**Summary**

The man who used to be Bucky Barnes lined up his shot. His finger twitched, only once, very precisely.

Help me, the bullet sang.

Ninety-eight floors below him, the bullet glanced off a vibranium shield with a musical ping.

And Steve Rogers looked up.

(Now with Chinese translation here!)

**Notes**

I freely admit to being late to the Marvel Cinematic Universe party. I eventually saw most of the movies in a marathon just prior to seeing The Avengers, and fell in love with Steve/Bucky. Much frantic internet research assured me that Bucky survived the film, and I came looking for the epic modern-day fix-it fix.

I couldn't find it.

And that, gentle reader, is how this story came to be.
(Now with Chinese translation here! Thanks grace_yuan!)
Chapter 1

_The darkness drops again; but now I know_
_That twenty centuries of stony sleep_
_Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,_
_And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,_
_Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?_

– Yeats

Santa Cruz, California

Two months previously

_It is said that a good gunman treats his weapons like a master craftsman treats his tools. He cares for them meticulously, makes sure they are always clean, always oiled, stored carefully and exercised regularly. He views his weapon as his companion, as his friend, as his sacred trust._

The Winter Soldier lay on his stomach atop a tall building. There was a raised edge of concrete between him and the long drop below, and his sniper rifle rested on this ledge. The rifle was cradled in his arms, which were wrapped in the most sophisticated braces money could buy. By contrast, the rest of him was shabbily clad in cargo pants and a t-shirt that was stained and worn. The small pebbles of the roof dug into every surface of his body.

He did not care. He did not move. He almost did not breathe. There was only silence, and the sound of the wind blowing.

_A better gunman treats his weapon like a man treats his lover. He holds conversations with his gun, treats it tenderly. A good gunman talks to his bullets, tells them where to fly, and they always fly true._

Ninety-eight floors below the man lying in wait, a press conference was being held. A group of reporters milled around like the denizens of an angry ant colony. From the gunman’s height, the neutral colors of the reporters’ suits blurred together, making it impossible to tell where Fox News ended and CNN began. The Avengers, by contrast, were bright and distinctive, even up here. The aggressive flash of Iron Man. The barbarian splendor of Thor. The red-white-and-blue of Captain America.

There could be no difficulty in telling them apart. There could be no difficulty in selecting the appropriate target. Lights flashed and questions were shouted. On the top of the skyscraper there
was only silence, and the sound of one man breathing.

*The best gunman does not speak to his gun. He listens. His weapons sing to him, telling him what they need, how they should be held, how much force to use on the trigger and how their sights drag ever so slightly from true. He listens to his bullets, lets them tell him their secrets, their impurities, and curves them lovingly into their target.*

The man who used to be Bucky Barnes lined up his shot. His finger twitched, only once, very precisely.

*Help me,* the bullet sang.

Ninety-eight floors below him, the bullet glanced off a vibranium shield with a musical *ping.*

And Steve Rogers looked up.

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*New York, New York

Present time*

The sound of a shrieking alarm cut through Steve Rogers’ pleasant dream, where he was knee-deep in mud, hadn’t slept for three days, and was about to charge valiantly into a well-defended HYDRA base with nothing more than a bowie knife and his shield. Steve groaned, flailed for the button that would kill the banshee wail, and wondered when alarms had gotten so goddamned annoying. Then he wondered what it said about him that dreams of World War II had started getting categorized as *pleasant.*

Steve sighed and rolled out of the luxurious queen bed onto the thick carpet of one of the *three* bedrooms his apartment had. Down the hall was a palatial kitchen with granite countertops and chrome appliances. His bathroom looked like it belonged in the Taj Mahal. The showerhead blasted perfectly temperature-controlled water with enough force to stop an attacking HYDRA battle tank in its tracks. Steve stuck his head under it and tried to think about how nice this all was and how lucky he was to have it. It wasn’t any use. He was still nostalgic for the good old days.

*Damn, Rogers,* a familiar voice laughed from memory. *You just don’t know when you’ve got it good, do you?*

Steve wiped wet hair out of his eyes and leaned against the shower wall for a moment. *Guess not,* *Bucky,* he answered the voice silently. The thud of water drops drumming against the floor of his shower sounded like gunfire.

At least the motions of applying soap and shampoo were familiar. So much had changed, it wouldn’t have surprised him if the future came equipped with robots whose job it was to wash humans. Or if people these days climbed into machines, like dishwashers or car washes, and got buffeted from all sides by water and soap and hot air until something went *ding!* and you were clean.
Mostly he was content to have it be treated like a joke, the way he was so completely and thoroughly out of step with the world around him. It was laugh or cry anyway. But here in this place Steve was trying to call home, it was hard to shut out the sounds of the past.

Steve wandered out into his kitchen and stared at his custom-made, Tony-Stark-designed, far-too-complicated coffeemaker. He was hoping that this would be the time he was visited by a choir of angels with idiot-proof instructions on how to make the thing produce coffee instead of brewing tea, ejecting the filter, or attempting to lift into orbit. Steve gave it a full minute, staring patiently into the entirely electronic display, but the coffeemaker continued to scroll GOOD MORNING and MAKE 1000 DIFFERENT BEVERAGES instead of something helpful like PRESS THE RED BUTTON FOR COFFEE. Looked like today wasn’t his day, then. Steve decided, yet again, to stop in the Starbucks on the way to SHIELD headquarters. He also decided, again, not to admit to Tony that he didn’t understand the coffeemaker. Stark may have custom-built the thing for him, but he’d also never let Steve live it down.

He was beginning to seriously consider privately asking another Avenger for help, though. The only thing Steve could really say for Starbucks coffee was that it was better than Army coffee.

*And that’s saying something,* Steve could imagine Bucky joking. *Seriously, man, you gotta talk to somebody about this thing.* Bucky would poke experimentally at the hulking chrome-and-metal appliance, shaking his head in bemusement. *Can’t live in an apartment without a coffeemaker,* he’d say. *We didn’t have running water most days, but we had coffee, am I right?*

If Steve tried, he could conjure Bucky’s image up into the empty space by the coffeemaker. He’d lean there, one arm propped against the counter for balance while the other raked through his hair, giving Steve that familiar grin that was one part humor and one part irony.

“You’re right,” Steve said out loud, experimentally. The still air of the apartment seemed to consider the words for a moment before letting them drop to the floor, unheard. Steve exhaled silently and turned to get dressed.

The truth was, Steve was having a hard time calling anywhere home that wasn’t shared with at least one other person. He kept turning around and expecting to see someone. His parents. The other boys at the orphanage. The other commandos. Bucky. Bucky most of all. Steve had been turning around and seeing Bucky next to him since he was five years old. He’d stood in one of the wards at the orphanage, staring at nineteen other boys staring at him and clutching a bag containing all his worldly possessions. Bucky had been the one to break out of the crowd and smile at the new boy. Steve could have had to share a bed with Jimmy, who stole the covers and bit whoever was unfortunate enough to try to get them back. Or Sean, who talked Irish in his sleep and no one could understand. Or Billy, who was nice enough but had feet like ice. Steve had been lucky, really, to end up paired off with James call-me-Bucky Barnes. Who neither snored, nor hogged the covers, nor complained when Steve woke them both up with an asthma attack in the middle of the night. Who had, in fact, helped Steve through more than one episode, pounding him futilely on the back and talking to him until the constriction in his chest eased and he knew he’d live to see another dawn.

Seventy-five years later, Steve Rogers couldn’t turn around in his palatial apartment without remembering creaking floorboards and drafty windows and Bucky –

*Relax, Steve, just breathe,* the familiar voice admonished from memory.

Steve tugged the front door shut behind him and headed for the elevator, shaking his head. *I don’t have asthma anymore, Bucky. Just breathing isn’t going to cut it.*
SHIELD maintained a land-based headquarters in New York, conveniently located in what remained of the original Stark Industries building after the Chitauri had trashed New York. Coulson promised that funds were coming to fix the worst of the damage, but no one wanted to divert money from reconnaissance, R&D or recruitment, so what actually happened was that they hung up a lot of tarps over structurally unsafe areas and set up facilities in whichever part of the tower had space. It made the interior layout pretty idiosyncratic, but in an impressive if misguided display of shared culture, most SHIELD employees swore blind they liked it better this way. Steve watched the junior agents troop up and down five flights of stairs any time they wanted coffee and thought that at least anyone who tried to invade the building would be at a significant disadvantage.

Tony had paid to shore up the upper floors so that at least nothing would fall over, and also so that he could install a skyway between SHIELD tower and the new Stark Industries building, because heaven forbid Tony have to walk outside unnecessarily. He seemed to get a kick out of the rest of it, though, and always seemed to have a convenient excuse ready whenever someone suggested he chip in a few thousand extra for actual repairs.

Steve himself showed up to SHIELD Tower regularly every day for his Fury-ordered round of therapy, training, lunch, and more therapy. A group of historians had been coming by in the afternoons, too, to talk to him about his experiences growing up in the Depression and fighting in World War II. They were a loose confederation of men and women from at least twelve different universities, and they infought mercilessly for the right to direct the discussion, but when it came to actually talking with Steve they all had an air like they were listening to God himself. It creeped Steve out. Frankly, he preferred therapy. At least none of the SHIELD psychiatrists behaved like what Steve had gone through was some kind of good thing.

His usual schedule had him meeting with Dr. Martin in the morning and Dr. Alvarez in the afternoon. Alvarez was a specialist in war-related trauma and battle fatigue. Martin covered the more prosaic subject matter of Steve’s childhood and the trials of adjusting to daily life in the twenty-first century. Steve had double-checked his messages this morning, though, because today was Wednesday and Wednesday was, on paper, Dr. Stamford’s least busy day. The head of the SHIELD psychiatric corps was usually too swamped with what she herself cheerfully referred to as “bureaucratic bullshit” to get in with Steve more than two or three times a month, but she was far and away Steve’s favorite shrink. Her brisk, no-nonsense attitude appealed to Steve’s outward pragmatism, while her willingness to regard any change, no matter how small, as “progress” fed Steve’s inner optimist. Best of all, she absolutely refused to sugarcoat anything for Steve. Stamford wasn’t always the most comforting woman to be around, but at least Steve always knew where he stood.

When he’d first woken up, it had been Dr. Stamford who had taken on the herculean task of pinning Steve down and not letting him go until he opened his mouth and words came out. Unfortunately, as head of an entire SHIELD division, Stamford was staggeringly busy. It had been a minor miracle that she’d been able to devote as much time to Steve’s case as she had. Steve reminded himself of this frequently: he’d been lucky to get as much of her time as he had, and still did. And he was also lucky that she had extremely a well-trained and competent staff – like Doctors Alvarez and Martin – that would continue to work with Steve when Stamford’s own duties drew her away.
Steve just missed making that kind of progress.

