me! Don’t you see that? How can you not? I love her, Tony, and she’s dying because she got in the way! No, I have to go. You’re right; it’s the same damn thing over again, and I can’t let innocent people suffer because of what I’ve done and who I am.”

Tony was continuing down the steps. “And you really think you surrendering to HYDRA and Viper is going to fix any of that? You think she’ll stop hurting people if she has you?” And Tony, being Tony, could be vicious when it suited him. “You’re a catch, Cap, but you’re definitely flattering yourself.”

He couldn’t hold back. This felt like it had back then, back when he and Tony had been at each other’s throats in the beginning. When the Avengers had been forming and they’d pushed each other’s buttons and argued constantly over everything, when everything they’d said and done to each other had set them off. Things really had come full circle, like some crazy ride only to end up where they’d started. “Go to hell! You have no idea how this feels!”

“I don’t,” Tony agreed. “But it doesn’t matter. You… Steve, you don’t even see what you’ve become.”

Of course, he did. Natasha had said it. Fury. Sarah. And he wasn’t blind. It hurt. So much. “I don’t see how it matters,” he replied, deflating a bit in sorrow.
“It matters! It matters because you’re not half the man you were. I see that clear as day. I hardly recognized you last night. You were a stranger then and you’re a stranger now. And it’s not the beard or the clothes or the lies you lived or any of that. It’s the way you carry yourself. It’s this look you have. I know it because I’ve seen it before on other people. I’ve seen it on myself. You’re broken and you’ve thrown in the towel. You want the path of least resistance, the easy way out, because you don’t think you can do more. I didn’t think I’d ever see that look on you. Not on you. It hurts like hell.” A shade of grief darkened Tony’s eyes, and Steve had never felt so low. “I stood up to Clint for you, but he’s absolutely right. Who are you to make any choices now? You’re a man who’s been defeated. You’re not a hero.”

How dare Tony say that? “I can’t do this right now!” Steve snapped in fury. He turned to keep going.

Tony wasn’t going to let him, though. Something hard hit him right in the butt, and he lurched forward before stopping. Shocked, he turned around and glared at the other man. “Yeah,” Tony said. “Yeah. I just kicked you in the ass. Deal with it.”

Steve rubbed his butt where it was smarting, glaring balefully. “Seriously?”

Tony stepped closer, making no effort to hide his anger. “You need someone to kick you in the ass. My cross to bear, I guess.” Steve sputtered uselessly. Tony glared right back, disappointed and worried to beat the band. “You’re supposed to be Captain America! You left your shield here, but I never dreamed you’d forget what that means.”

“I couldn’t be Captain America! I had to leave it behind! You said it yourself, Tony. Sarah needed her father more than the world needed Captain America. You said that!”

“I was wrong!”

It was strange to hear Tony admit that. He rarely did. And not only was he admitting it. He was shouting it, all in on it, utterly certain of it. Steve sighed shortly. “I can’t do it. I told Nat. I told Fury. I can’t lead the team. I can’t fight. I can’t do this! You think I look broken, Tony? It’s because I am! And you deserve better than that.” He turned, and again Tony kicked him. “Ow! Damn it, stop!”

“No.” Tony was suddenly right there, pushing into his space and grabbing him by his shoulders as if he was going to physically shake some sense into him since kicking didn’t seem to be working. “No. That’s what you’re forgetting, Steve. What you taught me. When SHIELD found Sarah and brought her to you, we didn’t think you could be both Captain America and her father. None of us could. Not Fury or anyone at SHIELD. Not Clint or Natasha. Not Bruce. Not… Well, Thor did. Go figure.” Steve gave a little smile in spite of himself. “But not me. Especially not me. I was the biggest proponent for you letting SHIELD have her or giving her away or anything that meant you could stay on as our captain. You know that. And I was completely wrong. We all were. You were the only one who knew the truth.”

All his good cheer (the meager amount there was) faded. “What truth?”

Tony squeezed his shoulders. “That you could be both Captain America and a father. A great father. You knew that. Even when you weren’t sure how, you knew it was right and what you needed to do. Steve, do you even realize what you showed me? All of us?”

“Don’t, Tony,” he pleaded. “Don’t placate me. It’s nonsense, and we both know it, and I can’t take it. I can’t with Nat like this. I can’t have you tell me I did the right thing.”
Tony frowned again. “You’re not listening. There is no right thing! There’s just what you do and who you are. You don’t know who you are anymore! You’re not Captain America. You’re not her father even.” Steve tried to pull away again. “No. Listen. You have been hiding out there on your own little island, suffering silently with the weight of the world on your shoulders. And that weight’s been crushing you down. I can see that. And you know what? You have to be better than this.”

It felt like being scolded. The part of Steve that was intact down at his core, that hadn’t been bullied and beaten by depression and fear, knew it was. And that part also knew he deserved it. It was so hard to hear it, though. But Tony was Tony **still**. And Tony didn’t sugarcoat things. He could be harsh, and he could cut to the heart of things with exacting precision and the all the tact of a stampeding elephant. “This is me figuratively kicking you. You need to get past all this horrible stuff that has had you chained to Natasha’s side since you got here. You need to rise above your guilt and the pain and the grief. You need to.” Steve flinched and tried to leave again, but Tony still wouldn’t let him. “You need to **remember** that you’re an Avenger. That you used to **fight**. Because the man that my father wouldn’t stop searching for? He wouldn’t surrender himself to the bad guys like this.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “I’ve done this before, Tony.”

“No, you had a plan before. It was the plan before. Even when it was a stupid plan, it was a plan. And it was part of a strategy to win the fight. Remember that? When you fought because it was the right thing to do?”

“I’m fighting now not to curse you off. Or worse,” Steve snapped. “Now let me go.”

Tony was stubborn, too. “Not until you snap out of this! Damn it, Steve, I just got you back. What’s left of you anyway.” The inventor grabbed him tight and held even tighter. Steve went rigid. It wasn’t just the touch again; for the past year the only person he’d hugged like this, with emotions bared and vulnerable, aside from Sarah was Natasha. It was how this felt **new** and it **shouldn’t have**. “I’m not losing you now. You hear me? Not again. And not like this.” The desperation in Tony’s voice melted away his resistance, and he relaxed in fits and starts. “You’re not running. **Not like this.**”

“Tony, please—”

“I don’t get it. I never do with you. Why aren’t you angry?”

Why? A flood of his own questions raced through his head. Why couldn’t Tony understand? Why didn’t he see this was the only way? Why couldn’t he accept there was no choice? Why didn’t he see… And then Steve stopped. It occurred to him then. Why he felt this way. Why his anger over what HYDRA had done to him and his daughter and the woman he loved and the world he vowed to protect wasn’t enough. Why he’d rather hide than fight. And why he’d rather submit and surrender now than standing up. “I am,” he finally admitted. His voice shook. “I… I’m so damn angry, Tony. Every night I spent out there, I thought about it. I couldn’t get Viper and what she’s done out of my head. It hurt so much and there was no one to help me through it. You have no idea how many times I thought about making her pay for what she’s done. But… No matter how much I hate her, I can’t fight her.” Tony’s face fractured in confusion as he pulled back. Steve felt his eyes stinging. “She’s Sarah’s mother. Her mother. I can’t hurt her. I can’t kill her. I don’t even know if I can make myself raise my hand to her. Sarah doesn’t understand. I can’t even explain it to her. God, how could I do that? How could I tell her who her mother is? She loves Nat and wants her, but that doesn’t change the truth. There’s a part of her inside of Sarah, and I can’t destroy that.”

Tony’s expression softened. “So you’d rather sacrifice yourself than face that truth? Steve, come
Steve shook his head. “That’s not—”

“Sure, it’s not,” Tony said knowingly. He clasped Steve’s face in his hands and made him look at him. “You’re not alone now. Not anymore. We’re going to get through this. We’re going to figure it out together. If we have to fight her and you can’t do it, fine. We’ll find a way to make this right, Steve. You’re not alone.”

Tony kept repeating that. It was comforting to hear it, and maybe it could be true. Maybe. That sense of shame and driving horror was stronger, though. “If I don’t surrender myself, she’ll kill people. You heard it, Tony. I can’t let that happen.”

“So it won’t,” Tony replied firmly. “You’ll go. But you are not going alone. I’m coming with you.”

“No. You can’t.” Steve pulled away. “No, Tony. I can’t let you do that!”

“What do I have to say to get you to listen? At least that hasn’t changed much.” Tony grabbed him again. “I let you leave before. I’m not letting you leave again.”

“Pepper’s pregnant,” Steve argued. “You can’t just—”

“And you have a four year-old. And, yes, we can. We have to. We’re Avengers.” Steve opened his mouth to argue further, but Tony shook his head and pushed him back lightly. “Seriously? This is what you fight for? Bearing it all yourself? Shut it, Rogers. I don’t care how stubborn you are. This is a battle you will lose.” Steve couldn’t help just a bit of a smile curling his lips. “So go get your stuff. Your uniform is exactly where it always was.” My uniform. A cold sense of unworthiness washed over him, and his brain stalled on that for a moment. But it didn’t last. Something warm and true was coming on its heels. Something he hadn’t felt in a while. Strength.

“Get changed. Say goodbye to Tash and goodbye to Sarah. I’ll meet you down in the infirmary. Then we’ll take the jet. We’re going to take a stand.”

Take a stand.

I can do this.

Steve ran back to his suite. Like everything else, this was coming home but not. Everything was the same but different. The same furniture. The same things. The same light and shadows. But different because he was different. He tried not to think, not to doubt, as he raced past Sarah’s room (which was exactly as it had been when they left, like Tony and Pepper hadn’t been able to even entertain the thought of changing it) to his bedroom. Sure enough, in one of the adjoining rooms, his uniform hung in its alcove. Tony had obviously redesigned it. It was more blue than he remembered, the red and white embellishments subtler. His shield wasn’t there, though. Natasha had it.
He didn’t let himself focus on that. Instead he threw himself into the shower, finally washing off the mud and dried blood and sweat from his encounter with the assassin last night. There was no time, and he felt the press of every second against his back as he dried himself and stood in front of the vanity in his suite. One look in the mirror, though, made him pause. His face was pale, covered in fading cuts and bruises, and… You’re a stranger.

No. He fished in the drawers of the vanity for his razor. A few minutes later, he stared at his clean shaven face. His reflection seemed even more like a stranger now, but that was only because he’d forgotten what he used to look like. Who he used to be. He brushed his hand over his jaw, breathed through a moment or two, and went to get dressed.

Needless to say it felt strange putting the uniform back on. After wearing it in some form or another for the better part of the last decade, it was remarkable how quickly he’d forgotten what it felt like. It wasn’t just the texture of the leather and Kevlar and padding against his skin. It was what it meant. This uniform moved a little more stiffly than he recalled, and the gloves went further up his arms and were equipped with some sort of magnetic system, likely to pull his shield back to him. He had to admit he liked that and he liked the suit in general. He liked how it felt. This more than anything was akin to coming home.

But there was more he had to do. He grabbed his helmet and sprinted from his suite, heading a floor down to Natasha’s. “JARVIS,” he called as he ran along the corridor. “Can you let me in?”

“That locks on the doors released, and Steve hesitated only a second before heading inside. He actually hadn’t been here before. Something about Natasha had always seemed forbidden when they’d only been friends and teammates. Truth be told, a new sense of guilt came over him for treading in here uninvited. It didn’t matter that she loved him, that they’d made love, that she wanted to marry him. He was uninvited. There was no time for that, either. “Where…”

“In her bedroom closet, sir,” JARVIS responded. Steve jerked into fast, long strides, light on his feet like he was trespassing less by being fleet. He found her bedroom, her bed immaculately made and everything clean and well organized. He tried not to look at her bed, tried not to imagine her there so many nights without him or her there with him, a fantasy he couldn’t bear to have. And he couldn’t bear to look – but he did – at the pictures on the bedside table. There were only two. They were from one of her trips to Oregon a couple months ago at the beginning of summer. Steve had always been terrified of her taking any pictures of them on her phone, and even though that had probably been ridiculous, she’d obliged him. They’d taken Sarah to the mall that weekend, though, and there was one of those photobooths there that printed the pictures right on the spot. He’d been nervous about that, too, but this time he’d been overruled by his overexcited daughter and his tender yet insistent girlfriend. Natasha and Sarah had gone in first, smiling like loons, hugging, giggling, producing a strip of adorable pictures that Natasha had framed. The other strip was all three of them, Steve with both of them on his lap. He remembered it so clearly, being so afraid of letting go and letting his guard down even for a second. But once he had, it had felt so good. Making goofy faces. Laughing. Grinning.

At the moment, this was all there was to prove he and Natasha were in love. That they’d been a family.

His grief was overrun by his anger, and like Tony said, he let that win. Gritting his teeth, he went to her closet and found his shield. Natasha had obviously taken care of it. It had been repainted, polished, the scars from the battle against HYDRA and Deathlok long erased with tender, maybe even obsessive, care. Natasha had promised, after all, to keep it safe. And she had. He stared at it a moment, and once more that feeling of utter inadequacy left him reeling. I’m Captain America. He clenched his hand into a fist, and the leather of his glove cracked and snapped as he did. I’m
Captain America. You don’t get to hurt my friends, my daughter, the woman I love. You don’t get to destroy me. I’m Captain America.

I won’t let you win.

He took a deep breath. Then he reached down and pulled the shield up away from the wall. It rattled with its familiar hum, that sound washing over him. It felt so good in his hands, powerful and true. Steve let go of the breath he’d taken and slid the shield onto his back.

Then he went back to the infirmary. For the first time in a year, his mind was blank, empty save for his purpose. He had the courage and fortitude to keep it that way. His boots were firm and steady on the floor as he walked down the corridor and into Natasha’s room.

It was empty save for her. She lay exactly as she had when he’d left her not long ago. The same.

He wasn’t, though.

Once more the grief threatened. It was overwhelming, the maelstrom of thoughts in his head. It’s my fault. She’s dying because of me. It’s my fault and she’s going to die and I can’t I can’t I can’t—

I have to.

His feet had seemingly been rooted to the floor as he’d stood there and suffered with that. His eyes were committing this, how ruined she was, to memory without his even realizing. But he didn’t let those memories win. Instead, he thought back to those pictures, to all the love and joy. To the fun times they’d had amidst the depression and darkness. To the way Natasha had looked when she’d said yes to his proposal. To the way she’d looked when they’d made love. To the way she was with Sarah, all fiery beauty and purpose that she’d never known she’d had. That was what this was about.

I have to fight for you.

A tear tracked its way down Steve’s face as he finally freed himself and crossed the room. He shuddered against another sigh, dropping to his knees beside her bed. Then he took her hand in his own. “I have to go,” he said. In the silence, that sounded thunderous. He swallowed, struggling to keep going. “I have to stop her, Nat. I have to make it right. I can’t let her hurt you or hurt Sarah. I can’t let her hurt anyone else.” He closed his eyes, clinging to those sweet, precious memories again. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry! I’m going to make it right. I promise. I promise!” He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the dry, bruised skin. He swept his thumb over where the ring should have been. “And I promise I’m going to get it back. All of it. She’s not going to ruin what we have. She’s not taking us. When… When this is over and she’s gone and you’re better, we’re going to stay right here, where we’re supposed to be. We’re going to get married. Everyone’s going to be there. No running or hiding or being afraid. You’re going to be Captain America’s wife and Sarah’s mother and everything’s going to be fine. You just…” His voice wavered, and he closed his eyes. “You just have to keep fighting. Don’t give up. Please, Nat. Please don’t give up. Please. I’ll come back to you, and you’ll come back to me, and… Everything’s going to be fine. I know it. You’re so strong. Stronger than I’ve ever been. Braver, too. So you just keep fighting.”

Keep fighting for me.

He lingered there for as long as he could. It wasn’t much, but he simply couldn’t let go, clinging to this moment, this prayer. He did, though, eventually. He stood. He breathed. Then he kissed her hand again and set it to the bed. There was the chance that he might come back and she’d be… He wasn’t going to think about it. For the first time in a year, he forced himself to have faith, only that
and nothing more. Faith and love. He leaned down, gently sweeping his fingers through her hair, before pressing his lips gently to her forehead. “I love you, Nat.”

He walked away. It was hard, but he did. On his way out the door, he passed Coulson and Simmons who were clearly just returning from upstairs. The agents looked flabbergasted at his sudden change in appearance, though Coulson recovered quickly and seemed… relieved. “Captain,” he greeted softly.

Steve gave a firm nod. “That serum you talked about before… Do whatever it takes. Give it to her.”

A brief expression of surprise crossed Coulson’s face. “Are you sure?”

He was trying to be. This was the first time in months he felt like he could be. “If there’s anything I know about Natasha it’s that she doesn’t quit. She doesn’t run. I think… I know she’d rather have the chance to fight.”

Coulson stared at him a moment, appraising him evenly. Then he nodded. “Alright, Cap. I’ll do what I can. Stark said you’re leaving?” Steve stood a little straighter and nodded. “He gave me Doctor Banner’s contact information. I’ll try to get him here as soon as possible.”

Simmons smiled at Steve, a sweet, unabashedly happy thing. “I promise you, Captain Rogers, I’ll do everything I can to figure it out. With Doctor Banner’s help, I’m sure we can make this work. Agent Romanoff will be okay. I know she will be.” Coulson grabbed Simmons’ arm not very subtly, and she flushed with embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Steve assured. He managed a small smile, for what it was worth. “I need to go now. There’s no time.”

Coulson stepped out of his way. Steve headed down the hallway to where he’d left Sarah. “For what it’s worth, it’s good to see you like this.” Coulson’s voice gave him pause, and he turned to regard the other man. Coulson gave a little smile. Again it was relieved. Maybe even a little proud. After all, his idol was pulling himself together right in front of his eyes. Living up to the legend. That meant something. “Welcome back.”

Steve gave him another little nod. “Take care of my family, Agent Coulson.” Coulson nodded, too.

Steve continued on his way. Down the hall a little further he could hear Pepper talking to Tony. He tried not to pay attention to the words, but he couldn’t help but catch a few. She was upset, struggling to be brave. So was he. There was an air of calmness to their tones that seemed very brittle. Steve turned away and stepped inside the other room. The lights had been dimmed and the blinds drawn against the fading daylight. Belle lifted up her head, and her tail immediately started wagging. Steve couldn’t help another smile, despite how grave the situation was, when she stood up and came over to lick his hand. He dropped down in front of her, petting and petting, running his fingers through her soft fur and letting her slobber all over his face. Obviously she still recognized him. “You take care of her,” he implored softly. “Hear me, girl? We’ve been through some tough stuff before, but this is the toughest of it all. I’m counting on you.” She licked his face more, and he hugged her a moment. Maybe it was stupid and silly, but he felt better for it.

He stood and saw Sarah was still sleeping. She was so peaceful that he almost lost his nerve. He could have walked away, let her be, left Pepper to explain. But that wasn’t right. Instead, he crouched at the bedside. “Sarah,” he finally said, his voice soft, his touch gentle. That wasn’t enough to rouse her so he tried again. “Sarah. Wake up, honey.”
Her eyes fluttered open, hazy with a deep, pleasant slumber, but she blinked it away quickly enough and focused on him. “Daddy?”

He smiled broadly. “Yeah, honey. It’s me.”

She frowned. “You don’t look right. And you shaved.”

He rubbed his jaw a little. “Yeah. It was time.”

Sarah didn’t know what to make of that, staring at him, at the uniform, at the way he looked now. And she was so smart. *So smart.* “Daddy…” Her eyes welled with tears. “You’re leaving?”

Steve rose to sit on the bed. He set his shield on the foot of it. She stared at it, her gaze wide and terrified. “Just for a little bit. The bad people who hurt us, who chased us back at the airport… I have to go and stop them.”

He didn’t know if he could do this if she started crying. She was on the verge, eyes laden with wetness at this point, white as a sheet and shaking with the dawning realization. And why should he expect her to be okay? After everything that had happened? After everything through which she’d suffered? “Sarah.” He opened his arms to her, and she came right away. Holding her tight, he rubbed his hand up and down her back. It was hard to stay strong, but he knew he had to. And why should he expect her to be okay? After everything that had happened? After everything through which she’d suffered? “Sarah.” He opened his arms to her, and she came right away. Holding her tight, he rubbed his hand up and down her back. It was hard to stay strong, but he knew he had to. Things were clearer now. Natasha was right. His depression and Sarah’s anxiety and their loneliness compounding and back-feeding on each other in a vicious, miserable circle… He had let it get the best of him. This was another thing he’d forgotten. He had the power to show her it was going to be okay. He’d known that before Viper, that a parent’s love and a parent’s reaction to fear and a parent’s steadfast serenity shaped a child’s perception of the world. “Don’t cry. It’s going to be okay. I mean it. We’re home. We’re safe here. You know that, right? Everything’s fine.”

“You know that?” she whimpered into his neck.

“’Course I do,” he answered immediately. “You see this… star-spangled getup I got on?” He felt her nod against him. Her little hand brushed over the star on his chest, tentative at first but then firmer and more trusting. “This ridiculous outfit means I am absolutely, one-hundred percent telling you the truth. ’Cause you know something?” He pulled her away and looked in her eyes. “I told you not to tell anyone before because it was dangerous, but here… Your dad’s Captain America. You can say it. You can see it.” *I can say it and see it. And it’s true. It is.* He took a deep breath and smiled. “I’m Captain America, baby girl. And I’m always honest.”

Her cheeks were wet, but when he carefully lifted her face, she was smiling, too, and looking at him in wonder. “You’re Captain America?”

“Yeah.”

“And Uncle Tony’s Iron Man.”

He was a bit surprised she remembered so much. “You bet.” She nodded slowly, like she was digesting this and accepting it. “And we’re going to protect you. And Natasha. Okay? So you stay here with Pepper. I’ll be back, and everything’s going to be fine. I know it.”

Sarah watched him, and he feared it wasn’t enough. But she nodded. He slid off the bed and lifted her into his embrace, breathing deeply of her and holding her tight. She clung to him, arms around his neck and knees tight to his chest, as he smoothed down her hair and kissed her forehead over and over again. “It’s going to be fine,” he promised again. He couldn’t promise it enough, even if he wasn’t sure. It felt good to say it, even if it was a lie. “It’s all going to be fine.”
She leaned back finally, looked him straight in the eye, and softly said, “Okay, Daddy.”

Maybe it wasn’t a lie at all. “Okay.”

Sarah cried when he left her a few minutes later, of course. He couldn’t expect otherwise. She was only four, and maybe she was remembering more than he thought she would of this place and the people who used to be her family, but it was still strange and new. She let him go, though. She didn’t scream. She didn’t cling to him, refusing to release him. She stood with Pepper, tears silently streaming down her face, as Steve and Tony walked away.

God, it hurt.

But he could do this. He had to. For her. For Natasha. For Clint and Bruce and Thor. For Pepper and Tony. For the people of the world who needed him. Most of all, for himself.

When they were inside the lift heading up to the Tower’s jetpad, he finally wavered. Tony was there to catch him. “You’re doing the best you can,” he promised, an arm around Steve’s shoulders. “When this is done, we’re going on vacation. I still owe Sarah a trip to Disneyworld.” Steve gave a hoarse laugh, and Tony smiled. He didn’t say anything more, didn’t offer anything else, but that was enough, however placating it might be. Steve breathed through the pain, feeling himself getting stronger and more determined. By the time the elevator reached the top of the Tower, he was ready.

The two Avengers quickly made their way through the hallways above. Tony narrowed his eyes. “J?”

“Incoming, sir.”

Neither of them missed a step as Iron Man flew through the Tower to encase its owner. Red and gold shone in the dying daylight while the suit came into position. It was seamless and remarkable. By the time they reached the quinjet, Tony was fully armored save for his helmet, which he carried under his arm.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes,” he said. “Let’s get there before Viper gets antsy and pulls the trigger.”

“You actually have a plan?” Steve asked, darting a glance at his friend as JARVIS remotely powered up the jet. The back ramp descended with a hydraulic hiss. “Or was this just some fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants attempt to get me to put the suit on?”

Tony smiled despite the implication. “Might have been.”

Steve shook his head fondly. “Still can’t believe you actually kicked my ass.”

“Worked, didn’t it?”

Yeah. It did.

They walked up into the jet only to find that Clint was already there in the pilot’s seat, flipping on switches and getting the aircraft ready to fly. Steve and Tony stopped, surprised. “What?” the archer said, glancing over his shoulder before going back to his work. “Did you two idiots honestly think you were going to leave without me?”

Another rough laugh burst out of Steve, his heart swelling just a bit. “Avengers assemble?” Tony quipped, clasping his shoulder again before heading up to finish the flight prep. Steve watched them. The memories threatened again. The good ones and the bad. And the worries and the
doubts. The pain. The fear of facing Viper. The anger and the guilt. But he pushed it all back, drove it all away from the here and now. He was a soldier on a mission.

“Thanks, Steve,” Clint said after a moment. His voice was soft, all of the ire and resentment from before gone from it. There was only affection and relief and gratitude. “Thanks for doing the right thing. I know how hard it was.”

He didn’t know if Clint was referring to giving Natasha the serum or picking the shield up again. And it didn’t matter. “You’re welcome.”

Clint looked to him again, poised for take-off. He smiled. “Give the order, Cap.”

*I can do this.* “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Much gratitude to the amazing [vbprodz](https://www.tumblr.com/) for this gorgeous piece of artwork:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Is it wrong that my eyes go right to his muscly arm? :-P
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: There is going to be some discussion of some... really immoral things that happened to both Bucky and Steve in this chapter and the next couple to come. Nothing is described in detail, but, well, if you are following along, Sarah really couldn't have come into being without some nonconsensual DNA collection going on from Steve on the part of HYDRA. This chapter and the ones following really delve into the heart of that, which has gone fairly well unanswered and has been kind of brushed under the rug since the first chapters of this series. Lastly, there is some nonconsensual touching/kissing in this chapter and will be some in the next few as well. Nothing is graphic or what I would call overly disturbing (or even exceeding the rating), but please read at your own discretion.

At any rate, enjoy! There's a lot going on here. Poor Steve. This is a bad one for him...

By the time Clint set the quinjet down at the coordinates, Steve decided to let himself be angry. He had lived his life trying not to do that. No matter how things had turned, how cruel life had been, he hadn’t succumbed to his emotions. Not when the bullies had beaten him down. Not when his poor health had made him both a burden to his mother and a social pariah. Not when his mother had died or when he’d lost Peggy. Not when he’d woken up seventy years in the future. And not even when he’d discovered that his DNA had been stolen and someone had used it to genetically engineer a child. Not even then. He never saw the sense in it. Did getting upset help? He never thought so. It wasted time, wasted energy. Turned the mind from a tool into a burden. Even when Ward had been at their mercy after the ex-SHIELD agent had kidnapped Sarah, he’d kept his cool, kept himself calm. He hadn’t given in to the urge to hurt him to get the answers he’d needed. Even then. What good did anger do?

In fact, the only time he’d been angry – really angry, really thrown himself into the haze of hatred and a vicious drive for vengeance – had been when Bucky had died. He’d buried himself in the mission then, gone after Johann Schmidt and his men with everything he’d had. He’d let his fury power him, drive him, push him like never before. Bucky had deserved that, him putting a stop the Red Skull and HYDRA, and he’d made sure it got done. Sometimes since then... Well, he wondered once or twice if he would have been so willing to sacrifice himself if Bucky hadn’t fallen just days before. He tried not to think about that, hadn’t so much in recent years since Sarah had come into his life. He had so many good things in the future: Tony and the rest of the Avengers, Sarah of course, and Natasha. But he wondered because that was the last time he’d felt truly lost, truly reckless. Truly enraged.

Until now.

What Viper had done to him, to his friends, to his daughter and the woman he loved... Maybe Tony was right. Now was the time to get angry, to make her pay. He was tired of running, tired of despair, tired of hating and fearing from afar. That wasn’t who he was. It was time to remind this witch of that.

Clint gave a long, tense breath as he finished landing the jet. He flipped switches overhead, and the
powerful whir of the aircraft’s engines began to quiet. He’d put them down fairly far from the coordinates, although Viper knew they were coming in all likelihood. Still, there wasn’t any sign of anyone, the broad expanse of an empty field ahead of them. They were in northern New Jersey, not far from the Meadowlands, and it was extremely quiet around them. Long, fall grasses covered the open area, a few trees here and there interrupting the view that was turning golden from the setting sun. This was far enough away from the major commercial areas that they wouldn’t be noticed or bothered. The perfect place to have a brawl. Or to surrender. Steve still wasn’t sure which.

And he wasn’t the only one. “We actually have a plan here?” Clint asked as he looked back at his friends. “Note that I am onboard with anything that features beating Viper down into nothing and no one.”

Steve sighed and forced himself to think beyond his anger. He put his shield onto his right arm, narrowing his eyes as he swept them over the field through the cockpit windshield. “Fight. Beyond that, I don’t know.”

“You’re not surrendering yourself?” Clint clarified.

Steve couldn’t read his tone (or his expression) enough to discern what sort of answer the archer wanted. “Not unless it’s the only choice.”

Clint nodded. Tony put on his helmet. “Let’s make sure it’s not,” he said.

Together the three of them exited the jet. They walked out into the crisp evening air, treading through the tall grasses, tense and on alert. There was nothing, just the sound of the wind brushing through the reeds. No one around for miles. Steve gritted his teeth, felt that dark anger pulse inside him. She knew he’d come. Of course she knew that. She’d made certain of it with her threats. So why the theatrics? Why the cat and mouse game? He felt like he was food, prey, and she was playing with him, now more than ever. He’d never hated someone quite like this before.

Eventually they reached the middle of the field. “These are the coordinates,” Tony declared, turning around. Steve knew with Iron Man’s systems Tony could detect far more than even he could with his enhanced senses. Tony turned around slowly and appraised their silent surroundings. Then he raised and dropped his hands in a show of exasperated helplessness. “Someone want to give us a clue here?”

Clint practically growled. “I’ve about had it with this,” he seethed. He had an arrow nocked and his bow was held loose but ready, his quick eyes devouring the field with a series of sharp glances. “What’s the deal?”

The air was taut between them as seconds became minutes. Steve ground his teeth together, every muscle in his body poised for the fight, his heart pounding against his sternum. He had no patience for this. If she’d led them out here, away from Natasha and Sarah for nothing… “We’ve got incoming,” Tony finally declared.

Steve whirled, caught between relief and a jolt of cold apprehension. “Where?”

“Aircraft coming from the south. ETA: thirty seconds.” Iron Man regarded him with that perpetually tense glare of his. “Steve?”

He supposed they had a chance to change their minds, a chance to flee and return to the Tower. But what would be the point? “Close ranks,” he said, and the two other men did, pressing very near to Steve’s side. “Hold fire until I say.”
“Right,” Clint said, his voice a promise of wrath.

Tony nodded, the soft whir of Iron Man’s mechanics comforting. “Got it. If she wants you, she’s gotta go through us.” That’s what I’m afraid of. Steve didn’t say that, though, because it was too late now. Clint and Tony were there, closing ranks, and they were going to protect him. If he’d never run in the first place, maybe this was how things would have gone. Maybe it would have been better. Here and now, with the dark blur of the helicopter zooming quickly closer, wondering that served no point. They were here with them, and he had to trust it was for the best.

The helicopter wasn’t a helicopter at all but a SHIELD quinjet. That was definitely disconcerting. Steve watched as the jet circled over them, the roar of its rotors loud in the evening, the grasses of the field waving wildly as the aircraft descended. It set down not far away. Steve shared a concerned look with Tony, but his friend was watching the jet, stern and steadfast. The rear of the quinjet opened with a hydraulic hiss, and out came their enemy.

Steve hadn’t seen Viper in more than a year, but she looked exactly as he remembered her. She was just as stunningly gorgeous as she had been when he’d first seen her, when she’d fooled him into lowering his guard by pretending to be an innocent girl enamored with him on a seemingly innocuous date. Her skin was clear, perfect, and milky. Dark hair, lush and full, cascaded down her shoulders and back. She wore a cat suit that was black and green leather, and on her shoulders the cephalopod of HYDRA was woven into the fabric with a bloody red thread. Striking blue eyes took in the scene before settling on him. She smiled, her pink lips twisting just a bit in a feral smirk. “Good to see you, Captain. I knew if I called the right way, you’d finally come to me.”

Steve tried not to think about that, about the innocents dead because of this monster, about Natasha fighting for her life. “I’m here,” he returned evenly. “What do you want?”

Viper’s eyes darted to Clint and Tony. “Is this show of power meant to intimidate me? All that remains of the Avengers. The god’s gone home. The monster’s run off to hide.” That little smirk grew larger. Cruel. “And poor, poor Black Widow. Is she still alive?”

Steve stiffened, and Clint jerked beside him. He raised his bow in one swift motion, targeting the woman with deadly precision. “Answer the damn question,” he snarled. “What do you want?”

Her eyes flicked to the archer. “You shouldn’t have come with him,” she warned. She tsked, clucking her tongue and shaking her head in a light reprimand. “He’s a marked man, Agent Barton.”

“If you think you’re taking him, you got another think coming,” Clint returned icily. He pressed closer to Steve. It was almost as if all the tension of the last day had vanished, had never been there at all.

Viper knew better, though. “You’re so willing to stand by him now, now after he abandoned you and let your team fall apart, after his love affair with your best friend nearly cost her her life.” She practically spat that — love affair — and the jealousy in her eyes was shocking for how fierce and frightening it was. “He was fool to think he could escape HYDRA. And he was a fool for thinking he could love anyone else aside from me. He belongs to me.”

“He’s standing right here,” Tony snapped. “I think he can speak for himself.”

Viper stared right at him. It felt like a long time coming, this moment, even if he’d tried to convince himself for months it was better to hide. He was starting to see that Tony was right. Fury was right. Natasha was right. He couldn’t run from who he was. And she was right, too. He couldn’t run from her. “You’re insane,” he said firmly, stuffing all of his emotions down deep. He wouldn’t give this witch the pleasure of seeing how much he was hurting. “I’m not yours. I never have been.”
“We have a child,” Viper reminded, as if Steve (or anyone else) could forget. “Can Black Widow give you that?”

Steve stiffened. “Sarah might share some of your DNA, but you’re not her mother!”

She smiled back, a sly, cruel twist of her lips that was meant to demean. “I am,” she replied. “And that, those three, little words – ‘I’m her mother’… That was enough to scare the great and powerful Captain America into dropping his mighty shield and running away.” She took a step closer, bold and undaunted despite the three Avengers staring at her. Despite the whine of the repulsors in Tony’s palms as he raised his hands and the deadly tip of Clint’s arrow tight to the arc of his bow.

“You think you can just pick up where you left off? Come back to what you were? You can’t come back, Steve. I took you right there, right at the Sandbox when I told you the truth.” That cut down into his heart, to think that everything he’d done to stay away from her, to keep Sarah safe, really meant nothing. It did, considering where they were now. “You couldn’t run from me. It was only a matter of time.”

“Why do all this?” he demanded. “Why wait? If you knew where I was, why not just take me? You had someone right there, watching all this time, and you could have ended it! Why?”