For all that he spent four hours every day in therapy, Steve often felt like he was beating his head against a brick wall. Somewhere in his file it probably said ‘poor communications skills’. Steve didn’t know what it was, exactly, but talking about how he felt had never been one of his strong suits. Maybe it was just because he’d never really had the practice. A childhood in the orphanage and an adulthood in the military didn’t exactly bias a man towards long conversations about his feelings. In between, there’d been Bucky, true. But Bucky had never needed words to know what Steve was thinking.

At first therapy had been an exercise in frustration and futility. Even if he had wanted to talk – and he had, really – there was too much going on in his head for him to even begin to deal with. The world had remade itself overnight and he had no kind of idea how to even approach it. In a way, the big things were the easiest to deal with. The internet, nuclear weapons, the civil rights movement. It was like living in a science fiction world. Steve learned about those changes like a foreigner learning a new language, and it wasn’t easy, but it was something he could lay side-by-side with his old life and say, *Okay, this is what’s different.*

The little changes, though, the ones that wormed their way into the things he’d always taken for granted but never known, those were the ones that still blindsided him. The way a dime was worthless and a dollar wouldn’t get you on the subway. Bread that came from the supermarket in a plastic bag and tasted like chemicals. Chain stores. Takeout.

The way most people had stopped living with death close by. No infant mortality. No risk of starvation. Childhood diseases a rite of passage instead of a very real fear.

For someone who had woken up to find everyone he’d ever known was dead, it was a lot to take in.

“Why am I alive and they’re dead?” Steve had asked Martin once, early in their association. He wanted to go on, but his throat closed up and he felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“Do you want the therapeutic answer, or the real one?” Martin asked bluntly in return. He’d never coddled Steve like some SHIELD agents did, who seemed to think he was made of glass and would shatter if they treated him too harshly. Steve knew other members of the SHIELD psychiatric corps thought Martin was too abrasive, sometimes, put too much faith in a steel spine and didn’t have enough respect for the occasional need to tread lightly.

Steve had had enough of people treading lightly around him for one lifetime. That was all anyone else around here ever did. “The real one.”

Martin shrugged. “Luck. Fate. Chance. The will of God. You can pick the one that helps you sleep better at night. But that’s all the good it’ll do you. The real answer is ‘we don’t know’.”

Steve really wished that made him feel better, but it never seemed to work that way anymore.
“I’ve lost soldiers before,” Steve had said to Alvarez, a few days later. At Steve’s request, Coulson had gotten him the military files on the rest of the Howling Commandos, on the SSR. They’d all been disbanded after he’d crashed Red Skull’s plane. The Commandos had been assigned to other units, but most of them hadn’t even gotten a chance to ship out before V-E Day and the end of the war. They’d gone home a little older and maybe a little wiser, and they’d lived the rest of their lives believing that Steve was dead and gone. How many of them had lain awake nights after the war and asked themselves some variation of this exact question?

“But?” she prompted, giving him a look that managed to combine encouragement, sympathy without pity, and warmth. Alvarez was good at that; she had a knack for reading any situation and playing herself to best advantage. When Steve was upset and afraid, she was unassuming and meek. When he needed a kick, she was five feet three inches of sheer holy terror. And on days like today, when he just needed someone to listen when he talked and make him feel like he was still real, she was the sister he’d never had.

That feeling of rapport let Steve swallow his first, reflexive answer, that he was okay and it wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle. Instead, he looked past Alvarez and out of the windows at the top of SHIELD tower, over New York spread bright and glittering beneath them. Almost automatically he tried to identify the places he’d known – the orphanage, the newsstand, 33rd street. But none of them were there anymore, and all he saw was Bucky, slipping through his fingers and falling forever into the whiteout of an Austrian winter. “But this is different. It’s like – they’re the ones who lost me, but I’m the one who’s here telling you about it.”

“It’s backwards in your case,” Alvarez agreed, “but survivor’s guilt is an old thing. Your friends got past it. They lived happy, full lives. You can too.”

Happy, full lives. Well, yes, mostly. Morita had become a great-grandfather and lived to see the new millennium. Dernier had recovered his family’s land from the Nazis and started a winery. The rest of the commandos had similar stories.

But Bucky was still dead at the bottom of a cliff in Austria. And when he opened the files on the SSR and flipped through them, looking for one familiar face, he learned that Peggy had gone right back into the secret service after the SSR disbanded. A new branch of some classified division had just been forming, somewhere in England. And then the records just… stopped. No more information. As if Peggy Carter had been erased from history, in favor of whoever she had gone on to become.

The file said she’d volunteered for the posting. Steve hoped like hell he was wrong about why.

When Red Skull’s plane had been shaking apart beneath his hands, its cargo of destruction minutes away from everything Steve loved and its nose pointed down into the water, he’d opened his compass and put Peggy’s picture where he could see it. She was going to survive, and Steve had hoped she’d do great things. He’d talked to her until the radio shorted out, then he’d kept right on talking, to Peggy and Bucky and Doc Erskine, all the way down, until his plane hit the water. Telling them everything that had ever gone through his head, now that they couldn’t hear him anymore and it no longer mattered. Telling them what he’d hoped for and what he’d gotten, the good he’d tried to do, the mistakes he’d made and the lives he’d lost. Sometimes Steve thought the ability to talk had been eradicated by the rush of water into his lungs, right before the ocean closed over his head for what he’d thought would be the last time.

Dying hadn’t scared him, in the end, not when he’d thought of all the lives he was saving. It was living that was turning out to be the problem.
“Steve, you’re a good man,” Alvarez said earnestly. “Your friends would be glad you’re alive.”

There had only ever been three people who had seen something in Steve worth respecting, before the serum had given him the opportunity he’d always wanted. Steve felt the weight of their hopes and dreams settling on his shoulders every time he put on the red, white and blue; he judged his actions by what they would have thought was right. And he thought to himself that if he was a good man, it was because he had been more fortunate than most in his friends.

“Did you have a girlfriend?” Tony asked, during one of his rare serious moods. Most of the time, Tony was noise and motion, tossing off comments that would have been grounds for a fistfight during Steve’s childhood and seeming to take delight in seeing what made Steve twitch. Sometimes, though, when Tony’s latest flight of fancy had fallen flat, when Pepper had been away long enough for him to really miss her and there had been no Avengers-related mayhem to bring out his manic side, he’d come down to the rec room in SHIELD Tower looking for company.

Steve was often to be found there in the evenings. SHIELD wasn’t strictly military but it was run on military lines, and the army – the Howling Commandos – had been Steve’s life for three years, right until he rode Red Skull’s plane down in the middle of the Arctic. And while everyone had always talked about what they’d do when the war was over and they got to go home, Steve found himself staring vacantly at a wall most evenings and wondering what the hell he was supposed to do with himself when there weren’t any more missions. No orders, no HYDRA bases to invade, no prisoners to rescue or tanks to stop from rolling over civilian towns. No errands to run; no need to do odd jobs for shopkeepers to make ends meet, and no shopkeepers to do odd jobs for because apparently all of that had vanished while Steve slept twenty thousand leagues beneath the sea.

So Steve hung out a lot in the SHIELD rec room. Sometimes he’d find a junior agent looking for a sparring partner, and they’d head down to the gym and work off some energy. Sometimes he’d end up talking with some of the more senior agents, the ones who had come to SHIELD after their own stints with the Marines or the SEALS or black ops, who had some war stories to set against Steve’s and make him feel a little less alone in his experiences. And some nights, Tony would produce the bottle of 50-year-old scotch that Coulson thought no one else knew about, tell JARVIS to turn off his phone and pour them both a drink.

“Yeah, I had a girlfriend,” Steve said after a moment. He shrugged a little, uncomfortable. “At least, well, mostly I did.”

“ Mostly?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “It’s not usually the sort of thing you do by halves.”

“She was stationed with the SSR, back in London. I was out behind the lines with the Commandos.” He sighed. “We didn’t see each other much, and when we did, well.”

“You were too busy for formal definitions,” Tony nodded. Usually the comment would be snarky, accompanied by a waggle of eyebrows or an exaggerated wink. Tonight it was just a statement of fact.

Steve shook his head. “It wasn’t like that.”

Now Tony did move his eyebrows, in surprise. “What was it like?”

Steve looked away. “Well. We talked, man. And we were going to go dancing, one day… I mean,
when the war was over.” He could still feel Tony’s eyes on him. “The war was everything,” he
tried to explain. No one in the modern era understood that. Alvarez said that was normal, that
adjusting back to civilian life – even SHIELD’s admittedly skewed version of it – took time. Martin
said that someone who had never fought in a war wouldn’t understand, and Steve shouldn’t expect
too much.

“Didn’t you like her?” Tony asked, sounding honestly curious.

“Of course I did,” Steve said reflexively. He bit his lip, looking down into his glass and watching
as the liquor swirled around. Tony still poured a glass for Steve every time, even though it didn’t
do any good. Asgardian mead or the cheapest moonshine ever brewed; it didn’t matter. Steve still
couldn’t get drunk.

He looked up; Tony was still watching him expectantly, waiting for more. “She was smart,” Steve
said. “And tough, and….” He gestured loosely with his free hand, trying to put what he’d felt into
words. “She knew me before the serum, and she… I used to be this scrawny little kid, I mean,
ninety pounds dripping wet, short, asthma, the works. And she still saw something in me. Not
many people did, you know? And then after the serum, all of a sudden I looked like this –” he
waved down at himself. “And suddenly girls were lining up around the block, right? I mean, one of
them actually pulled me into a dark corner and kissed me, just like that!”

“Hmm,” Tony said, trying and failing to hide his smile behind his glass.

“But Peggy wasn’t like that,” Steve finished. “She was just the same.”

“Sounds a little like Pepper,” Tony said wistfully. “I used to be this self-centered, egotistical
jackass… yeah, laugh it up, Cap, but it’s true,” he added, grinning, when Steve chuckled. The look
on his face turned introspective. “But she stuck with me regardless.”

“And you kind of want to show her, right?” Steve asked rhetorically. “That her faith wasn’t
misplaced, that you’re still a good person, no matter what.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed.

Silence fell for a moment.

“Was she hot?” Tony asked. “Peggy, I mean.”

“I don’t really…”

“It’s not a hard question,” Tony said, smiling. “Was she hot or not?”

Steve hedged. “There was this one time when she walked into a bar, wearing this… this dress…
and everyone stopped and stared.”

“Steve.” Tony leaned forward, eyes serious. “Was she hot?”

“I… yeah.” Steve laughed a little, took a drink of his scotch. The burn was still there, at least,
running down his throat but vanishing before it hit his stomach. “Yeah, of course.”

“Sounds like you don’t know for sure.”

“What the heck does that even mean?” Steve snapped, stung.

Tony looked at him. “Nothing.” He leaned back, shrugged. “So what happened?”
Steve’s mouth felt dry. “I died.”

“And your friend?” Tony’s voice was unwontedly casual for an evening drinking in the SHIELD rec room.

“My – what?” Steve blinked in honest surprise.

“The one you grew up with. The one you’re always going on about.”

“Bucky.” Steve tried to swallow, failed, and took a larger swig than usual from his glass. Tony watched him, a line appearing between his eyes like he was trying to figure out a particularly knotty engineering problem. Steve didn’t know what to make of that, didn’t know what to make of any of this – hadn’t they just been talking about girls? “He died before me.”

“Did he think Peggy was hot?”

“Jesus, Stark, what does this have to do with anything?”

“Just asking,” Tony said calmly. He unfolded himself from the couch he’d been sprawled across, empty scotch glass dangling from his fingers. “I like hot women, that’s all.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve muttered, a little ashamed of his reaction.

“I’m gonna call it,” Tony said, setting his glass in the rec room sink for someone else to deal with, because that was just how Tony was. His stride across the room was the picture of confidence bordering on arrogance, the gait of someone who was sure of himself and his place in the world. Steve, watching, thought of Bucky, how he’d always had that same kind of swagger.

He stared down at the amber liquid in his glass, tempted to down it all in one go. He didn’t, because there was no point. Alcohol wouldn’t do anything to dull the grief that settled over him like a physical weight whenever he thought about Bucky. He’d proven that once already, a world away and a lifetime ago.

Steve stood up, put his glass in the sink next to Tony’s, and tried to convince himself that he didn’t care.

The next morning, Steve jogged the last few flights of stairs up to the floor housing the SHIELD psychiatric corps and nearly clocked Dr. Stamford with the door.

“Good morning, Steve,” she greeted him, sounding amused. She was dressed in the standard SHIELD field suit, carrying a ruggedized briefcase, and was clearly waiting for Steve to vacate the doorway so she could take the stairs to the roof. Steve smiled in return and held the door for her.

“Morning, Doc.”

Looking at Stamford as she went by, Tony’s question from last night still ringing in his ears, Steve thought that she should be a beauty. He couldn’t tell; it had always been hard for him to tell that sort of thing, and it had gotten harder in the modern world, where fashion and makeup had changed so drastically that Steve had a hard time telling a society girl from a street rat. Bucky would have thought Stamford was beautiful. But Bucky had thought everyone was beautiful. That had been one
of Bucky’s many gifts, his ability to look past the physical and find something wonderful underneath anyone’s skin. Even that of a skinny waif, pressed up next to him in the too-narrow beds of the Avondale Home for Boys.

“Steve.” He blinked and looked back. Stamford had paused partway into the stairwell, catching the heavy fire door with a well-placed knee. “Are you all right? You look a little pale.”

“Oh, well.” Steve resisted the urge to back away. “Not sleeping that well,” he finally admitted.

“Dreams again?” She gave him a look, and he nodded unwillingly. “Well, talk to Martin about it, that’s what he’s there for,” she admonished. “I’m sorry, Steve, I have to run – there’s a situation in Portland – but I really want to get in with you after I get back. I know it’s been a while.”

“That’s all right, Doc,” Steve said. “I understand.”

Stamford looked as if there were something else she wanted to say, but her watch beeped at her and she sighed. “Talk to Martin,” she said again, and started up the stairs. The door fell closed behind her.

Steve repressed a sigh. He wished Stamford weren’t quite so busy, then felt guilty for the wish. He’d taken up a lot of her time already, after all. Stamford had worked with him nearly full-time after his reawakening. She’d helped get him through that first horrible shock, easing him into modern living with a deft touch and a sense of humor that helped Steve feel grounded. But SHIELD was stretching itself thinner and thinner, with Steve’s revival only the latest in a series of world-changing events – Tony’s kidnapping, Bruce’s accident, Thor’s appearance – and projects requiring SHIELD’s specialized talents were vastly outpacing recruitment. Steve couldn’t really argue in good faith that he had more issues than a man who had been tortured or one for whom emotional control could literally be a matter of life and death.

It was just selfishness that made Steve wish he were talking to Stamford instead of Martin or Alvarez. And that wasn’t the sort of thing Captain America was supposed to stand for, after all. He was supposed to be a better man than that.

“So you’re still having trouble sleeping,” Martin said, leaning comfortably back in his chair. The afternoon sun slanted in through the windows of his office, near the top of SHIELD Tower, and illuminated his face.

When Steve didn’t answer immediately, Martin tapped his fingers against the polished surface of his desk. “You’re not used to living alone. You lived with Bucky before.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. First in the orphanage, then... after it.” When Bucky had turned fifteen, he’d gotten a job at the local newsstand that paid enough to buy bread and rent a roof that only leaked for six months out of the year. He’d woken Steve up in the middle of the night and told him he was getting out of the orphanage, and taking the blankets with him. The blankets, and Steve. They’d been worse than poor, because Bucky’s job barely paid enough for one to live and Steve, with the best will in the world, had been a scrawny, under-fed fourteen-year-old and couldn’t land a full-time job in the middle of the Depression, not for love or money. But he’d run errands for the shopkeepers and collected cans for the deposit and, when the nights were fair, he’d taken his prized chalks down to the main thoroughfare and done portraits for rich tourists for a penny apiece. They
hadn’t starved, and Steve had grown older and the Depression had eased and things had gotten better.

“That’s a long time,” Martin said carefully, watching Steve for a reaction. Steve met his eyes squarely and wondered what he saw in them. Steve’s relationship with Bucky had been the subject of a significant number of his sessions. More, even, than his relationship with Peggy. He always left with the impression that Martin was asking questions that were subtly different from the ones Steve heard. Now he said, “We’ve talked about carrying guilt over his death…”

“That’s not it,” Steve said quickly. Maybe too quickly, judging by the way Martin’s eyebrow went up, but it was the truth. Mostly. “It’s just… the place is too quiet. And too big for me by myself.” He shrugged self-deprecatingly.

“You have trouble accepting that you deserve so much,” Martin said, trying on a paternal smile. He had to be in his sixties, and the grandfatherly act probably worked very well for him most of the time. The topic of family and fathers was still a little raw for Steve, though, and the whole thing fell flat when they started talking about a childhood which had taken place before Martin was even born.

“It’s not uncommon,” Martin was continuing. “You’re not alone in that. Growing up as you did with so little, it can be hard to adjust to suddenly having a lot. Especially if the person you’re used to sharing everything with isn’t with you anymore.”

Steve nodded, not quite trusting his voice.

“Maybe it would be a good idea for you to try moving into SHIELD group housing for a while,” he suggested. “Or you could try staying with one of the other Avengers? Goodness knows Stark’s got the room.”

Aren’t I supposed to be getting better, not playing into my own insecurities? Steve wondered. Still, he considered it for a moment. “No,” he said finally. “I know you’re trying to help, but I don’t think… I don’t want to live with just anyone, you know.” He tried to smile, but knew he wasn’t keeping the sadness out of his voice or eyes. “Going into SHIELD housing would just remind me of the orphanage all over again. And Tony’s nice, but he’s, well…”

“Tony?” Martin guessed, voice understanding.

“Yeah.” Now Steve was able to grin a little. “Besides, I had quite enough of one Stark already, during the war. I’m not gonna jump back in with another.”

“Fair enough. But – ” Whatever Martin had been going to say next was cut off by the shrill ring of his office telephone. Steve winced. The alarm clock, the telephone – what was it about the 21st century that all of their devices had to sound as unpleasant as possible? Martin eyed the device in annoyance. “We’re not supposed to be interrupted, it must be important – sorry, Steve, can you hang on a moment?” He picked up the receiver at Steve’s nod and pressed a button. “Martin. What? Oh.” He listened for a second, then held the phone out to Steve. “It’s for you.”

He took the receiver hesitantly and brought it to his ear. “Rogers.”

“Coulson here,” the familiar voice of SHIELD’s commander of agents said into his ear. “Director Fury is calling a briefing. Twenty minutes in Conference Room Charlie. You’ll be there?”

Steve blinked. “At the New York headquarters?”
“That’s right,” Coulson answered, and now that Steve listened for it, he could hear the sounds of wind and helicopter blades in the background. Modern noise-dampening technology, at least, was something Steve had no problem appreciating. “We’re en route now.”

“Affirmative,” Steve answered. “I’ll be there.”

“Twenty minutes,” Coulson repeated. The click of the telephone was all the signoff he got.

“You’re running out on me?” Martin asked, accepting the receiver back from Steve and replacing it in its cradle.

“Fury’s calling a meeting,” Steve said, giving him an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“That’s all right, it’s only a little bit early.” He smiled. “Steve – look. I think the trouble you’re having, with sleeping and living alone, is just a minor symptom of a larger issue. I think we need to spend more time talking about your friend Bucky. Maybe we can figure out why you’re having so much trouble letting go.”

Martin’s voice was kind, but Steve couldn’t shake the feeling that he was a little disappointed, like he thought Steve was holding out on him. Steve nodded uncomfortably. It was technically true that Steve hadn’t told Martin every little thing about how he and Bucky used to be. But he was afraid that if he tried, Martin would give Steve a pep talk about overcoming his losses. And since Martin’s pep talks always ended up somehow making Steve feel worse, he just nodded uncomfortably, hoping the subject would drop.

“Steve,” Martin said patiently. “You have to tell me about it sometime.”

“Sure, Doc,” Steve said, standing and summoning up a smile. “Sometime.”

In a well-designed building, Steve liked to think, the offices and the conference rooms would be relatively close together. Maybe on the same floor, or the same couple of floors. And probably you could take an elevator between them if you didn’t feel like taking the stairs.

This being SHIELD Tower, though, the situation wasn’t so convenient. The psychiatric corps had taken over a still-intact attic at the top of the building and subdivided it into offices, so that’s where Steve had therapy. Meanwhile, conference rooms were what happened when someone shifted some boxes around in one of the basement storage rooms and lugged over a table and chairs. There were a few elevators in operation, but most of the shafts were either blocked by rubble or cordoned off as unsafe. Current policy frowned on using the elevator unless you were wheeling equipment around. Even then, if you were a serum-enhanced supersoldier who could carry twice his body weight without too much issue, you were pretty much expected to take the stairs regardless. So it took Steve almost the full twenty minutes to slide down fifty flights and then jog through the maze of corridors to get to his destination.

The conference table was only half put together when he got there; Steve gave the junior agent setting it up a hand, while her partner ran down the hall and came back with some chairs. There was already a place cleared away for Fury to alternately loom or pace, which he vastly preferred to sitting. The two agents put one chair at the head of the table in a way that was clearly meant for the briefing officer and pulled three other seats up before asking Steve if there was anything else he needed. He waved them away and tried to figure out who else was coming. Thor, he knew, was
back in Asgard, so it wasn’t a surprise that there was no specially reinforced, Norse-god-sized chair awaiting his presence. But that was as far as his knowledge of his teammates’ location went. He shook his head a little as Natasha came through the door. During the war he would always have known where his commandos were and what they were doing. Clearly, Steve was going to have to step it up if he expected to lead the Avengers effectively.


“Working a smuggling ring out of Brazil,” Natasha answered. Her look was eloquent of annoyance, but the fond smile tugging at one corner of her mouth rather ruined the effect. It made Steve grin, a little, and that was always a welcome feeling.