She was unimpressed by his anger, by the damage all those long, fearful nights alone had done to him. “We weren’t ready.” That was said so simply, but it sounded nothing but ominous. HYDRA’s plot. Whatever it was, it was happening. “But it wasn’t just that. Letting you languish out there wore you down, and it destroyed the Avengers. Your pathetic team fell apart without you there to lead it.” Tony stiffened. Steve felt it, despite the rigidity of Iron Man’s armor pressed close to his flank. Viper noticed, too. She smiled cruelly. “Face it, Stark. You’re not cut out to be the hero.”

That was too much for Tony. “Okay, you know what? Shut the hell up. Are we going to throw down here? Because I’ve about had it with you and all your HYDRA buddies dragging us around. Let’s finish it.”

“It’s already finished,” Viper replied. “The only question left is how many more of you Steve wants to take down with him.” Cold fear settled in the pit of Steve’s stomach, and that butting against the fiery anger pumping through his body made for a miserable wave of anxiety, of cold sweat and blood pounding between his ears. “How about, Steve? I told you to surrender and save the innocents endangered by your freedom. Are you ready to do that?” That hatred grew stronger and tighter inside him, squeezing his heart, and all he could see was Natasha lying lifeless in that hospital bed. Sarah’s tear-streaked face. “Are you ready to put a stop to this? To come to where you belong? Erskine’s serum was meant to be HYDRA’s and HYDRA’s alone. You are part of our family.” She smiled, raised her left hand. “See?”

Natasha’s engagement ring, simple glittering gold and sparkling diamond in the sunset… It was right on Viper’s finger. And when he looked further, he saw a plain gray chain about her neck, descending down the V of her cat suit. His dog tags.

Nothing could describe the depths of the betrayal he felt. The rage. It was enveloping, encompassing, devouring. He couldn’t do much more than stare for a couple of seemingly infinite seconds, unable to process, unable to accept. He’d known Viper had ordered the attack on Natasha. He’d known she was the reason the woman he loved was fighting for her life. But this? This was plain, old fashioned, unrepentant jealousy. “You…” He couldn’t find the words. “You vindictive–”

“Don’t say something you might regret,” Viper warned.
It was too damn late for that. Suddenly he was moving without thinking, crossing the field between them in a few huge strides. Other things were happening in the periphery. More men were pouring from the shadows in the back of the quinjet. SHIELD’s former STRIKE Team. HYDRA’s now. Probably always had been. It was Rumlow and Rollins, men with whom he’d worked back before everything had fallen apart. Traitors who apparently hadn’t gone down with the Sandbox last year when the Avengers had raided it. And with them was the assassin, dressed in black with his metallic arm uncovered, wearing the black face mask again. He was a walking armory, guns on his back and holstered on his hip and knives strapped to his combat vest. One of the handguns he yanked free of its place on his thigh and unceremoniously jabbed it into Steve’s temple, just as he grabbed Viper’s left wrist and twisted, sliding the sharp edge of his shield right up to her throat. Undaunted by the gun, he bore down on the slighter woman. “What is it you think is going to happen?” he demanded. “Huh? What do you think? That I’m going to love you? That we’ll be together? That this is some sort of epic romance?”

Viper smiled almost sweetly, completely uncaring that his shield was mere centimeters from crushing her throat. “Yes.”

Steve couldn’t contain his rage. “Is that all this is? Pull off all the HYDRA rhetoric, and it’s all about your obsession with me?” She grinned more somehow, sleek and taunting. Infuriated, he leaned closer, even as the STRIKE Team surrounded them and aimed their rifles at Tony and Clint, even with that gun pressing deeper into his skin. “You’re insane. Sick. It’s never going to happen! You hear me? Never!”

With her other hand she very boldly reached up and grasped the edge of his shield before pushing it back from her neck. “You think that?”

“I know that,” he seethed, glaring at her. “I know that.”

That smirk never faltered. Steve had stared down some of the world’s worst in terms of evil, and he knew he could be intimidating. But she was completely unfazed. “You know what I know, Steve?” She reached up that hand. Steve tightened his grip on her wrist hard enough that he knew it had to hurt. Still, she didn’t stop, didn’t even doubt as she reached up to slide her hand down his cheek. She stepped closer and dropped her voice to a sultry whisper. “There’s no way in hell I was ever going to let you marry her.”

That was it. Steve gave a cry of deep, unmitigated fury and twisted. His attack took the assassin by surprise, and he was able to move fast enough to kick him back before he was shot. The bullet glanced Steve’s shoulder as the assassin reeled back. Steve followed him, delivering a rapid punch strong enough to break bones right into the man’s solar plexus. Vaguely he could hear the situation dissolve into chaos around him, Tony shouting and Iron Man’s repulsors firing. Vaguely he could see out of the corner of his ear that Clint was running, unleashing arrow after arrow at the STRIKE Team, and they were returning fire with bullets ripping into the grass and shattering the cool calm of the quiet fall evening. But everything he had was focused on this man, this man who’d pumped bullet after bullet into Natasha’s body, this man who’d practically taken her life and left her a shell with little hope to ever open her eyes again. This tool of HYDRA who’d taken from him the only woman he’d ever love on the orders of a jealous, evil wretch. All that anger came surging forth, and he fought.

It was a blur of instinct, of fast kicks and faster punches, of lightning-quick reflexes and counters and blocks. Steve let his reservations go completely, perhaps for the first time since he’d fought the Red Skull on the bridge of the Valkyrie. He’d trained himself not long after first receiving the serum to hold back when fighting to varying extents depending on his opponent. His enhanced strength could destroy an average human, and he was always mindful of that, even when confronting his enemies.
However, this was no average human. Memories from the fight the night before raced through his head, guiding him now. His adversary was ferocious, cold, and mechanical. Ruthless. But he was on the defensive now, taking more and more steps to retreat as Steve pushed him back. He could be ruthless, too. He could be against the man who’d hurt Natasha like this.

So he was. He wielded his shield like a weapon, slamming it mercilessly into the assassin’s chest. The other man skidded back, obviously uncertain as to his opponent’s sudden change in demeanor. Last night Steve had been more cautious, more desperate and frightened, more panicked. Now, with the fire of hatred thrumming in his veins, he was vicious, pounding, driving. The assassin countered, changed his attack style, drew knives and wrestled for guns, but it wasn’t enough. Steve had knocked him off his game, and it showed in his movements. It showed as he delivered his own strikes just a bit too slowly, with not enough power or control to be effective. It showed in his blades scraping across vibranium and his guns being knocked from his hands. All around them a battle was raging between HYDRA and the rest of the Avengers, but Steve couldn’t stop. He couldn’t help. This anger was free now, and it was hungry, thirsting, nearly insatiable. A red haze had devoured him. He couldn’t focus on anything other than this man and what he’d done.

A particularly hard punch from him knocked the assassin back. The man hopped, though, and spun, delivering a roundhouse kick that landed and landed hard. Steve dropped, stunned and breathless from the boot hitting his exposed midriff. The assassin reached down for him into the grass, but Steve rolled, flipped to his feet, and got him about the neck. He caught glimpses of Iron Man, bright repulsor blasts filling the field as he stood protectively between Clint and the STRIKE Team. There was no cover out here, which had effectively grounded Tony because if he went airborne, Clint would be completely exposed to the dozens of rifles spitting bullets at them. The sound of them striking Iron Man’s armor was deafening, as was the concussive shudder of a grenade tossed toward the two friends. Steve ground his teeth together harder and held tighter, trying to choke the other man into unconsciousness so he could help his friends. The assassin was shuddering, struggling, a bit more maniacal in his efforts, a bit more unhinged. Even still, Steve refused to let go, throwing all his weight into strangling his opponent, clenching his arm firmer. Squirming violently, the assassin grabbed his hand and tried to wrench it away, metal fingers curling tightly enough into Steve’s wrist to hurt despite the padding of his suit and the hardness of his bones. The man gurgled, coughed, and then choked, losing consciousness, and Steve just pushed him down harder, held on firmer. He’d squeeze the life out of him if he had to.

Sheer desperation finally had the assassin whipping his head back. It smashed into Steve’s chin with bruising, surprising force. Steve’s teeth dug viciously into his tongue, and warm, bitter blood filled his mouth. He pulled back, trying to take the man with him, but he’d lost his grip enough that his arm slipped up. It caught on something – the assassin’s face mask – before Steve was forced to let go completely. Freed, his opponent whirled, and the metal fist cracked right across his face. Steve spun through the air, his shield flying into the grass. He hit the ground hard, rolling instinctively despite the pain radiating through his neck and head, and turned to look up.

The assassin stood. The mask had fallen away, revealing the other man’s face. An unshaven jaw and slightly cleft chin. Eyes that seemed grayer and wider. The unwashed brown hair in strings around his cheeks. That face. All the fight left Steve on a single breath, and the sky crashed down and the earth seemed to shake even though nothing was moving at all. Not his mind. Not his heart in his chest. Nothing. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be! “Bucky?” he asked.

The assassin’s eyes were disturbingly blank. “Who the hell is Bucky?”

Steve didn’t even have a chance to process that before something bit harshly into his right calf. On some level he knew he’d been shot, could feel the pain and the blood, but it didn’t really sink in, not
even as his balance was destroyed and he was abruptly tackled. The other man – *Bucky!* – had
obviously recovered far faster than he had from the shock, and now he was crushed down into the
glass, blood and dirt mixing on his lips. Bucky was absolutely merciless, driving that metal fist into
his side a couple of times. Vicious, violent punches that bruised or maybe even cracked ribs. The
pain from this was worse, enough to send paralyzing bolts up and down his torso, and the next thing
he knew, both of his arms were wrenched behind him. A knee was wedged into his spine, wedged
hard, and those damn magnetic cuffs were back around his wrists again. *No, no, no!* “Bucky?” he
gasped, sputtering. “Bucky, it’s Steve! Stop! It’s Steve!” Uncaringly Bucky secured his bonds.
Then he was hauling him to his knees, shoving him forward in the grass.

Viper was there, towering over him with her arms folded across her chest. She was utterly
nonchalant despite the battle raging around her. “What’s the matter, Cap?” she sneered. “You look
like you’ve seen a ghost.”

It was too late to fight now, but he did. He did because fury didn’t begin to describe what he was
feeling. He didn’t know how this could be – *how this could have happened* – but whatever it was,
she’d known. She did nothing more than flick her eyes at the assassin, though, and Steve instantly
stilled in his futile struggles because he felt the sharp, cold edge of a knife against his throat. He
couldn’t move, couldn’t turn around to see that this was Bucky. He tried, though, squirming and
pulling until that knife was digging into his jugular and spilling rivulets of red. He tried, because it
couldn’t be. This was an actor or a trick or a hallucination. *It had to be*, because Bucky was *dead.*
He’d died almost seventy-five years ago. He’d fallen from that train in the Swiss Alps, fallen to his
death. Steve had seen it, reaching for him, trying to save him… There was *no way* he could have
survived. No way. *No!* Steve trembled mindlessly, thoughts spinning violently in his head, the
image of Bucky tumbling away into that icy gorge tormenting him sharper now than it ever had
before. His guilt and grief over Bucky’s loss had been a constant companion since it had happened,
quieter in recent years but never gone completely. Yet even in his worst nightmares he’d never
dreamed, never *fathomed* that something like this could happen. How? How was he alive? How
was he here? Why was he… What… What had HYDRA done to him?

Viper gave that disgustingly sweet smile again, staring at him on his knees before her. “Are you ever
going to learn?” she asked, grasping his chin and lifting it. Steve’s blood positively boiled.
“HYDRA always wins.” He hadn’t even realized the extent of the mistake he’d made coming here
before she was turning, stepping aside so that the all-out brawl going on behind them could see him.
She gave a shrill shout. “Avengers!”

There were only the two of them. *Only two left.* And they’d been fairly effective at taking on the
STRIKE Team, even outnumbered six to one. But now they stopped, and Clint’s face fractured in
dismay. There was a wound across his midriff that glistened darkly red, and he seemed winded and
overexerted. The STRIKE Team were among the best in the world; they weren’t easy to beat,
especially not as overwhelmed as Clint and Tony were. He raised his bow nonetheless and aimed
straight at the assassin who held Steve down with the knife to his neck. Iron Man muttered an
obscenity before raising his palm repulsors and glaring malevolently at Viper. Given the momentary
lull, the remainder of the STRIKE Team was quick to reform, flanking Tony and Clint with weapons
at the ready. Steve tried not to breathe. He should never have come like this, never have let Tony
and Clint bear this burden with him. This was a hell designed especially for him, and now they
would burn in it.

He couldn’t let that happen. “Tony, run!” he gasped, uncaring that speaking was moving his
Adam’s apple closer to that razor-sharp edge. “Run! She won’t kill me! She won’t–” The knife
pressed deeper, and he choked on his words, stilling instantly.

Iron Man glared. “He’s right. You won’t kill him,” he said evenly, confidently.
Viper smirked. “Not him. You two, on the other hand…”

STRIKE moved closer, encircling them. Their weapons were trained on Clint. There was no way Tony could protect him from so many guns. Not like this. Steve’s blood went cold. He couldn’t let them be killed. He couldn’t! “Let them go!” She ignored him, so Steve forced himself forward on his knees, lurching toward her, panic lacing his words. “Mandy – Ophelia. Please! Let them go. I’ll come with you.”

She turned and looked down on him coolly. “I already have you, Steve. You’re not escaping again.” She did, and he wasn’t. He knew that. He’d given away the only leverage he’d had by coming here.

Maybe not the only leverage, he realized. “I’ll do anything you want. I won’t fight. I’ll…” He glanced at the ring on her hand. The ring he’d given Natasha. The ring she’d stolen. “I’ll marry you.” Once more she looked to him, this time more interested. Steve was horrified at the words coming out of his mouth, but there wasn’t any other way out. He swallowed down the shame and fear and revulsion and the fact that he was betraying Natasha and made himself keep talking. “I’m the one you want. You hunted across the country for me. You want us… You want us to be a family, don’t you? So we’ll be one. I’ll marry you. I’ll… I’ll be with you.” He couldn’t stand to be more specific than that.

“Steve, God, no!” Tony shouted.

Steve glared a warning at him, sparing only a second for that before turning back to her. “Whatever you want, I’ll do it. But you have to let them go.”

“And lose the chance to eradicate the Avengers? I don’t think so,” Viper said with a haughty laugh. Still, from the light in her eyes, that hungry gleam she’d had back at the Sandbox… He knew she was more than interested. She wanted what he was offering. She was obsessed with him, with HYDRA, with HYDRA having him. With whatever crazy dream she had that they could be some sort of family. He’d been absolutely correct before, about stripping all the nonsense about HYDRA and world domination away and leaving only the core of her motivations. She wanted him. And she knew he wouldn’t submit. “And you should be careful with what you’re offering.”

Steve clenched his jaw and tried to hold together his equanimity. “I don’t care what happens to me. I never have. I just want your word that they go free and you leave Agent Romanoff and Sarah alone.”

“Our daughter belongs with us, too,” she coolly reminded. “There’s a reason I took her last time.”

“She doesn’t have anything you want,” Steve snapped, praying nothing betrayed the lie. “You want a baby with Doctor Erskine’s serum. We can…” God, he couldn’t even bear the thought. He swallowed down the sick taste of blood and the burn of bile in the back of his throat. “Like you said. Back then. We can keep trying.”

Viper’s lips curled in a hideous caricature of an excited smile. She reached for the chin strap of his helmet and unbuckled it with ease. A cold shiver that had been building since the assassin’s identity had been revealed wracked its way up his back. Suddenly Bucky’s metal hand left his shoulder where it had been curled to grab his newly exposed hair and pull his head back. Steve grimaced but did nothing else because that knife didn’t so much as twitch. He found himself staring into Bucky’s uncaring gray eyes. He thought about pleading with Bucky, with whomever or whatever he was now – a stranger wearing his best friend’s face – but he didn’t. He didn’t have a chance. Viper was glaring down at him. She tossed his helmet. Then her thumb slipped over his lower lip, and he couldn’t stop himself from recoiling despite the fingers tight in his hair and the blade hot against his
heaving throat. “I’ll say it again, Captain. You really need to be careful with what you’re offering. HYDRA doesn’t negotiate. We take.”

The horror of that had no time to sink in. There was sudden movement behind Viper. Steve couldn’t see what at first, but whatever it was, it was causing a great deal of confusion. He could hear Iron Man’s armor moving, rapidly clanking and whirring, and Clint’s muffled cry. The steel fist in his hair let go to draw another gun, and when he lowered his head, he did just in time to witness the blur of red and gold as Iron Man shot high into the sky. The suit was clearly firing its thrusters at full blast because it jetted away faster than he could track and, more importantly, faster than these bastards could shoot.

Tony left. Steve closed his eyes and slumped. There was cool relief mixed with acidic betrayal – more betrayal – churning in the pit of his stomach. Tony left. Tony got away.

“Okay, I’m surrendering.” That was Tony’s voice, though. Steve turned his gaze back to the field, and Tony was there alone, with his arms raised in a very classic pose of sending up the white flag. Clint was gone. That didn’t make sense a moment until Steve’s brain finally kicked into gear. Tony had sent Iron Man onto Barton. And then Iron Man had taken him to safety. Damn it, Tony! Tony put his hands on his head. “So that’s that. No more negotiating. No need to ’cause it’s settled. Come get me.”

“Should we follow Hawkeye?” Rumlow barked, frustration tight on his face as he pointed his rifle right at Tony’s back. Viper seemed too surprised to answer. “Madame HYDRA, should we follow?”

“No,” she declared irately. “We have what we came for. Let him go.” She turned to glare at Tony, her eyes steely, her lips pressed tightly into a frown that heralded barely restrained frustration. “Let him fly back home and tell everyone left that the end is upon them.”

They called Bucky the Winter Soldier. And they treated him like a slave.

Those were the only things Steve was able to glean as he and Tony were secured as prisoners in HYDRA’s quinjet. Viper had Bucky handle Steve, and Bucky was anything but gentle as he forced Steve into cuffs inches thick and made of reinforced steel. He was locked into a sitting position, arms fastened together over his lap, legs bound to the fuselage, unbreakable bands of metal around his chest and lap as well. These weren’t restraints he could break. As Bucky finished with him, there was a look on his face, just the barest hint of something. Not recognition of Steve, though Steve’s heart leapt at the thought. Recognition of the restraints. These hadn’t been made for Captain America, he realized. They’d been made for and used on Bucky.

Like a slave.

“He’s just Bucky,” he gasped, his voice trembling. His leg was burning where he’d been shot, but that didn’t stop him from struggling. Nothing would. He pulled and pushed and tried to break free, because if he could just reach Bucky, just touch Bucky, Bucky would know him. He had to know him!

“Bucky, it’s Steve.” He could feel Tony’s eyes on him from where the STRIKE team had tied him up across the jet on the other bench. “Bucky, please! Please!”

The Winter Soldier didn’t answer, at least not verbally. Instead, Steve got a vicious backhand across the face, and the assassin stalked away. It took Steve a moment to recover from the hit; it had been hard enough that his skull was wracking with dizzying pain. When he blinked the blurriness away, Viper stood in front of him instead. “He doesn’t know you, Steve. He doesn’t know anything beyond what we tell him. He hasn’t for seventy-five years.”
Steve could hardly contain his rage. His eyes burned. “What did you do to him?”

She gave that hideous little smirk again. “We’ve scrubbed his brain raw of his memories so many times. Erased James Barnes completely.” Tony blanched across the way, shuddering. He knew who Bucky was. Of course he did. Howard’s old war stories aside, Steve had spoken about him a lot, about how much Bucky had meant to him. About how he had taken care of him in their youth, stood by him through thick and thin, protected him from the biggest bullies and tended his injuries when he hadn’t gotten to this alley or that dance hall in time. Tony knew exactly how terrible this was, and he looked positively horrified as he made the same miserable realizations that Steve had. HYDRA had taken Bucky seventy-five years ago and done this to him. Turned him into a mindless, soulless murderer. A puppet. Viper saw the flinch and predictably went for the kill. “You think he knows you? You think he might remember you if you keep talking? Keep calling him by name? Keep saying your name? Never. It’ll never happen. He’s mine, so trust me when I tell you there’s nothing left of your friend.”

Steve had so many questions, but he couldn’t bear to ask them. He didn’t get a chance, at any rate. “You’re a real piece of work,” Tony snarled viciously. His face was bruised and banged up from where Rumlow and the others had gotten a few hits in. “What is you think is going to happen here? Steve’s going to marry you and you two will make super soldier babies and name them after dear old grandpa? You really think this is gonna be some squid Nazi version of happily ever after?”

She turned around and appraised Tony evenly. And, just like before, she was bold and certain. “Yes.”

“Apparently smarts and beauty don’t run together in your family,” Tony seethed. “At least the Red Skull wasn’t dumb enough to think Captain America would ever come to the dark side.”

Viper snarled, stalked over, and slapped Tony hard enough to nearly knock him off the bench. Rumlow was all too eager to yank him back onto it with a fistful of his hair. “Ow, easy there,” Tony sputtered, blood dribbling down his face from a split lip. “Don’t disrupt the hair. Any idea how long it takes me to get the perfectly disheveled look?”

“I want to know what you did to him,” Steve demanded. He was in really no place to demand anything, stuck as he was in these ridiculous restraints with a dozen guns on him and with Tony completely at their mercy. But he couldn’t stop himself. Everything – Sarah and him being outed and Natasha being shot and Bucky ending up like this – was too much, and he couldn’t hold it in. Her answer before wasn’t enough. He wanted specifics. He wanted some hope, something onto which he could latch and hold. This wasn’t true. It wasn’t permanent. Erased James Barnes completely. His voice was hoarse with pain and grief. “Tell me what you did to him to make him like this!”

Viper shook her head. “Wouldn’t want it spoiled just in case we need to repurpose the late, great Doctor Zola’s tech on you.” Zola. Johann Schmidt’s right hand man and lead scientist. Steve hadn’t thought much of him in years, not since the Howling Commandos had captured him in 1945. That had been the mission where Bucky had fallen. Zola had captured and experimented on Bucky’s entire unit in 1943, and Bucky had been the only one among them to survive the heinous procedures. Could what Zola had done to him have helped him survive the fall from the train? And what had happened to Zola after World War II? Nothing good, it seemed.

She came closer, sashaying her hips just a bit, and the bile burned in the back of Steve’s throat again. How the hell was he going to follow through on any agreement to be with this woman when the sight of her disgusted and infuriated him this much? “But I’ll tell you other things, if you want. If you really want to know.” Steve swallowed down his pounding heart, glancing to the shadows.
near the rear of the jet where Bucky was standing. He couldn’t see him all that clearly now, but it seemed like he was staring at Steve’s shield where one of the STRIKE Team was holding it. *Please remember it, Buck. Please…* Viper grabbed his chin and turned his face back. “Do you want to know how many times we’ve put him in cryostasis? Left him frozen until we needed him again?” *

*Oh, God.* That struck a nerve, a deep one that pulsed in anguish. “How many times we’ve thawed him out only to wipe his mind like a blank slate, program his directives, and send him off to do his duty? Brainwashed him and given his orders? He never knew anything else.” _Programmed him._

The thought turned Steve’s stomach. All the life Bucky used to have himself back in Brooklyn, all the smarts and charm and strength… An image of Bucky’s roguish smile danced across his mind unbidden. It was one from when they’d been boys, eleven or twelve maybe, and deep in mischief, pranking Becca and Bucky’s other sisters. “Aw, come on, Stevie… It’ll be fun. You worry way too much.” So much _life._ Free will. Hopes and dreams. All taken like his arm had been and replaced with a cold, mechanical falsehood. All _erased_ like his body had been a husk into which they could thrust their own commands. HYDRA had programmed him.

_Like a machine._

Viper could see Steve unraveling as his mind worked it over, and that fed right into her desire to own him. “Do you really want to know what your war buddy has done for us, Steve? What he’s spent the last _seventy years_ doing?” She moved closer, digging her nails into his jaw. “Do you want to know the number of innocents he’s slaughtered? The world leaders and dignitaries he’s assassinated? People he’s tortured? Arsons. Massacres. Weapons stolen and regimes toppled and dreams destroyed. From within SHIELD HYDRA has been reaping war and chaos for decades, and the Winter Soldier has been our long arm. Our weapon in the shadows. Our ghost story. Our tool to shape history the way we saw fit.” She leaned next to his ear. “My _asset._”

Steve jerked. “Yeah, well, he hasn’t always gotten the job done, has he?” Tony snidely reminded from across the way. Viper turned, and Steve was forced to wonder how much of the comment was Tony being difficult for difficulty’s sake versus him trying to distract their captor from tormenting her prey further. It was probably a little bit of both. “I mean, I’m sure you sent him to take down Nick Fury. Well, news flash. He failed.” A look of confusion crossed Viper’s face. Tony shrugged as best he could with his arms bound behind his back. “What? This is a ‘you show me yours, I’ll show you mine’ kinda moment, isn’t it? Fury’s still alive. And Natasha’s alive. So that’s two people your precious asset missed. And he kinda sorta failed to capture Cap last night. Maybe he’s not so mindless after all.”

That earned Tony another slap, and Steve flinched, barely biting down on a plea for them to leave him alone. “You want I should put a bullet in that billionaire-dollar brain?” Rumlow offered. He had always been a sadistic bastard, and Steve cursed anew for every time he’d ever trusted him back at SHIELD. The STRIKE commander drew his handgun and jabbed it into the top of Tony’s head.

Tony went white, terror deep in his eyes, but that didn’t quell his need to make a wiseass of himself. “Believe it or not, I’ve been through this before. This whole threaten to shoot-me thing? Somewhat loses its effect with the number of times you use it.”

Rumlow gritted his teeth and pushed the gun against Tony’s skull harder. “At least we wouldn’t have to listen to your yapping.”

“My yapping is one of my best qualities. Ain’t it, Cap?”

_Stop, Tony!*_ Rumlow hit him across the face with the gun, and Tony slumped, his nose oozing blood. The HYDRA agent made to shoot him. “Don’t,” Viper instructed. Rumlow turned, eyes flashing, breathing heavily with the threat of violence. She shook her head. “We might need him to
keep Rogers in line. He could have other uses, too.”

Tony spat blood to the floor. He was really struggling to straighten himself now. “Don’t bother ransoming me. The Board of Directors of Stark Industries would probably be happier with me gone to be honest, and my wife… Well, I cut her off after I got a load of her credit card bills.”

“Your wife is pregnant,” Viper smoothly said, and Tony absolutely blanched. Steve struggled again, desperate to keep Pepper and their unborn baby and everyone else out of this. “It would do you some good to tell her to stay where photographers can’t see her. We didn’t even need SHIELD’s intel network to find that out with her picture all over Esquire.”

Tony’s eyes were deep with hate. “You don’t touch her.”

“If the two of you were your side’s best chance of stopping us, I think this discussion is over. Agent Rumlow, feel free to shut up his yapping.” She glanced over her shoulder at Steve, a twisted little grin on her red lips. “Rogers, too. I think listening to him moan and cry for his long lost friend for the next couple hours might make me sick.”

There wasn’t anything the two of them could do as both of them were silenced, Tony with plain old duct tape and Steve with some sort of reinforced Kevlar muzzle. The thing was thick and awful between his teeth, and it went far enough into his mouth to make it difficult to swallow. Viper looked on in satisfaction as he squirmed against the half a dozen STRIKE agents trying to fit it on him. He caught Bucky’s eyes glazing with that same, awful hint of memory. Leashed and muzzled. Like an animal.

When it was over and Steve was breathing heavily through his nose and glaring balefully at Viper, she smiled again. “Let’s get this show on the road, boys.”

And that was that. The quinjet’s engines roared to life, lifting the aircraft from the earth, and a few moments later they were shooting across the sky. There was no way to be certain which way they were headed, but something inside Steve knew it was east. Across the ocean. He sat in barely contained rage, every nerve in his body crackling with energy, every fiber of muscle coiled tightly and ready to act. It was torture onto itself, to sit there helplessly while surrounded by their enemies. Tony was looking down, defeated in a sense, and Steve’s heart ached for him. He shouldn’t have done this! Should never have surrendered himself. Didn’t he get it? Now he was here, the prisoner of HYDRA, doomed to suffer as leverage against Steve or worse. Tony had been – was – the leader of the Avengers. He was a mighty prize, ransom or no. He’d sacrificed his life to ensure Steve wouldn’t sell his soul. At least Clint had escaped… He could go back to the others, tell them what had happened, maybe have a chance at fighting back against whatever HYDRA was planning. They could protect Sarah, maybe protect Natasha if she had any chance at all for survival… That was hardly any consolation. Not with tears thick in Tony’s eyes at the thought of Pepper suffering. Not with Steve’s own heart shuddering to pieces in his chest. Why hadn’t Tony listened to him?

And why had Steve listened to Tony before? He’d known in his heart that he shouldn’t have let anyone get involved. He’d known in his heart that he should have never let Natasha come to him like she had. He’d known. This was his burden to bear, and his alone, and he should have carried it alone, but he’d been so damn weak and scared, and now it was too late.

What was worse was the fact that was he sat there, completely helpless and hating everything, Viper lost her will to maintain this air of nonchalance. She’d been trying to act uninterested for most of the flight, standing closer to the cockpit and looking over data that Rumlow and the others from STRIKE were handing her, but he’d caught her wayward glances in his direction. He hadn’t returned a single one, not wanting to show her any consideration. It didn’t matter. She came over all the same, and he was helpless to stop her. “It doesn’t have to be like this, you know,” she softly
offered.

Despite her gentle tone, Steve glared malignantly into the shadows underneath the bench on the opposite side. Every muscle in his body stiffened in a visceral reaction to her nearness. It wasn’t something he could stop. Not that he wanted to. Uncaringly, she sat beside him. Extremely close beside him. “It doesn’t have to be. You’ve never understood that, not even when you were fighting my grandfather.” He ground his teeth down on the thing in his mouth. He wanted to tell her she was a fool for thinking he was the one with a problem understanding how things were, but he couldn’t. “You’ve wanted a home, a family. Ever since you woke up here. And you want Sarah protected. Safe. You told me that, on our one night together. Remember that?” She carded her fingers through his mussed hair. Steve jerked away. Still undaunted, she kept at it. “You laugh at me and call me crazy for wanting the same things you want. Why can’t we have that together? You and me. Our daughter. Our legacy.” He was afraid he’d be physically sick when she set her other hand unto his knee. “Just cooperate. When the new world order comes, you’ll be happier that you did.”

Steve grunted. Right now the only thing that would make him happy was to throw her off him. That was sadly not an option. He caught Tony’s eyes, caught the disgust and pain in them, and he had to look away, shame burning hot on his cheeks. Viper picked up on that of course, but she obviously didn’t feel the slightest bit doubtful about continuing. She settled into her seat, practically nuzzling into his side, and Steve swallowed the acid burning in the back of his throat. All the nights he’d spent hating this woman… To have her like this. Snuggling into him like Natasha had done so many times. He glanced down and saw the engagement ring flash in the light, shining dully where her hand was curled around his knee. And his dog tags, down inside the front of her uniform. She was obsessed, depraved, delusional.

And somehow it got worse. Her voice dropped to a private whisper. “I was there, you know. When SHIELD brought you down from the ice.” Something inside him tightened even more. Now he looked directly at Tony. He did because he had no choice, because he knew where this was going and it was too horrific to think about. Tony knew, too, and his face filled with pain and sympathy. He’d have been raging, Steve knew, if he hadn’t been trussed up like he was. Viper somehow tucked herself even closer. Steve could smell her perfume, sickeningly sweet, and whatever shampoo she used. Something spicy. That made his nausea worse. “I was right there, waiting for you. Once they realized you were alive, we had to move fast to get what we needed before Agent Coulson and his people got you secure and transported you to New York. You were unconscious while Agent Blake and his team collected the samples, but I watched the entire time. And I could have sworn you opened your eyes once. Saw me.” Steve had absolutely no memory of this. Everything between freezing in the Valkyrie and waking up in that godawful charade of 1945 in Manhattan was blank. She’d been there when they’d… Without his consent, they’d taken things from him. Blood. DNA. Under Fury’s orders. Under hers. It didn’t matter which anymore. And of course he’d known about this, known that it had happened. He had since they’d discovered Sarah. But it was something about which he never thought. A dark, damaged thing in the back of his mind he’d never really acknowledged. Hearing that Viper had been there, had witnessed it happening, had overseen it… Violation unlike anything he’d ever felt rolled over him, and he couldn’t contain his shudder. “No, don’t get upset. Don’t you realize what that meant? You opened your eyes for me. I knew then and there that this was what was meant to happen. That we were meant to be together.”

Steve couldn’t listen to anymore. He tried to ignore it, squeezing his eyes shut and breathing as deeply as he could through his nose and distancing himself from his senses, but there was no escape. “You have no idea how many times we tried. Doctor Zola didn’t just find ways to turn men into machines. He pioneered a great deal of the genetic engineering that made this possible, you know. It took them years to attempt to perfect the procedure to harvest and splice serum-enhanced DNA
with normal DNA. That was the ultimate goal, once we realized decades ago that there was no way to replicate Erskine’s work. If we couldn’t recreate the serum, we wanted to reproduce it. Find a way to create the next step in mankind’s evolution. The perfect specimens of humanity’s potential. Seventy-five years ago the Nazis envisioned a perfect world, one without weakness or flaws or the… undesirable. Their vision was limited. Sarah was meant to be the first of a whole race of superior beings.” Steve shuddered again. A memory came unbidden. The argument in Fury’s office the day Sarah had been found, when Steve had been fighting to protect her from SHIELD’s scientists. That was when they’d wondered if the people responsible for Sarah could have been attempting to breed an army from his DNA. They’d dismissed the idea because it had been too heinous and awful and, at the time, seemingly irrelevant. God, they’d been fools.

Viper smiled. “She was our most successful attempt in that she survived but still, in the end, a failure. And we’ve been trying since then, Steve. With the last of your DNA we had left.” He couldn’t stand to listen to this, squeezing his eyes shut. That nauseating sense of violation was digging deeper into him, claws curling into his heart and ripping cruelly. Viper had been trying. Trying to impregnate herself again. To create more of their children. God help me.

“When we ran out of that, we turned to inferior options.” She turned her head and Steve followed her gaze to Bucky. Steve didn’t want to consider the implications of what she was saying. What they had done to Bucky. Tried to… The horrors were compounding on top of other horrors. Part of him wondered if it would be better at this point simply to give up. “Nothing has worked. That’s why we needed you back. Why I needed you back. You have no idea how hard it’s been to wait. Feel like I’ve been waiting for you in one way or another since you opened your eyes and saw me back there in that room.”