“Well, the most important member of the team is here,” Tony announced, breezing through on Natasha’s heels. One hand was cradling a cup of coffee and the other was clutching some device Tony seemed to be interacting with via his mind. Steve looked at it sideways, trying to see if he could match the tiny thing’s profile against some of the electronics he had learned about, but drew a blank. Might be homemade, anyway, there was no telling with Stark. But along with Steve and Natasha, Tony made three, so they settled into the chairs provided. No Bruce Banner, then.

“Banner’s doing a turn with Doctors Without Borders,” Natasha said, quirking an eyebrow at Steve’s look of surprise. Of course she would know that Steve was taking a headcount. He had to remember that she had years of military experience, too, despite looking like one of the girls the commandos had posters of back during the war. Steve had never been interested in collecting snaps or magazine clippings of movie stars and chorus girls, but Dum Dum had practically had a catalog’s worth, and somehow the image of full lips, round hips and a chest you could stack books on had stuck in Steve’s mind.

“So it’s just the Three Musketeers,” Tony finished, throwing out his hands extravagantly and grinning at Steve like he’d deliberately picked a pop culture reference Steve would get. Which was probably the truth, but Steve grinned back anyway. Tony could be a little patronizing at times, but his heart was essentially in the right place. He’s a lot like Howard that way, isn’t he, Bucky?

“Or the Three Stooges,” Natasha deadpanned.

“Hah hah.” Tony rolled his eyes and propped his feet up on the conference table, right on top of one of its foldable seams, ignoring the way it sagged. “Heya, Steve. Life treating you okay? How’s the therapy going?”

Steve fidgeted. “Fine.”

Natasha’s gaze sharpened a little. “Just ‘fine’?”

Steve shrugged a little, trying for nonchalant. “Well. You know.”

“Yeah, that whole ‘talking about your feelings’ thing. Gets me too.” Tony waved a hand lazily.

“You never show up to therapy,” Natasha said pointedly.

“And now you know why.” Tony grinned at her.

“It’s fine,” Steve repeated, torn between wanting to head off a potential inter-team argument and wanting to get off this topic as quickly as possible.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony said, suddenly sounding serious in that mercurial way he had. “It’s a process, you know?”
Steve was saved from the necessity of answering this by Fury’s entrance. Fortunately he caught himself in time to not stand or salute; Fury had not been amused the first few times Steve had done that out of sheer reflex. Hill had laughed and Coulson had just sighed. Suppressing the old habits was another thing that was ‘a process’. To this day Steve still made his bed with tight corners every morning, though the inspection never came, because Director Fury frankly had better things to do with his time than make sure the Avengers made their beds.

Fury took up his customary position at the head of the table, looming ominously over the proceedings. Two steps behind him was Coulson, carrying a thick manila folder in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. He sat down in the briefing officer’s chair and nodded to everyone.

“Good morning, agents.”


“The Winter Soldier,” Coulson said briskly, slapping the folder down on the table. Steve looked expectant and Tony yawned. Natasha, however, sat bolt upright.

“What about him?” she demanded. Steve tried not to stare in surprise, but hearing that tone out of Natasha was definitely worthy of concern. She sounded almost afraid, and there wasn’t much that scared Black Widow.

“Who or what is a Winter Soldier?” he asked.


“One of the defining features of the Winter Soldier is that he had his left arm replaced with a metal one,” Fury said. “US intelligence believed that it contained a backup weapon, or possibly that it was a weapon. Handy thing, for an assassin.”

“At least in those days,” Coulson amended. “Make it hard to get on an airplane today.”

“Tell me about it,” Tony muttered. “Thank goodness for private jets.”

“There are a lot of rumors about his kill list, all very sketchy, and most of them probably exaggerations or outright lies,” Coulson continued. “But the ones we have confirmation on are bad enough. The US Ambassador in ’56 – the Winter Soldier got to him through a state-of-the-art security system and a hundred-meter dead zone. A scientific asset being guarded by two platoons of marines in ’58. A high-ranking defector in the heart of an army base in West Germany in ’65. The list goes on.”

“So, what?” Steve asked. “Those were all a long time ago. Why are we interested in him now? Is he retiring? Looking to defect?”

“No and no,” Fury said, sounding amused. “He’s still at large.”

“How much of a threat can he be?” Tony said scathingly. “If he was one of the first products of the Red Room, he’s got to be pushing seventy.”

“No,” Natasha said tightly. “He was too valuable and too dangerous to leave out when he wasn’t killing enemies of the state. They kept him in cryosleep between missions. No aging. He’s no older than Steve.” Her gaze slid sideways. “Or maybe Tony.”
Tony bristled at the jab to his age, but Steve blinked. “You mean he’s like me?” He didn’t want to sound too hopeful, and a Soviet assassin would definitely not have been his first choice for a contemporary, but... “He’s my age, he’s from my time? He’s missed most of what’s been happening in the world?” He won’t get pop culture references either? He’ll remember struggling to survive during the Depression? He won’t act like the war was a million years ago?

“Bingo,” Fury said, nodding approvingly at Steve.

“Well, except for being a walking communist death machine, sure,” Tony muttered. Steve shot him a Look, but what was there to say? Tony was right, it was just... even so, it made Steve feel a little bit less alone.

“He was a walking communist death machine,” Coulson said calmly. “Not anymore.”

Pause, and Tony and Steve shared a look. Steve tried to catch Natasha’s eye, but she was staring into space, looking like she was barely paying attention to what was going around her. Steve cleared his throat. “So what’s changed?”

Fury considered him coolly. “No more Soviet Union,” he answered mildly.

“No more Soviet technology,” Tony amended. “Right? The government changed a while ago, but underneath the hood it’s all been the same old gang. But they’ve been putting less and less money into their tech, and the old Soviet-era machines are finally beginning to wear out. It’s been good business for Stark Industries lately.”

“But the more clandestine technology isn’t getting replaced,” Coulson said. “No more cryosleep. No more cybernetic arms.”

“And no more orders,” Natasha said, coming back to reality, a note of finality in her voice.

“If the Winter Soldier had been asleep when the breakup happened, he might still be there to this day,” Coulson continued. “But as the Soviet Union spiraled into destruction, they were making more use of their tool, not less. Hoping to assassinate their way back into stability.”

“Spoiler warning: it didn’t work,” Tony muttered.

“Mmm.” Coulson gave Tony a thin-lipped grin. “As far as we can reconstruct, the Winter Soldier was putting a bullet into a mobster’s brain right around the time the spiritual successor of the Red Room finally got, ah, decommissioned with extreme prejudice. We’re not sure if he deliberately stayed away or if his pickup just left him out in the cold.”

“A highly-trained assassin isn’t the sort of asset you just leave lying around,” Tony objected.

“There are some indicators that the Russian government attempted to recover or eliminate him,” Coulson conceded.

“And?”

Natasha snorted eloquently. Coulson quirked an eyebrow at her. To Tony he said, “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Either way, he’s been a free radical for the last year,” Fury picked up. “There’s always room in the criminal underworld for a man of his skills, and for a while he prospered.”

“But?” Tony asked. He saw the looks of surprise thrown his way and shook his head in disbelief.
“Come on, guys, you don’t drag us all out here to tell us it’s business as usual. What’s the ‘but’?”

“It’s actually three ‘buts’,“ Coulson answered. “First is that the competition for the Winter Soldier’s services is heating up, and not in a nice way. It seems that documents possessed by the Red Room have leaked into the criminal underworld, including some information on how they controlled the Winter Soldier.”

“And several of the more ambitious organizations are starting to dream about having their very own pet assassin,” Fury said grimly.

“Reports indicate that the Winter Soldier has spent as much time dodging potential suitors in the last three months as he has taking paying contracts,” Coulson continued. “Our projections say it’s just a matter of time before someone picks him up.”

“Damn,” Tony summarized. “And that’s not bad enough?”

“Oh, no, it gets worse,” Coulson said with inexplicable calm. He tapped the folder in front of him significantly. “That’s the second ‘but’. The Winter Soldier’s behavior is becoming erratic. He’s botched four contracts in the last six months. Two of them it looks like he simply walked away from. The third, he actually shot the man who hired him instead. A particularly nasty ex-KGB operative.”

“The man had hired the Winter Soldier to murder a group of women who had escaped from sexual slavery in one of his brothels,” Fury added.

“I admire his taste,” Steve murmured.

“Yeah, but it’s still not good for a hitman’s long-term prospects to kill his employer,” Tony countered. “So not only do we have a former Soviet assassin being pursued by a bunch of unsavory criminals interested in controlling him, but said assassin is starting to behave unpredictably. That’s just great.”

“What’s the third ‘but’?” Natasha asked, sounding as if she dreaded the response.

“That’s the best part,” Fury answered with a humorless grin. He turned to look at Steve, who instinctively straightened his spine. “The fourth contract the Winter Soldier broke was against you, Cap.”

“Me?” Sudden adrenaline shot through Steve’s veins. Hearing that an assassin was gunning for him was not calculated to help him with his sleeping problem. He resisted the urge to look over his shoulder and make sure someone had his back.

“Steve?” Tony started to cock a thumb at him, then paused mid-motion with one eyebrow raised. “The man who shot at him in Santa Cruz,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Can’t have been,” Natasha answered at once. “The man in Santa Cruz actually took the shot.”

“And missed,” Tony pointed out.

“The Winter Soldier doesn’t miss,” she insisted, something dark and ugly shadowing her eyes and tone. “It’s impossible.”

“Nevertheless, it appears to have happened,” Coulson said. He flipped open the manila folder and slid eight-by-ten glossies across the table at each of the Avengers present. “We have confirmation that the man who shot at Steve was, in fact, the Winter Soldier.”
Steve tugged the picture closer and stared at it. It was a wide-angle shot, zoomed to the far end of the building, showing the top of one of the skyscrapers in Santa Cruz. Steve vaguely remembered this particular building being across the street from the bandstand where he and the other Avengers had stood around and answered questions during a press conference. Just one of the many stops on the goodwill tour Coulson had routed them all on after their success in stopping Loki had left a lot of New York in ruins. There had been nothing special about it – until a bullet had pinged off of his shield. They had searched the area, of course, and so had SHIELD’s agents, but they hadn’t found any trace of the shooter. It hadn’t been the first time a disgruntled member of the public had tried to get physical with an Avenger, and SHIELD had been forced to ration the resources it devoted to such incidents. The ones where someone (usually a bystander) actually got hurt tended to jump to the top of the list. Steve had honestly forgotten about Santa Cruz.

Bucky would have a field day if he’d known that. Only you could forget about someone trying to take your head off, Rogers, he’d say. His voice would be bright-edged with laughter, overlaying a darker current of worry and protectiveness.

“Where did these images come from?” Tony was asking. Steve blinked and made himself focus.

“Anti-theft cameras on the roof of an adjacent building,” Coulson answered. “It took a while to get the footage and enhance it to something useful.”

“Winter Soldier probably didn’t even know the cameras were there,” Fury said, shaking his head. “World’s changed. It’s a whole new way of doing business.”

Just visible over the ledge of the building, Steve could see the familiar shape of a long-distance sniper rifle. The angle meant that there was no visible tripod, but the incline of the gun and the way the shooter wasn’t using his own body to brace it meant there had to be one tucked in the shadow of the ledge. The shooter himself was only partly visible. A domino-style mask covered his face, and Steve wanted to point out that anyone could wear a mask, anyone could be under one. But the sun had been shining when this picture had been taken, and it was glinting unmistakably off the shooter’s left arm, which appeared to be made entirely of metal. Steve shivered again and pushed the picture away from him.

“It’s definitely him,” Natasha said, astonishment and fear warring in her voice. “But I don’t understand. He shouldn’t be capable of missing.”

“It could have been an accident,” Tony suggested. “I mean, he’s still human, right? Humans make mistakes.”

“No.” Natasha slammed both palms down on the metal table, and the abrupt gracelessness of the gesture drew every eye to her suddenly. Her face was drawn and pale. “A mistake – unlikely, but possible. But then what?” She looked around the table and shook her head. “He just leaves? Writes off the job because he missed the first shot? Why didn’t he take a second one? Why didn’t he follow us back here and try again? I tell you, it’s impossible. The training does not work like that. If he chose not to follow it up, if he let Steve live, it was on purpose. It was part of his plan somehow.” Her shoulders shook minutely, and her breath came faster.

“I asked you here because I hoped you might have some familiarity with the Winter Soldier,” Fury said cautiously. “Whatever it is you know, I need to know it too.”

Natasha took several deep breaths, then sat back down and folded her hands demurely in front of her. “The Winter Soldier was the Red Room’s crowning triumph. Completely loyal, and completely malleable to their will. They wiped his memory between every mission so that he would never be able to develop any autonomy or compromise any projects. When he wasn’t on a
mission, they stored him in cryosleep. He was their all-purpose tool.” She had been staring fixedly at her copy of the picture, still lying askew where Phil had pushed it towards her. Now she touched it with one slim finger, drawing it towards her. “He was involved in my training. He was… extreme. They had made him so. I do not know what they did to him, but if it was anything like what they did to me, he would be dedicated. Beyond devotion. He would not miss, would not falter or fail. It would be impossible.” Natasha shook her head, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes. “None of this makes any sense. Without this photo, I would say there’s no way the Winter Soldier could be involved.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony said impatiently. “Fascinating. Great stuff. Can we focus on the big picture here?” He pointed at Steve. “Someone shot at Steve. What are we going to do about it?”

“Well, regardless of his motivations, we can’t have an ex-Soviet assassin becoming the personal property of an underworld gang,” Coulson answered wryly.

“And if he’s taking potshots at my Avengers, sooner or later he won’t miss,” Fury said grimly. “No, we need to neutralize this threat.”

“What exactly are you ordering us to do?” Steve asked warily.

“Bring him in, if possible,” Coulson said. “His knowledge about the Red Room’s methods and Soviet-era secrets in general would be invaluable, assuming we can persuade him to cooperate.”

“But if it’s not possible, your orders are to eliminate him,” Fury finished, holding Steve’s, Tony’s and Natasha’s eyes in turn. “He’s a menace. A nightmare, left over from America’s last great war. He’s killed before and he will kill again. We need to stop him, one way or another.”

“Fine with me,” Tony said. He picked the photo off the table. “Send the rest of the dossier to JARVIS, won’t you, Phil?”

“Sure thing,” Coulson said.

“Cap?” Fury asked. “You good to go on this?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve answered. It was nice of Fury to ask, but the prospect of having to kill an ex-Soviet assassin wouldn’t be what kept him up at night, even if the man was probably the closest thing Steve would ever have to a true contemporary in this crazy modern world. They’d try to bring him in if they could. Steve would be lying if he said he didn’t hope very much that would be the case. Fear and distrust of ‘commies’ was a part of the modern world that had completely passed Steve by, so there was no reason to believe Steve couldn’t make a friend. But if that wasn’t to be, well, Steve had been through a war. If it came down to the Winter Soldier’s life versus the lives of innocents, Steve wouldn’t hesitate.

“Romanoff?” Fury’s voice remained even, no hint of worry or concern peeking through.

“Yes.” Natasha nodded, though her eyes never left the photo of the man lying on the roof in Santa Cruz.

“All right then,” Fury said briskly. “Coulson will give you the material we have on the man. Study it. I need you three ready to go the next time we get word the Winter Soldier’s surfaced. Until then, stay loose.”

Tony nodded, already out the door, probably eager to get back to his latest pet project. Natasha followed more slowly, almost visibly lost in thought. Steve considered going after her and trying to talk, but decided that she looked like she’d rather be alone. Instead he turned back to Fury. “Sir,”
Steve said, “Do we have any idea what he –” waving the photo of the Winter Soldier gently – “looks like under the mask?”

“No,” Coulson answered for Fury. “It was one of the Red Room’s most closely kept secrets. During the Cold War the Winter Soldier would often work as an infiltrator.”

“Since the War ended, the man’s never taken the mask off, far as we know,” Fury finished. “Guess he made it his trademark or something.”

“Hmm,” Steve muttered, eyes going back to the picture. There was something about the man in the picture that was niggling in the back of his mind. Something about the way he sprawled on the roof of that skyscraper, the set of his shoulders… but Steve only had a little to work with, in the picture. Part of a torso, a face wearing a mask, one-and-a-half arms. It wasn’t enough.

Who are you? Have I seen you before? On one of the many battlefields of the war? He’d worked with some Russian units. Even had a few specialists assigned to the commandos, for certain missions. It wouldn’t be out of the question for Steve to have met this man, a lifetime ago, before the mask and the arm and the rift between their countries.

“Maybe you’ll find out for us, Cap,” Fury suggested.

“Yeah,” Steve said absently, still trying to pin the feeling down. “Maybe.”

Steve went to his afternoon counseling session still thinking about the Winter Soldier. He tried to talk out some of it with Alvarez, but absent anything concrete about the other man, Steve was just spinning his wheels. She realized it after the first fifteen minutes and spent the rest of the time determinedly keeping the conversation off the topic.

He ran into Martin on the way out for the day, which was unusual; the other man must have been hovering. He pinned Steve down and asked very earnestly if Steve needed to talk, if there was anything Martin could help with, since hearing that he might have a contemporary in the Winter Soldier must have been such a shock for him. Steve genuinely appreciated the thought and effort Martin had put in on his behalf, but there really wasn’t anything to say, and encountering Martin’s disappointed look twice in one day didn’t actually help.

At home that night, he tried to read the dossier on the Winter Soldier and discovered it was barely worthy of the name. It was short on facts and long on speculation and mysticism. If every kill attributed to the assassin were actually his, there wouldn’t be much time for cryosleep. Steve remembered Natasha’s assertion that the man wasn’t much older than Steve and guessed that he had actually been used sparingly, but that his personal legend has been as big a weapon for the Soviets as the assassin himself.

In a way, Steve thought, the Winter Soldier had a lot in common with Captain America. They both had legends vastly outweighed their personal presence; they had both disappeared behind the mask in their people’s collective consciousness. But Steve liked to think he stood for some of the better aspects of America. Truth, justice, all that stuff. The Winter Soldier represented the dark underbelly of the communist regime: fear, control, violence. Steve shook his head in mute sympathy. If the Winter Soldier had started as a patriot, he had been betrayed. If he had gone along with the Red Room’s plans willingly, he was a monster. It was hard to figure out which would be
worse, in the grand scheme of things.

After dinner, with nothing better to do, Steve spent a while attempting to figure out which kills actually belonged to the man and which were the acts of lesser-known assassins following in his footsteps. It was familiar work, almost comforting if Steve didn’t think too hard about why that was. Target, profile, plan, mission, debriefing. Routine. Steve caught himself planning out scenarios to capture the Winter Soldier that involved the Commandos and shook his head sharply, trying to make himself focus.

Anyway, it was a wash. There were a few obvious big-name kills, and a few lesser targets during drought periods that Steve figured had been chosen more to keep the legend of the Winter Soldier alive than anything else. Beyond that, though, the whole thing was too much of a jumble to keep straight. Steve stayed up until midnight trying to get the timeline to gel, but finally gave it up in disgust and went to bed.

He dreamed of Bucky falling down the mountain again. When he woke in the middle of the night, shaking and in a cold sweat, it occurred to him to wonder what dreams the Winter Soldier might have.
Chapter 2

Three days later, the call came in. This time Steve was in the middle of a workout instead of a counseling session, which had its pros and cons. The pros were that he didn’t have anyone to apologize to when he grabbed a towel and ran out of the room at top speed. The cons were that there wasn’t time for a shower, and struggling into the Captain America uniform when one was already sweaty was one of those things that no amount of practice made any more fun.

*Maybe I can get Tony to build some kind of enormous air dryer for humans,* Steve thought. *If they can get an airstrip to fly, surely there’s a better way to dry off than this.*

He made it from the gym to the helipad atop SHIELD tower in thirteen minutes, a new personal record for him when his method of transit didn’t involve stepping out the nearest window and being carried to the top by Thor, Iron Man or (on one memorable occasion) The Hulk. Having been borne up the side of the building like Fay Wray was one of those rare experiences that he was actively glad no one from his old life had been around to see.

When the elevator doors opened and Steve jogged over to the waiting Quinjet, he looked around and nearly groaned in frustration. “Where’s Iron Man? Did he go on ahead?” Again?

“California,” Natasha shouted back over the roar of the engines starting up. She pulled the door open and levered herself inside. Steve followed and saw Clint at the controls. The archer flashed them both a jaunty wave and started the ‘jet lifting before Steve had even gotten the door closed again. “Some shareholder meeting he couldn’t miss. Supposed to be back this evening.” She gestured towards the cockpit. “Clint just got back late last night, but Fury said you’d want a third body on this.”

“Did Tony at least get the call?” Steve strapped himself down and took the headset Natasha offered him. The noise of the engines dulled immediately to an almost soothing background hum.

“Coulson pinged him,” Natasha replied, “but he’s out of contact. No word on when or if he’ll be able to join the party.”

“Dammit,” Steve sighed. They were going up against a legendary Soviet assassin with Captain America, Black Widow and Hawkeye. Sure, that was technically three-to-one odds, but tactically speaking it was a bad mix. Natasha needed to close with her opponents, making her a bad matchup against an assassin known for ranged kills. And in a battle between two dedicated, skilled snipers, well, no offense to Hawkeye and his quiver of tricks, but Steve’s money was on the man with the gun.

“Bruce is routing through Europe on his way back from Africa,” Clint’s voice crackled over their headsets. “He may be able to reposition himself in time to join the party.”

Hulk also needed to close in order to smash, but he’d probably shrug off any ordnance the Winter Soldier could fire. “Let’s hope so,” Steve muttered.