She gave a contented sigh, sliding her hand up and down his thigh possessively. Like Natasha had done so many times back in Oregon. He flinched at the unwanted juxtaposition; that made Viper’s touch that much worse. “But now we can be together. It’s time. He’s almost back.” He? Steve glanced at Bucky despite himself. The Winter Soldier was watching them, watching Viper touch him like this, and there was something in his gaze now. A question. A sliver of doubt in gray eyes. A sense of shared revulsion. It was gone in a blink, and Bucky turned to stare at his boots, frowning with his brows furrowed in confusion. “He’s almost back, and when he sees what I’ve done…” Steve could feel Viper’s satisfied smile against his cheek as she leaned up to kiss him. He flinched. “A new world order.”

The rest of the flight proceeded like that. She didn’t move away. Steve couldn’t. She didn’t speak anymore. Steve couldn’t. The silence was nigh unbearable.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The warnings from last chapter for some nonconsensual kissing/touching and vague mentions of other nonconsensual acts apply here, too. Also, the views on Nazism and its relationship to HYDRA are just my own take on it for the purposes of this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

HYDRA of this day and age was a strange amalgamation of old and new. Steve could see right away that it wasn’t a happy marriage. As he was prodded into walking by the entire STRIKE Team and with Bucky’s metal hand like iron around his arm, he was rather struck by the oddness of it all. They were in France, along the remote regions of the northern coast where it butted up against the English Channel. He recognized the area, of course. He’d been there during Operation Overlord. He’d stormed the beach at Normandy with the Howling Commandos and Bucky at his side, in the midst of thousands of brave men fighting and giving their lives for their Allied war effort. Back then, SSR had always thought HYDRA had had a few secret bases deep in German and French territory, large bases even, but they’d never been able to locate them with any certainty. To the best of his knowledge, even after D-Day and after Berlin had fallen to the Soviets in the spring of 1945, those bases had never been located. When the war had ended and he’d crashed Schmidt’s plane, interest in ferreting out the remains of HYDRA had dwindled (or the efforts to do so had been prematurely considered completed), so this place must have been left undiscovered for seven decades.

It showed it. There was Nazi heraldry and symbolism everywhere, hung alongside the blood red cephalopod of HYDRA. It was awful to see it, particularly here where it was so close to where one of the most important and bloodiest battles of World War II had been fought. Steve knew that Nazism hadn’t died with Hitler, and he’d figured the HYDRA of today was somewhat removed from the HYDRA of his past. Racism and hatred knew no bounds, so anyone could be susceptible to it. Still, just seeing that awful symbol on its bright red flag again unsettled his stomach. He could tell it bothered Tony greatly as well if his pallor and the repulsion in his eyes was any indication. The people serving here weren’t German. Like HYDRA inside SHIELD, these soldiers and agents were from all walks of life: white, black, young and old, of all nationalities and both genders. It was astounding and disturbing. The new world of oppression, where HYDRA’s strength called anyone corrupt into its ranks. This threat didn’t wear a single flag or one face like it had in his time. The result was still the same, though. Bloodshed. Prejudice. Hatred. Killing. Power over many belonging to the select few.

How to get to that goal was obviously a point of contention, if the tension in the air was a sign. Ideologies and methodologies and the like. Again, that discontented union between the traditions and foundations of HYDRA and its necessary evolution. Steve knew Schmidt hadn’t been a lover of Hitler and the Third Reich’s mindsets entirely, but he had certainly been interested in purifying humanity, in obtaining the power of the gods for use and abuse by him and those he deemed worthy. It seemed like that was something Viper – Madame HYDRA – wanted as well, a revival of old beliefs. Her grandfather’s beliefs. They’d tried with Project: Insight. Maybe not everyone was on board with that plot. People here seemed to be holding their breaths, waiting for something with uncertainty in their hearts. Whatever way HYDRA was planning on attempting it now, Steve couldn’t help but bitterly wonder how many of their own agents wouldn’t fit their idea of
“perfection”.

Not that it mattered. He wasn’t in much of a position to stop anything.

HYDRA’s base was located on a rocky, craggy bluff that looked down on a small beach hundreds of feet below and then the ocean beyond. Their captors took him and Tony into the installation. First there was a massive open courtyard of sorts that was being used now as a staging area. There were all sorts of aircraft, helicopters and a few fighter jets and quinjets. All stolen from SHIELD, repainted and repurposed. Crates of supplies, likely munitions and weapons, were being moved about. Everywhere soldiers and workers were preparing things, dozens if not hundreds of men and women busy. As they crossed the yard, Steve could see most the rest of the base was underground, marked by only an old, stone castle up top. There were men wearing black uniforms and black combat gear and red badges everywhere. Again, scores of troops, though not nearly the number they had boasted during World War II or even when SHIELD had fallen. Maybe that was a small comfort, like Tony and the rest of the team had done some good, whittling away at HYDRA’s forces. Still, overall this was disgusting and disturbing. Natasha had been wrong. HYDRA had never been gone at all, never defeated. HYDRA always wins. That was what Viper said, and Steve knew more than ever that she hadn’t been lying. HYDRA always wins. Bucky’s grip on him was implacable and vicious, and Steve felt it in his bones. Everywhere people stopped and stared at them, a few in surprise, but most in smug satisfaction. All the years they’d been working toward this, hiding in places like this, lurking in the shadows of SHIELD, readying themselves to strike… Now they had the Red Skull’s old nemesis right in their grasps. They’d taken Captain America. And Iron Man. It was over.

Maybe it had been over for years. All of this, inevitable. So much had gone on since SHIELD had collapsed that Steve had never really processed the truth until now. Tony and the others had fought for nothing. Steve had died for nothing. He and Bucky. They’d both died for nothing.

He frankly didn’t need to feel worse, not with Viper ahead of him and glancing over her shoulder to smile back smugly. Not with his shield in the hands of one of the STRIKE Team and everyone practically beaming to see him trussed up like this. Not with Natasha dying and Sarah left alone with people who were all but strangers to her. Not with the damn gag still practically choking him and the magnetic shackles tight around his wrists and Tony being pulled along beside him by Rumlow, too. Animals and prizes. Slaves. He closed his eyes against that, the thought of what he’d been brought here for. A slave to Viper. The horrors of what she’d told him… They were swirling around in his head until he could hardly think. Maybe it would be best not to.

They were loaded into a large elevator, the sort that would be used to transport cargo or freight. Down they went. Steve stared at his boots, trying to keep his mind clear, trying to keep the roiling mess of his emotions calm. It was terrible, having to stand there still amidst Viper and her men as the elevator took them lower and lower. Down into hell. He couldn’t help a little grunt of a laugh at his own thoughts.

“Something funny?” Viper said from beside him. Steve narrowed his eyes, refusing to so much as twitch even as she leaned closer to him. Even with all of her men and Bucky watching, she was pressing close again, practically hanging on him just as bold and unrelenting as she had for hours on the jet. It was hard to stay stiff and unmoving, particularly when he could feel her breath on the side of his neck. “Hard to smile like this. I know.” She brushed her hand down his face where the strap for the muzzle was. “But it is worth celebrating. Later, baby. I swear it.”

The promise made him want to vomit, but he swallowed that down through a constricted throat and kept his gaze forward. Tony wasn’t as successful as he was at containing his reaction, yelling something that was so muffled it was nearly pathetic. And Rumlow wasn’t at all restrained about
cuffing the inventor, and he did so right across the back of Tony’s head. That didn’t stop him. His shoulder went into the chest of the nearest thug before his foot found the shin of the next one. There was a loud, dull rattle as a mess of bodies fell into the metallic wall of the lift. Tony cried out while he was swarmed by the STRIKE Team, and Steve twisted to help him. To hell with staying still!

He didn’t make it two steps. Bucky grabbed his hair and kicked his legs out from under him. Pain slashed up and down Steve’s calf where he’d been shot, and Bucky put pressure on the wound with his boot, digging hard to further subdue him. He groaned, crumpling and trying to get away. He yanked on the cuffs, pulling as hard as he could, truly struggling against them for the first time since they’d been captured. They didn’t give, and there was no chance to do more, not with Bucky pushing him prostrate with all his strength. Steve kicked at him as best he could, but when Bucky’s metal arm locked itself around his neck, there was no hope. He could hardly breathe between the pressure on his trachea and the Kevlar bit in his mouth. And he couldn’t look away as the STRIKE Team beat Tony senseless.

By the time the lift finally reached the bottom, Tony was limp and groaning and Steve was barely clinging to consciousness. The doors opened, and Bucky hauled Steve up and viciously shoved him out. Steve staggered, sucking in a desperate breath with the strangling force gone, oxygen flooding his deprived cells in a rush of dizzying heat. Coughing, he couldn’t do much more than let himself be dragged along. Not with Rumlow making a very visible show of the gun to Tony’s head and Viper’s unspoken threat clear in the air. Leverage. Tony himself was slumped, groaning and bleeding and bruised. Steve would have done anything to see him freed. They were deep in the bowels of HYDRA’s stronghold, surrounded by enemies, held by the Winter Soldier. There wasn’t going to be any escape.

Through a series drab, gray corridors made of old, drafty cement they were led. A few lights illuminated the way, lonely, yellow, and dim. They reached what was clearly the prison block. There were a couple of cells, both with reinforced steels doors and a great deal of electronic security. Rumlow opened one, revealing a small cement box of a room completely devoid of any furniture, and shoved Tony inside. The inventor staggered and went down hard on his knees. “In you go, Cap,” the STRIKE commander then ordered, gesturing with his gun. When Steve only glared in response, the Winter Soldier grabbed him by the hair again and forcibly yanked him inside the cell. If he pulled any more harshly, Steve was fairly certain he’d be ripping out his hair by the roots. Bucky slammed him against the opposite wall roughly, once, twice, three times, each with even more violence. Steve could feel him shaking as he held him there. It was minute, hardly anything at all, a faint tremor wracking its way through Bucky’s body. But it was something. Not rage but some sort of self-defense mechanism, like he was throwing himself into his orders all that much more intently to protect himself from whatever he was thinking and feeling.

Maybe it shouldn’t have, but that gave him hope.

It didn’t last long, though, not as Bucky held him there for Viper to come over and appraise him where his cheek was flush to the cold, rough concrete. He grunted, struggling and trying to push back, to hip check Bucky or do something to dislodge the grip on the back of his neck and arms. There was no place to go. “Aw, baby,” she whispered, clucking her tongue. Again with that awful endearment. Steve glared icily at her, pouring every ounce of the hatred poisoning his blood into his scowl. She was uncaring, reaching behind his head to undo the buckles and straps of the muzzle. “Too hard to give you a goodbye kiss in this.”

“Go to hell,” Steve spat the second he could. His mouth was drier than a desert, his lips were cracked, and his jaw hurt, but he still snarled at her. “I’m not giving you anything.”

Bucky wrenched him around, shoving him back painfully, and held him still. He was absolutely
pinned between the Winter Soldier’s unmov ing body, pinned by Rum low’s gun pointed at Tony’s moaning form on the form, as Viper leaned in and stole the kiss he wouldn’t give.

He’d gotten so used to Natasha, to the way she kissed, the way she treated him with nothing less than the utmost love and respect. She kissed with all the tenderness and sweetness that she rarely had elsewhere in her life, as though she’d been saving it throughout all the difficult traumas she’d endured for the person she loved. She kissed like she wanted to give, wanted to complete, wanted to be completed herself.

This was nothing like that. HYDRA takes. And that was what Viper did. She was smart enough to be quick about it, rough and possessive but quick at least, and just as Steve was getting his wits about him to fight back, she released his jaw and backed away. Bucky let him go, too. Steve was practically vibrating with rage, rage that had no outlet and which seemed to mean nothing. Before he’d told Tony he didn’t know if he could raise a hand to Sarah’s mother, no matter what she’d done. Here and now, he’d give about anything to wipe that smug smile off Viper’s face by whatever means necessary.

Rum low and his men retreated from the room. Bucky did as well, not offering Steve anything more, not even a final glance. Viper did, though. She let her eyes linger hungrily, sweeping up and over his body. Steve glared back, chest heaving in fury, his emotions bleeding out through every gasp. “I’m not giving you anything,” he declared again. “Never.”

She only laughed and slammed the door behind her.

Steve stood against the wall, shocked and shaking a moment as the echo of the locks securing vibrated through the cell. It took a moan from Tony to drive energy back into his limbs. “Tony,” he gasped. “Tony, God…” A couple of limping steps had him at Tony’s side, and he awkwardly dropped to his knees. “Tony, are you hurt bad? Tony…”

Tony groaned. He was fairly battered, his face a mess of bruises and blood. His nose was oozing red and a gash above his left eye wept it precipitously. The other eye was already swelling shut. He was having a hard time breathing with his mouth taped, but Steve figured it wasn’t just because of that. He probably had damaged ribs or worse if the way his chest was stuttering was any indication. Steve’s heart ached heavily in his chest. He closed his eyes against the burn of tears, bowing his head. This was his fault. His fault. Tony was here, in the hands of their enemies to be used against him. Away from Pepper. Away from their baby. And he couldn’t do a damn thing to change any of it.

Rage sent fiery energy pulsing down his muscles, and he was trying to break the cuffs again. He yanked at them as hard as he could, but of course it was in vain. All it won him was bloodied, sore wrists and even more panic and desperation pounding through his body. He slumped, choking on a sob. “Why’d you do this, Tony? This was… It’s my problem! She’s my problem!” It all poured out on a heavy breath, his voice cracking and wavering, thick with barely restrained sobs. The world blurred, his eyes stinging hotly and his muscles and tendons twisting as he subconsciously railed and struggled. “Why didn’t you listen to me? I told you not to… I told you… You should have stayed. You could have taken Clint and gone! Why didn’t you? Why? Why? Why?”

Because no man is an island.

For a long time, there was nothing but heavy breathing. Steve opened eyes he’d squeezed shut, blinking away the wetness that had been trapped. Natasha had told him that, just a few days ago. He took a breath and smelled the sweetness of her hair, felt the warm strength of her body to his and the ghost of her lips to his neck. “No man’s an island, Steve. You don’t have to go it alone.”
“I’m sorry,” he whispered. Tony stared at him with teary eyes. There was such pleading in them, not for his own life but for them both to have strength now. Everything, their close friendship, the respect and admiration they had for each other… This bond between them that had suffered so for Steve being gone and Tony struggling alone. brotherhood. Tony had done so much for him. Helped him with bringing Sarah into his life, despite all the difficulties and changes it had wrought, despite how uncomfortable it had made him. He’d stood by Steve no matter what. Helped protect him and his family from HYDRA. Shouldered all the responsibility of leading the team in the wake of SHIELD’s collapse. Talked some sense into him. Sacrificed himself for Steve’s sake. This was just one more thing he’d done. Stayed with Steve so that he wouldn’t have to face this – Bucky and Viper and whatever HYDRA was planning – alone. “I’m so sorry, Tony.”

Tony’s eyes said what his lips couldn’t. Don’t.

Steve slumped completely. He braced his head on Tony’s shoulder, all the anger and energy leaving him on a shuddering sigh. Collapsing on his side, he closed his eyes again. Tony only squirmed closer as much as he could. And that was how they stayed, breathing and fearing the next twist in this nightmare.

They waited. Hours had passed (three by Steve’s count) before he picked up on what he thought were the sounds of footsteps in the hallway outside. He leaned up. Tony had fallen asleep a while ago, a deep, peaceful one. Steve struggled to listen over the loud rattle of Tony’s breathing. Definitely someone was coming. Multiple people. “Tony,” Steve whispered. His friend didn’t so much as stir, and for a second Steve thought about letting him be. What could they do, at any rate? No. They’d fight if they could. Steve nudged Tony with his knee, the fabric of his uniform loudly scraping across the rough floor. “Tony!”

Tony immediately snapped awake, eyes popping open. He gasped before moaning hoarsely. Steve could practically see the memories and the awful realizations that came with them coalescing in his eyes, dashing the comfort of oblivion. “Someone’s coming!” he whispered, knowing his friend couldn’t hear what he could. He turned to the door. Panic pumped through his veins. Beside him, Tony groaned again, something that sounded like a vague attempt at a curse behind the tape, and tried to sit up a little. Agony crinkled his reddened face, sweat gathering on his hairline. “Tony, take it easy!”

Again, there wasn’t much Steve could do. He scooted back, trying to offer up his shoulder and torso against which his friend could lean. Tony did that, crumpling and breathing heavily through his nose. Over the roar of his heart and the sound of Tony’s labored sniffing, Steve could hear those footsteps converging outside. He turned frantic eyes to the other man. “Listen, whatever happens now, don’t put yourself in their line of fire. You hear me, Tony? Don’t mouth off. Don’t make them angry. Please. Whatever Viper is gonna do to me…” Steve swallowed, trying not to imagine it. Wiping and programming. Using Zola’s evil technology on him, whatever it was, to force his allegiance. To force him to love her. It didn’t matter. “Whatever happens, you don’t put yourself in their way. I can’t have you hurt because of me, okay? I…” He couldn’t help the rueful laugh, the incredulous smile twisting his lips. “I realize the irony here, with this coming from me, but no heroics. Please.”

The door slammed open before Tony could nod. Into the room the STRIKE Team came again, fanning out and surrounding them with a thunder of stomping boots. Their rifles were already up, aimed at the two Avengers, and their faces were set into emotionless scowls.

Save for Rumlow’s. His was teeming with sadistic glee. “Get Stark,” he ordered his men. The soldiers were all too willing to do that, even as Steve struggled to his feet and tried to put himself between them and Tony. Most of the STRIKE Team went to him, tackling him and driving him
away. Steve spat fire, dropping his center of gravity and ramming his shoulders into the closest man. Someone collided with him from behind. Another someone piled on top. And someone else kicked at his injured leg. And something crackled in his ear as he went down onto his knees.

“No!” Steve gasped, but he couldn’t do a thing as the stun baton charged before it was unceremoniously driven into his midriff. Another cracked across his shoulder blades. The pain was intense; they obviously had removed the safeties on these devices to provide a shock that would kill a normal person. Bucky. An image of them moving him through this nightmare, using the stun batons like cattle prods, idly danced through Steve’s electrocuted brain. It was the last thing he thought before his mind went white. And his muscles seized and contracted in an awful wave of agony before he went limp.

The world moved in slow motion around him. Everything was distant, like it had been sucked through a tunnel and was now lightyears away. Blurs of color. Deep, rumbling sounds. Shadows. The juddering thud thud thud of something. His heart, he realized. Focusing on that, his lungs finally jolted back into a trembling attempt at breathing. He sucked in a desperate gulp of air, feeding his oxygen-starved tissues. His lips were wet with bloody saliva, and he coughed, blinking and blinking until his eyes focused.

No! They’d already hauled Tony out the door. He was limp between two of the STRIKE soldiers, dragging his feet as they pulled him. Horror washed over Steve in a cold, miserable splash, turning his blood to icy sludge pumping through his veins. He squirmed weakly. The commands from his brain – get up fight stop them don’t let them take Tony! – never seemed to reach his limbs. Whimpering was all he could do. “No. Don’t hurt him…”

A pair of boots set down in front of him, blocking his view. He struggled to look up. Rumlow smiled that predatory smile of his. “Don’t worry, Cap. We’re just going to ask Stark a few questions. Nothing too serious. He’ll be back before you know it.”

That horror got harder and harsher, settling in the pit of Steve’s stomach. He still couldn’t make his body move, his muscles as limp as jelly from the electricity that had so violently assailed them. “No,” he gasped. “No. Take me. Ask me! Please! Rumlow, please!”

Rumlow just grinned. “As much as I like the begging, I have to turn you down, big guy. Our lady in charge doesn’t want you damaged too badly, and frankly I think you’d probably die before you told us anything. Stark on the other hand…”

“No!”

“Ah, shut up.” One of those boots was slamming into his head, and he let himself black out.

“Steve?”

Steve snuggled deeper into the pillows of his bed. His bed back in Oregon. Not the biggest or most comfortable, but it had become more than just where he slept in the last months of their time there. More than its utilitarian purpose. More than a place he spent every night wide awake, listening, holding his breath and holding a gun and fearing for his and Sarah’s lives with her little body tucked tight against him. It was more. And he was back there now, in a dream. Or a memory. He wasn’t sure which, and he wasn’t sure that he cared, because being there was infinitely better than the world he knew he’d left behind. Those lumpy pillows and the not-so-pleasant mattress and the less than premium sheets were a cocoon of warmth and security and safety, and he wasn’t going to wake up.

“Steve? Are you awake?”
Natasha’s voice was a quiet hum in the deep of the night, in this dream, in this memory. Somehow he knew it was the night before she’d left. The night he’d proposed to her. The night they’d made love for the first time. They’d crept back up to his bedroom, carefully avoiding the many places in their sad little house that creaked and moaned when you stepped on them so as not to disturb Sarah. They’d fallen into this bed, and for the first time in forever, Steve had slept unafraid.

That was where he was now. Some place where he didn’t have to be afraid. “No,” he teased.

“Look.” He opened his eyes reluctantly, but there wasn’t the cold, concrete cell in which he’d been imprisoned and seemingly left to rot. There were only Natasha’s bright eyes in the familiar shadows of his bedroom. They were alight with life and love. She smiled once she caught his sleepy gaze and glanced down, directing him to look there. Sarah had snuck into his bed again. Steve had told Natasha before, had always been worried about her sleeping with him because of that, that it wouldn’t be proper or appropriate. Or that Sarah would reject having someone else there. His bed had become her safe haven, the only place she could sleep away from nightmares, and he never felt right upsetting that.

But he needn’t have worried, it seemed, because Sarah was lying with Natasha. She was between them, of course, but she was closer to Natasha, tucked up against her chest with her little head pressed into Natasha’s neck. And she was sound asleep. Peaceful and untroubled. It was beautiful and so, so right. Like the first time he’d sleep unafraid, this was the first time in forever he’d felt this right about anything. “She loves you,” he whispered, moving closer and reaching over his daughter’s sleeping form to brush his hand down Natasha’s face.

She reached up, too, weaving her fingers together with his. Her engagement ring caught the faint light of the room, glittering against the dark, sinewy roughness of his hand. “I know. Not sure what I’ve done…” Her soft voice faltered, and she kissed his palm to hide it before admitting to the quiet, happy sob. “Thank you for letting me be a part of this. You don’t know how much… What I feel right now. I finally…” Her eyes shone with tears. “I finally have a family.”

“You always had a family, Nat.”

“Not like this. Not with a child who loves me like this. I thought I’d lost that forever, Steve, and you’ve shown me that I should’ve never been afraid or sad or any of it.” She smiled, the new tracks of wetness on her face glistening in the moonlight. “It’s like… Something inside was missing all this time. And I was so used to it being gone that the pain didn’t bother me anymore. You know how that is? When a wound’s really old that it just becomes a part of you.” He wiped a tear with the pad of his thumb before hooking his arm gently around her waist and pulling both her and Sarah closer to him. “But now it’s gone.” Natasha was positively beaming as she whispered that, and Steve’s heart ached with how happy the look on her face made him. She was right. This was like everything with which she’d struggled since Sarah had come into his life, her own infertility, her own choices taken from her, her own childhood stolen by the Red Room… Steve could see those scars healing before his very eyes. “And nobody can take that from me.”

Sarah breathed a little sigh, burrowing deeper into Natasha’s neck. Gently Steve stroked the mess of her blonde hair away from her face before kissing the top of her head. “Not ever again,” he swore.

Natasha lost the last of her reserve, pulling his face to hers and kissing him deeply.

Never again.

He opened his eyes as the dream faded and saw unfamiliar shadows and awful, gray concrete. Nothingness. Imprisonment. The breath locked in his chest for a seemingly interminable moment. Everything came flooding back, destroying any lingering sense of joy and contentment, ripping apart
his resolve, and a choked sob burst from his lips. That promise he’d made… It had been broken almost instantly. He was trapped here in the hands of his enemies, and he didn’t even know if Natasha was alive. Had Bruce gotten there? Would he find a way to fix Coulson’s alien serum? Could it save her? And even if it did, would she be the same?

Or would she be like Bucky, twisted and tormented and changed beyond repair, resurrected only to become someone or something else? He couldn’t imagine it. He’d made her choice for her. And Bucky had done this to her. Maybe Viper had ordered him to, but he’d done it all the same. It made him sick with how much he hated his friend and hurt for him.

And Sarah… He couldn’t even stand to think of the number of ways in which he’d failed her. In this box, where each second was being stretched to infinity by the silence and emptiness, there wasn’t much else to do. God, he’d been a fool. Maybe Tony thought he was a good father, and maybe that had been true, but it had only been true when things had been simple and easy. When his biggest problems had consisted of managing bottles and diapers and figuring out how to potty train and how to deal with separation anxiety and tantrums. When his biggest worries were finding a preschool he could trust and his dear friend spoiling his daughter with too many toys and expensive trips to Disney World (they’d never gone, now that he thought about it. Sarah’s third birthday present from Tony had been a vacation in the Magic Kingdom, and she and Pepper had been kidnapped by HYDRA before he and Tony had even had a chance to formally plan it). Sure, it had been easy then, supported by the entire team as he had been (coddled, he bitterly corrected). Balancing being Captain America and being a father had consisted of trying to find more hours in the day to accommodate all his responsibilities, and that had been the worst of it. So naturally he’d been an excellent father. He’d also been a stupid, short-sighted, damn naïve fool.

So he’d failed as a father. Failed as a lover and fiancé. Failed as a friend, given what had happened to Bucky without his knowledge (and given the fact he’d let Bucky fall) and given what was happening to Tony right now. And definitely failed as Captain America. His old enemies had come back, threatening the world as if they’d never been gone at all, and what had he done? Ran and hid. Tony’s sharp words from before taunted him now, loud and undeniable in the silence. “You have to be better than this. You need to remember that you’re an Avenger. That you used to fight. Because the man that my father wouldn’t stop searching for? He wouldn’t surrender.” Well, he’d tried to fight. And he’d gotten them both captured right on the spot. So much for leading the team. And so much for being a hero.

The room spun like his thoughts were spinning, over and over again. Eventually he got sick and tired of his own misery. There was only so much he could tolerate. His mother had told him often in his youth that feeling bad about something was God’s way of motivating you to do better, to learn from your mistakes and try again. Well, that was all well and good, but as helpless as he was, doing anything other than brooding and waiting wasn’t much of an option.

Time passed. Tony had been gone a long while. They’d taken him hours and hours ago. No one had come since then. Not the Winter Soldier. Not Rumlow and his men. Not Viper. Steve was completely alone. At first he’d struggled more, gotten to his feet and tested the door as best he could with his hands bound. He’d even rammed it a few times in his more desperate moments, driving his shoulders into it until they were bruised and sore. There was no way to break it, no way to force it open. Aside from the lights overhead, there was nothing else in the room that might help him. No windows. No weak spots in the walls (he’d checked them all almost obsessively, every inch he could reach and see). Nothing. And when the horrific frustration of that had set in, that he was locked in this hell and well and truly helpless, he’d screamed to be let out. It was stupid and desperate and foolhardy, but he’d yelled at the top of his lungs, demanding they bring back Tony, demanding they take him instead, demanding that someone answer him. No one had. It had felt good to scream, at least, like some sort of dark purging of his soul. His throat ached now from it, but
he’d done it a few more times over the course of the hours when the silence had grown too terrible and his own panic had become unbearable. The serum rarely let him let go of the passage of seconds and minutes and hours, and the torment of that was awful. His worry mounted with every beat of his heart, every shallow breath through his lips. What were they doing to Tony? Interrogating him. Torturing him. That was the obvious answer. The thought twisted Steve’s stomach until he could hardly bear to breathe.

It went on and on like this. More and more hours. Endless and terrible. Just when he was certain he’d go mad with his own mind, the door opened.

Steve lurched up at the clamor, snapping from a troubled doze. “Tony.” That was punched from his lips like a fist to his gut, breathy and pained, as Tony was unceremoniously carried into the cell and dropped in the center of it. The STRIKE thugs that dumped him there didn’t even glance at Steve. The thought to attack them and escape also didn’t so much as cross Steve’s mind. For all his senseless railing and useless struggling, he was frozen now, watching Tony’s lifeless body. The door shut again, locking. That jolted Steve into motion. “Tony. Tony!”

Tony moaned weakly. Steve scrambled closer. His friend looked… God. It was as bad as Steve had feared, as terrible as he’d imagined. They’d obviously gone at him. His face was more bruised than before, lined with blood. It was caked in his hair, dried with fresh glistening wetly on top. His clothes were ripped, his jeans splattered with red, his t-shirt nearly torn off his torso to reveal angry welts down his chest. And there were burns. And contusions. Blunt force trauma. Long strips of torn flesh that had maybe come from some sort whip. Tony wasn’t gagged anymore, and his arms weren’t cuffed behind him anymore, but it was pretty obvious why. It didn’t matter. He was hurt beyond doing anything to try to escape.

Tears burned Steve’s eyes. He swallowed down the burning in his throat, laboring to stay calm. “Tony? Tony, it’s Steve.”

Tony groaned again, this time a little more forcefully. He was clearly drifting between awareness and unconsciousness, and Steve was torn between wanting him to go down so as to escape the pain or stay awake. But if the day ever came where Tony let go of an opportunity to be a smart ass, the world would well and truly be over. “Next time… you can deal with – with your demons yourself, Rogers.”

Steve choked on a sob. “God, Tony.”

Tony sobbed, too. “Can’t lie… This hurts bad.”

Anger rushed through Steve, and he clambered toward the door, gracelessly getting to his feet. “Somebody! Rollins! Rumlowl! Viper! Let me loose so I can help him!” Nothing but the echo of his loud, angry words answered. He didn’t know why he bothered to hope. That anger burned hotter, coiled tighter into blinding rage, and he gave a wrangled scream, pulling anew on the mag cuffs. The bones of his wrists throbbed under the punishing force, his skin tearing more and more, but he still couldn’t break free. Frustrated beyond the pale, he threw his right shoulder into the door. Despite having all of his considerable strength behind it, this, too, did nothing, and the reinforced metal just repelled him this time as it had all the times before it. Steve didn’t stop, though. “For God’s sake, just let me help him! Please! I’ll do whatever you want! Just let me help him!” Still nothing. No answer, no response. No compassion. Steve cried, battering himself against the door. “Damn it! Somebody answer me! Somebody!”

“Easy there, Capsicle. Don’t… don’t throw your back out or something.”

Steve slumped against the metal, all the fight spilling out of him with the tears streaming from eyes
clenched shut. He stood there a moment, shaking, lost in himself, before somehow gathering up the remains of his equanimity and staggering back to Tony.

Tony was laying on his side where they’d tossed him, his hands limp on the ground. Steve saw one had its fingers twisted, the digits broken or dislocated. The other was a mess of blood and bruises, and he couldn’t stand to inspect it any closer. His hands. Steve knew just how much Tony valued them, just how much he needed them to build and invent and create. That made the pain worse. He went back down on his knees. “What can I do?”

Tony closed his eyes. “Not much.”

Steve tried not let that bother him. Tried and failed. And he couldn’t stop himself from asking. “What… What did they want?”

“The usual.” Tony grunted, clearly struggling to make light of this all for Steve’s sake. Even now, even as hurt as he was, he was protecting him. That simultaneously made Steve feel like the most unworthy and inadequate man alive and blessed beyond belief for such a wonderful friend. “Always knew SHIELD was dirty, but… hiring someone like that Rumlow guy? How’d… how’d we ever think they were anything but HYDRA?” He sneered in a poor impersonation. “There’s only order with HYDRA, and order only comes through pain. You ready for yours?” What a – a hack.”

“Tony.”

Tony barely had the strength to talk. His chest was shuddering and stuttering through every weak breath, and his eyes blinked hazily, but he kept going. “They – they wanted to know about where Thor is. Where Bruce is. What Coulson’s team knows about their plans. What Fury knows. Where the rest of SHIELD is hiding out. What our strengths are. You know, the usual. Tactical stuff.” Tony shifted weakly, just the bare minimum of movement, to roll a little onto his back and get the pressure off his side. “I didn’t tell ’em nothing.”

Steve couldn’t help his rough bark of a laugh. “Course not. You’re Tony Stark.”

Tony smiled, revealing reddened teeth. “Damn right.” It went quiet for a moment. Tony lay there, trembling, and Steve’s helplessness was a tangible thing, a torture all its own. Eventually Tony sighed slowly. “They asked about Sarah.” Steve’s heart stopped still in his chest, and he closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. Truth be told, he’d been frightened of this since he’d woken up after they’d taken Tony for questioning. He hadn’t allowed himself to think about it. Now… “Mostly where she was. I didn’t tell them anything, Steve.” Tony swallowed, his eyes blindly roving the shadows overhead. “I didn’t tell them. Won’t ever. Never.”

Steve shuddered through a nauseating mixture of relief and fear. “Tony…”

“Love her like she was my own. Have since… Have since she came. Promise you I won’t tell them anything about her.”

“Tony!”

“Got to keep her safe.”

That was too much. “I’m so sorry,” Steve gasped without thinking. “I’m so, so sorry!”

“’s fine.”

“It’s not fine! There’s no way it’s fine! Not with…” He couldn’t make himself say it at first. “Not ever. But Pepper… God, Tony, the baby… You should be worrying about the baby. Got to save
Tony winced, and Steve immediately felt like an idiot for being so careless and thoughtless. “Sorry. I can’t stop… Been thinking so damn much.”

“Long as they’re safe,” Tony answered. He licked his torn lips and closed his eyes. “Can live with that. Die like that. Long as they’re safe.”

Steve wasn’t sure they were. Not Pepper and the baby. Not Natasha and Sarah. Not Clint. Not the rest of SHIELD or Coulson and his team or anyone. Imprisoned and isolated as he’d been, there was no way to be certain. But there was no sense in going over all those worries again, and there was no sense in telling Tony. Instead he fell onto his back, crushing his hands. He quaked through another breath, trying to control his emotions. It wasn’t good enough. None of this was good enough.

They were silent a moment, Tony curled into his side again, trembling in pain and breathing through clenched teeth. Steve sank into numbness again. He’d managed to go there a couple of times during those long, long hours. It had been fleeing before, but as the cold apathy of defeat settled deep upon them, it became more lasting. More comforting, as awful as that was. As long as they’re safe. Maybe… Maybe if Steve really did surrender now, they would be. If he gave Viper what she wanted, she’d forget about Sarah and Natasha. She’d spare Pepper and Tony’s baby. Maybe that was all that was left. HYDRA would take the world, and she would take him, but maybe they’d be alright.

“There is something you… you can do for me, Steve.” The hoarse rasp of Tony’s voice was thunderous in the absolute silence, and Steve cracked open eyes he’d allowed to close. He turned his head, tipping his body up a bit to see his friend better. Tony’s eyes were hazy, wet with tears and bloodshot where he could open them. “Just promise me… You need to take care of them.”

Steve bit his lower lip to keep it from shaking. “I’m not–”

“You are. You’ll find a way out of this. All that harsh stuff I said before when I kicked your ass. I mean, I said it, but I didn’t mean it.” Tony shook his head a little like he was trying to focus. “You’re Captain America. You’re Captain America and a good father. We always say those things like they’re mutually exclusive, you know? One or the other. But that’s not true, is it?” He was rambling. Steve scooched closer so Tony could lay his head on his shoulder. “You’ve been both since the second you saw her.”

“Haven’t been that great at it,” Steve murmured. “Not either of them.”