Thirty miles out, his headset buzzed, and Steve saw Natasha reach up out of the corner of his eye and flip a switch on one of the Quinjet’s many panels. “Avengers One, go.”

“Coulson here,” the familiar, unflappable voice crackled into Steve’s ears, staticky from being bounced through too many Stark Industries satellites. “I’ve got your final mission briefing. Everyone on the line?”
“Rogers, on,” Steve said.

“Barton’s here.”

“Right.” A moment of silence; in his mind’s eye, Steve pictured Coulson shuffling papers and clearing his throat. “The Winter Soldier’s target is a high-ranking arms dealer named Burzhov. We’re sending you a dossier now.” The screens built in around the ‘jet lit up, scrolling through screenfuls of information. “Independent Eastern European contractor. Funded the Afghan resistance in the 70s. These days, does most of his business with various terrorist cells. The hit was contracted by another arms dealer, Karkoff. Former Soviet military, based out of Russia. Now embracing the possibilities of capitalism to murder for personal profit instead of ‘the glory of the state’.” Steve’s eyes flicked over to the bottom of the display, where an English translation helpfully scrolled up. The last part had been said in what was probably impeccable Russian, Coulson not being known for doing anything imperfectly, and Natasha’s snort was eloquent even over the static-filled connection. “They competed recently over supplying arms during the Arab Spring. Burzhov’s closer geographical position gave him better physical access into the Middle East to move the goods and, consequently, a bigger part of the market. Now that the Arab Spring is over, the new governments are trying to build standing armies, and Burzhov’s the man they’re looking at to supply their munitions. Karkoff’s out in the cold, and he doesn’t like it. Thus the contract with the Winter Soldier.”

“Looks like Karkoff got tired of free market enterprise and decided to fall back on an old Soviet-style solution,” Clint commented wryly.

“Yeah, just think what would happen if these people could buy from Stark Industries,” Steve joked.

“All the illegal arms dealers would murder each other in fits of rage and we’d finally have peace in the Middle East?”

“Focus, people,” Coulson said sternly. It was impossible to tell for sure over this connection, but Steve rather thought that Coulson was smiling in the privacy of his office. “Our intelligence says that Burzhov has a meeting with a supplier tonight. Arms dealers aren’t known for mutual trust, but in this case it’s a man Burzhov has been buying from for years. Security will be relatively light. It’s a good chance and we expect the Winter Soldier to take it.”

“Right.” Steve agreed, listening with one ear as he scanned the information appearing on the Quinjet’s built-in screen.

“Remember, we want the Winter Soldier alive if possible. But don’t risk yourselves unnecessarily. Compared to alien incursions, one assassin is small potatoes. Coulson out.”

The night was hot, muggy and sticky with a humidity that wasn’t entirely water. It was sweat and steam, the smoke from the cooking fires lit by the city’s poor and the furtive suspicion of the city’s criminals. The buildings towered around them, old and run-down, brick and concrete and metal, and Steve wasn’t sure how to deal with the fact that a run-down city in Eastern Europe was more like the neighborhood he grew up in than the Brooklyn of today. The tenement on which Steve was crouching at this very moment was practically a dead ringer for the orphanage in which he’d spent the first ten years of his life he could clearly remember. He’d flown halfway around the world to
The memory rose unbidden before his mind’s eye. *Old man Hennessy needs another delivery boy and he says he’ll give me the job. He’ll pay three dollars a week, Steve, three! Mrs. Dietrich from church, do you remember her? She’s got an extra room and she’ll rent it to me and she says she won’t ask any questions. I’m getting out of here, Steve.* Bucky’s voice was young in this memory, still boyishly high most of the time, though beginning to break and drop at unpredictable intervals in a sign of the man he would shortly become. It was pitched even higher than usual in excitement and energy only partly controlled, all held tightly down to the level of a whisper in the silence of the orphanage at midnight.

*That’s great, Bucky,* Steve answered. He supposed he could have said something else to the fragment in his mind, something that would short-circuit the whole familiar flow of this conversation and keep him from talking to a ghost. But of all of his memories of Bucky this one might be his favorite. Steve always answered the right way. *Good luck. I’ll… I’ll really miss you…*

*What are you talking about, Steve?* Even at the separation of so many years, even though the memory was worn and faded with the frequency of remembrance, Bucky’s look of surprise still tore at Steve’s heart. *You’re coming with me, dummy! Mrs. Dietrich says she’ll take us both. Come on, quick…*

“*Steve?*” Natasha’s voice was quiet in his ear, almost lazy with the heat, and it wove in and through the lingering wisps of the past. “*Anything yet?*”

“*Negative,***” he answered after a moment, schooling his voice to stillness. “*No visual on target. Barton?***”

“*Nothing yet,***” Clint sighed.

Steve reminded himself that he was sprawled on the rooftop of a rundown tenement, watching the entryway of another dilapidated building for the appearance of Burzhov or his contact, five thousand miles and a lifetime away from the Avondale Home for Boys. Natasha had the back entrance covered, and Clint was a good couple of miles farther down the strip, watching for the Winter Soldier to make his entrance. One sniper to another, Steve figured; if anyone could get inside the Winter Soldier’s head and predict where he would choose to set up, it was Hawkeye. Neither Avenger was really that far away in the grand scheme of things, but in the stillness and closeness of the night air they were reduced to voices in his ear, no more or less real than the memory of Bucky’s voice. The buildings around him kept blurring between the rundown shapes of urban decay in Eastern Europe and the same in Depression-era Brooklyn.

“*Sometimes I think the things I remember are more real than the things I see***,” Steve murmured, quietly enough that the mike wouldn’t pick it up and transmit it to Natasha and Clint. He’d read that in a book recently, one of the many things he’d been doing to try to get a handle on the way the world had changed without him, and it had stuck with him for its very truth.

He should remember to tell Martin about this when he got back. Probably it meant something that his childhood was still so real to him, even after so much change and upheaval.

“*Hang on,***” Clint said suddenly. “*I’ve got something.***”

“*Report,***” Steve snapped instantly. The memory of Brooklyn faded around him as his senses kicked into combat mode. The scents and sights of the city came into sharp focus, and he shoved his memories back into the box in the back of his mind to be dealt with when the mission was over.
“I’ve got a visual on the Winter Soldier.” Clint spoke in a staccato, controlled clip, but Steve heard excitement/fear/tension/anticipation as subtle threads weaving themselves through Clint’s voice. “He’s moving towards the building… heading towards you, Cap. Looks like he’s going to position himself closer to the target than I thought. Should be visible to you in another minute or two. I can follow–”

“No, stay put,” Steve ordered. “I don’t want the Winter Soldier noticing you. Assume his vision’s as good as yours. Wait until you can’t see him to move.”

“Nobody’s vision’s as good as mine, Cap.” Even through the professionalism, the pride came through.

“Then we’re being extra cautious, aren’t we?” Steve said firmly.

Something that might have been a sigh came over the comms. “Roger that.”

“Widow, anything on the back entrance yet?”

“Nothing,” Natasha answered. She sounded suspicious. “The meeting was supposed to begin twenty minutes ago. Punctuality isn’t a major concern in the underworld, but we should at least have seen security precautions beginning at the meeting site. Something’s wrong.”

Steve considered this. He wasn’t an expert on the functioning of the criminal class, but military doctrine applied to well-executed villainy more often than he would have thought, and his instincts, too, were warning him that they were missing some crucial piece of information. Steve made a snap decision. “They’re not coming in the back. Circle around and link up with me. The Winter Soldier is the target, not Burzhov.”

“Roger that,” Natasha said, and the comms went silent.

Across the street, on top of what must have been a factory once and was now an empty, burned-out shell, a shadow detached itself from the deeper pool of darkness cast by its neighboring building and padded silently across to the edge of the roof. The relatively more complete darkness of the slums washed out the color from Steve’s vision, but the outline was unmistakable, and the starlight glinted off the metal arm. The Winter Soldier.

“I have visual,” Steve murmured at precisely the minimum volume required to activate the mike. “Natasha, where are you?”

“Other side of him,” her voice came quietly back, and, squinting, Steve could just see her, a flash of red against the moonlight. The Winter Soldier was pinned between them and it didn’t look like he knew it yet. Steve held his breath and began to work his way closer.

“Barton?”

“Still a few thousand meters out. Ten minutes.”

Steve would have shaken his head if the movement wouldn’t have given him away. The chance was too perfect, the opportunity too golden, even to wait for the extra manpower Barton represented. Steve finished his careful shimmy to the edge of his roof and looked down. On the roof of the lower building across from his, the Winter Soldier set down a metal case that had to contain a gun, and went to open its latches. Two quiet beeps in Steve’s ear told him that Natasha was in position, ready to drop on the Winter Soldier from above. Steve tightened his grip on his shield and whispered, “Go.”
And everything happened at once.

Black Widow dropped onto the Winter Soldier, and Steve would have sworn blind in front of every general in the army that the man had had no idea that she was there even a moment ago. But he must have heard something, because he threw himself forward into a tight roll and came up with a pistol in his metal hand. Natasha at least caught the move far enough out that she didn’t land face-first on the roof, coming down hard into a fighter’s crouch, but she wasn’t holding a ranged weapon and any moment now the Winter Soldier was going to fire. Steve was already in mid-lunge and it took him a few crucial moments to change tacks and ready his shield for a throw, knowing even as he did so that if the Winter Soldier were going to shoot Natasha, he was already too late.

Behind the two staring at each other on the roof, a door slammed open.

The Winter Soldier must have seen it over Natasha’s shoulder. The hand holding the gun swerved smoothly away from Black Widow and spoke once, twice, three times, gunshots shattering the night air as a group of well-muscled men in ill-fitting camouflage gear started pouring out onto the roof. For every bullet the Winter Soldier fired one of them went down, but there were more behind them. Steve swore, and he changed his grip on his shield for the third time in as many minutes and launched himself off his roof.

He landed next to the Winter Soldier and went to town. Steve wasn’t trying for finesse or strategy; he was just trying to cut his way through the crowd to Natasha, figuring that once he and she were back-to-back they could make short work of the unexpected attackers. He wasn’t thinking of the Winter Soldier except as one more potential opponent, albeit one he had an interest in taking alive, so it took him completely by surprise when he realized that the Winter Soldier was actively working with him. He had positioned himself at Steve’s back and was following two steps behind, covering him as well as any of the commandos had ever done. The realization that the Winter Soldier was right behind him with a weapon and Steve apparently hadn’t noticed sent an icy shiver down Steve’s spine; something was seriously wrong with Steve’s situational awareness if the Winter Soldier wasn’t tripping his friend-or-foe. But since the assassin had apparently had all the time he’d need to put a bullet in Steve’s back and hadn’t done it, and there were more pressing matters to attend to at the moment than the Winter Soldier’s motivations, Steve shoved his misgivings aside and kept his focus on the fight. The enemies were all coming from the door so there was no need for 360-degree awareness. Just Steve with his shield covering them both, delivering a quick jab to anyone who got within range, and the Winter Soldier picking off targets with mechanical regularity until the light from the door was a solid square of yellow and Steve realized there were no more coming.