“Nah. If it was easy, ev’ryone’d do it,” Tony slurred. “You do great. Always do, Steve. Not your fault. Sorry I was such a jerk to you before.”

“You weren’t. You said what needed to be said.” He gave a small smile. “You were looking out for me, same as you always do.”

“Considerin’ where it landed us, I’m not sure ’bout that. Doesn’t matter anyway. When you beat ’em here, you make sure Pep is okay. Take care of my wife. Take care of my baby.” Steve felt and heard his little, sad laugh. “It’s a girl, you know.”

Steve closed his eyes against the burn of tears. It took him a moment to gather himself enough to speak. The image of Tony with his own daughter, a little baby with dark curls and Pepper’s pretty eyes… It was hard to let go of it. “Never said congratulations,” he managed. “Not to you.”

“’s okay,” Tony answered. “Been kinda busy having ev’rythin’ go to hell.” Steve smiled again in spite of himself. “Sarah’ll be a good cousin to her, yeah? Who cares if they’re not actually
cousins.” Again, Steve could picture it. Sarah taking care of baby girl Stark, Pepper looking on. So happy and enthusiastic and loving. The thought warmed him at his core. Tony grunted. “Kinda amazing. Wonder what my old man’d say about this? Always thought he’d be proud of us workin’ together.” Tony had said that before. Years ago, when they’d sat together on a peaceful, happy Christmas morning, just after Steve had decided not to give Sarah away. In fact, a great deal of this moment felt like it was mirroring that one. The closeness. The affection. The appreciation for each other. “He’d be pretty proud of this, too. Never had anything close to a sister. Or a brother.” Once more with the smile, this one very knowing. “At least not until I was older. So I know I can ask you this.”

Steve swallowed through a dry throat. “Please…”

“I know you’ll beat her. I know ’cause you’re you. Captain America and a great father. Not one without the other.” Steve wished he could be that sure. “We’ve got this…” Tony sighed, trying to find the words. “We’ve got this one life to be who we’re meant to be. A good friend. A brother. A father. A hero. And you know what? You’re meant to be all those things. You’re you. You do the right thing. You always do. You’re–”

“It’s alright, Tony.” The words came unbidden. Picking up his shield had been one thing. Calling himself Captain America boldly and truthfully in front of his daughter had been another. This… This was something else. Tony’s faith and admiration. His love. The truth, in a sense. Steve was all of those things. And they weren’t… at war with each other. Ever since Sarah had come into his life, he’d felt that inside, this pull to be one part of his identity or another. This fight to balance it, compartmentalize it, and make peace with it and manage it. But that wasn’t the answer. He needed to embrace it. Accept it. He was Captain America and a good father, both at once, just as he was meant to be. And he was Natasha’s fiancé and Clint’s friend and Tony’s brother. He was everything he had to be.

He leaned down as much as he could and planted a kiss on Tony’s forehead. “It’s alright. I—I promise. I will. But I’m going to get us out of this first.”

Tony gave an exhausted but genuine smile, so very relieved. “Was countin’ on it. You’re the man with the plan, right?”

“Right.” Steve was still hazy with that, thinking about that, so he didn’t notice right away when Tony dropped off to sleep.

More hours passed. So much time spent bound this tightly was starting to take its toll on Steve. Still, despite the ache in his shoulders and wrists, he didn’t move at all, didn’t disturb Tony where his head was pillowed on his shoulder. He slept soundly. His few half-hearted efforts to rouse the other man were met with silence. Tony was too hurt and too deeply unconscious to respond. He desperately needed medical attention, though that was rather moot. They were alone once more.

But it didn’t last. Of course it wouldn’t. The door banged open again, and this time it wasn’t just the STRIKE Team. Rumlow stalked closer, sneering yet again, and behind him, the Winter Soldier stepped into the room. “Oh, ain’t this cute.” Rumlow laughed. “Don’t want to break up the touchy-feely thing you got going on. Really. But it’s time. Stark’s ready for round two.” He gestured for Bucky to take Steve. “And Madame HYDRA’s ready for her date.”

Steve couldn’t stop them from taking Tony again. He tried because there was no way Tony was in any shape to withstand their torture. He struggled wildly and fought with everything he had left, but it didn’t matter. Not with Bucky’s metal arm like a vise around his throat and a pair of STRIKE soldiers’ rifles jabbed into his back. He choked and gurgled as they roughly dragged Tony’s limp
body from the room. Horror didn’t begin to describe what he felt, watching that, watching Tony barely react to the pain as they grabbed his ankles and hauled him away. He couldn’t shake the fear that this would be the last time he saw him.

He supposed he should have been concerned with his own situation. Bucky was heartless, soulless as he manhandled Steve out of the cell. The emptiness in his cold eyes was disturbing, to say the least, as was the unrestrained violence he was using against his best friend. It took Steve a rough knock or two before he managed to get his brain to refocus from Tony’s plight onto his current predicament, namely the Winter Soldier was dragging him through the corridors of this place toward Viper. Whatever she thought she was going to get from him, she was going to try to get it now.

The mere concept of that twisted Steve’s stomach so badly that he thought he was going to be sick. His heart was pounding, and a cold sweat tickled the small of his back. They were marching through the halls of this place, going up instead of deeper down. Up into the castle. Everything was old stone, drafty and damp-feeling, monotonous and ugly. Bucky was leading him through this place, this stronghold of their old enemies. Taking him to her. This was going to be it. The resolution of a year spent running for his life and hiding. A year spent evading this woman’s clutches. If she was to be believed, this obsession of hers ran even longer. He shuddered anew at the thought of her watching him as he’d laid unconscious from the ice, of her ordering her scientists to quickly gather what they’d needed before Coulson and his men got there. Of her touching him without his knowledge or consent. It was over and done with and unchangeable, years in the past, but it felt like a new wound. What she wanted from him now… That nauseating sense of violation would be but the tip of the iceberg.

“You're you. You’ll find a way to stop her.” Tony’s faith was firm about his heart, just as Bucky’s grip on his arm was strong and unbreakable. “You’re you. You’re who you are. You’ll find a way to win.”

Suddenly he couldn’t be silent anymore. They were reaching the top of a set of old steps. The windows to the left revealed the English Channel. It was evening, very late with just the first hints of moonlight dancing across the rippling ocean hundreds of feet below. They’d been here for more than a day. The wind that cut inside the fortress was unseasonably cold. It did nothing to dissuade him. “Bucky, it’s Steve. Steve Rogers.” Those gray eyes flicked to him, steeped in warning, but Bucky said nothing. Steve went on. It did nothing to dissuade him. “Steve Rogers. We grew up together. Fought in the war together. Remember that? Remember me?”

Again, there was nothing. Steve gritted his teeth, wondering just how deep the damage went. Years, decades, spent as HYDRA’s weapon, as their lapdog. Bucky could have been conducting HYDRA’s operations from inside SHIELD during that time and Steve would have never known it, just as he hadn’t known his DNA had been collected against his will. Bucky had been wiped and reprogrammed countless times, if Viper was to be believed. Was there anything left of the man he had been under that? Could there be? There has to be. Steve had to reach whatever remained of him now. He refused to accept that a lifetime of wonderful memories, playing together and laughing together and fighting side by side against everything from schoolyard bullies to poverty and sickness to HYDRA in the trenches… He refused to accept that there was power in this world that could simply erase that. “Steve Rogers. We lived in the same building. You lived with your mom and dad and your three sisters. I just had my mom. You remember them? Winifred and Joseph Barnes. Your sisters were Rebecca and Lucy and Katie. My mom’s name was Sarah.” Nothing. Steve’s throat closed up on him a little, but he continued. “We met on the first day of school. I started something with a kid bullying a little girl and you pulled him off me and then–”

That hand tightening on his arm was the only warning he got before Bucky was wrenching him violently around and driving him into the wall. “I don’t know you,” Bucky hissed close to his face.
His voice and body language belied what he was saying. That frazzled air of tension was back.

“You do know me,” Steve insisted in a strangled gasp. Even though Bucky was practically choking him with his metal arm to his throat again, and even though his eyes flashed with murderous violence, Steve couldn’t help his relief. Why would he seem so rattled if he didn’t remember? At least just a little? Self-defense. An attempt to remove something that was a serious threat to his internal stability. Which meant Steve was threatening his internal stability, getting through the programming enough to elicit something that was Bucky and not the Winter Soldier. “You do!”

“No, I don’t!” The cybernetic arm was gone from his neck, but Steve’s relief was short-lived because it was crashing across his face. He reeled, staggering to the left. The two STRIKE soldiers with them immediately shoved their guns at his chest. Not that that mattered. Bucky wrenched him back with a grip on his arms. “Be quiet!”

“No,” Steve gasped around the blood in his mouth. “No, Buck! You gotta remember me. I’m Steve Rogers. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes, but you hated being called anything other than Bucky!”

A furious yowl escaped Bucky’s lips, and he smacked Steve again. “Shut up!” he snarled, grabbing Steve by his uniform and hauling him up. He shoved him forward, and Steve’s hurt leg gave out as he staggered and fought to get his balance. The Winter Soldier was merciless, even as Steve nearly fell.

And Steve wasn’t dissuaded. “People are gonna die, Buck,” he gasped. “We – we have to stop that. Can’t let that happen. Please let me go. Help me. You don’t have to serve them. You don’t have to listen to her!” Bucky slammed him into the wall again, unforgiving, pummeling him hard with his left hand while his right held him steady. Steve cried out. “You don’t have to be her slave!”

Bucky’s voice was a low hiss in his ear. “Yes, I do. And so do you.”

Combined with the pain in his chest and head, that was enough to daze Steve momentarily, to paralyze him enough with fear that he stopped fighting. Bucky immediately returned to dragging his subdued prisoner to his fate. They went higher until they were likely at some sort of tower. Through Steve’s foggy head, images of a fairy tale, of a noble knight climbing to a castle’s highest point to rescue a maiden fair, drifted through his head. He was the knight, trying desperately to reach his one true love and complete his quest. Sleeping Beauty or Rapunzel or something of the like. Except in this case the knight was being rather forced and the maiden fair was a vindictive witch with plans for world domination. “Nit-picking,” Tony would say. Steve laughed before he could stop himself. Bucky glanced at him. He said nothing, but his eyes softened again.

Finally they reached the end of the line. Bucky stopped him outside the closed doors to some chambers beyond. Their escorts were quick to raise their rifles again as Steve was pushed to the cold wall there. He braced himself for another beating, but Bucky only spent a moment undoing his cuffs. Just for a second, Steve let hope wash over him. Bucky had heard what he said and was breaking free of the brainwashing and remembering him. Bucky did know him. And he was letting him go.

But no. Bucky’s gun came quickly and smoothly from its holster and was at Steve’s temple before he even had a chance to process what was happening. The Winter Soldier was silent, a malignant force at his back, and the threat was very clear. This wasn’t them escaping. It was Bucky doing exactly as he’d feared: delivering him. And there was no choice but to comply.

So he did. He turned around slowly, facing those closed doors. But instead of succumbing to his terror and frustration and spending these few seconds struggling in vain, instead of foolishly fighting
back simply to fight, he ignored the gun to his head and grabbed Bucky’s black combat vest and hauled him close. “I’m gonna get you out of this,” he swore, hugging him tightly, cherishing this moment even if it was brief and laden with danger. The body in his arms was stiff, unyielding, not reacting at all. Steve only held tighter, embracing Bucky as firmly as he could. This might well be the first warm, kind touch his friend had experienced in the last seventy years, and he meant it. He meant it despite what Bucky had been forced to do to him. He meant it despite what Bucky had done to Natasha. This was a solemn promise, and he meant it. “I swear, Buck. I’m gonna make this right. I’ll save you. Not letting go this time.” At that, Bucky did shake ever so slightly. “Not letting go.” Not of you. Not of Tony. Not of Sarah and Nat. And not of myself. “Not again.”

Never again. I’m Captain America.

With that, he let Bucky go and stepped to the door to face Viper and everything she wanted of him.

Chapter End Notes

Check out this amazing artwork inspired by this story, created by the wonderful missingthebetterhalfofme!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thanks for reading, everyone! We're getting to the end. You can tell because we're at the part of the story where things can't really get worse :-P.

Viper was delusional. Insane. Completely crazy.

Absolutely off her rocker.

Steve couldn’t think anything other than that as he stood inside her room. Bucky closed the door behind him, but he didn’t move for quite a few seconds, staring in unabashed shock at what was before him. The room was surprisingly nice compared to the cold, drab stone that made up every inch of this place. The walls and floors were that here, too, but there were rugs and drapes, nice furniture upholstered in velvet, an alcove in the back with a huge, four-poster bed, a polished oak table with chairs. It was that which surprised him the most, the table completely adorned in expensive linens, china plates, crystal goblets, and silver flatware. There was a vase with flowers and a few tall candlesticks that were softly burning and shedding golden illumination throughout the dimmed room. An elegant affair. A romantic dinner set for two. A date.

“What is this?” he snapped, staring in disbelief. She emerged from behind one of the chairs, having traded her cat suit for a form-fitting, slinky black dress that accentuated her curves just as well. Her face was heavily painted, gorgeous with impeccable make-up that made her seem like a predator hiding within beauty. Red lips and smoky eyes and flawless skin. It was sickening. So was the array of food on the table, expensive steak and potatoes and vegetables. It smelled delicious, and he was miserably hungry after hours and hours without sustenance, but the mere thought of eating her food twisted his stomach. Especially like this. It was mind-boggling, what she was obviously expecting. “You brought me here to… What? Have dinner with you? Talk? Spend a nice evening together?”

“That was the idea,” she responded. She was barefoot, boldly slipping across the room. The dress was slit high up on her thigh, and he could see a great deal of bare flesh as she sashayed her way toward him. Standing there was damn well difficult with her coming at him like this. Somehow, in all of his nightmares about her capturing him, he hadn’t envisioned anything quite this way. Somehow he’d always imagined it to be more… overt. Forceful. He should have seen this coming. He was so naïve, so stupid sometimes. She was obsessed with him and wanted him. What other end could that possibly have? “Like I said before. I thought we could celebrate.”

Steve said nothing, glaring at her with every ounce of his fury thrown into it. He was rigid with it, with just how much he hated her. She didn’t care at all, continuing in her slow approach. Undoubtedly it was meant to seem sultry and seductive. It was anything but. “Oh, you’ve rubbed yourself raw.” She reached for his hand. Steve resisted the urge to recoil or hit her as she took it. She’d been pawing at him since they’d been captured, but somehow this was worse. She inspected the bloody welts and bruises encircling his wrists and clucked her tongue sadly. “You shouldn’t fight so hard.”

“You know I could kill you right now without even trying,” he simply said.
She smiled at him, sweeping her thumb over his split knuckles. It made Steve want to shiver in disgust. Natasha did that to him so often when they held hands. “You could,” she agreed. It was nearly a purr. She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his bruises. It took everything he had to stand still and let her. Smirking behind his knuckles, she cocked an eyebrow. “But you won’t.”

He couldn’t take it anymore, wrenching his hand away from her vile attention. For a fleeting second he thought about actually doing what he said, following through with his threat. After all the hell this woman had put him, Sarah, and Natasha through, she deserved it. Viper gave a little laugh. “Not that you don’t want to. I know you do. You’ve spent night after night fantasizing about it, haven’t you? In that sad, little, lonely house you were hiding in. You laid there on what I’m sure was a ratty bed wondering how good it would feel to get your vengeance on me for what I’ve done to you. And I’m equally sure you convinced yourself you’d never do it, no matter how badly you wanted to.”

The liquid gleam in her eyes turned smug. “You’re Captain America. Murder seems a tad bit uncivil.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Steve snarled.

“If you didn’t make an exception for that rat bastard Ward when he was the only way to reach Sarah, I think I’m probably okay. Plus, he didn’t have the… emotional baggage I have, right?” She grinned now, outright and arrogant. Steve supposed it was all obvious, but it felt like she could see into his head. “It’s just wrong on a fundamental level to kill the mother of your child.”

That rage exploded inside him. It was all he could do not to do exactly as she taunted. “Go to hell.”

She folded her arms coyly across her chest. “Even still, though, I’m a big believer in insurance. That’s why I kidnapped Sarah in the first place: to ensure that you came to me. And that’s why I had her made.” Had her made. That was sickening. “To ensure that HYDRA wasn’t putting all its eggs into a single basket with Centipede and all our other projects. So if I’m wrong and you do make a move on me? Someone might see it.” She tipped her head a little. Steve followed the gesture and saw the tiny camera in the corner of the room near where the ceiling curved up into its vaulted arch. “And that someone might not take too kindly to it. Might get mad even, seeing me go down. Might take it out on Stark.”

Steve ground his teeth together in fury. Of course. And she was so sure about it, sure enough to have him here unbound. It killed him to admit it to himself, but she was right. He wasn’t going to attack her. And he wasn’t going to run, not with Tony’s life in the balance. He had to battle to get above his anger and frustration, swallowing thickly. And he had to play along. Somewhat. “We’re not celebrating anything.”

“There’s so much to be happy about, though,” she replied casually.

“There is?” he returned, tone dripping in fake interest.

She beamed. “Definitely. Our stronghold here for one thing. Magnificent, isn’t it? For all his efforts, Agent Coulson and the rest of the pathetic remains of SHIELD have no idea just how strong we still are. Or our plans about to come to fruition? That’s certainly worth a toast or two.”

Steve kept his face entirely impassive. He’d learned a thing or two about lying, about playing things cool. He’d learned from the best in the world at it. “Go ahead. I’ll watch.”

She wasn’t put off. Her eyes darted to his uniform, dirty and streaked with red. “I’d much rather you change and get comfortable. There’s a shower and clean clothes in the bedroom. You can freshen up.”
He couldn’t believe her audacity. The thought of getting undressed in the mere vicinity of her was worse than nauseating. “You’re not serious.”

Again with the smile. She turned and headed back to the dining room table, reaching for a wine bottle there. “Alright, then. If you like wearing your friend’s blood. It’s certainly all over your hands. Stark’s. And Romanoff’s. And the innocent people who died today because of you.” Steve stiffened. “Smarts, doesn’t it, Cap?”

It did. It did so much. Still, he wasn’t going to admit that to her. “No.”

“You’re a terrible liar. What, Black Widow couldn’t teach you to be better at it?” He said nothing, not rising to the bait. She grinned again as she smoothly poured herself a glass and then did the same for him. “Not poisoned,” she offered as she lifted her goblet and took a sip. “See?” He was tempted to remind her she couldn’t poison him anyway given the serum, but he didn’t bother. “And you have to be hungry with that metabolism of yours.”

Steve shook his head. “You want me to tell you that I’d rather starve than eat at your table or stop stating the blatantly obvious.”

She chuckled. “I like you sassy. Far more interesting that bland, awkward Steve Rogers who loves his mommy and worries about his daughter and wouldn’t know what to do with a woman if she dropped into his lap. Such a sweet, innocent boy.” It was hard to stand there and be insulted so personally. Sure, he’d been demeaned before, but it had always been some villain coming after Captain America. This was her coming after him as a person. That was infinitely harder to tolerate. “And I bet you find me far more interesting than Mandy Thayer, zoo keeper from a little farm out in the Midwest or some stupid nonsense. Some idiotic, boring, useless girl stunned into a stupor that the great Captain America would deign to go on a date with her.”

“Oh, even the great Captain America makes mistakes.”

Laughing outright, she raised her glass to that. “Indeed.” Her smile slid just a bit, and her eyes hardened. The mood changed drastically just with that from this tense bantering to utter threatening seriousness. “And if you don’t want to make another, I suggest you sit.”

Steve weighed his options and quickly realized he had none. Viper might seem flirty and light now, but she wasn’t predictable. With Tony in their hands, he couldn’t take any chance. So he finally took another step into the room. And another. Slowly and guardedly, he made his way to the ornate table with its fine place settings and gourmet food. He made to do as she asked. “Aren’t you forgetting something? You may have been pathetic before, but you were polite, too, and a gentleman.” It was pathetically obvious what she wanted. And, God, it stung to give it to her. Again, he wasn’t sure there was a choice. He had to give ground a little, as much as he would prefer not to. He had to save the fight for something more important than his pride. Humiliation and rage burned hot on his cheeks despite that as he stepped over to her side of the table to pull out her chair for her. He waited until she sat, and she made a production of it, moving slowly, settling herself pointedly, arranging her dress with great care. Then he was able to push her chair in and sit himself.

She reached for her plate. “Eat.”

“I told you no.”

“And I told you: eat.” This wasn’t a request. It was an order, clear as day, and Steve’s eyes darted among her face, his food, and the camera in the corner watching everything. An image of Tony tied up with a gun to his head flashed behind his eyelids as he let them slip shut, and he struggled with his ire a moment before reaching for his utensils. He smeared blood on the pristine table linens when he...
reluctantly pulled his plate closer. Despite how unwilling he was to do this (he really meant it when he’d joked about starvation being preferable), he was famished. He cut into the steak with the knife, absently running through every conceivable way he could use it to kill her as she sat across from him and enjoyed her dinner. He had never imagined the prospect of murder would be satisfying, never fathomed the day where he thought it could be, but here he was, fantasizing about it. Just how easy it would be to end her, escape, and rescue Tony. Save Sarah. Love Natasha (please let her be okay) and be free. He couldn’t make himself do it, though. Holding the knife felt like too much temptation, so he quickly cut his meat and set it down.

She noticed. “Something wrong?” she asked, her voice dripping in fake concern. You know damn well what’s wrong. “Don’t like it? I can have the cook send up something else.” Steve gritted his teeth, spearing a piece of steak with his fork. It was ridiculously difficult to eat it, caught between wanting to throw it in her face to spite her and devouring it as fast as possible so as to get this over with. It tasted like nothing, and he chewed it mechanically. The quiet was thick and unbearable, filled with only the clank of silverware. Steve worked his way through the meal, closing himself off emotionally. He knew this was only the beginning, but it was difficult to accept it, to think beyond this moment. Whatever I have to do, she can’t make me love her. Whatever I have to do, she can’t take that. He said that over and over to himself as he ate, fortifying himself as much as he could. Whatever she makes me do, she won’t have me.

Steve jerked, shocked out of his thoughts, as something brushed against his leg. He dropped his fork with a clatter, the surprise rapidly shifting to disgust. Her bare toes were rather vigorously rubbing his shin through his pants. She was playing footsie with him. God Almighty. Did she have no shame? What the hell? Steve pulled away almost automatically. “Don’t,” he seethed.

“Don’t what?” she asked innocently.

Disgusted and off-kilter with how strong it was, he quickly changed tactics. “You want to re-enact our date? Our only date? Alright, do it. Let’s play that game again. A question for a question. Tell me about the real Ophelia Sarkissian.”

Her face tightened into something not quite readable. “Do you really care?”

He wasn’t sure what to say. He took a chance and tried to be earnest. “Yes.” It wasn’t completely a lie. Maybe he could learn something from this. Something about who she was that he could use against her. Something about what HYDRA was up to. If nothing else, at least it would distract her.

She wasn’t convinced. It was hard to be genuine given the hatred thrumming in his veins. “You don’t.”

“Fine,” he snapped. He shoved his plate away, making a show of his frustration. That wasn’t nearly so difficult. “What am I here for then? I’ll make that my question.”

She scrutinized him, clearly a bit surprised by his attitude and trying to figure it out. He prayed he was good enough to play this game. “You’re here to love me.”

He’d anticipated that, of course, but hearing her say it was an entire new level of terror. “And if I won’t?”

She grinned, lowering her glass after taking a sip of wine. “That’s two questions. It’s my turn now.” At least he’d gotten her involved with this stupidity. She lowered her goblet. Then she twisted her ring finger just a bit. The engagement ring. It caught the light and shone as she turned the diamond the right way. “Do you love her?”
For some reason, that took Steve aback. He didn’t even know why. Viper was nothing but jealous, and that had been obvious to him the moment he’d found out she was behind Natasha’s shooting. Even before that. However, hearing her so boldly question him made it very real and undeniable. There was no reason to lie. “Yes.” Her eyes flashed. Before she could say anything more, he barreled on. “Who are you really?”

That calmed the fire. Barely. “Sarkissian is my mother’s family. My great grandmother was a member of the lesser nobility in Berlin and the daughter of a man who had some import in the Third Reich. Even back then, Johann Schmidt was a visionary. When Hitler first came into power, there was a movement among HYDRA to secure the German legacy and protect the bloodlines of its ruling members. She was… matched to him in an arranged marriage.” Matched to him. That didn’t sound entirely willing to Steve. Viper didn’t seem to care. “When Schmidt became obsessed with finding the power of the gods – the Tesseract, as we know it now – he left her pregnant and never returned. She gave birth to my grandfather, who carried on HYDRA’s work in his father’s name from the shadows after the war. He, in turn, gave birth to my mother, the first Madame HYDRA. A counterpoint to your precious Director Carter. Undermining her from the shadows, reaping war and creating havoc. And, years after that, here I am, at the dawn of the promised new age.”

That was all awful. He’d never known Schmidt had married; all the information the SSR had had on the man had never included that. It was disturbing, both because it humanized him and because it had meant a part of Schmidt had survived his death. Equally upsetting was the concept that there’d been other leaders of HYDRA hiding in the shadows, carrying on the Red Skull’s work. He supposed it was only logical, but that was poor consolation. There’d been another ruler of HYDRA after Schmidt, and Madame HYDRA before Viper. A heinous, evil legacy, one that had worked against Peggy, against Fury, against SHIELD. Awful. More than ever, he felt like the Avengers had never had a chance.

“My turn,” she said softly, obviously pleased with how stricken he probably looked. “Does Sarah know who I am?”

As upset as he was, his answer came automatic, quick, and harsh. “No. I never told her. Never!”

Her lips curled in a smile that was equal parts smug and forced. “You can’t erase the truth, Steve, no matter how much you want to.” She twisted the ring again. “And she can’t replace me.”

He didn’t want to think about it. “What’s HYDRA’s end game?” She lifted her glass, taking a sip and making a show of the red wine touching her equally red lips. Fuming, Steve struggled to rein in his temper. He gripped the arm of his chair hard enough that he was probably a second or two away from cracking it. “Come on. What’s the end game?”

“Don’t want to wait?” she baited.

“Answer the damn question. Those are the rules, aren’t they?”

Viper stared at him evenly. “The Red Skull believed in the power of the gods, that the worthy man would be able to receive it. Wield it to his own ends. Look behind me.” Steve did. There was an old tapestry there, one faded and mottled with age. It seemed like it was from the Medieval period, which he supposed made sense given where they were. It wasn’t French, though. It looked Norse. There were runes on the corner of the fabric, the style of which Steve recognized from Thor’s things. A great shadow threatened a large group people in the tapestry’s main image. They appeared terrified. Something red glowed in the distance above the shadow. The sun? Viper was continuing on. “He believed in magic, for lack of a better term. Artifacts from the heavens holding ancient powers that could change the course of mankind. His vision was the driving force behind HYDRA for decades.” She shook her head, her disdain clear in her eyes. “Now we lack cohesion.
You probably noticed it. I don’t think half the people we have under our wings believe a fraction of what he did. Even with undeniable evidence, gods from Asgard walking among mere mortals, powers from other planets, aliens and science beyond our wildest dreams… They still seem to believe that victory lies in man-made weapons. Project: Insight. Centipede. Noble aspirations, but even as I greenlit them I figured they were doomed. Man-made weapons have never been enough.”

Steve didn’t give a damn. “The Red Skull was monster,” he snapped, “and so are you.”

She gave a knowing smile. “Ironical. Of all the insults you could’ve used, you picked that one.”

Steve narrowed his eyes, unnerved. “And you’re just as short-sighted and blind in the face of all the evidence as everyone else, I see. A superior race is not going to come from genetic engineering alone. You and I can breed the next step in humanity’s evolution. Doctor Erskine’s work as it should have been had he cooperated seventy-five years ago. But even with that… Well, a little house-cleaning is in order. A purification process, as Doctor Zola called it, one wrought by a monster rather than a man.”

“You’re insane.”

“Vision, Steve. You need to learn to have some if you are going to be at my side.”

Steve bristled, trying to gather his wits. How could she be so cocky and blind? He glared at her as she finished the last sips of her wine. “Let’s be clear about something,” he finally said when the awful silence had dragged on too long. “You have me as your prisoner. You have Tony to use against me. And you can use him to make me cooperate. Sit here and carry on like we’re having some sort of romantic dinner. Make me pull out your chair. Kiss your damn hand. Or worse.” He surged onward, refusing to let his own fears dissuade him. “But no matter what you do to me, I am not at your side. I’m not helping you willingly. Maybe I’m not fighting against you, but I’m not agreeing with you. And maybe you own my – my body. But you will never own my heart.”

He could see his words struck home. His defiance did more than anger her. It frightened her. “Sure about that?”

“Absolutely,” he said.

She was up and across the room in a flash. And she shoved the whole table away with one mighty push. Dishes crashed to the floor and shattered. Food went everywhere. The wine spilled like blood. Before Steve could bring himself to act, she was in his lap, straddling his thighs with her chest pressed to his. From a sheath that had been hidden high under her dress, she’d pulled a knife, and it winked in the shadows like a flash before settling at the vulnerable flesh of his throat. “You think you can stop me from taking what I want?” she hissed. “Huh? You think after waiting as long as I have, for the moment to finally be right, that I’m not going to get it?”

“You won’t.” The urge to fight back, buck or punch or get her the hell off him, was so strong, but he didn’t dare with that blade against his throat. “You can’t make me love you. You can’t force me to serve you.”

“Here’s a question for you,” she whispered, leaning close to his face. Her dark hair curtained them, and her lips were dangerously close. His dog tags dangled down in front of him. “Do you really think I can’t force you when I’ve forced your friend for seventy years?” Steve’s blood turned to ice water. His eyes widened, and he knew she could read his horror, but he couldn’t contain it. “He’s been mine in every sense of the word. In every way. His faulty version of the serum… He’s contributed to my cause, to our quest for the superior race, even though it failed time and time again. Don’t think for a second that he hasn’t been a part of it.” Oh, God. Bucky. “Knowing that, do you honestly think I can’t dominate your will? Erase your memories?” She grabbed his hair with her
free hand, wrenching his head back. Steve forced himself to be limp, to let it happen. “I’ll wipe her from your brain over and over again if I have to. Until she’s gone. Until she never existed at all.”

“You can’t make me love you!” he snapped again. “Doesn’t matter what you do to me. You can’t make me!”

“Watch me. Watch me reprogram you until you’re mine, too. Until all you know is me. Until all you care about is me. Until all you want to do is satisfy me!” She was losing her temper. She dragged in a couple calming breaths, staring at him with a mixture of hungry lust and fearful desperation. “It doesn’t have to be pain, Steve.” Steve wanted to laugh, but he didn’t dare with that knife where it was. “It can be pleasure. We can have it together. I can be yours as much as you’re mine. Our family, together. You lost your chance with Carter. Romanoff is nothing. Doesn’t matter how many times she came to you. I can still be your first. I want to be your first. Your only.”

“I’ll never want you!”

Her rage burned. “You think she can compare with me? Black Widow? A snake against a little spider? She’s half the assassin I am! I know she tried to break my cover when I came after you, but she failed. You know why, Steve?” So much for calming herself. Her words were getting faster, harsher, more frenzied as she lost herself in her attempt to convince him. “She’s nothing. A weak shadow of what she was. I’m more. I’m Sarah’s mother! I’m her mother!” She solaced Steve’s hair harder, petulant like a child on the verge of a tantrum. “She’s not! She’s nothing! And she’ll die as nothing.”

In the silence that followed, with Viper’s awful threats looming large and strong, Steve forced himself to be calm. And the words came unbidden. “Here’s a question for you,” he finally said. “All those long nights you spent wanting me, waiting for me, dreaming about it… Did you really think that you’d be my first?”

It was cruel. Harsh. Very unlike him, both to taunt like this and to use something so meaningful to him as a weapon. But it had an immediate effect. Viper’s eyes went wide, like some preconceived notion she had of him, this awkward, naive, chivalrous gentleman who wouldn’t dream of sleeping with a woman before marrying her, was being trounced before her very eyes. Seeing it was endlessly satisfying. All the lust, the possessive, ferocious heat in her eyes, went cold immediately as she digested what he was saying. He went in for the kill, unyielding beneath her. “HYDRA takes, right?” My DNA. My dog tags. Nat’s ring. Our life and mine. Our life together. He shook with the rush of power he suddenly felt. “Well, it’s too late. You can’t take what I’ve already given to someone else. It’s not mine anymore. It’s hers.”

In the long run, it didn’t really matter, that he’d already slept with Natasha. It was a minor thing, and if Viper wanted to erase his memories, his identity, and turn him into her lover, he knew she could. But this was symbolic, monumental because of it, and Viper knew it. She gave a frustrated yowl. For a horrific second, Steve worried he’d gone too far, that she’d kill him for what he’d said. The knife shook against his throat. But she didn’t cut him. She was off his lap in an instant, and she was enraged and disgusted now. It was as if everything she thought she’d had right in her hands was turning to ash before her very eyes. With her free hand, she slapped him hard. Steve didn’t give an inch, staring at her defiantly. “You will never make me love you,” he said again, “and you’ll pay for what you did to Natasha. And Bucky. And Tony. And me and Sarah. All of us. You’ll pay for everything.”

She hit him again. He still didn’t so much as flinch. She was losing her temper now and losing it fast, looming over him, her color erratic and her eyes wild. They stared at each other, and despite the
fact that Steve was her prisoner, her prey, it was very much an equal show of strength and
determination. She was the one who cracked first, backing down and gathering her composure.
“You’ll be the one who pays,” she retorted. “You wanted to know what my end game was? Fine.”
She grabbed him by the hair and yanked him out of his chair and onto his knees. “It’s time. I’ll
show you. And then we’ll talk about how you will learn your place.”

All the pleasantries (laughable to call them that, but still) were gone in a flash. The Winter Soldier
stalked back into the room at Viper’s command. She disappeared into the alcove beyond, every line
of her body taut beneath that black dress, as Bucky and his escorts went about securing their prisoner
anew. Steve struggled, but it was fairly perfunctory. Any effort Bucky had made to hold back the
cold violence that seemed to bleed out of him constantly was gone at Viper’s nod, and he was a
flurry of harsh blows and sharp movements as he pinned Steve and bound his hands again. That
awful Kevlar muzzle was back, too, and Steve shouted and begged for his friend to heed him, but it
was all to no avail. In short order, he was bound, gagged, on his knees, and just as helpless as he
had been before with Bucky’s handgun digging into his temple and the two STRIKE soldiers
flanking them.

Viper took her sweet time getting ready. Steve struggled to breathe through the thing in his mouth
and his own rage as he was forced to kneel there and wait. Eventually she emerged, composed
anew, her face a picture of icy anger. She was dressed once more in her uniform, perfectly so, and
she stared down at him with nothing but hatred and condescension. “When this is over and the new
world order has come, there won’t be enough of you left to regret crossing me,” she warned softly.
Steve growled in the back of his throat and stubbornly kept his eyes on the stone floor. “Look at
me.” She grabbed his chin and lifted his face. He tensed his muscles and refused. There was no
way she could force him to look up at her like some sort of slave, or so he thought until he felt those
metal fingers in his hair and a knee in his back. He painfully found himself staring into her eyes. “I
tried to be nice. I tried to make this pleasant for you, for both of us. I tried to give you a place with
me. You threw it back in my face.” She frowned stiffly, clearly restraining her anger. Her nails
curled viciously into his jaw. “So now I’m not going to be nice anymore. You think I care that she
had you first? You think that will stop me? It won’t. You’re mine, and I’ll remake you, just like we
remade him.” Her eyes darted to Bucky behind him. “Get him down to the gateway.”

A few minutes later, Steve was being manhandled through the castle again. They were descending
back into its depths but not heading to the prison block. He was led to a large room, something that
may have once served as a meeting hall. The ceilings were high above, again vaulted. There was no
furniture aside from computers and lab equipment. Steve knew enough about technology to
recognize server racks. A rat’s nest of wires and cables connected them together, the cords strung
everywhere almost like a web, and an array of computers were arranged on desks. In the center of
the room, there was a platform of sorts, and some sort of metal arc encircled it. That was joined to
the computers through more thick cables. Off to the side, there was a machine no bigger than a box,
which was also connected. Pipes led from it to the arc, and they were venting gas slowly and softly.
Steve took one look and realized all Fury’s speculation and Ward’s intel was right. This was the
Gamma Burst Generator stolen from SHIELD that they’d last been able to locate outside out of
Paris. Obviously HYDRA had moved it north to this place and was using it to power a portal, just
as Fury and his group had feared. But a portal to where? He had the sinking suspicion he was
about to find out.

Bucky shoved him into the room. He pushed him toward the dais in the center. Then he kicked
Steve’s legs out from under him. Steve grimaced, falling, barely catching himself before his face
smashed into the stone floor. Bucky yanked him back into his own legs. It could have been simply
more rough, unforgiving treatment, but Steve let himself believe Bucky was steadying him for his
sake.
“Front row seat,” Viper declared as she came in behind them at a brisk pace. She hadn’t come down with them, and he could see why. Wherever she’d gone, she’d gotten his shield. She gave it to one of the many soldiers in the room. A light smile that was nothing but fake and insulting claimed her face at Steve’s venomous glare. “What? You deserve to see this, believe me. Time?”

That was barked to one of the many technicians. Most of them were rushing around, adjusting things on the computers, checking their equipment. There was a larger screen on one side of the room, and it was displaying a diagram of two globes – planets? – and a timer counting down. “Eleven minutes, Madame HYDRA,” responded the unfortunate target of Viper’s demand. “Everything is ready.”

Viper turned back to the soldiers. “Get Stark. I think he’d like to be here for this, too.” The two men nodded and went to do as she ordered. Steve stared at her, struggling to stay submissive and compliant. His heart was pounding and his skin was crawling with a dark and miserable sense of foreboding. She read that, of course. She came to stand right beside him, staring at the dais. “I can see you’re wondering what all this is about. Want me to bring you up to speed?” He didn’t nod, grinding his teeth together and praying someone put a stop to this. “You remember the Convergence, I assume? Big deal. Happened a few years ago?” Of course Steve remembered it. He hadn’t been much involved. In fact, Thor had handled the entire crisis fairly well on his own. When the Nine Realms had come into spatial alignment, the Dark Elves of Svartalfheim had attempted to destroy the universe by unleashing an ancient power called the Aether. Thor had been away on Asgard when the situation had begun, and all of the sudden there had been a hole in the sky over Greenwich in England that bridged the realms and their Asgardian teammate had been there on television, battling Malekith. Everything had been quickly resolved before SHIELD had even been able to call the rest of the Avengers to assemble, and Thor had been victorious though both his mother and Loki had died in the event. In the aftermath, he forsook his place as Prince of Asgard and returned to earth to live.

But what did that have to do with this? Viper continued on. “While your God of Thunder was busy trying to save the world, SHIELD’s scientists were studying the Gamma signatures coming from the Convergence itself. They might have been a tad slow to issue the order for the Avengers to assemble because, well… I told them to wait. There was something in the Gamma fluctuations, you see, and we needed those precious minutes to figure out what it was.” Steve bristled at the thought that Thor and Jane and their friends, that the whole world, had been endangered so HYDRA could have extra time to do their science. “Once we realized what was happening, it threw a very fundamental assumption made by you into question.”

What?

Again his face must have betrayed him. Viper smiled. “Still not getting it? Let me remind you.” One of the techs tapped a space on his keyboard, and from the speakers around the computer, a distorted recording began to play. Steve recognized his own voice immediately.

“This is Captain Rogers. Can you read me?”

Morita. “Captain Rogers, what is your–”

Peggy. He could hardly stand to hear her. “Steve, is that you? Are you alright?”

“Peggy? Schmidt’s dead!”

“What about the–”

The recording turned off. Steve couldn’t piece it together. His brain refused to think. Viper folded
her arms across her chest smugly. “You told the world that the Red Skull was dead.” She shook her head. “But he didn’t die, did he? The Tesseract took him away, and you only thought he’d been killed.”

That… wasn’t possible. But even as he thought that, he knew he was fooling himself. Shock was leaving him fairly bereft of any other cognizant thought, though, and he couldn’t process much as she continued talking. “The Gamma signatures were a message, a message from the Red Skull meant for his followers on earth. It was a prophecy, a promise. The next time earth came into alignment with the realm on which he’d been trapped… He’d return.”

No. He jerked without thinking to, a raw, automatic, visceral reaction to the horror scraping its way across his nerves. No. This was absolutely insane. Not possible. So damn crazy that it couldn’t be real. But… He’d seen what could be done. Loki’s invasion. The Convergence itself. And Viper was insane and obsessed but not stupid. If she believed this could happen… No, no, no. Suddenly he couldn’t keep quiet, shouting something about her lying, about her being crazy, about none of this being true. It was all muffled beyond comprehension. And she smiled gleefully. “Oh, yes. Fortunate that we heard it, huh? So I followed his instructions. Waited until now, until the night where the earth would be in the right place at the right time. Built a way to generate the portal. And when the moment comes…” She grinned. “He’ll be back to lead us. Isn’t that exciting?”

Not the word he’d use. The words he’d use were swirling in the back of his mind, twisting underneath his shock and horror like a tempest. None of them were able to pierce that layer of panic to get to his mouth. And it wasn’t like it mattered. He couldn’t say them if they had.

Viper was grinning and grinning. It was oily and so conceited. She had him right where she wanted him, and she knew it. “What’s the matter? Don’t like that end game you were so interested in? Hurts, doesn’t it? You really did die for nothing. It’s not just that HYDRA survived. He did. And he’ll come back and bring Armageddon with him.”

There was a scuffle behind them, but Steve was reeling so badly from what she said – from what she thought would happen – that he couldn’t pay attention at first. She had to be wrong. This couldn’t be certain. It was nonsense. When those ten minutes ticked down, nothing would happen because it couldn’t be right!

“Ah, Tony, so nice of you to join us,” Viper said, standing aside to reveal the men coming in. Steve’s eyes widened. Oh, God, Tony! The hobbled man before him hardly resembled his friend. As bad off as Tony had been before, he was worse now. There seemed to be more blood on his body than in it. He was bent, and his eyes were hardly open. He was barely conscious, barely alive. Were it not for Rollins’ and Rumlow’s grips on each of his arms, he would surely have collapsed.

And Steve couldn’t keep quiet, couldn’t keep still. He struggled senselessly, which earned him a vicious cuff across the back of his head from Bucky and Viper’s sharp demand of, “Shut up!” She turned to her men. “Did you learn anything from him?”

“Plenty. Took some doing, some drugs, but Stark’s pretty good at flapping his lips after you break him apart.” Rumlow’s proud smile was hideous. Steve was trembling with rage and horror, with anguish. He shouted again, desperate to do something, but Bucky smacked him repeatedly until he was dizzy with pain and prostrate on the floor, Bucky’s combat boot crushing his temple into the stone. Consciousness was fleeting a moment, and when he could hear again above the hammering of his heart in his ears, his blood went cold. “–all at Stark Tower. Coulson and Ward. Fury. Carter. And Romanoff and Barton. One strike could take them all out. And, thanks to Stark here, we have the access codes to his AI. We can shut down their defenses.”
Oh, God. Steve whined helplessly, squirming against the pressure on his skull. Viper glanced at him, so damn pleased with herself. “Excellent work,” she complimented.

“That’s not everything. It’s not even the best part.” It didn’t seem possible, but Rumlow’s smile got wider. “You want to know what else he told us?”

Oh, God! Tony started to struggle, clearly aware enough of what was happening to put the last of his strength into trying to stop it. He threw his weight into Rollins, but the big man just let him go and stepped out of the way. Tony’s feet gave out, and down he went. “No,” he sobbed. “No! Steve, I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“ Enough,” Rumlow spat, kicking Tony hard into the midriff. Tony coughed a mouthful of blood to the floor, curling weakly onto his side, weeping plaintively and begging softly. Tears burned Steve’s eyes for him, for himself, for– “Cap’s kid has the serum.”

The air changed. The silence turned thick and deep. And, just like that, everything he’d fought to protect was right in the hands of his enemies.

Viper turned, her eyes wide. Her expression was indescribable, a mixture of shock and repulsive glee. “Really.”

Tony whimpered. “So sorry, Steve. So sorry…”

Viper sauntered over to Steve. Without even her instruction, Bucky was hauling him up and positioning him on his knees in front of her. Steve struggled, breathing rapidly through his nose, desperate to do something. Anything. “Is that true, Steve? Does our daughter have the serum?” He couldn’t answer her, even as she loomed over him, eyes narrowed and judging. “Is it?” Emphatically he shook his head. She dropped to a crouch, cupping his jaw. Steve reared back, but yet again he wasn’t going anywhere. Viper simply stared at him a moment. He was shaking. He couldn’t stop himself. And he could feel the cold sweat bathing his face. She leaned close and whispered into his ear, “She really should have taught you to lie better.”

“Madame HYDRA,” called one of the technicians behind them, “it’s nearly time.”

“Here, all the while, I believed it failed. The doctors who made her said it did. Blake said it did, too. And he got that from Banner. Did the good doctor tell a little white one for you?” She brushed her fingers across Steve’s cheek. All around the activity kicked into a fever pitch, equipment whirring to life and people racing about, but Steve couldn’t look anywhere but her blue eyes. Sarah’s eyes. “No, somehow it started working, didn’t it? Delayed phenotypic presentation. That’s why you ran. That’s why you hid yourself from me, why you gave up your shield. I get it now. You didn’t want me to have my daughter.”

Steve choked on his terror. “Thirty seconds,” someone announced. “We nearly have alignment, and the Generator is holding steady. But if he’s not right there, we can only keep the portal open a matter of minutes. There’s no–”

“He’ll be there,” Viper snapped harshly. The technician cowered and ceased his objections and reminders. Viper smiled as the equipment around them hummed to life. “It’s time.” Her voice was a low, euphoric whisper against his cheek. “And won’t he be thrilled to know his legacy endures.” Then she rose and turned to the dais.

“Fifteen…” The lead technician was watching the counter as he gestured to his assistants. Steve closed his eyes against the burn of his tears, but he couldn’t hold them back. Not anymore. “Ten.” Defeat unlike anything he’d ever known sucked him down. He didn’t fight. Not anymore.
“Five… Four…” The whirring of the machines got louder. The lights dimmed around them as power was sucked into their system, probably needed to sustain the Gamma Burst Generator. He didn’t care. *Not anymore.* “Three…. Two… One!”

Behind his tightly sealed eyelids, blue light flared. The portal. It was blinding, even though he wasn’t looking. The roar was deafening, the air changing again, charging and reeking of ozone. The technicians were shouting numbers and readings over the din. He couldn’t hear it. There was nothing but the sound of his heart breaking and the world ending.

When it was done and quiet again, he couldn’t help himself. He had to check.

Somehow, in the light of *everything* that had happened, seeing *him* there wasn’t as bad or surprising as it should have been. Incredibly he looked completely the same, seventy-five years after Steve had last encountered him. It was almost as if this was a nightmare, or it was like no time had passed at all. *The Red Skull.* If Steve hadn’t witnessed firsthand just how deranged and evil Schmidt was, he might have thought the moniker stupid for being so blatantly obvious. Schmidt wore black, jet and without flourish, a simple uniform that had no adornments. His face was as hideous as ever, blood red skin, gaunt and drawn cheeks, piercing black eyes, sockets where a nose should have been, nearly no lips. The serum had burned his face away, leaving him disfigured, leaving a monster in its wake.

And, as incredible as it was, the monster was back.

*It was all true.*

Everyone was silent, frozen in place by shock and fear. Terrified into subjugation. The Red Skull stood at the portal, which was still open behind him like a gaping maw, showing a fiery, awful world filled with lava and black rocks and misery. *Like a demon escaping hell.* He stepped away just as the image began to fade to darkness. He looked around the room, hawkish in his inspection. There was no trace of surprise in him, no hint of fear or interest or relief, just a pensive, tense frown and those analytical eyes sweeping. It was as if he’d *expected* exactly what was there. Then his gaze settled on what was undoubtedly only familiar face of the lot, and he smiled. Steve lifted his head despite himself, that simple sight enough to awaken deep-set defiance in him. Even seventy-five years later and despite everything, that was still there. The rivalry. The hatred of what this man had done and symbolized. The calm, steady sense of strength and purpose. It was anchoring, in a way, and oddly enough, he was grateful for that.

The Skull spoke. “Captain America! Strange to find you here, though I must say seeing you like this is a pleasant way to greet this new world.” Steve gritted his teeth around the gag. That voice was exactly as he remembered it, too, and it was as awful now as it had been then. “Time has passed, has it not?”

Viper was in awe. It was fairly unabashed, like a fan girl at long last meeting her idol. “It has,” she replied. She dropped herself a bit diminutively and add, “Herr Schmidt.”

“How many years on earth?”

“Seventy-five years. The war is long over, but we have never stopped fighting. We are here for you to lead us.”

The Red Skull was emotionless. “And you are?”

Viper lowered her head. “Ophelia Sarkissian,” she replied. “Your great granddaughter.” That obviously meant nothing to him, but Viper was too elated with her plans coming to fruition – *with*
The fact that Sarah had the serum – to care. She gestured to the soldier with Steve’s shield, and the man came forward to hand it to her. She, in turn, presented it to Schmidt. “Like your son and all who have come since of your bloodline, I’ve led HYDRA in your absence. We’ve destroyed our enemies. What was the SSR grew strong, but it’s gone now. Everything that stood in your way is gone. Everyone.” The shield caught the lingering light of the portal. “The world is ready to be purified.”

The Red Skull came closer, staring at the shield. Steve saw now that he had something around his neck, a necklace that had a circular red jewel. What was that? Schmidt took the shield. Steve jerked at the sight of that. Then the man slowly made his way to him, standing over his prisoner. His opposite in every sense of the word. Steve glared resolutely at him. “Yes, here you are, Captain,” the Skull sneered again. “Still trying to deny your nature. Still fighting a senseless fight. Decades later, and you are as naïve and visionless as ever, chained still to Erskine’s dream. Still just… What was it? Ah, yes. A kid from Brooklyn.”

“Erskine’s dream is ours now,” Viper proclaimed proudly. “The good Captain and I have a child.”

Steve wanted to throw up. He wanted to scream, fight, do anything. But, again, there was nothing. Nothing but the Red Skull’s hard, ugly attempt at a smile. And, after that, nothing but the flash of red and blue as his shield was rammed into his face. He fell back into Bucky’s legs, pain exploding along his forehead and cheeks. The firm support behind him didn’t waver. For a moment Schmidt looked upward from him, up at Bucky, but he said nothing to him even though he potentially recognized him. No, of course he would. That night in Azzano, where Bucky and Steve had stood on one side of a burning factory and Zola and Schmidt had stood on the other…

The Skull grunted. “So at long last my bloodline has combined with Erskine’s serum,” he said. Steve swallowed blood flooding his mouth, almost choking. “And it seems much of the past still lingers in the present. Subjugated, as it should be. Today is a good day!”

A cheer went through the room, hesitant at first but encouraged by Viper. The Red Skull grinned maliciously, staring down at Steve, before the shield struck again. It was hard enough that Steve nearly lost consciousness. Over the booming of blood in his ears, he heard Schmidt asking, “Where is this child?”

“In the hands of our enemies,” Viper replied. “We need to get her back.”

The Red Skull looked displeased. “Her?”

Viper paled. “There was no control of that. Obviously.” Liar. A choice had been made, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to Steve that Viper had envisioned Sarah would become the next Madame HYDRA, carrying on the leadership of HYDRA as a woman.

Of course Schmidt, with his hard set prejudices, wouldn’t approve. However, he didn’t know how Sarah had been created. “No matter,” he replied. “Where?”

“In New York City. The last stronghold of resistance against us. The Avengers. They are led by Captain America and Iron Man.” Viper beamed. “Both of whom are here at your feet, my lord.” Schmidt turned to look to Tony where the tortured inventor hadn’t moved from his side at the feet of the STRIKE Team. Somewhere during all this hell, he’d lost consciousness. Steve could see he was still breathing. He shook his head, horrified, as the Skull got closer. “Howard Stark’s son,” Viper so helpfully supplied.

“Is he of use to us?” the Skull asked when he stood over Tony’s body.
“He was,” Viper explained. “Not anymore.” She looked at Steve, smugger than ever, and Steve couldn’t keep quiet. He screamed behind the gag, struggling, and Bucky actually let him go. He almost got to his feet before Bucky remembered to snatch him back. Viper looked infinitely pleased. “He’s Rogers’ best friend.”

No. The Red Skull glanced at him, and Steve knew the horror and panic was bright in his eyes. There was no hiding it. The monster smiled again. “You seem to have done a very poor job at protecting the people you love, Captain.” Then he reached down and grabbed Tony about the neck and lifted him clear off the ground.

“No!” Steve yelled, scrambling forward on his knees. Bucky’s grip turned tight and cruel, and Rumlow and the dozens of HYDRA soldiers converged on him to keep him in place. Steve howled, frenzied, not about to let this happen, jumping up onto his feet and pushing into the throng of adversaries. Rumlow wasted no time, smacking him hard across the face with his rifle. That didn’t drop him, not with the fire burning through his body, so the STRIKE commander did it again as his men held Steve steady. And again. The world blurred.

But not enough to hide the Red Skull carrying Tony’s limp body to the portal, the portal was that still a haze of dark gray and midnight blue and deep purple but flickering now as its power started to wan. He gave a pleased smirk as he observed Tony’s barely breathing form, his lax face. And there was nothing Steve could do as he tossed Tony into the void.

“No!”

Nothing. The winking portal. That hint of nothingness beyond now that the planets were no longer in alignment. Nothing else. Nothing. Tony was gone.

Steve screamed.

“Shut it down,” Viper ordered. The whirring died to silence, and the light vanished. The portal closed like it had never been there at all. Steve closed his eyes and surrendered. Surrendered. There was nothing else.

The Red Skull was shouting in the background. “HYDRA! Today we finish what I started seventy-five years ago! Today humanity will realize its destiny!” He shoved his fist into the air, the jewel he’d had about his neck before clenched in it now. It shone red like blood in his fingers. “Our wrath will lay this world to waste! We will purify the weak, expunge the unworthy, eradicate all those who stand in our way, and in the end the power of the gods will bless the superior man! The world will be barren save for the strong, the smart, the blessed! Then we will start anew with the next step in our evolution!” There was cheering, loud and raucous, as the previously frightened soldiers and techs rallied. The Red Skull turned to look at Steve, broken and beaten and crying, down on his knees, defeated. “And all of this will start in New York, just as it should have seventy-five years ago. This time no one will stop us!”

People were shouting, moving. Soldiers. Assistants. HYDRA was mobilizing, leaving to attack. They didn’t have an army, but they didn’t need one. They had the power of the gods.

And Steve had nothing. Nothing left. He’d lost it all.

Thus his life didn’t seem like it was worth much as Viper neared him. She smiled at him, clearly coming for a final taunt, to stab the knife in deeper and twist it as much as she could. “You never stood a chance, Steve. Even if you hadn’t run, you couldn’t have stopped this.” She dropped to a crouch in front of him. Steve flinched and tried to pull away, but he couldn’t. She lifted his jaw, kissing his forehead tenderly. “I’m going to go get our daughter. And you’re going to have an
“attitude adjustment.” Fear washed over him, leaving him cold and shivering, as she stood. “Run him through the Asset’s procedure. I want him wiped and reprogrammed, whatever it takes. Captain America will serve HYDRA yet.”

Over the rush of horror in his head, he heard someone stammering, objecting. “Madame HYDRA, it’ll take a couple hours to even prep the equipment, and I don’t know if—”

“What did you hear me? Whatever it takes!” she snapped coldly. Then she gestured to the Winter Soldier, beckoning him to join her at the Red Skull’s side. Bucky was unmoving, even while Rumlow and his men grabbed Steve and hauled him up. He didn’t let go of Steve’s arm, staring quizzically at the Red Skull, and when Rumlow went to hit Steve again for his struggling, Bucky snatched his rifle away and crushed its barrel with his metal hand. The STRIKE soldiers backed off.

Viper’s glare at the display was nothing short of menacing. “Are we going to have a problem?”

For a moment, it seemed like they were. Like Bucky was escaping, remembering. He glanced among Schmidt, Viper, and Steve, and Steve could hardly breathe for his rush of renewed hope.

But there was still nothing. Bucky let him go and went like a dog at Viper’s call. Steve screamed again, struggling more wildly now, fighting and fighting and fighting, but the STRIKE Team converged on him, hitting and hitting and dragging him away.

He ended up back in the cell again. Alone. Tony was gone. Dead. Natasha was dying. Bucky was a brainwashed tool of his worst enemies. The rest of the Avengers were gone or in New York, completely unaware of what was coming. And Viper was going to take Sarah, take her and turn her into the future of HYDRA. Everything and everyone he loved was lost or in mortal danger. And he couldn’t do anything.

Steve tucked his knees up to his forehead and struggled to breathe.

The silence was back and even more devastating. Moments (hours?) before, he’d completely come apart, screaming and throwing himself at the sealed door anew and putting everything he had into breaking the cuffs. All he’d done was waste his energy and work himself even more into hysteria. He could picture it. New York burning. The Avengers fighting. Clint and Bruce (if Bruce had even made it) were all that were left, but they wouldn’t be enough. All of SHIELD’s meager defenses would fall. The Tower would be destroyed. The city would be bathed in red, fire and blood like tentacles choking the buildings. And Viper would find Sarah. Take Sarah. Bring her back so they could be a family. Train her to be evil, hateful, violent and sadistic… Train her and retrain him. Turn him into a machine incapable of fighting back. That was his future, and he couldn’t stop imagining it. It was the worst torture he’d ever endured, living through those nightmares. Minutes had passed while he burned in it all before he’d gone down on his knees and simply cried.

He was empty now. Numb. Accepting of his own helplessness in the same way an insane man accepted his own insanity. It came in fits and starts, peace through submission that wasn’t at all constant or comforting. He felt like it could be, if the long minutes of silence and despair continued to pile up. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be broken. If Bucky had felt this when HYDRA had found him and taken him. Or if Tony had when the Ten Rings had captured him in Afghanistan. Or if Natasha had when the Red Room had pumped its poisonous serum into her veins and ruined her body. Was this what it felt like to have nothing left? Not even hope. He was so worn and raw he couldn’t make himself care.

It was hours later when the door to the cell finally opened. It was Rumlow, of course, since Viper
and Bucky were gone to bring HYDRA’s wrath upon the world. The STRIKE commander eyed him, as battered and defeated as he was, and smiled. “We’re ready for you, Cap.” Steve barely lifted his head. He didn’t even bother with a muffled, useless retort. And he didn’t even struggle when the STRIKE Team flooded the cell, a dozen strong with their rifles yet again pointed at him. Obviously they still considered him a threat. They didn’t know just how wrong they were.

In short order they had him moving down the corridors again. He didn’t pay attention to where they were taking him. There was no reason to; he wasn’t going to be able to escape. And he tried not to focus on what was going to happen. An attitude adjustment. Wiping. Reprogramming. They were going to take his memories, take his identity. Something told him that because of the serum, this was going to be extremely unpleasant, maybe even impossible for them to accomplish. If Bucky had had to endure this, though, it only seemed fitting. And to him, it seemed, as he was being led at gunpoint, bound and gagged and helpless to his fate… Well, there were only two outcomes: either it worked or he died. Either way, this would be over and he wouldn’t have to think about just how much he’d failed or worry about Sarah and Natasha anymore. That was selfish, but it was the only relief to be had.

They reached their destination. It was another nondescript stone room in the bowels of this castle. There were computers and equipment arranged throughout the place. All of it was arrayed around a central chair. This chair had shackles on each arm and for each leg. There was gear surrounding it, metallic things that looked like spider legs or tentacles, and it was clearly meant to enclose his head. Otherwise the seat was nondescript black leather. Still, nothing had ever looked so foreboding. This was where they had tortured Bucky. He knew it in his bones. This was where they had made the Winter Soldier.

And this would be where they’d unmake Captain America.

As senseless and futile as that was, it stoked to life his terror, and suddenly he was struggling again. They had to undo the mag cuffs to get him into chair, and when they did, he threw everything into breaking free. It was automatic, something ingrained into his very muscles and bones. This need to fight, like Tony had said. This part of him that he couldn’t change or forget or smother in some other life or lies. Fight!

But it didn’t matter. Rumlow and his men were ready, stun batons charging up before dropping him. He wailed in agony, the world dimming as the electricity wracked over his body. Against his will he seized and then went limp. And, against his will, they forced him into the chair and locked him into place. When he regained his senses enough to test the manacles, he realized immediately that they were unbreakable. Of course they would be. They were, yet again, made for Bucky.

Someone help me. They pushed him back, a dozen hands on his shoulders and torso and head. Around him the technicians were moving fast, readying equipment. Steve shouted through the gag as things were snapped into place around his head. He’d been ready to accept this hours ago, but now that it was actually happening, he couldn’t stand it. The terror was harsh and sickening. Panic burst inside him. They were going to take the few things he had left. Sarah. Natasha. The love he had for them. They were going to take that! Someone help me!

“No worries, Cap. Your buddy survived, so you can, too,” Rumlow promised, fistng his hair and holding him in place. The machines began to whirl with power. Steve gasped a sob. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

The room rattled. Steve grimaced, every muscle in his body taut, as he waited for the pain. It didn’t come, and everything shook again. “What the hell…” Rumlow leaned away. “Something wrong?”

One of the techs shook his head, looking down at the computer monitors. “It’s not—”
The vibration got louder and louder, more and more powerful. The stone walls shook, and the floor quaked hard enough that Steve felt it through the chair where it was bolted to the cement. “What the hell is going on?” Rumlow demanded, now far more irritated than a few seconds before.

His answer came in the form of the far wall bursting in. Steve couldn’t see what was happening, but he definitely could hear some sort of massive fight breaking out. Guns were firing. Men were screaming. He struggled to overcome his shock before wrenching against his restraints. They bent but didn’t give. He did manage to knock his head pretty viciously into Rumlow’s chin where the other man was still looming over him. The STRIKE commander staggered back, mouth flooded with blood. Furious, he drew his sidearm and made to shoot at Steve, aiming at his chest where he was completely immobilized. He never got a chance. There was a blur of red and a huge, muscled arm shot across Rumlow’s body to snatch his wrist. The fingers that latched around it snapped it with a sickening crunch, and the gun clattered to the floor. The next thing Steve knew, Rumlow’s body was flung violently into the computer desks surrounding the chair. Sparks filled the room, and the lights faded, plunging everything into darkness.

When they came back on a breath later, Steve could have cried in relief.

Thor stood there, surrounded by the bodies of the men he’d killed or injured, his hammer clenched in his fist. His brow was furrowed, his bearded face taut with ire, until he saw Steve trapped in the chair. “Steven,” he gasped, concern blowing his eyes wide, and he was at Steve’s side instantly. It took nothing for him to break the restraints, ripping them clear off the chair. Steve immediately grabbed for the muzzle. “Stay still.” Thor fumbled for the buckles, quickly getting them loose, and Steve wrenched the gag free the second he could. He coughed and choked, staggering from the chair. “Steve!”

Thor reached for him, but Steve was already scrambling toward Rumlow where he lay in the wreckage. He gritted his teeth, grabbing the other man’s broken body and hauling him up. “Tony,” he snarled, breathless and tingling with the rush of freedom. There were so many issues, so many things he needed to do right now, but this was somehow the most pressing. “Is he dead? Is he?” Rumlow gurgled on a bloody breath, obviously in serious pain, but Steve couldn’t muster an ounce of sympathy. He shook him roughly. “Is he?”

“How… how the hell should I know?” Rumlow slurred.

“How does the portal go? When the planets aren’t in alignment?” Steve’s patience was hanging by a thread. Maybe he’d been reluctant before to hurt a man in order to get answers, but this time… This man… He’d make a damn exception. “Answer me, damn it! Where does it go?”

“The void,” Thor supplied from behind him. Steve turned to find his friend horrified. Thor shook his head helplessly. “Heimdall sensed the disturbance these men were trying to create and alerted me immediately. That is why I came.”

Steve gritted his teeth and turned back to his prisoner. Rumlow was losing consciousness (or worse), but he didn’t care, trying to jostle him awake. “Can we open the portal again? Can we?” Rumlow probably wouldn’t know, even if he was awake (and cooperative) enough to respond. “Tell me! Can I get to Tony?” Rumlow simply slumped in Steve’s grasp, and Steve dropped him, frustrated and shaking with how desperate he was. I’m not letting him go. He needed to leave now, and he knew that. Warn New York. Save Natasha. Save Sarah. Lead what little remained of the Avengers and SHIELD. Fight the Red Skull and stop all of this.

But he couldn’t just do that, because Tony had sacrificed himself for him. Tony had Pepper and a baby waiting for him. The world might be ending, but he couldn’t forget that. He couldn’t let him go.
No man is an island. I can reach him.

He was running before he thought twice. “Steve, wait!” Thor called. “If he’s lost in the void, you will not be able to find him! There is no hope! Steve, stop! Stop! Steve!”

Steve didn’t care. He’d do whatever he had to. Tony believed in him, and he was going to save him.

Somehow.
“Steve! Wait! Wait!”

Steve couldn’t wait. There was no time. He felt like he was being wrenched in a multitude of directions all at once—Tony, Sarah, Natasha—and stopping wasn’t an option given that. He tore through the castle, trying to remember which way he needed to go. He wished he’d paid attention before!

“Steve!” Thor grabbed his arm and pulled him back. As strong as Steve was, he was no match for Thor. It was so good to see the other man, to feel that strong, confident aura Thor always exuded. He’d been such a help to Steve when Sarah had come into his life and again when all the misery of last year had happened. And now he was here, had saved his life again, had come exactly when Steve had needed him. Proof in Asgardian magic if there ever had been. He couldn’t deny his relief then, grabbing Thor’s shoulder and tugging him into a hug, firm and strong however brief. “Praise the Allfather that you are well… What were they trying to do to you?”

He couldn’t spare the time or the heart to explain. “We have to save Tony,” he breathlessly declared, and when he pulled away this time, Thor let him. “They threw Tony in. We have to save him!”

Perhaps Thor knew very little of what was going on, but he’d probably gathered that from before. He followed his captain, Mjölnir tight in his fist. “You must tell me what has happened! Heimdall said someone has come through the portal, someone who was not meant to be on Midgard. He saw it clearly.”

Steve rushed down the corridor, fighting to recognize where they were. “The Red Skull.”

Thor’s confusion and dismay was practically a palpable force behind him. “Your old enemy from the war before you were frozen? How is that possible?”

“Obviously the Tesseract didn’t kill him. It sent him somewhere else, and HYDRA figured out how to bring him back.” They blundered directly into a small company of HYDRA soldiers walking patrol. They were the only ones they’d encountered so far, and the two Avengers made short work of them, Thor pounding a pair of them into the walls hard enough to shatter the stones while Steve snatched another couple and slammed them together before tossing their bodies back down the hall.

Thor took his arm again. “The Red Skull… Did he have a red gem upon him? It may have been set into a casing and worn as jewelry.”

That took Steve aback, cutting through the haze of panic in his head. “Yeah.” Thor’s frown deepened, almost impossibly so. “What? What is it?”

The demigod was clearly dismayed, as though he’d been hoping for another outcome. That only heightened Steve’s horror. “It is called the Harbinger. My father took it from the Fire Giants on Muspelheim eons ago when they threatened war across the Realms. Surtr was not pleased but never rose again against Odin’s rule. The Harbinger has stayed in the Vault on Asgard since, but months ago it went…” Thor was clearly distraught, irate even. “It disappeared. There were no signs of robbery as there were when Loki allowed the Frost Giants to attack years ago. My father did not seem concerned in the slightest, which only further fueled my own worries. I visited Muspelheim in search of the gem but to no avail. It seemed to be long gone.” None of this sounded good. Steve swallowed thickly, fighting to find some patience so Thor could speak. “When Heimdall saw the portal, he saw the Harbinger at long last.”
“What does it do?”

Even without Thor’s obvious reluctance, Steve had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer. “You must remember this is a magical weapon, infused by Surtr’s power and his need for fire and destruction. Perhaps against the Giants themselves or against my people, it would not pose such a threat. Against humanity, however…”

Steve lost his patience. “What does it do, Thor?” he snapped.

“It permits the wielder to unleash devastation in the form of a demon,” Thor replied shortly, “a demon bred of the wielder’s own mind. An extension of the wielder’s nightmares or visions. A monster capable of—”

“Wait, wait!” Steve forced himself to calm down and think. God, it couldn’t be that, could it? How Viper had taunted him before about calling the Red Skull a monster? About that tapestry with the huge looming shadow? He didn’t know whether to laugh at the incredulity of it all or cry at how awful it was. “You’re telling me Schmidt is heading to New York to unleash some sort of… huge creature on it? Like – like **Godzilla**?”

Thor’s brow furrowed. Steve knew he knew what that was. Once, not long before everything had gone to hell, they’d gathered for a movie night after Steve had put Sarah to bed. Thor and Clint and Tony and him. And they’d watched a marathon of these really bad Japanese films from throughout the decades, ones that featured large, incredibly fake-looking puppets destroying Tokyo. Clint insisted these were some of the best movies ever made. Steve had thought they were ridiculous. Now he was being told he was going to get to experience that ridiculousness firsthand. “Yes,” Thor said, “though the size of the creature is not necessarily relevant.”

It likely was to Schmidt. That man did not believe in subtlety. “Great,” Steve muttered, feeling sick and tired.

Thor was not in the mood for sarcasm. “It is not.” Steve didn’t bother to say more, turning anew and running. “If the Red Skull releases the Harbinger, the situation will become most dire. We must stop him quickly. Where did he intend to attack?”


Thor blanched. That needed no further explanation. “He’s after Sarah. Thor, he knows.”