He dropped the shield to rest position, panting, and without really intending to he turned to face the Winter Soldier. The other man was staring at Steve in what Steve thought must be surprise, though the mask made it hard to tell, and although he was still holding his weapon it was tilted down and away from both of them. Not threatening Steve with it, just holding it. A moment later Steve realized he was doing the same thing with his shield, letting it drop to bang against his thigh, not ready to block a bullet from the Winter Soldier’s rifle. And Steve knew it was stupid, because the other man could swing his gun up and fire before Steve could get his shield back into position, and serum or no serum Steve would still die from a bullet in the heart just like any other man. Distantly, he heard Natasha shouting his name. Over his earpiece, Clint demanded to know what was happening, still too far away to see. But none of that seemed important right then. Not when Steve and the Winter Soldier were just staring at each other, panting from the fight, alone in their unexpected camaraderie.

The fact that they both had their guards down meant that when the gas grenade suddenly appeared between their feet, neither of them got away in time.
An army medic had once told Steve that when someone was knocked out, their hearing was the last thing to go and the first thing to return. He’d relied on that fact a few times to good effect in the days with the Howling Commandos, when evading HYDRA patrols had been a matter of life or death. He used it again now, staying still and limp as the world shook around him and bright lights began to streak across the inside of his closed eyelids. Muscles were shaky and vision would be useless for a good five minutes, but his ears were working just fine.

“Karkoff says to throw them all in,” a voice said, close by. It was deep and rough. A grunt seemed to answer it, coming from Steve’s far side. There was the sound of footsteps, at least five sets, the familiar slap of combat boots against concrete. Rough hands held Steve up, half-dragging, half-pulling. He repressed the urge to struggle. Four minutes until he could put up any sort of effective resistance, and it wouldn’t be any good if he lost the element of surprise.

“Get the door, Yevgeny.”

A rattling sound cut through the silence, the shriek of metal grinding against metal. A thump that sounded awfully like a body hitting the ground. Then the hands on Steve shifted and his inner ear spun, and cold concrete came up from nowhere to slap him.

“The place ain’t meant for all of them.”

“Won’t be here long enough to matter.”

Ice shot down Steve’s spine and he started to tense himself anyway, but the rattling noise coming back had to be the sound of a prison door closing, and then there wasn’t any point in doing anything but lying there silently while the footsteps retreated and the cobwebs cleared from his head.

“Steve?” Natasha’s voice.

He groaned and tried to push himself up. It worked, to his surprise; he didn’t seem to be bound in any way, hands or feet. After a few tries he got his eyes to open and focus, always the hardest part of coming back from a hit to the head, and a good sign that his enhanced body had rescued him yet again from what would otherwise have been a fairly nasty concussion. He must have landed hard on that roof, or else their abductors had dealt him an extra blow to be sure he would stay out long enough.

Steve blinked and took in his surroundings.

His initial impression of a prison, a place meant to hold superheroes captive, was more accurate than he’d expected. The place was, in fact, a textbook cell. He wasn’t a connoisseur of such places, but it seemed fairly standard to him. Five sides of concrete and one of metal bars. The smell of rot that was complimented by a pervasive dampness, and amenities that were simple in the extreme: two pails and a single cot. It was clear enough that the space had been designed for one, which answered most of Steve’s questions. He may not have been a genius like Howard or Tony, but he could connect the dots when they were all laid out neatly in front of him.

There had been no arms deal. No competition between Burzhov and Karkoff – or, at least, such a competition had been secondary to Karkoff’s real goals. Karkoff had hired an assassin to kill his competitor at a place and time his competitor was never going to be. The real purpose of Karkoff’s
op was the same as SHIELD’s: to acquire the Winter Soldier. The presence of the Avengers had thrown an unplanned element into Karkoff’s little setup, but the man had apparently taken the legend of the Winter Soldier seriously enough, gone with enough overkill in his preparations, that he’d been well able to take down Natasha and Steve as well.

“I’m okay,” he answered muzzily, shaking his head to clear it of the lingering effects of the gas. He tried to make his brain work. “Clint?”

Natasha shook her head. “Not here.” She looked torn between worry that they might have Clint somewhere else and fierce satisfaction that a member of their team appeared to have escaped. If Clint was still out there, Karkoff was going have the might of SHIELD and the Avengers descend on his head, and that was going to be one bad day for him.

But in the meantime…

Steve nodded at Natasha’s look of concern and turned to face the Winter Soldier.

Outside the fog of battle, the man was both more and less intimidating than his legend. He was smaller than Steve had been expecting, and Steve had to remind himself that he wasn’t five-foot-five and skinny anymore. Most people looked smaller than Captain America, but the man would still be physically intimidating to most, well-layered with muscle and looking flexible to boot. The metal arm was every bit as scary-weird as Steve had been expecting. The briefing reports had said there was originally a red star painted on the bicep, but it had been effaced after the fall of the Soviet Union. Looking closely, Steve could see that it appeared to have been buffed off manually, and the finish was scratched and pitted around the area of its removal. In fact, the whole arm had clearly seen better days. The metal disappeared underneath his short sleeves, but streaks of silver reappeared on the Winter Soldier’s chest, tracing along up his neck and vanishing beneath his collar. Steve shivered, and raised his eyes to the Winter Soldier’s face.

The Winter Soldier blinked slowly, a long drag of eyes closing and opening again, and nodded to Steve. It was a formal, heavy nod, an acknowledgement of what the other man must have seen in Steve’s eyes.

“Captain America.”

Steve inclined his head in return. “Winter Soldier.”

“I think perhaps you are here because of me, yes?” It took Steve longer than it should have to process the other man’s words; his speech was heavily accented, and it sounded like he was chewing gravel. The Winter Soldier walked over to one end of the cell and sat down, propping his back up against the wall and arranging himself comfortably. “And I do not just mean because of Karkoff’s little intervention at the end.”

“No.” Steve sat down, too, on the cot. Natasha took her cue from him and joined him there. Their legs pressed against each other and their shoulders brushed when Steve automatically reached to settle the shield he was no longer carrying. “We came looking for you.”

The Winter Soldier nodded. “I thought so. That is good.”

“Good?” Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Why would the Red Room’s greatest triumph be glad to see Captain America?”

“The Red Room,” the Winter Soldier repeated like an epithet, something dark and ugly slithering through his tone. He moved his hand decisively, a short cutting motion that seemed to express a
lifetime of repressed rage; the hand was metal, and the gesture looked lethal. “The Red Room is no more. The Soviet Union is no more. I am a soldier without a war.”

“You’ve been doing well for yourself as a freelancer,” Steve noted, trying to keep his tone calm and disinterested, like being a paid assassin was a perfectly valid career choice.

The Winter Soldier may have heard something in Steve’s voice anyway; his chin tilted down ever so slightly, and Steve thought he looked dismayed. “It is not honorable, you are thinking. But it is the work I know how to do.”

Steve considered and discarded a variety of responses, from asking the Winter Soldier whether his sense of honor factored into him having walked away from his recent contracts, to bringing up Santa Cruz, to asking him about that fight on the rooftop and why he hadn’t taken the chance to put a bullet in Steve’s back. But he swallowed them all in favor of repeating Natasha’s question. “Why are you glad that we came looking for you?”

The Winter Soldier smiled. “Because I wanted you to.”

Patience, Steve reminded himself. “Why?”

If anything, the smile grew wider. “I do not know.”

“What?” Steve stared at the other man in surprise. “How can you not know?”

“Because I do not know many things,” the Winter Soldier said calmly. Now the smile slid off his face, leaving behind something serious in the visible lines of his face. “I do not know who I really am. I do not know why I have the skills I have. Sometimes I remember, but always the memories vanish. When I know something as strongly as this, however, I also know that it is true, and that it is very important.”

“And what you know is that you’re glad to see us?”

The Winter Soldier shook his head. “No, Captain America. What I know is that you will help me.”

“You mean SHIELD?” Steve asked weakly, trying to figure out how that made sense.

Another shake of the head. “No. You personally. You will help me. You will save me.”

Steve stared at the man. Help him? Steve certainly was interested in taking him back to SHIELD, yes, but how on earth could the other man have known that? How could he have predicted that SHIELD would want to do anything other than shoot him on sight? More, how could he think that Captain America would personally care about him?

Steve opened his mouth to tell the Winter Soldier that none of this made any sense. “Look—”

Footsteps echoing down the corridor cut him off. The little group in the cell turned towards the bars with one accord, tension entering three sets of shoulders and impassive masks dropping over three faces. The fragile ease between the Avengers and the Winter Soldier vanished as if it had never been.

The footsteps belonged to a group of men in knockoff military uniforms. Steve gave them one glance and immediately dismissed them. They were clearly bodyguards, or else hired muscle; impossible to tell and not much of a difference in any case. The man behind them, though, Steve recognized as Karkoff.
Karkoff was also wearing some kind of military uniform, though in his case it was probably genuine. It was clear he was consciously trying to recall the glory days of the Soviet Union. From what Steve had read about that time in history, that was a problem all on its own. But beneath the gold braid and the fake medals, he was also a gangster, through and through, running guns and stirring up wars to serve his own greed. And if that wasn’t bad enough, as of this moment Karkoff was the current leader in the race to acquire the Winter Soldier’s services, no longer required by the defunct Soviet government. It was a potentially lethal combination, and Steve mentally kicked himself for having let things get this far.

The group came to a stop in front of the cell, and Karkoff stepped forward. It wasn’t just the uniform that was deliberately evocative of an earlier time. He was wearing a carefully trimmed mustache that could have been copied from Stalin, and a cigar trailed dramatically from one corner of his mouth.

“Good evening, comrades,” Karkoff said in a smooth, cultured voice Steve immediately pegged as an affectation. And in English, which was something of a surprise. If the point of the whole exercise was the Winter Soldier and the Avengers were just a bonus, he wasn’t sure why Karkoff would make the extra effort to speak a language Steve could understand, instead of using his native tongue. Maybe it was some kind of intimidation thing, or Karkoff wanting to prove that he was somehow better or more educated than his capitalist opponents. “I am so glad you could join us.”

Steve just gave Karkoff a flat look. Traditionally, this was his opportunity to tell Karkoff what a mistake he’d made in capturing them, and how swift and deadly would be the retribution of SHIELD, and so on and so forth. Tony had wanted to teach Steve to give a proper speech, but whenever he tried Steve kept hearing the overture to The Star-Spangled Man playing in the background. So this time Steve just sat and worked on keeping his face impassive, and Natasha and the Winter Soldier did the same.

“All right,” Karkoff said, nodding. “We shall do it your way.” The smooth planes of his speech fractured, leaving an ugly undercurrent of anger exposed.