Thor was not in the mood for sarcasm. “It is not.” Steve didn’t bother to say more, turning anew and running. “If the Red Skull releases the Harbinger, the situation will become most dire. We must stop him quickly. Where did he intend to attack?”


Thor blanched. That needed no further explanation. “No,” he whispered. He loved Sarah as Tony did, as Clint and Bruce did. He knew what that meant. “Then this is all the more reason we must go now!”

“Not without Tony!” As they rounded another corner, Steve finally spotted something familiar in this maze. The courtyard. It was nearly empty now, a few soldiers milling about in the floodlights stationed around the area. The quinjets and fighter jets and choppers were all gone. HYDRA doesn’t need an army. If Thor was right, if summoning some sort of actual monster was their plan, that was probably true. The thought made his gut clench, and he ran on, avoiding detection, Thor fleet behind him despite his size. He had to stop this. **Have to get Tony first.**

They jetted through the hallways, sprinting as fast as they could. Just a few seconds later, they reached that cavernous room, empty and abandoned now. “Thor, this – this **void**. Can Tony be alive in there?”

Thor again grabbed Steve’s arm to stop him. “Steve, you need to understand! The void… He might be alive, but he is between realms, between worlds.” Steve didn’t care. He wrenched away and Thor was too stunned to hold onto him. He staggered into the room, rushing to the computers.
He slammed his fingers to a keyboard, jolting the machine awake. “Steve, listen to me. Listen! I know how much Tony means to you, but if he is in there, you will not be able to find him!”

“Yes, I will,” Steve resolutely declared. He looked through the information on the screen, forcing himself to concentrate. He wasn’t the best with computers as Tony always said, but it wasn’t for lack of capability. Rather, he didn’t care for it, for the reliance on technology, so he didn’t put as much effort into learning as he probably could. Furthermore, he somewhat liked Tony teasing him about it and teasing Tony back. Now more than ever before, he needed to make Tony proud. “I’m going to reopen the portal.”

“Can you do that?” Thor asked from over his shoulder.

Steve cocked his head, tracing the power diagram of the system he’d managed to open. “No idea,” he admitted. “Have to, though.” Frantically he tried to make sense of the image. “Thor, over there against the wall. There are some power relays that are in the overload position. We need to flip them back.” Thor might not think this crazy plan of his was possible, but he was willing to help nonetheless, bolting across the room to the massive circuit box. Steve’s hands flew over the keyboard, rebooting the portal power-up sequence program. He could figure this out. He knew he could. “Did you find them?”

“Yes!” Thor shouted back, “but I know not which ones require fixing!”

“What’s it look like?” Just as Steve said that, he was brought back years, back the helicarrier. “It seems to run on some form of electricity.” That made him smile despite it all, bolstering his faith. I can get him back.

“Three blink red!” Thor replied.

The description corresponded with what he was seeing on the computer screen. “That’s them! Move the switches into the opposite position!” Thor did that, turning the indicators above the switches green, and the power routes of the diagram immediately turned green, too. The lights dimmed anew, and the Gamma Burst Generator and its surrounding equipment hummed to life. Steve’s hopes flared to life, too, as the system came online. Across the terminal on the monitor, lines of code ran by the millions until the computer was ready to go, all of it ending with a prompt and a “yes” or “no” text selection. I can do this!

Thor was back. “Steve–”

“I have to get him, Thor.” He was up and out of the chair, glancing around the room.

“You are still not listening to me, my friend!” Thor shouted. He stilled Steve, taking both his arms and holding him in place. “The void is formless! It is emptiness beyond compare. No landmarks. No paths. There is no escape. You will become disoriented almost instantly, and you will not be able to find your way back to the portal. Many of my people have been lost forever–”

“I know the risks. I have to at least try.”

Thor’s face softened with Steve’s calm words, with the realization that he wasn’t going to be able to talk him out of this. Maybe they hadn’t seen each other in more than a year, but they knew one another well enough for Thor to recognize and appreciate Steve’s stubbornness. For the first time in all those long months, Steve was certain he was doing the right thing. Certain of it. “Fine,” the demigod acquiesced. “But only if we can find something to anchor you. It is your only hope of finding your way back. And if the portal closes…” Which it would. It had only stayed open a few minutes last time, and it had been unstable toward the end. “You must be fast. I am uncertain if you
will be able to hear me.”

“Any idea if I’ll be able to see the portal?”

“No.” In that case, Thor was absolutely right. They needed something to anchor him, something Thor could hold at one end, something to tether Steve to him. Without that… Steve didn’t waste any more time worrying or fretting about it. They tore the room apart before finding a spool of thick computer cables. The cable was nearly a half of an inch in diameter, which was thick for what it was but Steve would have preferred something considerably thicker and more durable. There was no time to look for anything else, and it had a great deal of length, more than a hundred feet. Still, it could break if they weren’t careful, particularly with both their enhanced strengths on either end. And if Tony wasn’t close to the portal in the void, Steve wouldn’t be able to go very deep to find him. And if the portal closed on him while he was in it, he doubted all the anchoring in the world would be enough to save him.

But this was all they had. Quickly they worked to double it up, twisting it together in a make-shift rope of sorts until they had something a tad stronger. Thor worked fast to wrap it around Steve’s waist and tie it as best he could. “Do not lose your way,” he cautioned. “It will be extremely difficult to stay focused in there. Your senses will scatter, your thoughts with them. The nothingness seeps into the mind like poison, and it will take you without your realizing it. You must not let it. Do not lose yourself.”

“I won’t. I can get him and get out.”

Thor shook his head. “I should be–”

“You need to stay here. If Schmidt’s going after New York with some sort of – of monster, we need you there. We need you to fight.”

Thor shook his head. “The team–”

“There is no team,” Steve hastily replied. “I can’t explain everything now, but if I don’t come back, you need to fight them.”

It was obvious Thor wanted to argue further, but there was no time. Steve whirled, typing furiously at the computer to start the portal program. The countdown from thirty seconds started. Steve crossed the distance to the dais, the thundering of the Gamma Burst Generator charging loud and ominous. The lights flickered and the room shuddered. Ahead, the space beneath the arc crackled as though the air was becoming electrified, and little veins of blue filled the spot like webbing. They grew and thickened and twisted into cords, stabilizing as the portal gained power. Thor grabbed his arm again. “I’m only going to have a few minutes!” Steve shouted over the din. “If something goes wrong or it doesn’t last–”

“I will pull you out!” Thor answered, wrapping the other end of the cable around his hands tightly. It was all nonsense; there was no way to be sure he could do that. But Steve let himself believe, hugging his friend firmly for a second or two while the timer counted down to zero.

The portal burst open before him. The light was blinding, and Steve covered his eyes and turned away. When he looked again, the illumination was cooler, calmer, and the gaping maw of darkness appeared before him. It was swirling, those deep blues and purples, so deep they were almost black. It was almost like the endless abyss of space without the light of any stars. Considering where it led, that probably wasn’t a poor analogy. Though he knew he shouldn’t, Steve wasted a few seconds staring into it, losing himself in that twisting nothingness and his own trepidation. Tony’s in there. You have to get him out. He knew he could do this. He couldn’t explain how. He just knew it, like
he used to know things. That he could fight no matter how sick and small he was. That he could save Bucky from Azzano. That he could stop Schmidt. That he could raise Sarah. *I can do this.*

Sucking in a deep breath, he went in.

Disorienting didn’t quite cover what this was like. The moment he crossed the threshold, his senses seemed to go haywire. Thanks to the serum, Steve always had a fundamental understanding of *where* he was. That was gone. Nothing sounded right, either, like everything was stretched and distant, like he was miles underwater only there was no water. And nothing *looked* right. Shadows upon shadows, lightyears long, layered and layered like pressed silk. It was hard to move through it, hard to perceive anything in it, hard to think past it. His thoughts were sluggish, as if his neurons were so overwhelmed by the emptiness they were misfiring in wild discordance. It was awful, the unending vastness juxtaposed with the heinous sensation of immobility, that he nearly tumbled down, nearly felt like he was falling forever. *Do not lose yourself!*

*Tony’s in here!*

“Tony!” he screamed. There was no echo of his own voice because there was nothing for the sound waves to hit. He didn’t know if space and time worked in here the way they did on earth, but he had to trust blindly. He had to trust that Tony could not have gone far as hurt as he was. As lost as he likely felt. He had to believe that the portal had taken him to the same place Tony was. “Tony! Tony, where are you?” He forced a step out of himself. And another. And another. Something was tugging him back, and for a moment he couldn’t figure out what. He looked down, squinting in the darkness. *Ropes. Thor.* The cables were thick in his hand, and he pulled them forward, asking for slack. The taut length loosened and he ventured deeper. “Tony, can you hear me? Where are you?”

Forcing himself to focus, he looked around. There was no answer to his calls. Tony could be dead. Tony could be lost. There was *nothing.* The endlessness of eternity, of the void, of this place between realms and worlds and lives. Steve’s heart shuddered in his chest, and his despair mounted, sucking him down. “Tony! Please, answer me!” He whirled as if spinning in syrup, struggling against unseen restraints. There was no light to guide him. No sound. Not even the pounding of his own heart in his ears. “Tony!” His voice cracked. “Tony, where are you? Where are you? I’m here!”

Again there was no answer. *Nothing.* Steve wasn’t giving up, though. He pulled more, demanding more slack, and surged deeper into the void with renewed frustration and vigor. “Tony! It’s me! It’s Steve!” Not even hearing his voice come back at him made it seem like he wasn’t screaming at all, and that miserable dizziness nearly pulled him down again. But he wasn’t going to succumb. He took more steps, further inside, further away from the portal. He looked over his shoulder, but he couldn’t see the way back. It was as dark and hazy as the rest of this miasma. He couldn’t see where the cables went. *He couldn’t let that stop him.* “Tony, tell me where you are! *Talk to me!* Please… Tell me you’re okay!”

Time faded. He walked. Over and over again he yelled for his friend, ignored the silence, ignored the vertigo and mounting panic, ignored the way he couldn’t think very well anymore and the pressing fear that he was lost. He ignored *everything,* including the insistent tug on his waist that hauled him back. Stubbornly he put more effort into going forward. That tugging got worse and worse. He couldn’t remember why, what it meant. He just knew he had to find Tony. This hell had split them apart before, and he wasn’t going to let it happen again. “Tony! I can’t lose you! Don’t let me lose you! Please!” Tears burned his eyes. He felt that, felt his heart breaking. “You’re like my brother. Just like you said before. You’re like my brother! So don’t let me lose you! *Please!* Answer me! *Tony!*”
It was hardly anything. A whisper of a moan, so faint that he couldn’t parse it from his desperate imagination for a precious second or two. Then it came again, this time tangled in a word. “St-
Steve…”

Steve spun. “Tony! Tony, say it again!”

“Steve…”

It was stupid, ridiculous, outrageously dumb luck that he was able to track Tony’s voice. More a feeling than anything else. He took a few quick, rushed steps, but there was nothing to see. No, no, no… “Tony?”

“Steve!”

He couldn’t see anything. Tony had to be here! “Just tell me where you are,” he whimpered, turning around. Those insistent tugs came again, harder and harsher, reminding him that he needed to go. I need to go.

“No, not without you!”

Suddenly he felt – there, straight ahead! – and reached out with both arms. His fingers curled into something, skin and torn cloth, and he held on tight. He pulled back, dragging the thing with him, ardently trusting that his senses were telling him the truth. He was holding onto something, someone, Tony. He was pulling that something back. The tugs on his waist grew sharp and violent, desperate and panicked, and he gathered the thing into his arms and let himself be yanked. He staggered, not knowing where to turn, what to do, only holding tight and stumbling in the direction of the pulling. Everything got dimmer, darker, like the last light in the universe was dying, and they needed to get out.

“Steve!” The scream seemed to come from within, from all around, and his senses scattered with doubt. He couldn’t feel anymore, not with any certainty. Not the soft, warm thing in his arms nor the void around him nor his own body. Doubt sent him reeling, dizzying and devastating, and he wanted to sink it was so encompassing. “Steve!”

I can do this!

He straightened, held onto Tony, and ran. There was the light, a blurry, faint, flickering thing. He saw it now and held tight to its image, to where it was in the void. The tether pulled taut, dragging him closer and closer, and he dragged himself with it. I can make it. Go home. We’re going home, and we’re going to stop them. Be a family again. All of us. I can save us.

Giving a ragged cry, he went out.

Steve hit the platform hard on his knees, the impact jarring him worse than anything he’d ever felt. The pain was sharp as his senses realigned to reality, and he gasped through a few shuddering breaths. There was color again, the sound of his heart pounding and his lungs heaving, the feel of cold sweat covering him and the smell of damp air, the whir of machines and Thor’s voice. Thor’s hands on his shoulders.

And Tony in his arms. Steve’s brain caught up with his senses, flooded so acutely with information, and he looked down to find his friend cradled against his chest. He was still hurt badly, but he was there. He was breathing. He was alive. Steve choked on a sob. Thank God.

“Steve, you did it! You did it!” Thor was absolutely alive with glee and relief, taking them both and guiding them away from the portal. Steve looked behind him and processed that, that he was back
on earth and clearly not a moment too soon since the portal was closed again. Thor’s arm was around his shoulders, which was good because he was so shaken he practically went down on his knees again a few steps away from the dais. “Truly I have never met a man made of sterner stuff! And I apologize profusely for doubting you!”

“Didn’t.” That murmured word came from Tony, where his bruised, bloodied face was tucked into Steve’s chest. He was barely conscious, eyes swollen and nearly closed, breathing in shallow pants. But his lips curled into the smallest hints of a smile. “Didn’t doubt. Told you. Told you – you’d find – find a way.” Steve’s heart swelled in his chest, and it was hard to breathe. That little smile on Tony’s face grew larger. “You’re Captain America.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Yeah, Tony.” I am.

They needed to go. They needed to go now.

Easier said than done.

Tony was cradled in Thor’s arms, hardly awake and suffering through every breath, as Steve floundered to figure out what to do. They’d found a first aid kit in one of the labs nearby, and together they were doing everything they could to treat their friend’s innumerable wounds. Tony was in deplorable shape. Steve had seen enough serious injuries to know he needed immediate medical attention. “Fly him out of here,” he quietly demanded.

“I cannot leave you,” Thor returned. The realization was nothing but frustrating. Thor couldn’t fly them both, not with Tony unable to hold on. Steve could perhaps carry Tony as Thor held onto him, but it was risky, too dangerous. Not given the distance they had to travel. He gritted his teeth in irritation. They were no planes here, no way to get back to New York. HYDRA had had to fly across the ocean, but surely they were nearly at the city by now. There was no time, not even to argue, but that was exactly what they had been doing for the last few minutes. Trying uselessly to tend to Tony’s hurts and debating just as uselessly about what needed to be done with them stranded thousands of miles from where the battle was undoubtedly about to occur.

Steve sighed shortly. “You need to be there to fight! There’s no–”

“Could… could you two keep it down?” Tony winced as he came to in the midst of their debate again. He groaned, pushing Steve’s hands away. “You owe me, Rogers. Keep… keep telling you that.”

“Thor, you need to go and warn them. That’s an order!”

Thor shook his head. “This is one order I cannot follow, Steve!”

“Both of you shut up,” Tony moaned. He forced open his good eye to glare at them. “Steve, go – go there. Over there.” Steve glanced at where Tony was pointing. Confused, he went to the computer terminal not far from the dais. After the portal had closed again, the system had shut down, and all that was on the screen now was a prompt and a flashing cursor. “Hurry up.”

Steve sat at the desk, shaking his head in confusion. “What?”

Tony coughed deeply, splattering fresh blood on his chin that Thor wiped away. Despite that, despite the agony clearly assailing him, he grinned. “You want a – a ride out of here and a warning message, right?” He cocked an eyebrow. “So I’m gonna… gonna walk you through hacking this sorry excuse for a computer system. I’d do it myself, but…” Weakly he lifted his broken and mutilated hands. Tears burned his eyes, tears that he blinked away. Tears stung Steve’s eyes, too.
“And we’re gonna make—” He couldn’t hold in a groan, though, which had Steve seriously worried, but he soldiered on. “Gonna make a call into the Tower.”

“Okay,” Steve said, breathless. “But didn’t Rumlow say you gave them access codes to JARVIS?”

Tony managed to smirk. “Oh, please. Access codes? Ain’t no such thing.” Steve couldn’t hold in a relieved gasp, half a chuckle, half a sob, and looked incredulously at Thor. The demigod supported Tony firmer (or simply wanted to offer a hug, or both). “Thought if I – if I made something up about bringing down the Tower’s security, they’d stop. They’d be – be too dumb to – to know the difference, right?” Tony moaned again, losing control of his breathing for a moment and slumping against Thor. “Unfortunately, they were persistent bastards. And I was dumb. They figured they broke me, so that was when they – when they—”

“Tony,” Thor murmured softly, and Steve was back up and out of the chair, coming to kneel in front of his friend.

Tony frowned, and his eyes glistened with tears anew. This time he couldn’t blink them away. “Pumped me full of some kind of truth serum. I don’t know. All I knew was I couldn’t stop talkin’. That was when…” He drew as deep a breath as he could. “When they asked about Sarah again.”

His shame was a palpable thing, thick and heavy, and it killed Steve to see it. He grasped Tony’s face in between his hands. “It’s not your fault.”

“Steve, I swear – I’m so sorry. So sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t!” He pressed his lips to Tony’s forehead in a rushed kiss before tenderly dragging the other man into his arms. Tony wailed half a sob in Steve’s shoulder, so torn down that his control was in tatters. “Listen, it’s probably better this way. They’re after Sarah, which means they’re not going to just blow the Tower up. And Clint’s there. And Coulson and his team. And Fury.”

“Aside from Clint, you’re not exactly ticking off people I trust here,” Tony moaned.

“Bruce might be there, too.”

“… Okay, that’s slightly more comforting.”

Steve couldn’t help a small smile. “Point is: you actually bought us some time. So let’s use it, huh? Walk me through doing this and then Thor’s taking you somewhere to get you help.”

“They brought back the Red Skull, Steve.”

Steve palmed the back of Tony’s head, running his hand over his shoulders in a comforting sweep where he wasn’t hurt. “Yeah.”

“That’s – that’s all kinds of messed up. Didn’t see it coming.”

Thor’s large hand fell carefully to Tony’s back. “It matters not who they have brought back or what monsters we may face.” Steve grimaced at that, thankful that Tony couldn’t see him. He didn’t need to know the extent of the danger the world was in right now. “We will defeat them. We are together again, a family again, so we will prevail.”

Tony pulled away from Steve with great effort, grimacing the whole time. His eyes and cheeks were wet, but he couldn’t wipe them. Instead, he drew a steadying breath and nodded. “Alright. Time to kick ass, right? Do the hero thing? Save our loved ones? And the world?” Steve nodded, too.
Tony gathered himself more and more by the second. “Butt in the chair, Cap. Thor, prop me up next to him so I can see the screen.”

They arranged themselves quickly. Thor stayed right at Tony’s side; it was clear he had no strength, no capacity to keep himself upright. Steve knew they had to move fast, and not just because HYDRA was probably nearly to New York. If Tony lost consciousness before they could do this, they’d be back to square one. “Okay.” Tony blinked a couple of times like he was trying to focus. “Okay. So start typing…”

Quickly the inventor walked Steve through the steps. There were a lot of them. First they needed to reroute power to the system’s satellite connections. Then it was a matter of daisy-chaining through a bunch of satellites (not at all legally) to reach a Stark Industries satellite whose sole purpose was tracking hostiles on behalf of the Avengers. From there, Tony was able to get Steve in touch with JARVIS. Steve had no idea what he was doing for most of this escapade, but he followed Tony’s careful directions to a T, and pretty soon the AI’s familiar, wonderful voice was filling the chamber. “Captain Rogers, it is quite a relief to see you.”

“Likewise, JARVIS, but we’re in serious trouble here.” Steve glanced to Tony, but he’d lost consciousness again, the task of guiding Steve though the hack having drained him completely. Thor held him, and he shook his head in worry. “We need to get back to New York right away. We’re somewhere near Normandy in northern France, somewhere along the coast. And HYDRA’s on its way to the city.”

The monitor suddenly filled with a video feed, and much to Steve’s surprise, Skye was there with Ward and Sharon. Obviously JARVIS had brought them in on the call. “Captain Rogers?”

There was no time for pleasantries or an explanation, no time for anything but action. However, the words came out before he could stop himself. “Is Natasha okay?”

Skye’s pretty face settled into a concerned frown. “I don’t know. Doctor Banner’s here. He arrived shortly after you guys left, and he’s been in with Agent Romanoff and Barton and Fitz and Simmons since. I – she’s alive, that much I know. But nothing else.”

She’s alive. Steve struggled simply to think past that a moment, to digest it and overcome his relief. “And Sarah?”

“She’s fine. Scared, but okay. She’s been with Miss Potts.” She’s fine. Again, it was hard to deal with just how grateful he was to hear that. “Do you want me to get her?”

He couldn’t take that right now and stay focused. “No, no. Listen. Viper’s on her way to New York. Dozens of aircraft. Probably hundreds of troops.”

Ward shared a look with the young woman at his side. “When?”

“It could be any minute. They’re coming to destroy the city.”

The color drained from their faces. “How?” Sharon demanded.

Steve shared a look with Thor. “We’re not sure yet, but they have a weapon that could level everything. And they’re coming to attack the Tower. They’re coming for Sarah.” Again the three of them seemed dismayed. “Whatever support Fury has in the wings, we’re going to need it. Is he there?”

“He and May left,” Ward answered, “when you guys didn’t come back. Coulson’s with them. They were looking for you.”
“Well, get on the horn with him.” Sharon nodded and disappeared from view. “We need everything SHIELD has left. This is gonna be it. HYDRA’s coming to finish us, to bring their plans to fruition, and we need to fight. Everyone needs to fight. Skye, can you patch me into all the television and radio channels in the city? And get on the internet?”

Skye seemed surprised by that, but she didn’t question. Immediately she turned and started working at one of the computer terminals behind them. Ward’s scarred, bearded face filled the video feed. “What’re you going to do?”

Steve drew a deep breath. “Something I should have done months ago. Lead.”

Ward’s hard expression softened, and he gave a small, approving smile. “We’ll take care of things here. Make sure they don’t find Sarah. You do what you need to.”

Steve appreciated that. There’d been a time when he’d had his doubts about Coulson’s team. Ward, in particular, had been nothing but a traitor after what he’d done last year. Now, though, he knew they would do their part, protect the Tower so he could focus on the attack. That wasn’t what he wanted at all – he wanted to get to Sarah and make sure Pepper was okay and get Tony back to her and find out if Natasha was going to be alright – but he couldn’t. Not now.

Skye returned. “You’re on, Captain.”

Steve narrowed the focus of the camera atop the monitor to record only him. He was doing this now, here, of all places and of all times. This wasn’t ideal at all, but there was no other choice. With the world threatened, he needed the people to trust in SHIELD, in the Avengers. He needed them to have faith. To fight. What Fury had said days ago… It echoed in his head. “You’re Captain America! You know what that means to this world. People listen to you. People follow you. I need you to lead.”

It was time to do just that.

He took a deep breath, held it as he gathered his thoughts and his words and his confidence, and then let it go. “People of New York City,” he started. He thought better of that. “No, people of the world. This is Captain Steve Rogers. I realize in recent months there’s been… doubt, a lot of doubt, about who the Avengers are. What we really stand for. And I realize it looked I abandoned the team in the middle of the most important fight we’ve maybe ever had. I… I want to apologize for that. We’ve made our fair share of mistakes, and that was one of mine. I had reasons, good reasons, but during it all, I forgot something fundamental. I’m here to fight, to protect you. That’s what I signed up for. That’s what I do. I was afraid, really afraid, that I couldn’t be everything I needed to be. I let my fears turn me into something I’m not.” He closed his eyes a moment. “But now I’m here. And now I’m ready to fight and protect you.”

He took another breath. “HYDRA has survived everything the Avengers – that we’ve done to stop them. They survived World War II. They survived the fall of SHIELD. They have survived everything. And they’ve done nothing but sell you lies, and you probably don’t even realize it. They’ve twisted and manipulated you. They’ve sunk their claws into everything: social media, the news, our government even. They’ve been corrupting your faith in what’s right and good, beating down your trust in it and in the Avengers. SHIELD brought the Avengers together to protect the world from threats like HYDRA, and we haven’t. I should never have let any of this happen. Never. I see now that running away only accomplished what they wanted: for you to think the Avengers have failed. For all of us, including me, to think that we’ve lost before we’ve even started fighting. To make everyone scared. You know what, though? We don’t need to be. We haven’t lost anything. We can all be exactly who we’re meant to be. We’ve got…” He turned to Tony and smiled even though the other man couldn’t see it. “…this one life to do what we can. Be all we
can. Stand up. Fight. Do what’s right. Not be afraid. I ask you to do that now, to be fearless, because they’re coming. HYDRA is coming. HYDRA is coming to destroy our city because they don’t think any of us is worthy to stand against them. They want to judge you as acceptable or not. They want to wield… ancient magic, the power of the gods, against us all to purify mankind. And they want all of us out of their way.” He set his jaw and shook his head. “So stand in their way. Stand. Evacuate. Keep yourselves calm. Help one another. Protect yourselves, your families, and your neighbors. And know that we – the Avengers – are coming to do what we swore to do. I died once before to stop HYDRA from having its way. I don’t regret that, not for one second. And I’d do it again. I’m here to fight. We’re all here to fight for you.”

It felt good to say all of that, to say it and mean it and know it himself. Skye’s face reappeared after the transmission cut off. “Captain, it’s going everywhere. The whole city will hear it.”

Steve nodded, coming down from that strange and sudden high. “Good. Get Agent Coulson in touch with the NYPD and NYFD. We need to guide the evacuation. And lock down the Tower. They’re going to come there, Viper and—” He faltered a moment. “Viper and the assassin.”

“What about you?” Sharon asked. She’d just returned, and she had concern in her eyes. “Even with all of us, we can’t take on an invasion of that number. And that’s not including whatever weapon you say they have.”

Steve looked to Thor. “Thor’s bringing Tony back and then I… I’ll—”

JARVIS gently interrupted. “Captain Rogers, sir. I believe I can be of service.”

Despite how awful the last days – months – had been and how dangerous the battle ahead of them was, Steve had to admit: this was pretty amazing.

To himself, anyway. He could never admit it to Tony. If he did, he’d never live it down.

“Captain Rogers,” JARVIS said, “you are coming up on HYDRA’s main force. Estimated time: one minute, fifteen seconds.” Inside Iron Man, Steve flew through the sky, excitement pulsing through his veins as he descended through the clouds. He was shooting toward Manhattan, Thor at his side with Tony wrapped in a quilt they’d found and tucked securely in his embrace. Dawn was breaking, and the Atlantic Ocean was calm, silvery, and glassy in the golden light of a new day. It was hard to focus on that, though, with Iron Man’s HUD continually bombarding him with information. How does Tony keep track of all this? Information was updating and streaming and blinking: the location of the HYDRA’s fleet of aircraft, the projected strength of their arsenal, the formation of the few SHIELD quinjets flying out over New York Harbor, the Avengers’ jet among them. There was also the brightly lit status displays of Iron Man’s systems, which he took to mean nominal since everything was green. Agent Coulson’s efforts coordinating the sudden evacuation were also being reported. They were proceeding as well as could be expected, but there was no way even in the best of circumstances that they could evacuate eight and a half million people from New York City. They had to stop Schmidt. That was the only option.

JARVIS seemed to read his mind. “HYDRA is forming a perimeter around Ellis and Liberty Islands. I believe the Red Skull is standing on Liberty Island.”

“Of course he is,” Steve grumbled irately. It made overly dramatic and completely sadistic sense for Schmidt to launch his attack from one of the most well-known symbols of American freedom and prosperity. Steve’s parents had immigrated through Ellis Island in 1912. It had been the chance for anyone to come to a new land, to find happiness and freedom, that had drawn them and millions of others to this country. Things were certainly more complicated now (and had been then, too) and
prejudices had always permeated throughout society, but the dream held fast, that anyone could be anything. That, like everything else, was in jeopardy today. “Thor?”

“I am with you,” the demigod responded.

“Gonna cut through them. Get Tony to safety!”

“Aye!”

In the grand scheme of things, aerial battle was not something with which Steve was terribly familiar. He’d had that one crazy moment on the Valkyrie where he’d taken out some of Schmidt’s men in the odd, little aircraft attached to the massive plane. That was nothing compared to this, and as they closed in on the dozens of quinjets and choppers surrounding the harbor, Steve felt his anxiety mount. “JARVIS, I’m going to need some help here…”

“Of course. Targeting algorithms are in operation. You control when the weapons fire.” That seemed simple enough. “I may not be able to compensate for Mr. Stark’s precision or reflexes. Or his dramatic flair.”

Steve smiled. “I’m sure you’ll do your best.”

“Indeed. You will reach HYDRA’s perimeter in twenty seconds.”

“Captain Rogers.” Ward’s voice cut over the communications link. “We’re closing in.”

Steve glanced at the tactical map JARVIS was usefully displaying for him. They were grossly outnumbered, even with every SHIELD quinjet and agent they could trust in the tristate area in the air. Steve didn’t let his dread deter him. “Engage at your discretion,” he ordered. “Keep the fight away from the city.”

“Copy that.” That was Sharon’s even voice where she was piloting the Avengers quinjet with Ward at her side. JARVIS was directly wired into the jet, so Steve could see readouts of all of their systems. “We’re ready.”

“Sir,” JARVIS said, “you have incoming.”

Steve could see that from the displays, that a couple of the HYDRA jets were breaking off to approach them. He poured more speed into Iron Man’s thrusters, speeding across the sky. Ahead, dark blurs became more distinct. Against the New York City skyline, there were so many of them. “I’m going to break their formation. Okay?” He knew Thor was with him. Gritting his teeth, he zoomed faster, close enough to see the jets now. Two were coming at him, miniguns lowered from their bellies, and Steve screamed between them. He was too fast to hit. JARVIS helped him take Iron Man vertical, and, despite what he considered an extremely strong constitution, the shift in gravity and the blur of the sky had him miserably nauseous for a second. “I don’t know how he deals with this,” he groaned.

“There has been the odd occasion where he has not,” JARVIS replied, and Steve winced, not wanting to picture getting sick in the suit. “They are following.”

“Good. Let’s make a distraction.” Steve banked left once he was much higher, and the sharp movement sent his vertigo into flurry again. He swallowed down the bile in his throat and twisted, bringing his arms up. For some crazy reason, he’d always imagined Iron Man to be heavy, restrictive in a sense. Looking back on it now, he realized that had been crazy; Tony moved with such grace in the suit. It was light, responsive and smooth, truly an extension of his own body. Steve let the repulsor cannons loose, not quite prepared for the kickback of the blast. The suit’s
thrusters immediately compensated, vents releasing, and he gathered his senses. “Quite a punch in these.”

“Yes, sir. Additional incoming!”

Iron Man jetted into evasive action, the computer helping him like a partner guiding him through a dance. Steve twisted into it, screaming through the clouds, unloading missiles from the shoulder compartments. They struck one of the jets, blasting away at its engine and sending it tumbling from the sky. Steve dropped, rolling to avoid gunfire. A few bullets struck his left leg, and the HUD immediately registered the damage. He didn’t even feel it. Ahead he saw the Avengers quinjet barrel into the dog fight, leading the small flock of SHIELD’s remaining aircraft. Whatever peace there had been in the early dawn was rapidly reduced to chaos, and the communications link vibrated with shouting. He didn’t recognize all the voices. SHIELD agents, emerging from hiding, from exile, and coming to join in the fight.

“Bogey on my six! I can’t shake him!”

“I’m coming in! Hang on!”

“Carter, I’m taking fire!”

“We’re on it, John!”

“These HYDRA bastards are going down like they should’ve in DC last year! Woo-hoo!”

“Cut down on the chatter,” Ward coarsely demanded. “Pull up, Graham.”

“Sir, Thor has cleared the harbor. There is no sign of pursuit.”

At JARVIS’ announcement, Steve broke off from the melee. He paused a moment, shooting higher in the sky again to check for himself. Sure enough, Thor was gone, flying Tony to one of the area hospitals that was already prepared to receive him. Steve sighed in relief. Tony’s safe. “Is the Red Skull still on the island?” He turned, unloading another round of repulsor blasts. He sliced the wing from a fighter jet, and down it went in a blur of smoke. The pilots ejected, barely, and fell right into another burning aircraft. Steve swooped low, snatching them both as their parachutes burned and tangled. He dove down and dropped them safely into the water. Pulling up again, he paused to look around frantically. “JARVIS?”

“Affirmative, Captain. I suggest you hurry.” JARVIS honed in on a security camera that was inside a gift shop on the island, it seemed. It showed the Red Skull standing right at the edge of land, near the ferry dock. He had Steve’s shield on his back like a damn trophy, and that red jewel was clenched in his hand. The Harbinger.

Steve gritted his teeth. “Sharon, Ward, I’m going after Schmidt. Does anyone have eyes on Viper?”

There was a pause. JARVIS certainly didn’t, though the AI was employing every resource he had – social media and satellite feeds and security cameras and cellphones all over the city – to try and track her. “Negative, Cap.”

“Keep looking,” Steve growled, setting his arms back and jetting as low and as fast as possible. Iron Man’s powerful thrusters kicked water up in a spray behind him.

“We’ve got this!” Ward shouted back.

Overhead, another HYDRA jet exploded, and Steve banked to avoid the falling wreckage. The
island was just ahead. JARVIS coaxed more speed out of the suit without his asking, and a breath later, Steve landed with a heavy thud near Schmidt on the island. Behind him the Statue of Liberty towered, glowing green and pearly in the sunrise. It would be a truly stunning sight, if not for the monster before him. “Schmidt!”

The Red Skull turned from where he held the Harbinger out over the water. He appraised Iron Man. “Another modern marvel?” he sneered, shaking his head in disgust. “Whatever you pathetic Avengers throw at me will fail!”

Iron Man released him, and Steve stepped free. The armor immediately fell into a defensive stance, arms raised and repulsors charged. Steve lifted his fists as well. “Not so modern,” he replied. “Give me the Harbinger.”

The Skull hardly looked surprised, and he laughed outright. “Really, Captain? Do you honestly believe, after all I have been through, lost and isolated and tortured in that hellish world on which I was trapped… Do you honestly believe I’ll lay down now and let you win?”

“I don’t care what you think,” Steve snapped. “I’m not going to let you destroy the city.”

“My plans are far more grandiose than your precious New York,” the Red Skull returned. “When our battle is over, this world will look much the same as the world I left: barren, desolate, and burning. And I’ll stand alone as the beginning of a new race.”

“Your granddaughter seems to think she’ll be standing there with you.” With me. And with Sarah.

The Red Skull’s ever-present sneer tightened into a frown. “She is a fool. There will be nothing left.”

That was more disturbing than it should have been. “You’ve never been the type to share,” Steve said.

“And you are still the type to believe in nonsense. Still wearing a flag on your chest. Still fighting a battle of nations. I have seen the future, Captain, and there’s nothing more than destruction!”

Steve lost his patience and charged him. The Red Skull wasn’t prepared, not for that or for Iron Man’s repulsor blasts striking his chest. He staggered back, and Steve went after him, delivering a series of fast punches and kicks to drive him toward the edge. The Skull gathered his balance, ducking beneath Steve’s next strike, but he wasn’t fast enough to avoid Steve grabbing at his back. He got both hands around his shield and pulled. “Still not my future,” he hissed, and he rammed his head into the Skull’s. Schmidt lurched back with a cry, giving up the shield rather than the gem. Steve whirled, getting his arm into the familiar straps, and he caught the next punch Schmidt threw at him on the vibranium surface. His shield hummed with the impact, and Steve was about to dig his heels into the grass and push back when something exploded behind them.

A quinjet came crashing down, bursting into flames and smoke. Steve turned, shocked, and the Red Skull took the moment to land a hard kick in his midriff. The force of it sent him flying back into the burning wreckage, his shield clattering into the flames, but Iron Man shot up, encircling him in perfect coordination before he was burned. He flipped and hit the ground hard on one knee.

And Thor landed right beside him, having brought the jet down. He didn’t even glance at Steve, his face tight with a threatening frown as he raised Mjölnir and pointed it at the Red Skull. “Release the Harbinger!” he demanded in a booming voice. “It is not yours! It was stolen from the Allfather’s Vault, and I will bring it home with me!”
If the Red Skull was at all daunted by the appearance of one of the gods he so lauded, it wasn’t obvious. “No, I think not.”

“You will not wield it against the good people of this city,” Thor promised, his glare nothing but menacing. “Return it to me now or I will destroy you.”

Steve was about to tell Thor not to bother with trying to negotiate, but the ground began to rumble. Iron Man’s sensors picked up on the vibration, localizing it out in the harbor a hundred feet or so from where they stood. They also honed in on the gem, on the Harbinger, where the Red Skull lifted it above his head. It glowed now, glowed a deep, dark red, and the quaking worsened. The river around them seemed to shake. What in the world?

No. Not of this world. Right.

Even remembering that couldn’t prepare him for the sight of the monster the Red Skull had summoned bursting out of the harbor. It was gigantic, climbing up and up toward the sky, spraying the island with water. Huge, hideous tentacles lined with hundreds of suckers, some as large as a car in all likelihood, lifted the thing aloft. A slew of black eyes covered the front of its head, glistening gray skin mottled and ugly and almost emaciated over its wide skull. HYDRA exemplified. That was what it looked like, what it felt like. A horrific cephalopod capable of crushing skyscrapers. A beast born of nightmare and madness and magic. Armageddon. The realization of an old and evil vision. HYDRA embodied.

“Holy hell…” That was Ward, breathless and horrified, over the commlink.

And others. Other SHIELD pilots. Skye observing from the Tower. “My God.”

“Is that… Damn.”

“The power of the gods…”

“Cthulhu in the flesh…”

“What is it?”

Steve didn’t have an answer. The beast lifted itself more and more out of the water, huge claws encased in shining resin slamming down into the side of the island. The tentacles waved wildly from beneath its head – heads! Oh, God! – as it turned toward the city.

“You are too late!” the Red Skull shouted. He slipped the Harbinger around his neck again and raised his arms to the sky. “Behold! The wrath of HYDRA!”

Said wrath of HYDRA roared, and the very earth seemed to shake. The HUD was blaring all sorts of warnings, and the comm line was filled with terrified shouting. “Look out!” Thor cried out.

Steve glanced up, the alarms flashing even more frantically across the HUD, and saw one of the huge claws slamming down toward them. JARVIS reacted faster than he did, jetting him left and out of the way. The ground shook with the impact. The beast was almost out of the harbor now, and it was over a hundred feet high. So much for there being any chance of this being small. “Thor!”

“We must keep it away from the city!” Thor shouted. He landed on Liberty Island again, Mjölnir spinning in a blur. He thrust the hammer upward, drawing down lightning from a rapidly darkening sky, and he threw the bolts toward the monster. One of the massive heads turned to him, its seeming phalanx of eyes giving a disgusting, shivery blink. The next thing Steve knew, an array of razor sharp teeth was careening toward Thor, and he was lurching to try to help. That wasn’t necessary, as
Thor swung his hammer up and struck with enough force to push the head back.

But that certainly made it mad. A tentacle swept through the air as the monster writhed with the blow, and it hit Iron Man hard. Steve didn’t even register the sound of the klaxons wailing inside the helmet, didn’t hear JARVIS yelling at him, as everything spun. He hit the water and sank, dizzy and reeling with shock. “Captain Rogers! Captain!”

He sputtered. He’d hit his head during the tumble inside the suit, and his nose was oozing blood. “I’m alright,” he managed. He managed to get himself oriented without too much trouble, and he jetted out of the water like a missile. Aloft now, he had a full breadth of just how bad things were. The monster was batting aircraft out of the sky like they were toys, jets exploding against the harbor, against the islands, flung across the way to crash into the city. The beast itself was lumbering through the river, sending huge waves every which way as it headed toward Manhattan. Above, both SHIELD’s and HYDRA’s jets were scrambling, some firing against the monster (ineffectively). Most of the remaining HYDRA aircraft were heading to the city.

And the Red Skull was still standing on Liberty Island, grinning like a madman.

Damn it. “Skye, do you read me?”

“I’m here, Captain!”

“We need to get the Lower East Side evacuated! Have Coulson focus there! And redirect everything northwest away from the harbor!”

“Right!”

Steve watched as Thor stood against this monster. A lone man, even if he was a god, had no chance. “And tell Bruce we need him here right away.”

“Cap, he’s in with Agent Romanoff. I don’t know—”

“And what about Viper?” Ward interrupted worriedly. “Captain, we still don’t have eyes on her!”

He couldn’t care about that now. He couldn’t care that Bruce was probably in the midst of trying to save Natasha’s life. She could die without him or be destroyed by TAHTI or worse. He couldn’t care. And he couldn’t care that if Bruce left, there would be no one aside from Clint there to protect Sarah and Natasha and Pepper against Viper. He couldn’t care. “We need the Hulk now!”

There was no argument. “I’m on it,” Skye said. “And I’m redoubling efforts in the search for Viper. We’ll find her.”

Unfortunately, Steve didn’t doubt that. “Ward, Sharon, keep your distance. Have everyone fall back. Try to keep this thing occupied away from the city.”

“It’s huge and slow at least,” Sharon said worriedly, trying to make that sound like an advantage to them. Steve wasn’t sure it was.

“What are you going to do, sir?” Ward asked.

Truth be told, as he hovered there above the harbor watching Thor battle this monstrosity from Liberty Island, watching said monstrosity whip its multiple heads and tentacles and claws at anything that got close to it like an animal slapping at bugs, he had no idea. Even with Thor or the Hulk, he didn’t think this was a fight they could win. If that thing got to the city, it would be mass destruction and hysteria. Millions dead. And with it at his beck and call, the Red Skull could rain terror
throughout the world. What could go up against something this big? _The power of the gods._ HYDRA in a living form, in flesh and blood, towering and unstoppable. Viper had said it, and he hadn’t listened. Man-made weapons were useless. He could see it now, missiles unloaded from jets, bullets spitting from barrels, Iron Man’s own arsenal, _all_ useless, _all nothing_, against something this large and powerful. Their biggest guns couldn’t touch it.

And then he heard Natasha’s voice. “Maybe it’s not about guns.”

His gaze snapped to the Red Skull. _The Harbinger._ “JARVIS, how well can you remote pilot Iron Man?”

JARVIS seemed perturbed for a beat. “Well enough, Captain, though my capacity for execution of precision maneuvers is greatly reduced without the guidance of someone inside the suit.”

He didn’t think this would need to be too precise. Hopefully. “You see that jewel Schmidt has around his neck? We need to get it off him.”

“Sir?”

“Thor said whoever wields the Harbinger controls its magic. We need to get it. If we do, maybe I can – or Thor can – control this thing or destroy it.” It was a mighty big “if”. Thor hadn’t directly said that, and Steve really had no idea how the Harbinger worked or what they were dealing with. “It’s our only shot at this point. I don’t think I can take the Red Skull alone, not if I have to get that off him, but you and I working together? Maybe.”

JARVIS’ tone filled with optimism for the first time since they’d contacted him. “It is certainly worth a try, sir.”

Steve smiled at that. Tony’s words flitted through his head. “Always thought he’d be proud of us working together.” It was almost like Tony was _there_ with him somehow, like he had been for years, bantering and pushing his buttons before a battle and letting Steve push him right back, lighthearted and steadfast. _We can do this._ “Alright. Ready?”

“Indeed, sir.” With that, Steve jetted down toward Liberty Island. The monster perhaps saw him coming, but it was immediately assaulted by the jets still twisting through the air above and by Thor, who’d jumped from the island onto one of its arms. Lightning raked through the sky, avoiding the small fleet of aircraft and striking the beast in the chest. It roared, shaking the harbor and the city beyond. Steve ignored that, barely darting beneath a section of tentacle as thick as a tractor trailer, zooming toward the Statue of Liberty. The lady in green was still there, still standing, despite the incredible battle around it. He circled it, trying to hide in the smoke and behind the bulk of the beast so the Red Skull wouldn’t see him coming. JARVIS was already powering up the suit’s weapons, targeting the Red Skull amidst the curtains of gray and flames. “Attacking.”

Iron Man flew through the fire, sweeping low and picking up Steve’s shield where it had fallen during the explosion before. He landed with a thud, throwing the shield harder than he’d ever been able to before. It struck the Red Skull in the back and sent him tumbling far across the grass. Steve wasted not a second, rushing across the way, palm repulsors igniting in fast, staccato bursts of energy. The Skull was already recovering, rolling to avoid the blasts, but he couldn’t get away from the crack of Iron Man’s fist across his face. The man returned a vicious blow of his own, and Steve ducked out of the suit as the armor took the hit. He sidestepped, crouching smoothly to grab his shield, and came hard at Schmidt.

“Is this what you are now, Captain?” the Red Skull taunted. “Resorting to parlor tricks and nonsense?” Iron Man fired at him but missed; the Skull was fast and JARVIS seemed to be right
about precision maneuvering. Combat in close quarters was not Iron Man’s strength, and it showed.

Fortunately, though, it was Steve’s. He delivered a mighty punch to the Skull’s face, snapping his head back. “Whatever works!” He grabbed for the jewel, but the Skull got wise to his plan and wrenched away, snatching Steve’s wrist and twisting his arm until it nearly snapped from its joint. Steve howled in pain, and Iron Man jetted up to fire at their enemy. With Steve in the way, it was clearly difficult to get a clean shot, and JARVIS wasn’t confident enough to try. Steve gritted his teeth, planting his boots in the now wet grass and pushing himself back. His arm twisted further, sending agony shooting up it, but he flipped up and over the other man’s shoulder. Bringing his shield up, he slammed it into Schmidt’s face.

The Red Skull staggered back with a cry, and Steve followed. For a few seconds, all he did was fight, losing himself in the battle, in his training. Iron Man darted in and out of the fray, landing kicks and punches, firing blasts from its palm cannons where it could. They traded places, moving fast, JARVIS trying to take the worst of the Skull’s rage-filled blows and darting out to let Steve land strikes of his own, accurate and powerful. All the while they were both trying to get the Harbinger where it hung on its chain around Schmidt’s neck. Trying and trying and failing.

And all the while chaos churned around them. The massive cephalopod hadn’t much moved from where it was, and where it was casted a massive shadow over Liberty Island. Steve couldn’t see Thor, couldn’t see the Avengers quinjet, couldn’t see anything aside from the multiple heads of the beast wailing and the tentacles flailing and all of this was so surreal it might as well have been a nightmare. Focus! He ducked beneath a vicious punch. Iron Man landed to his left, shooting a few long, powerful energy beams at Schmidt, but he was already diving into the grass to avoid them. JARVIS had Iron Man shooting forward, rounding on him, and Steve waited until he saw the jewel twinkle against Schmidt’s chest. Then he threw his shield, and the edge struck true. The chain snapped, and the Harbinger fell into the grass.

“No!” Schmidt screamed in fury. He dove for it. Steve did the same, lunging into the grass, but he never got close. All of the sudden a heavy, horrible shadow fell over him, and his blood went cold. He barely rolled out of the way before the tentacle slammed into the island. Cement and dirt flew high. Water rushed onto land as the entire side of it was broken away.

And Steve fell with it. He went down into the harbor when the section of ground he was on was practically pulverized. A huge section of the sidewalk slammed into his back as he struck the water, and what meager amount of air he had went right out of his body. Pain rendered his limbs useless, little more than jelly, and blackness swooped in to take him. Nothingness. Vaguely he knew people were shouting at him.

“We’ve lost contact with Skye. Anyone copy?”

“HYDRA’s regrouping! They’re attacking the Tower!”

“Orders, Captain Rogers? Orders? Where is he?”

“Cap’s in the water!”

He knew these people needed him. But he knew he was sinking. He was drowning. He was crippled by shock, by the agony along his back, and he couldn’t stop himself. Down he went, into shadows and nothingness. He was back in the void.

This time, though, Tony found him.

Iron Man’s glowing eyes were all he could see in the blackness. Arms grabbed him, steady and
strong, and the next thing he knew, he was flying, bursting out of the water, sucking in a desperate
breath into oxygen-starved lungs. JARVIS set him onto the island, cradling him while he shuddered
and coughed the water from his chest. “Captain Rogers! Sir!” The AI’s voice seemed so calm over
the comm link. “Are you alright?”

Steve couldn’t get the air into his body to answer, and even if he could have, there was no time to.
That awful shadow came again, blotting out the morning light, and Steve’s eyes widened in terror to
see the massive tentacle with its awful, huge suckers crashing toward them again. No!

An inhuman roar shook everything, though this one wasn’t from any of the monster’s many heads.
And this one was familiar. There was the thunder of feet and a blur of green, and just as the tentacle
was about to crush them, the Hulk was there, catching the limb and pushing it back. The
humongous muscles of the Hulk’s back rippled as he stood and fought for ground, holding that
devastating force still. For a moment it seemed like he wouldn’t be able to, but frustration was
always a good thing with the Other Guy. The longer this went on, the angrier he got, and eventually
he shoved the tentacle away. He spared a glance over his shoulder for Steve, his captain and leader,
to ensure he was alright. Steve gave a weak nod, too shaken to do much else. Then the Hulk was
off, pounding the ground with his feet hard enough to shatter the concrete, leaping up and grappling
at the cephalopod. Monster against monster. Beast against beast.

And Thor was there, too, atop the behemoth, lightning crashing and his hammer surging. Together
he and the Hulk attacked, and the cephalopod wailed, scrambling and twisting to dislodge them.
One of the heads reared up, smacking right into one of the jets and completely obliterating it. Steve
winced, his relief dissipating as quickly as it had come. Even with both Thor and the Hulk fighting
this thing, even with the jets distracting it, this situation wasn’t tenable. It would get to the city.

He had to get the Harbinger.

He knew the second he tried to stand that he was hurt pretty badly. He hadn’t felt it before, the
dimness of losing consciousness blurring it all, but he was sadly certain now that his back was
damaged. He felt warm beneath his suit, bloody, and he couldn’t stand straight. But there was no
time to stop, to focus on it, to do anything other than fight.

And fight he did.

Schmidt was searching the trampled grass and mud for the gem, and Steve immediately leapt on
him. They went down in a tangle of limbs, Steve on top, pummeling the other man with everything
he had left. Iron Man jetted upward. “Captain Rogers!” JARVIS shouted over the comm. “The
gem! It is three meters to your left!” Steve scrambled upward, half crawling through the muck and
trying hard to get to his feet. Schmidt yowled, realizing what he was doing and reaching for him to
stop him. A hand grabbed his ankle. Yelping, Steve went down, and the Red Skull kicked him right
where he’d been struck before. He couldn’t contain his scream, choked off by blood filling his
mouth when the Skull’s boot slammed into his jaw. “Captain Rogers!”

Just like that, Iron Man was back, encasing him where he lay trembling as Schmidt staggered off to
look for the Harbinger. “Where is it?” the Red Skull yelled hoarsely, temper spent and fury boiling.
“Where?”

“JARVIS…” Steve gasped. He couldn’t breathe. “Where…”

“I see it,” JARVIS replied. The HUD quickly displayed the Harbinger’s location, partially buried in
mud and exactly as the AI had first said: about three meters to the left. Schmidt would never see it.
“Perhaps it would do your old nemesis well to befriend a Stark.” Steve couldn’t help a smile, even
as hurt as he was, as Iron Man flew of its own accord. He raised the palm repulsors and fired at
Schmidt, blasting the ground around him and slowing him down. “Can you still fight, sir?”

“I could do this all day, JARVIS,” Steve said, getting a better breath into his lungs.

“Likewise. I shall distract him.” The armor let him go not far from where his shield had fallen, dropping him a few feet to the ground as gently as possible before jetting back to the fight. Steve grabbed his shield and limped to where the gem should be. Going down on his knees, he pawed through the mud and ripped earth and destroyed grass. There it was. There, just a foot or so away.

Schmidt’s scream was loud and damning, and before Steve could take his prize, the Red Skull was on him again. Rammed hard, Steve crumpled, twisting and landing sharply on his shield beneath his belly. Schmidt was on his back, pushing him down. He blinked the tears from his eyes just in time to see the cephalopod looming above throw the Hulk from its back, boldly turning to the city anew and sending its huge tentacles across the harbor toward the Lower East Side. One tentacle whipped across the island in a massive sweep that knocked Iron Man into the water. Steve could see the armor come apart with the crushing impact. No! “So much for your parlor tricks, Captain. You never had a chance,” the Red Skull hissed. He dug his knee into Steve’s injured back, and the pain was crippling. He twitched, unable to make his limbs move with the paralyzing hell burning his nerves. “And now you will lay in the mud and watch as your home, your humble beginnings, are destroyed.” Steve dropped his head, panting, but the Red Skull grabbed his hair and hauled him back up. Weakly he pulled his hands beneath him, his shield sliding in the muck. “Watch, Captain. This is the end.”

Never! With a cry, he pushed up as hard as he could, swinging his shield with everything he had left. It crashed into the Skull’s side, knocking him off, and Steve crawled in the mud to find the gem. The Skull was on him again almost instantaneously, struggling, punching and kicking and wrestling, but Steve shoved him off.

And right into Iron Man’s path. The armor was there, dented and damaged badly, but there. It was in pieces, careening toward them one at a time. This was its last effort, slamming into Schmidt and encasing him now, before jetting out of control and into the ground. Steve spared a second to watch the armor flailing, thrusters misfiring dramatically before winking out. Then he reached and grabbed the Harbinger. He stood, the gem warm and pulsing in his hand, and turned back.

Schmidt lay not far away, tangled in the remains of Tony’s suit. He ripped the helmet off with a frustrated shout, appraising the darkened eyes and dented face in fury before throwing it away. He shook the remains of the armor off himself before staggering to his feet. Steve watched him gather his wits before Schmidt whirled and stared right at him. He still couldn’t stand quite straight, and his uniform and shield were covered in mud, but he managed a little smile. He lifted the gem. “Looking for this?”

Schmidt’s eyes narrowed hatefully. “Return it to me! You are not worthy of its power!”

“Funny thing about that,” Steve said, appraising the gem in his palm. “You want to talk about the power of the gods? This thing you think I’m not worthy of having? Well, I actually know a god. Pretty shocking, considering I’m just a kid from Brooklyn, right? But I’m really good friends with one. And when we fight side by side, he follows my orders.” He glared, tightening his grip on the gem. “And he doesn’t take too kindly to people threatening this world and my family. Thor!”

At his call, Thor was there, there to catch the Harbinger as he threw it up and across the island. The Asgardian snatched the gem from the air, closing his fist around it. Schmidt screamed in fury, but it was too late. Thor landed on the sidewalk behind them that led to the Statue of Liberty, and he raised the Harbinger with a cry.
The monster stopped suddenly. It was remarkable how quickly the huge thing did that. The air was still, charged with tension, and nothing moved for an interminable second. After that, the beast turned and twisted away from the city, its tentacles calming, its many eyes blinking, its heads lowering. Lowering in submission to its new master. Thor was panting, breathless and surprised, but he grinned. He gestured toward himself with the stone, and the beast lumbered closer. Steve watched, wide-eyed, as the horror neared them again. Thor gave a small nod, that grin getting harder, and the beast growled.

Then it attacked. Schmidt backed up, his eyes going wide with dawning realization of the intentions of the beast’s new master. He shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “No, not after all of this.” The monster snarled, those claws grabbing the edge of the island. It reared up, its heads shivering with anticipation, its tentacles slipping around its prey in a huge, slithering cage. The Red Skull’s rage was unimaginable. “No! No!”

Steve grimaced as the monster threw itself on top of the island. Tons and tons of slimy, wet flesh descended. Those tentacles pulled taut, crushing and curling in on themselves, and Steve shook his head helplessly. There was no way out. He was alone, save for the Red Skull. The Skull turned to him as the ground around them started to crumble and break, as the shadow of the beast fell. “At least you will die with me.”

A huge, green blur landed in front of him, and an arm wrapped around him. Not alone. Steve could have laughed. “Not today,” he gasped instead with a sloppy smile. The Hulk held him tighter before jumping to safety. Seeing Steve was saved, the Red Skull’s face twisted in fury. There was nothing he could do as the tentacles closed around him. Steve held on tight to the Hulk, pulling his shield in, as the Avenger’s powerful leap took them both to the top of the Statue of Liberty. The Hulk set him down but kept a massive paw on his shoulder, steadying him as they watched the section of the island collapse under the weight of the beast. Thor landed beside them, holding the Harbinger still, watching in satisfaction as the monster fell. The Red Skull’s scream was drowned in the cacophony of it all, the moaning of the ground and the cracking of the world and the groaning of the monster while it sank. The cephalopod crushed Schmidt, took him down with it, its hulk burying him, killing him, before rolling off the side of the Liberty Island to return to the harbor from where it had come.

The water rippled in the quiet moments afterward as everything settled. A full third of the island was simply gone, torn concrete and wreckage in the water. The buildings around the base of the Statue were burning, and Ellis Island, Steve could see across the way, was burning as well, though not as violently. There was debris everywhere.

However, the city was untouched, unhurt. Spared. Safe. And the Red Skull and his monster were gone.

Steve caught his breath, pushing himself off the Hulk’s arm to stand on his own two feet. His back was throbbing, threatening to topple him. But it was done. Over. Finished.

“Cap, do you copy?” Ward’s voice suddenly cut over the comm link. “HYDRA’s all over the Tower! We can’t raise Barton or Skye! We can’t raise anyone! And Viper’s there! Do you read me?”


“Say no more,” Thor replied, and he hooked his arm around Steve before taking them both up and away.
The Tower was under attack. HYDRA was there. Viper was there.

And she was after Sarah.

Thor was obviously suffering a similar plight, fear mixed with fury, and he jetted upward into the dogfight. The Avengers quinjet was all that remained of SHIELD’s air force, and it, too, was damaged. Ward was manning the guns through the cockpit, and Sharon was struggling to keep them in the game as the HYDRA jets swarmed. There was nearly a half dozen enemy aircraft still flying, and they were all engaged in a wicked melee above Midtown Manhattan. Thor zoomed upward at a dizzying rate, avoiding random gunfire and pushing through plumes of smoke, to land on the Tower’s pad that housed the quinjet. A thundering roar followed them, and Steve turned just in time to see the Hulk catapulting up and after. The monster changed his mind at the last second, jumping up to grab one of the HYDRA quinjets that had descended low to shoot at them. He tore it apart.

“Get these bastards out of the sky,” Steve ordered Thor. “Carefully. We’ve got civilians around here. I’m going after Viper.”

Thor didn’t look pleased with the command, but he saw the reasoning behind it. “Save them.” He spun Mjölnir around his wrist, and with a whoosh, he was gone.

Steve drew a deep breath and forced himself to run. His whole body protested it something fierce, but he ignored the pain that lanceted up and down his back and charged into the Tower. Alarms were blaring throughout the corridors, and red lights were furiously flashing. “JARVIS?” he gasped as he headed toward the elevators. He had no idea if JARVIS was online at this point with Iron Man out of commission and the building this seriously impaired. Reaching the elevator, he jabbed his thumb into the call button. He doubted the lift would be operational, and that turned out to be true. Frustrated and frightened out of his mind, he sprinted to the stairs. “JARVIS, can you hear me? JARVIS!”

There was a buzz for a second. “I am with you, Captain.”

Steve could have melted in his relief. “Where’s Sarah? Up or down?”

“Biometric scanners are offline. There is significant damage to the building’s arc reactor. The Winter Soldier and others of Viper’s team detonated an incendiary device within the reactor room. Coolant systems are failing.”

“Is that bad?” Steve breathlessly asked.

“It is not good. The Tower’s power systems are shutting down. However, before the scanners failed, Sarah, along with Mrs. Stark and Agent Barton, were ensconced in the medical bay.” That
made sense. Clint would insist on keeping everyone together to protect them, which meant he’d
gather them around Natasha who likely couldn’t be moved. Steve ran down the steps, making his
legs work despite how much he hurt. His shield banged against the railing when he lost his footing a
moment, but he managed not to fall (barely) and thundered onward. He had to get it together now.
He had to fight a little more, be stronger for a while longer. He had to save them!

He burst through the double doors on floor with the medical ward. “God,” he whispered as he
beheld the wreckage. Everything was destroyed, ransacked, as though a storm had blown through
the bay. Carts were toppled, computers smashed, walls broken and everywhere things were
burning. The destruction was dizzying, and Steve felt panicked and ice cold as he uselessly stared a
moment. HYDRA had already been here. *Viper was here!*

Distantly he heard something, and his gaze snapped into focus. It was barking. *Belle.* Jolting
forward, he rushed through the wreckage, following his ears and praying he wasn’t too late. He
leapt over debris, spotting a few black clad bodies with HYDRA’s emblem on their shoulders.
Arrows stuck from their backs. *Clint.* Horror washed over him anew, and he rapidly checked every
room along the hallway. “Clint! Clint!” Maybe it wasn’t wise to be shouting; just because it
seemed like the fight was over didn’t mean it was. But that didn’t stop him. “*Clint!*”

No one answered him save the dog. Belle’s desperate barking was right behind the last door, the
door to the room where Sarah had been. Steve swallowed down a hoarse sob of despair, fearing the
worst, before kicking the door in. The room was in shambles. The bed was tipped and against the
wall, and everything else, the table and chairs and equipment and monitors, was smashed and strewn
about. There were bullet holes all over, riddling the walls, ceiling, and floor. The lights were
flickering as the power waxed and waned. Belle was barking from behind the bed. Steve rushed
over, sliding his shield onto his back, and grabbed the frame. He tossed it out of the way like it
weighed nothing. “*Clint*…”

Clint was there beneath the mattress, prone in a puddle of blood. His bow was lying next to his
hand, limp and useless. Belle was standing over him, barking still until she saw Steve. Then she
came over, whining and desperate. Steve dropped to his knees beside the fallen archer. “Clint?
Clint, can you hear me?” God, was he even alive? Steve pushed the mattress and other debris aside
before putting his fingers to Clint’s neck. There was the flutter of a pulse, but it was weak, hardly
anything. Shaking his head in dismay, Steve rolled the other man over only to find a pair of gunshot
wounds, both in the lower chest. Immediately Steve pressed his hands over the gushing holes,

“I’m here, Cap!”

“I need emergency med-evac, forty-fourth floor! Barton’s down!”

“No sure I can get to you!” That was Sharon. “Things are~” An explosion rocked the Tower, and
a roar followed it, and Belle starting whining and then barking again. Steve threw himself over
Clint, covering him as loosened ceiling panels came down. The room shuddered, and for a moment
Steve feared this was going to be it. Everything was coming apart and collapsing.

The wall behind them burst, creating a sharp spray of drywall and glass, and Steve looked up to see
the Hulk. The monster stood there, panting, eyes wild with anger. “Oh, thank God,” Steve
whispered. “Hulk, you need to take Clint to safety. He needs a hospital!” The Hulk snorted.
Clearly he’d been hoping to find a fight, and coming down from that frustration took a few breaths.
Steve made himself be patient and held his gaze. “Please.” He leaned back so the monster – and the
man within it – could see their fallen friend. “Clint needs help.”

That got through to him. The Hulk lumbered closer, kneeling to gather Clint in his arms. Clint
groaned in agony, the first sign of any awareness on his part, and Steve staggered away to look for something to stop the bleeding. He yanked a fallen sheet up and returned to wrap it as tightly around Clint’s bleeding midsection as he could. Tying it in place wrested another miserable cry from the archer’s lips. “Easy, Clint. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Steve…” Clint grimaced, shuddering through a breath or two, reaching blindly. “Sarah…”

“Where is she?” Steve asked, grabbing the other man’s hand and squeezing firmly. Panic coiled inside him until his skin was itching with it. “Clint, where?”

Clint licked his lips. “Sorry.” There was blood on his teeth, and his eyes were open to only teary slits. “Tried… I stayed… hold them off…”

Steve swallowed down his pain and grasped Clint’s face. “Doesn’t matter! It’s not your fault! Just tell me where–”

“Nat’s… Nat’s got…”

“Where?”

Clint lost consciousness. Steve barely resisted the urge to howl his frustration or to attempt to wake him again. Instead he looked up to the Hulk. “Get him to safety. Hurry. Please.” The thought of one more person being hurt in this hell, of one more friend being shot by Bucky, was too much to bear. The Hulk growled as if he could sense Steve’s anger. He nodded, though, cradling Clint close to his chest. With one last look, he took off running, smashing his way to the end of the floor. Steve watched him barrel through the remaining walls like they weren’t there and jump straight out, the height no matter at all. “Ward,” he said into his communicator after drawing a deep, steadying breath, “Banner’s got Barton. I need help finding the others.”

“Skye?” The worry in the other man’s voice was unmistakable.

“She’s not–” The whine of a gun was the only warning he had before another of HYDRA’s quinjets appeared through the hole the Hulk had just created. Steve’s eyes widened and he dropped like a rock, grabbing Belle about the neck and tugging her close with one hand while pulling his shield with the other. He scrambled for cover, trying to tuck them both behind his shield as much as possible while he did. The barrage of bullets was unbelievable, big and powerful enough to rip the medical bay to shreds. “Ward! Come in!” Steve screamed, praying the other man could hear him over the din. “I need help here!”

The building shook again, this time with actual thunder, and the gunfire abruptly stopped. Steve chanced looking over the edge of his shield only to see Thor land atop the quinjet tormenting him. His hammer glowed in the light of dawn as he smashed the aircraft, sending it tipping wildly. Steve didn’t wait to see what happened, releasing Belle and climbing shakily to his feet. The minute Belle was free of his arms, she took off in a run. “Belle! Belle! No! Come back!” If she was spooked, he couldn’t spare the time to chase her, not when Natasha and Sarah and the others were in danger. However, as he stepped out into the hall, he saw that she was waiting for him, barking, clearly trying to lead him somewhere. Steve tipped his head in surprise and gratitude and ran.

Belle led him back to the stairs but up instead of down. Steve followed, taking the steps two at a time, trusting the dog completely to lead him to where the others had gone. It ended up not being far, just a few floors back above the landing pad. The command center. Steve barreled through the fire escape doors, ripping them off their hinges, and charged into the hall beyond. The sound of gunfire in the rooms ahead was terrifying, and Steve let that anger burn over him again. Save them!
With a roar, he slammed into the glass walls that divided the command center from the hallways. The HYDRA soldiers there who’d been busily shooting and ramming at the closed door to the armory on the other side of the room were taken completely by surprise. Not even the pain reached Steve now as he fought. It only took a few seconds, fast kicks and fast punches, his shield humming as it flew. Belle bravely jumped onto the chest of one of the men, his gun spitting bullets as he fell under her snapping jaws. The soldier batted her away, sending the dog sprawling with a yelp, and Steve saw red. He kicked the man in the head, dropping him.

Standing surrounded by the thugs he’d defeated, Steve paused a moment. A stray bullet had clipped his thigh, and he grimaced, only now feeling it. “JARVIS,” he gasped. Belle limped to him, licking at his hand as if to comfort him. “Are they in there?”

“I believe so,” the AI responded. “I cannot raise them with the Tower’s power systems failing. Also there is—” And that was it. The power went out completely. The room turned dark and shadowy, the daylight from the windows thankfully pouring inside.

Steve swallowed thickly before stepping to the door and banging on it. It wasn’t budging. They’d obviously barricaded it. “Natasha, are you in there?” he yelled. He hit the door again. “Natasha! Sarah!”

“Steve?” That was Pepper. Her voice was muffled by the thick door, but she didn’t sound hurt. “Steve? Is that you?”

“Pepper!” Steve called, so relieved. “Are you okay?”

“Yes! We’re alright! Agent Fitz is unconscious, but we’re all okay!”

“Is Sarah—” Something clattered to the floor. Steve turned just in time to see a grenade roll into the wall behind him. The hallway exploded, and Steve ducked. Someone screamed something – Simmons, he thought – as he took cover behind the smashed conference table where he had so often led team meetings in the past. His ears rang from the detonation, and he spied more soldiers coming. Obviously the ones he’d taken down had alerted their peers before he’d attacked.

“Get the door open! Get it open! Steve’s out there!” That was Pepper yelling, desperation taut in her voice.

They couldn’t do that! “No!” Steve barked, pulling Belle closer by her collar as the soldiers fanned out in the destroyed hallway. “Don’t let them in! Don’t—”

The door opened despite his objections. Skye was there, rifle in hand. She let loose like a professional, undaunted by the weapon’s powerful kickback, eyes narrowed and aim steady. Pepper was beside her, hidden behind the side of the door with a handgun clenched in her fingers. She fired, also well-aimed, and the bullets struck the soldiers streaming into the hallway. It always took him aback, that Pepper was so capable. After the Mandarin incident and what had happened last year, she wasn’t someone to take lightly (not that she ever had been really, but it was even more striking now). Steve took the opportunity while their enemies floundered in surprise, charging across the room with his shield before him. He launched into them with a split kick, knocking two down, before whirling and sending his shield at the next group. With Skye and Pepper laying down suppressing fire, the battle was quickly over.

Steve struggled to catch his breath. He was wearing now, his back pulsing miserably in time with his heart, his leg and lungs burning. He returned his shield to his back with a grimace and a groan, forcing himself to rush to the armory. Pepper met him halfway, her face streaked with soot. She embraced him desperately. “Oh, God, Steve!”
“Are you okay?” he gasped into her hair. Prying her away from his shoulder, he glanced around before cupping her face with his filthy hands. “Pepper, are you alright? Where’s Sarah?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, dropping her own hands to the swell of her pregnant stomach almost to assure him. “Tony? Where is he?”

Steve didn’t know how much Pepper knew, and there was no time to go into any details even if his heart was shuddering in guilt at the fear and grief in her eyes. “He’s safe,” he assured. “At a hospital. He’ll be okay. Sarah?” he prompted again. He looked frantically among the small group once more, desperate to see his daughter’s blonde hair and bright, blue eyes, but she wasn’t there. _She wasn’t there._

Pepper shook her head. “She’s—”

“Viper’s after them,” Skye said.

“Captain Rogers,” Jemma said, flustered and frightened, “you have to get up to them. They went higher! She took her higher!”

Before Steve could even process that, could even ask what had happened, Ward was shouting over the comm link. “Captain, do you have them? Cap?” The hope in his voice is unbridled.

Steve felt like he was being tugged in too many directions at once. “I have everyone except Sarah and Romanoff. We need extraction right now. Can you come to the armory?” He knew there was an exit out of the Tower in the rear of the armory where Tony housed and deployed Iron Man. There was an emergency system to permit the suit’s release in the event of an attack. It was probably the safest option. Down was no good, and up… _I have to go up!_

But he had to get them out first. He couldn’t risk endangering Pepper and the baby. Sharon responded over the comm link. “Roger that. Coming around.”

He ushered everyone back inside, gathering Belle and pushing her in, before closing the door. That plunged the room into pitch darkness. Not even the emergency lights were functioning. Steve knew the Tower was designed to pull electricity from the city’s grid in the event something like this happened, but obviously HYDRA had prevented that. “Everyone hold onto each other!” he demanded. Skye had her phone. That was all the light there was, and she shone it on the door. “Help me,” Steve gently ordered, and she handed the phone to Simmons in order to aid him in pushing the chairs and desks back in place to block the way in. That wouldn’t stop HYDRA if they really came at it, which they would. “Where’s Fitz?”

“Over here,” Jemma said, terrified but doing an admirable job at hiding it. She whipped the phone around, the light dancing erratically as it pierced the pitch before settling on a body to the left. Quickly Steve limped closer and saw Fitz was out cold, a fairly massive bruise marring the side of his face. Jemma shook her head, her eyes shining with tears in the dim light. “He’s unresponsive.”

There was no time to fret about that. Steve slid an arm under the engineer’s knees and another around his shoulders. Normally a burden like this would be nothing to him, but as battered and banged up as he was, he struggled to get back to his feet. Pepper watched him, worry fracturing her face, but he stopped her question before she could ask it. “Let’s go.”

Quickly they crossed the armory, Simmons leading the way with the phone. It was so dark that avoiding vertigo was nearly impossible, and everyone staggered and stumbled with dizziness and uncertainty. Hearts pounded, and charged breaths were loud in the silence. Steve let memory guide him as he jogged beside Simmons. It was this way, past where Clint’s weapons were, where
Natasha’s were – Widow’s Bite’s missing and there’s something white on the floor and is that a gown? – and past where his uniform had once been. They burst into the large circular room that housed Tony’s suits, dark and idle and useless without power. The exit was to the right. Steve directed them there, Skye guiding Belle with a hand on her collar and Pepper tightly holding her hand. Sure enough there were the massive double doors that led to the little platform inside the “A” of the Avengers logo on the Tower’s north face. “Over here,” he said to Simmons.

She pointed the light toward the panel on the wall. It was dark and without power, of course. Skye was there, prying the panel’s lid off. There was a handle to pull down and another to turn to the right. “We need to prime it,” she said after a second of inspection. She grabbed the first lever and started pumping it vigorously. Just as Steve was about to set Fitz down to intercede, she was able to provide enough power to disengage the locks manually. “Jemma.” After handing the phone to Pepper, Simmons joined Skye, and the two young women grabbed the second lever. Again, they struggled, this time more seriously. The doors started to open, spreading a sliver of daylight into the room, but they were very clearly stuck. “It could be damaged on the outside!”

“Let me.” Steve tenderly placed Fitz on the floor and stepped to the lever. He grasped it and tugged. The mechanism was definitely obstructed by something. Steve put more of his strength into it, feeling seconds drain away into desperation. He pulled harder, and the doors parted further, a few inches total, before the lever snapped off in his hands. “Damn it!” Shaking with frustration and fear, he peered through the gap and saw nothing but a wafting wall of smoke. “Stand back!” Skye grabbed Simmons and tugged her away, and Pepper pulled Belle back by her collar. Steve tossed the broken piece of metal and wedged his hands in between the doors. His back absolutely screamed in protest as he threw all of his weight into pushing. At first, it seemed like this wasn’t going to work. Then the left door stubbornly slid an inch further. And another. Steve stepped into the gap as much as possible, grateful for the additional room to work, and pushed with both hands on the left door while driving with his back against the other side. It hurt like mad, and he cried out from the pain and the effort, but he was able to force the doors wider, wide enough for everyone to escape.

Wind whipped by them as they stepped outside. They were high up, almost fifty floors, and the platform was nothing more than a few feet by a few feet and burned and bent. The whole side of the Tower was damaged just as they’d feared, and the battle was still going on. Steve could hear it. “Everyone, stay back! Ward!” he cried into the comm link. “We’re there! Where are you?”

“Here!” There was the roar of engines, and the Avengers quinjet dropped down right in front of them. Steve thanked their lucky stars. The jet was even more battered, venting smoke from one wing and riddled with bullet holes. The rear ramp was operational, though, and it descended. Ward was right there, and Sharon backed the aircraft closer to the building, hovering uncertainly. They were sitting ducks as they were, and everyone knew it. Ward gestured frantically for the others. “Come on!”

Pepper went first. Steve didn’t care how strong and capable she was; he practically carried her across the narrow platform to the ramp. Ward was right there to take her. Skye followed, holding Jemma’s hand tightly, Steve guiding them. The platform shuddered with the weight, but thankfully it held firm. They jumped on the ramp, Ward grabbing Skye with nothing but relief on his face. She embraced him quickly. “Hurry!” Sharon cried over the comm link.

“I need to get Fitz!” Steve shouted. Belle was barking like mad from inside the Tower.

“Go!” Ward replied.

Steve did, hurrying back through the gap to reach the hurt young man. Belle was there, trembling and terrified. “Come on, girl. It’s time to get out of here.” Gathering Fitz up again, Steve returned
to the platform. He nudged Belle through the gap first, squeezed out himself, and ushered her across the way. “Come on, Belle! Come on!”

The dog hesitated, whining and shaking. Skye dropped to a crouch. “Come on!” she gestured, donning a sweet, calm smile despite the situation. “Come on! It’s okay! I’ve got you! Come here!” That seemed to calm Belle enough, and she made the jump, launching herself into Skye’s arms. Steve heaved a short breath of relief and stepped closer, bearing Fitz. Ward reached over to take him.

The building exploded behind them. Steve barely caught sight of one of the remaining HYDRA quinjets unleashing an arsenal of missiles at the top of the Tower. Some missed. Some hit. Everything shuddered, and the platform gave. “Steve!” Pepper screamed, and everyone grabbed for him. Jolted with terror, Steve spent the precious second he had throwing Fitz onto the jet and into their arms. “Steve!”

He fell. He twisted. He couldn’t think, couldn’t scream. It was only through instinct that he got his shield from his back and slammed the edge into the building. It scraped and tore through glass and cement like a knife through butter, but it slowed his descent. Finally the sharp edge bit into the side of one of the floors enough to stop him. His heart boomed in his ears, and his arms felt like they were being wrenched from their sockets. He looked down to see a swirl of city streets and burning wreckage hundreds of feet below and then up to see more debris coming down and Thor launching himself at the HYDRA jet, hammer swinging and lightning pulsing. He cut through the aircraft, sending it down, but not before something black and silver leapt back into the Tower. Steve squirmed and uselessly kicked his legs before getting enough strength and fortitude to get up. His whole body shook as he planted his boots against the side of the building, the muscles of his arms and torso straining and shaking. Grabbing at a broken rebar, he managed to lift himself through the shattered windows and to safety.

Rolling onto his back, he lay there for a moment. He had to. He had to catch his breath and swallow down the bile burning his throat and recover from the shock. Everything was spinning, and his muscles were completely unresponsive until his heart stopped stuttering against his sternum. Eventually he could hear again, feel again. Think again. “Captain! Steve, are you okay?” That was Sharon.

“’m okay,” he groaned. “’m okay.”

“We’ll swing around again and get you!”

He blinked away tears, slowly coming back to himself. Rolling lethargically onto his belly, he struggled to get up. It was harder than he cared to admit, and he went back down onto his knees when his thigh pulsed with free blood and his back twisted with a spasm. “No. No. Get clear.”

There was a pause. “That’s a negative, Captain. We won’t—”

“The remaining jets are breaking off. They’re attacking the surrounding buildings!”

“We’re on our way! Copy?” Coulson? “Thor, that one is unstable! There are people inside!”

“But Steve’s—”

“I’m okay,” he said more firmly. “Go, Thor. I’m…” A flash of black and silver. The Winter Soldier.

Bucky.
Steve snapped to awareness. That blur had been Bucky leaping back to the Tower. And if he’d
seen it correctly, he’d jumped up near the penthouse that house the common rooms. He rolled to his
feet, scrambling to free his shield and coughing in the smoke. Then he staggered to his feet and ran.
He ran like he’d never run before. *You’re not taking my daughter.* He tore through the hallways,
heading on instinct to the stairwell. He was on the forty-seventh floor. The penthouse was on the
fiftieth floor. He could make it. He burst through the doors to the stairs and climbed, taking the steps
two or three at a time. *You’re not taking my daughter.* His feet pounded and his heart pounded and
that thought *pounded* through his mind until it was all he knew. *You’re not taking my daughter!*

The fiftieth floor. The Tower’s pinnacle. The place where the Avengers had shared dinners and
watched movies and played games. Where they’d become a family, in a sense. Again, everything
was in shambles. The windows were shattered, and outside the HYDRA jets were tormenting the
surrounding buildings. The Tower shook with another explosion, and Steve could barely keep his
feet beneath him. All around furniture was broken and torn. Tables were shattered. Walls were
smashed. Bodies of soldiers lay strewn about, shot or slashed or necks broken. As gruesome as it
was, he recognized the style, the ruthless efficiency. *Black Widow.*

_Natasha._

“Natasha!” he screamed. She had to be here. She had to be okay. Coulson’s serum had to have
worked. She was here and she was fighting and Sarah was with her. *That had to be it.* Steve
staggered around, eyes wide, breathless and burning with desperation. “Nat! *Natasha!*”

“Daddy!”

Steve ran, leaping over the debris and heading to the living room down the short hallway. “Sarah!
Sarah, where are you?” He burst inside, horrified.

And, frankly, *amazed* at what he saw.

Natasha was there, dressed in her Avengers uniform and fighting both the Winter Soldier and Viper.
Her eyes were narrowed and emotionless and she looked pale and different to him. Still, she was
healed. The horrible wounds, the bruises and blood and broken bones, were all *gone* like they had
never been there at all. It was incredible, watching her like this when the last image he’d had of her
had been her limp, pale, and fading. And it was incredible that she was so fast and powerful,
perhaps even more than before, blocking Bucky’s knife and kicking Viper back. Bucky was a
machine, going at Natasha with cold calculation. And Viper was clearly trying to get around her, to
get at what – *who* – was on her other side. Blonde hair mussed and huge blue eyes filled with tears.
A tiny body cowering behind the bar in the back of the room. *Sarah.*

“Daddy!” she cried at seeing him. “*Daddy!*”

Natasha looked to him, bathed in the light of the new day behind her so amazingly that her skin
shone ivory and her hair was burning red. Her green eyes, though, were hazy and seemingly empty.
For an endless moment, their gazes locked. Steve feared the worst. It was probably ridiculous to be
concerned with the side effects of TAHITI right now, given what was happening, but that was all he
could think about. Those empty eyes, eyes that had so often looked to him for leadership in the past,
that had looked to him in love, that had worshipped his body and pledged forever to him with both
arms open… She wasn’t *there* in those beautiful eyes, wasn’t right in her mind. Wasn’t herself
anymore. Bruce hadn’t been able to repair GH.325 and they’d had to erase her memories,
fundamentally *change* her in order to save her life. She wasn’t *Nat* anymore.

But it only took a blink, and those eyes filled with *everything.* A glimmer of wetness. Tears of
Renewed to his core, Steve charged, jumping clear over the couch and into the fight. Natasha’s shout had alerted the Winter Soldier to his presence, and Bucky turned, knife glinting wickedly in the light. His face was taut with a murderous scowl. Steve hesitated a moment, both because the sight of Bucky as such was so awful and because he wasn’t sure he could take him. Not like this. His back was threatening to undo him at any moment. He was feeling woozy from blood loss; his leg was still letting it loose in a torrent. He was worn and broken, and he just didn’t know if he could fight.

No. I can do this. He’d fight. And he’d get through to his friend. “Sarah, stay back!” he snapped, seeing her move closer out of the corner of his eye.

“Sarah!” Natasha yelled, whirling and landing a kick into Viper’s side. “Run! Hide!” Sarah tried, and Viper went for her. Natasha was like lightning, though, darting in between the other woman and the little girl, Widow’s Bite crackling as she planted herself in Viper’s path. “You won’t touch her!”

“She’s mine, not yours!” Viper screamed, rage splayed all over her face. Steve knew he needed to be paying better attention to his own situation. Bucky was circling him, looking for the best way to attack, and attack he did, with a flurry of punches and kicks. But he just couldn’t focus. He stole glances, stayed on the defensive (barely) so he could watch. He hadn’t seen Viper fight until now, and she was ruthless and deadly. She had batons of some sort, and they, too, crackled with power. “She’s mine! My daughter! The future of HYDRA! Mine! I made her! You can’t take her from me!” Viper attacked like the snake after which she was named, lunging at Natasha. Natasha side-stepped, and in a flash they were fighting, lightning quick and powerful. Natasha side-stepped the blow, grabbing for the other woman’s wrist and twisting. Viper gave a frustrated yowl, and a vicious punch with her free hand sent Natasha reeling. Seeing her chance, she ran for Sarah. “She’s mine!”

“Tasha!” Sarah screamed. Viper slammed the baton into the bar, and the granite cracked. Sarah crawled away behind it. “Tasha! Mommy!”

That absolutely enraged Viper. Any semblance of restraint vanished. She was burning with fury, a torment of jealousy hot in her flashing eyes, as she reached for Sarah. “She’s not your mother! I am! I am!”

Natasha was a blur of black and red. She was ruthless, too, silent, deadly, and beautiful. It was easy to forget now that she was Black Widow, trained to be the world’s best assassin. In a graceful arc, she leapt onto Viper’s back and dug Widow’s Bite right into her shoulders. The discharge sent Viper jerking to the floor, and Natasha flipped over her, rolling to her feet. She reached for Sarah and pulled her away, darting to the other side of the bar.

“Run, Nat!” Steve cried, blocking another vicious punch from Bucky just in time. He’d stay and hold them if he had to. He’d do anything! “Get her out of here! Get–” His cry escalated into a scream when he blocked the next blow too late, Bucky’s fist driving into his stomach instead of his shield. He fell, choking on blood in his mouth.

And Natasha hesitated. Steve watched through teary eyes. “Kill her!” Viper screamed at Bucky as she scrambled to overcome the pain. It was too much, and she floundered on the floor as Natasha tucked Sarah behind her again and backed away, glancing between Steve where he lay crumpled and the Winter Soldier. Bucky hesitated, too, staring at Sarah as if he was finally getting a decent look at her. “Kill her!”

That snapped Bucky out of whatever trance in which he’d fallen. He turned, a machine given a new directive, and stalked to Natasha. Steve cried out, reaching frantically and grabbing the other man’s ankle. He yanked him back. Bucky tried to kick at him, but he summoned strength somehow from
someday and dodged the strike, rolling shakily to his feet. Before he could even breathe, the metal fist crashed towards him, banging violently into his shield. He skittered back again, his injured legs and midsection immediately buckling. Struggling to hold onto his balance, he whirled, delivering a kick of his own. It struck Bucky in the chest, but it hardly slowed him down. They traded blows a moment. Steve could barely keep up with Bucky, not like this, not struggling to watch as Viper charged Natasha again, and his next punch was too slow. Bucky caught it in his metal fist, squeezing hard enough that Steve practically felt his fingers crack. He cried out. “Bucky, stop! Stop please! You don’t have to do this! You’re not hers! I know you know me! You’re my friend!”

Bucky seemed to think he was hers. Viper’s hold – HYDRA’s hold – on him was maybe unbreakable. After what she’d done to him, reprogrammed him and tortured him and made him… serve her… He had to get through! “Bucky, it’s Steve! You need to remember me! Listen to me!” Steve backed away, raising his shield and winded. “Bucky, listen–”

Bucky didn’t listen. He punched Steve hard right across the face. He tripped as he stumbled away, falling down into the coffee table in the sitting area. The wood cracked and broke instantly under his weight. The Tower shuddered again, groaning loudly, and as Steve struggled in the debris, he idly wondered a moment how much more the building could take. That thought was fleeting because Bucky was on him. The metal fingers batted his shield aside, sending it clattering around the room, before closing around his throat and hauling him up. “Bucky! Bucky, no!” he gasped, grabbing at the hand choking him and sputtering for air. Bucky only growled, glared, and tossed him across the room. He crashed into the bar, his head clacking into the granite hard enough to smash the counter. In that split second where he lay there, slumped and dazed and lost in the agony in his head, Steve saw Natasha. The sun was washing over her again as she drove Viper back, and everything somehow was slow and peaceful. She was kicking at Viper, delivering a fast punch on the tail of that. Viper whirled to avoid her attack, but Natasha had already anticipated her counter. Like this, she was gorgeous, stunning, and he couldn’t help but drunkenly watch. All he could think about how was much she was dancing. That moment in the Oregon, where she’d glided through the grass on the cool autumn day, so much beauty and grace… He’d never seen it before, that when she fought she danced, but now, as his mind slipped into unconsciousness, that was all that remained of him. This thought. She’s dancing.

“Sarah, no! Stay back!” Natasha was screaming. “Stay away from him, baby! Run!”

It was too late. “Daddy!” Sarah’s face fell over his, and she threw herself on his chest. “Daddy, get up! Daddy!”

He couldn’t. No. Run, baby girl. But it was too late. A dark shadow fell over them both. The Winter Soldier. Bucky’s eyes were still so miserably empty, devoid of recognition and memory, as he reached down and grabbed Sarah about the arm. She screamed as he lifted her, struggling wildly, kicking and thrashing. Bucky grunted as her serum-enhanced leg smacked him in the chest, but he didn’t stop, hauling her higher. No!

“Take her!” Viper yelled, practically ecstatic. “Get her out of here! She’s mine!” With Widow’s Bite surging, Natasha struck her across the face, a blurry fire smashing a shadow. Viper fell back, her batons flying haphazardly. Natasha gasped, horror on her face as she turned, and ran at Bucky. He didn’t even look at her, his metal arm shooting out and smacking her violently out of the way. She tumbled into the furniture back in the seating area, flipping head over heels and landing hard with an oomph. Viper was hurt, her face slashed and burned and bleeding, as she struggled back to her feet. “Take her now!”
Bucky didn’t. He lifted Sarah closer, eyes focusing, brow furrowed. Sarah sobbed, whimpering for Steve in a steady stream. Bucky’s face scrunched in a frown, a confused, pain-filled frown, and he brought his metal hand closer. Steve couldn’t help but sob at that, stunned and suffering, as those silver fingers brushed over Sarah’s hair. Down her soft, round cheeks. Across her bright blue eyes. Eyes that looked like her mother’s eyes, yes.

But they also looked like Steve’s mother’s eyes. Bucky shook his head. “Sarah…”

“What are you waiting for?” Viper shrieked.

Bucky turned, and Steve moved. It took a great deal of effort, but he pushed himself up, leaning heavily on the destroyed counter behind him. He grabbed Bucky’s arm and yanked him. “Let go of my daughter,” he growled. Bucky practically snarled back, furious that whatever he’d been thinking or experiencing or remembering was being interrupted. The cybernetic hand twisted, breaking his grip easily, and decked him again. Steve fell again, that one blow battering all the fight right from his body. As he choked on his own breath, Bucky wrapped around his arm and yanked hard. Steve felt his bones bend under the pressure, and he cried out as he was dragged across the floor, through the glass and debris, and to the windows on the other side of the common room. The Winter Soldier gave a ragged yowl of effort, and he threw Steve right out of the building.

The last thing he heard was Sarah screaming. He closed his eyes and felt the wind rip at him and the despair slash his heart. He fell again.

For maybe fifteen feet. Then he smashed into something firm. Pain blasted over his back, but that wasn’t enough to overcome his shock. Rolling over, he looked behind him and found himself staring into Nick Fury’s one good eye. The man arched an eyebrow from the cockpit of the Bus. The massive aircraft was there, hovering with its engines rotated vertical and roaring. May was flying it, her capable hands on its controls, and Coulson stood behind her, pale and shaking his head in surprise. They’d caught him. They’d caught him.

Thank God.

With the bus, another slew of jets appeared. The remains of SHIELD. The National Guard. They fanned out, heading to deal with the last HYDRA aircraft. The Avengers quinjet was among them, too, firing on the closest enemy plane. Steve gritted his teeth, gathering his wits and his balance. He turned and caught May’s eyes, and she gave a small nod. She guided the Bus higher. Steve pushed himself up, his back and head absolutely pulsing with misery, but he got his feet under him. And when the Bus levitated back up to the penthouse, he ran down the 747’s nose and jumped.

He rolled when he landed, springing up and using his momentum to continuing charging forward. Immediately he saw Bucky who was still standing, still holding Sarah, and he lowered himself and thundered across the way, ramming the other man low. Sarah screamed, but Natasha was right there, shoving Viper away again to reach for her. She swept the little girl into her arms as Steve tackled Bucky. He drove him down to the floor, raising his fist and slamming it down into his friend’s stunned face. Once. Twice. Over and over again. Bucky didn’t fight back. Steve pushed an arm across his windpipe, not letting up, pinning him and choking him until his eyes started to flutter. Now he was ruthless. He was the machine. He’d do anything to stop this, and Bucky let him. Bucky didn’t fight back. “Stay down!” Steve hissed. “Stay down!”

He stayed down.

Steve gasped for breath as he watched Bucky lose consciousness. Dizzy and shaking, he pushed himself up and off the other man, stumbling and staggering to his feet. “Natasha! Sarah!” They were gone. So was his shield.
And so was Viper.

He limped quickly out of the common room, trying to listen over the thundering of his heart. In the hall, he smelled smoke, the Tower moaned and shuddered as he moved through the debris. Where did they go? Where was Viper? As silently as he could manage, he glanced into the rooms he passed. Nothing. No one. His frustration mounted, and he could hardly breathe for how tightly his gut was twisted up inside him. Just like before. Like at the Sandbox. Like the last year. *Cat and mouse.* Viper loved her damn games, and this would be the last one.

There was a kitchen ahead and a dining room, one of the ones they’d often used for meals with the team. Steve made his way there because there was nowhere else left. He could hear the battle raging outside, hear the Bus’s huge engines, hear missiles and gunfire. His heart was booming, and he couldn’t catch his breath. They had to be here. He stepped as softly as he could with his bad leg toward the kitchen, the light from the windows and balcony there brightening the room ahead. *Where are you?*

The second he stepped into the kitchen, she was on him. She leapt from behind the door, silent and fleet, and before he even realized she was attacking him, she had her thighs around his chest and her arms around his neck. Steve choked, his battered body absolutely refusing to deal with the added weight, and he crashed down onto his knees. One of her batons jabbed into his side. The world melted in agony. His body completely failed him. Time slowed, and he couldn’t fight, couldn’t do anything. When he came out from under the pain of being electrocuted, she was leering over his shoulder. “Hi, baby.” Steve choked when she yanked on his throat hard enough to crush his windpipe, and he struggled until he felt a gun pressing to his temple.

Viper giggled maniacally as she felt her captive go still. Then she was hissing in his ear. “Funny. In the end, I get to use *you* to lure her to me.” She pulled harder, digging her knee into his damaged back, and Steve squeezed his eyes shut. No, no, no! “Black Widow! Give me the girl! Give her to me now or I’ll blow his damn brains out!”

Steve trembled. He didn’t have the strength anymore to struggle, and he knew Viper was vicious and crazy enough to kill him if he tried. He’d gladly sacrifice himself to save them, but he didn’t think she’d let him. “You wanted me,” he gasped around the pressure on his throat. “You wanted me!”

“Not as much as I want her. With her, I don’t need you. *My daughter. The future of HYDRA.*” Steve closed his eyes in defeat. “Romanoff, now! Give her to me now! *I mean it!*”

Sarah’s quiet sobbing was suddenly thunderous, and Natasha stepped in from the shadows near the balcony doors. Sarah was in her embrace, the shield covering them both where it was hanging from her forearm. Her face was red and streaked with tears. Natasha’s was cool, stoic, and undaunted. “Let him go.”

Viper went mad seeing Natasha hold Sarah as she was. It all burst out again, the awful envy. “Do you honestly think you can be her mother? Just because he *loves* you?” She shook Steve with that, and Steve grimaced. “Do you really think that?”

“She loves me, too,” Natasha replied, lifting Sarah closer to her. Sarah buried her face in Natasha’s neck. Natasha shook her head, defiant. “You can’t take that.”

“No, but I can take him! And I will.” The gun pressed harder, and Viper’s finger was twitching on the trigger. “You can’t have both. It’s either her or him.”

“No.”
“You want to give him up? Huh? For a child that’s not even yours? Not your blood. A bastard in every sense of the word.” Sarah shivered, and Natasha held her tighter, lifting the shield more. “I never thought that Black Widow could be so weak.”

Natasha darted her eyes to Steve’s. He shook his head, pleading without words. *Run. Go now. Let her have me.*

And he could almost hear her denial in return, her calm strength, her thoughts. *I love you. We’re doing this together. You don’t have to be alone.*

*You never were.*

Slowly Natasha set Sarah down, but instead of pushing her forward toward Viper, she nudged her back behind her again. “If you want Sarah, you’ll need to kill me.” The gun shook against Steve’s temple. Steve felt it. Natasha saw it. And she knew *exactly* what to do. She tossed Steve’s shield, and it hit the floor on the other side of the kitchen with a dull hum. Without that, she was exposed completely. She smirked, undaunted. Unafraid. “You pathetic wretch. You think you’re better than me? More than me? You’re *nothing.* You sent your dog after me, and I’m still here. You couldn’t kill me. And you know what? Steve loves me. *Sarah loves me.* You can take them, but you can’t take that. You’ll never have that. *Never.*” Viper shook with rage. Natasha coolly cocked an eyebrow and opened her arms in a clear invitation. “So go ahead, Ophelia. *Do it.* It’s the only way you’ll win.”

For all her evil machinations and grand ambitions and cruel cunning, Viper was nothing if not predictable. She roared, unable to abide by that, unable to stand her own jealousy, and the gun ripped up from Steve’s head to point at Natasha. He wasted not a second, reaching and grabbing the weapon. Viper howled and the shot went wild, shattering the glass doors. Sarah screamed, but Natasha already had her again, running back out onto the balcony. Viper snarled like an animal, struggling against Steve, pushing him down onto the floor. Getting out from under her, he elbowed her in the face and shoved her down onto the floor. Straddling her, he used his weight to pin her prone, slamming the hand that clenched the gun into the tile repeatedly until she dropped it. He kicked it away. Then he fisted her hair and yanked her head up. “You will *never* touch *any* of us again,” he snarled. He slammed her head down hard, and she went limp.

Steve stared a second, unbelieving, half expecting her to move. She didn’t. She was breathing but out cold. Paralyzed by this irrational fear, he stayed put, ready to do anything, kill her if he had to. He’d do it now. He *should* do it now. After everything, what she’d done to him and Sarah and Natasha, to Bucky and Tony, she deserved to die.

But he didn’t. Seconds slipped away. Nothing happened. She stayed motionless beneath him, and he couldn’t will himself to kill her. He couldn’t make himself do it. Above all, he was Captain America. More than that and just as he’d said to Tony, Viper was *still* Sarah’s mother. And he’d rather have her in jail so Sarah could choose for herself one day what to think and how to feel.

So he finally crawled off her. Barely catching his breath, he pushed himself to his feet, staring yet and not quite believing this could be it. Then he shuddered with horror and limped as fast as he could out onto the balcony.

Natasha was there near the railing, ready to fight, Sarah cowering behind her. When she saw it was just him and him alone, she lowered her fists. “Steve?”

He couldn’t fathom how he looked, bloodied and worn and practically falling with every step. Still, he managed to stay standing for them. *Always for them.* And he managed a nod and a weak grin. “Yeah.”
That was all it took. Sarah burst from behind Natasha, running at full tilt toward him. She wailed in anguish, tears spilling in a flood from her eyes, and Steve went down on his knees to grab her. “Oh, God,” he moaned, enveloping her little body in his arms and squeezing tight. “Oh, God, baby girl. Are you alright?”

She gave a little hitch of her head under his chin. “I’m alright, Daddy!”

He squeezed his eyes shut again. “It’s over,” he whispered. He ran his hands through her hair, letting himself collapse into his relief. “It’s all over now.”

A hand fell to his head, and he looked up to see Natasha. She smiled down at him, her eyes glittering. “Hey, there, Rogers.”

He gasped another sob, this one rough and unrestrained, taking her hand and weaving their fingers together before pulling her down against them. He cupped her face when she settled on Sarah’s other side, kissing her desperately. “Oh, Nat,” he whimpered. “Oh, Nat. I thought I’d lost you. I thought I’d lost you!”

“Promised you that you wouldn’t do this alone, didn’t I?” she quipped gently against his lips.

He laughed hoarsely, peppering kisses all over her face. “I’ll never let you go,” he whispered. “Never!”

She laughed, too, grasping him hard and hugging Sarah between them. “Never.”

“I love you! I—”

A cry behind them shattered the moment of peace. There was a bang, and the balcony railing behind them shattered. Steve shouted wordlessly, immediately gathering his family against him, covering them under his arms and putting himself between them and whatever threat there was. Whatever threat there was.

Viper screamed, staggering toward them. Blood covered her face from the gash on her forehead. She looked hideous, broken, wild and maniacal. The gun shuddered in her grip as she fumbled to aim again. Stopping to stand beside him, she leveled the weapon right at his head. Steve closed his eyes.

A gun went off, a deep and thunderous crack.

In the second that followed, though, there was no pain, no darkness. When Steve chanced opening his eyes, he saw Viper above him. Blood-covered. Shot in the chest. Red dribbled from the wound and glistened on the black leather of her suit in the morning light, hazy and hideous. She blinked once. Twice. Tried to say something, but it was only a strangled whimper. The life faded from her eyes, and the gun slipped away from his head and down from her hand. She tipped over the edge of the Tower.

Steve reached for her without thinking, jolting forward and letting go of Sarah and Natasha to try to grab her and save her as she fell. But his fingers only scraped along her chest, curling over the only thing he could, and the chain of his dog tags snapped instantly. She tumbled down into the smoke below.

He watched with wide eyes until he couldn’t see her anymore. All that remained was the silver chain, quivering in the wind. He pulled his arm back slowly, unable to breathe for the shock coursing through him. Unfurling his fingers, he looked at the tags in his palm, the dull silver catching the morning light.
Abruptly he turned at Natasha’s whisper. There, standing in the doorway, was Bucky. He lowered his arm slowly, the gun smoking. He was unfocused, lost, it seemed, in what he was thinking and feeling. Remembering. Everything was still for what seemed like forever, the two friends staring at each other. Separated by fate, by a fall seventy years ago, by everything that had happened to them both.

Finally, Bucky’s fingers slowly unfurled, too, and the gun dropped to the balcony. He swallowed, and his eyes filled with emotion and memory. They glistened with tears. “Steve.”

Despite how hurt he was, how hard it was, Steve stood, lifting Sarah into his arms. Tentatively he took a step closer. And another. And another. “Buck?”

Bucky managed a little, uncertain nod. “Y-yeah.” He reached his flesh and blood hand, quaking so badly with fear and hesitation, to Sarah’s head. The little girl flinched a moment but only that. She held Bucky’s gaze, held firm. His fingers brushed through her dirty blonde hair, down her cheek, across her eyes. “Your mom’s name was Sarah.”

Steve couldn’t hold back anymore. He gave a weeping laugh, wrapping his arm around Bucky and tugging him close. “You remembered,” he whispered in his friend’s ear. Joy, strong and pure and sure, rushed over him. “You remembered!”

They stood like that for what felt like a long time. There were things going on around them, many things, but Steve experienced it all in a daze, too warm and relieved and exhausted to put much effort into following it all. SHIELD and National Guard jets filling the sky. Ward and May, flanked by SHIELD agents and police, landing on the roof. EMTs rushing to them. Coulson and Fury over the communications line. Reports from the battle and the hospitals. The last of HYDRA’s forces were surrendering. The situation was stabilizing. Casualty reports were minimal. The monster was defeated. The Red Skull was gone. Viper was dead, and the city was safe.

Tony and Clint were alive. So were Bruce and Thor. Everyone was okay. Bucky had returned to him. Sarah was in his arms. And Natasha was healed. It was a miracle. No other word for it than that. A miracle.

The EMTs escorted them to safety, Steve with his arm around Thor’s shoulders for support, Ward and May surrounding them. Just inside Bucky picked up Steve’s fallen shield. He stared at it, sweeping his hand over the surface, smiling softly to himself. He handed it to Steve, and Steve took it with a smile of his own.

As he did, Sarah shifted in Natasha’s embrace. She caught a glimpse of something in her father’s hand. Squirming, Natasha set her down and she went to take the dog tags from Steve. She smiled, too, smiled, her tears drying and her eyes bright, as she handed them back to Natasha. “Yours, Tasha,” she said. “We got them back.”

Natasha dropped to one knee, taking the clasp and fixing it so that the chain was whole again. Then she bowed her head so Sarah could put them back around her neck. “Yeah, we did. Daddy did.” She looked up at Steve, winking. “Daddy’s a good daddy, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And a hero.”

“Yeah!”
“And you’re a gift,” she said, sweeping the girl into her arms and kissing her forehead. “Malyukta.”

Steve’s heart couldn’t feel any bigger, any stronger than this. Natasha wove her fingers through Sarah’s hair, tucking her close, and as the morning sun struck her left hand, Steve grimaced with sudden realization. “Wait. The ring. I didn’t get your ring back.”

Natasha lifted Sarah to her hip again. “You know what?” She reached over and pulled Steve into a lingering kiss. “You can buy me a new one.” And she grinned that playful grin of hers, a beautiful one, the one that made the world bright and new. “This time on Captain America’s salary.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Well, that wraps this up. I hope everyone found the conclusion satisfying. It was certainly nice to write. I can’t lie; I had a harder time than normal writing this one. Doing a role reversal from *Heart of the Storm*, with Natasha hurt but emotionally stronger and Steve struggling and doubting, was challenging but worth it, I think. I want to thank everyone for reading this story, especially those of you who took the time to leave me a comment or a kudos. I know it took a while to get this one done, so I really appreciate you sticking with me through the delays. Extra special thanks to the wonderful faith2nyc for all her help and encouragement with this story! Love you, darling!

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