The Winter Soldier grinned, a terrifying, Death’s-head flash of teeth. “Boris Ivanovich, you would not like my way of doing things.”

Karkoff’s lips twisted into a snarl, and he looked as if he was fantasizing about stepping into the cell and dealing out some fist-to-face behavioral correction. Steve filed that away for later reference: easily rattled.

Unfortunately, he was at least smart enough not to give in to that urge. Karkoff settled himself almost visibly and gestured to one of his goons. “Something for you.” The goon moved forward, and Steve tensed, ready to exploit any moment of weakness in the opening of the cell door. The man didn’t make a move towards the door handle, though, just sliding a slim box through the opening in the bars. “To keep your strength up while I finish preparing my facilities.”

“If your facilities aren’t ready yet, why are you here?” Natasha asked pointedly.

Karkoff smiled. “Why, to give you a choice, of course.” He turned his head towards the Winter Soldier. “You were once a hero of the Soviet Republic. You fought for the people and covered yourself in glory. Will you not join me again?”

Steve expected the Winter Soldier to flash that grin again, or possibly to laugh. Instead he went very, very still. Steve’s vision wasn’t as good as Clint’s, but it seemed to him that the man trembled ever so slightly. Several emotions flickered through his eyes, almost too fast for Steve to catch, longing and fear and eagerness and revulsion. The Winter Soldier jerked his head once, a
decided negative, but the last emotion Steve saw was desperation.

Steve shivered himself, and tried to understand what had the Winter Soldier so afraid. Offers of partnership and promises of glory were nothing new, in this business; how could Karkoff’s affect him so strongly?

Karkoff made a *tsking* sound at the Winter Soldier’s refusal, shaking his head like a disappointed uncle. Then, to Steve’s relief, he turned his attention to the Avengers. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw the Winter Soldier lean a little more heavily against the wall, not quite sagging with relief. “And you, Black Widow, will you return to your motherland?”

“I am an orphan,” she replied composedly, “and I have no interest in revisiting the memories of my youth.”

“A pity,” Karkoff sighed, still with that sad-father-figure face. Steve wasn’t sure who he thought he was fooling, since he had to have expected none of them would join him for the asking, but villains liked to play all sorts of head games and maybe this was supposed to be another one of them. Then that sorrowful gaze was upon him. “And you, Captain America? I don’t suppose you have seen the error of the capitalistic ways and wish to publically denounce your greed and consumerism?”

“I- what?” Steve blinked at the man and tried to figure out if he honestly even believed half of the stuff he was saying. After a moment he decided it didn’t matter and shook his head. “That’s a ‘no’ from me too.”

“I thought so,” Karkoff nodded, “but I had to try.” He stepped back from the bars, and his goons stepped back with him. He regarded the three in the cell as if they were a particularly interesting bit of armament he was considering purchasing, and Steve’s skin crawled. “Then I will see you all again, very soon.”

As soon as they were out of sight, Steve put his ear to the ground, listening to the echo of their footsteps retreat and building a mental picture of the area. His eyes had already told him that there was nothing to the right of their cell but a dead end; now his ears told him that to the left there was only a short, linear corridor, and then something wooden and echoing – stairs, most likely – and finally the dull thud of a metal-reinforced door. The echo of the footsteps additionally told him that two of the men had been left behind as guards at the foot of the stairs. Far enough away that they shouldn’t be able to overhear the three in the cell, as long as they all kept their voices down. Of course, the guards were also far enough that they wouldn’t get involved if everyone in the cell started killing each other. Small mercies.

Steve pushed himself back to a seated position with a grunt. Natasha had already picked up the box Karkoff had slipped through the bars and worked it open. She shook her head over it. “Ration bars. Soviet-era ration bars, mmm.” Dark humor lurked in her voice. “Still sealed, which means absolutely nothing.”

“They will be drugged,” the Winter Soldier remarked from across the cell. Steve glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes. The man sounded normal to a first approximation, but there was still something ragged in the edges of his voice.

Natasha said something back to the Winter Soldier in Russian. From the tone of voice Steve guessed it was something like *teach your grandmother to suck eggs*. The Soldier laughed in a way that sounded distinctly familiar and long-suffering.

“What?” Natasha asked, seeing the way Steve blinked in surprise.
“Nothing, I just… I didn’t know you two really actually knew each other, is all.”

Natasha stared at him for a moment, then shook her head in disbelief.

“Anyway.” Steve cleared his throat. “We’ve got a little time until Karkoff bugs us again. First priority is escape, but I’m not seeing much we can do about that until we get some more information.” He eyed the cell door speculatively, trying to guess how much force it would take to shove it open, and came to the depressing conclusion that the answer was more than the three of them could exert. He was used to having his shield for moments like this, but it wasn’t in the cell with them, and he had no idea what Karkoff might have done with it. Hopefully it was still somewhere in the facility; he didn’t want to think about what Coulson would have to say if they had to chase it down on the black market.

“Yes agreed,” the Winter Soldier said gravely.

Natasha nodded.

“So. Since food isn’t on the menu, second priority is sleep. Draw for first watch?” Because they were in enemy territory. Yes, they were technically already captured, but Steve still didn’t like the idea of someone being able to sneak up on them.

The Winter Soldier hesitated, though, and Steve understood why. The man may have some crazy belief that Steve was going to save him – from what was an interesting question for a time when they weren’t all locked up – but he also had a perfectly functioning sense of self-preservation, which had to make the idea of letting them cover his sleep a difficult one.

“I’ll take it,” Natasha said, surprising Steve again. She followed that statement with something quiet in Russian. Steve’s tone-of-voice translation skills refused to help him out here, but whatever it was, it made the Winter Soldier nod in acceptance.

“All right,” Steve agreed after a moment. It wasn’t solving the problem, just putting it off for a while, but he figured pushing the issue now wouldn’t help anything. Maybe Steve would let the Winter Soldier have second watch and try to build some trust that way. And maybe Steve could use the time to try and figure out why the other man expected Steve to help him.

The Winter Soldier lay down on the ground without further ado, keeping his back to the wall in spite of whatever Natasha had said to him. He tucked his flesh-and-blood arm under his head in lieu of a pillow and appeared to fall asleep right away. Steve shook his head in disbelief. Soldier, he thought. The name was deserved, at least; any of the commandos would have dropped off as quickly and easily.

Natasha was still next to Steve on the cot. He started to climb to his feet and leave it to her, figuring the person on watch should get the comfy seat, but she shook her head at him and got up, moving to arrange herself cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the cell. “I offered to stay between you two,” she admitted candidly. “So you may as well take it.”

Steve blinked. “He trusts you that much?”

Natasha sighed. “He helped train me.”

Reading between the lines – the Winter Soldier thought he could take Natasha, if it came to it. “All right,” Steve said finally, when nothing else to say came to mind. Well, nothing else he was willing to say in front of the Winter Soldier, who may or may not have been as asleep as he looked. He really wished he could ask if Natasha agreed with the Winter Soldier’s assessment that he would...
Natasha gave him one of her corner-lip-quirk smiles, probably guessing his thoughts. Steve sighed, shook his head again, and swung his legs up onto the cot. Whatever the Winter Soldier might be doing, Steve was asleep in minutes.

When the screaming started, Steve was awake and on his feet before his brain even caught up to his ears.

His first thought was that they were under enemy fire. When he remembered that he was currently in a dank, unremarkable prison cell, his second thought was that someone was being tortured. Then his eyes cleared, and he took in the astonishing sight of the Winter Soldier – feared assassin, reviled symbol of communist oppression, ruthless fighting machine – lying curled up in the fetal position, both arms wrapped around his head, and screaming his lungs out.

“What happened?” Steve snapped.

Natasha shook her head in frustration. “Nothing! One minute he was sleeping, the next –”

Steve hesitated, then started over towards the Winter Soldier. “Hey now –” he started, trying to pitch his voice soothingly.

“No!” someone yelled, and Steve’s head spun in pure disorientation. The voice was male, deep, speaking English with a thick Brooklyn accent. For a moment Steve thought he was going crazy. Had he spoken? There was no one else in this cell who should have been capable of it. But then the word came again, even more forceful this time, and the Winter Soldier rolled over and grabbed Steve’s outstretched hand in an iron grip, and Steve realized that it was the Winter Soldier who had spoken, in defiance of all reason and logic. “No! I won’t do it!” he cried. Despite the force of the grip, the Winter Soldier was shaking like a leaf.

Natasha grabbed the Winter Soldier in turn, trying to pry him off Steve. She hissed something at him, a long string of Russian, and the other man seemed to go berserk. He twisted and thrashed and threw them both off, scrambling backwards until his back hit the far wall of the cell. “No!” he repeated, hands raised in front of him as if to fend them off. “I won’t do it. You can’t make me do it, you can’t make me!”

Steve had no idea what the Winter Soldier was talking about, but the details weren’t important; he understood the shape of it well enough. He’d known it as they fell asleep, that the Winter Soldier was a soldier, and Steve knew everything he needed to know about battle fatigue and war. He moved forward, ignoring Natasha’s startled squawk as Steve put himself within reach of the Winter Soldier again. The other man didn’t swing at him, though. Steve was able to get into his field of vision – not easy, considering how the other man was huddled in on himself – and waved his hands gently to attract his attention, keeping his own body language as nonthreatening as possible. Steve took a brief moment to pray that the ability to speak fluent English equated the ability to understand it, because ‘another beer, please’ was about the extent of Steve’s Russian and that sure as hell wasn’t going to cut it here. “At ease, soldier,” Steve said in his most authoritative tone. “It’s over now.”

To his utter relief, the Winter Soldier responded. He jerked once in sheer shock, then stilled
abruptly, sagging back against the filthy cell wall, tension running out of his body like water. “Over?” he croaked, still in English, still in that accent that had no place in this cell at this time.

“Over,” Steve affirmed, letting a soothing tone enter his voice. “You’re – you’re done. The mission is complete.”

The Winter Soldier sighed. “Steve?” he asked, and now it was Steve’s turn to jerk. A dozen small things whirred through his mind in a frantic medley. From the familiar slope of the shoulders in the picture of the Winter Soldier on the roof in Santa Cruz to the instinctive way they’d worked together in the fight against Karkoff’s men, everything spun around and pointed towards one conclusion. More than anything else, it was it was the sheer trust in the other man’s voice as he said Steve’s name, and the sound of it on those lips, that sealed it. Everything together in a neat package, finally shoving past his automatic, instinctive disbelief to come up with an answer as fantastic as it was impossible.

Steve sat down hard and tried to remember how to breathe.

“Guess I owe you one,” the other man muttered, still panting.

_Guess I owe you one, Steve_, a voice said from memory.

“One for the hundred I owe you, Bucky,” he answered them both, stunned.

The Winter Soldier blinked up at him. Steve’s gaze fixed itself on the domino mask, and the other man seemed to sense his scrutiny. The metal arm came up, fingers fumbling at the ties, suddenly clumsy. Steve held his breath.

The face matched the voice and the familiar words. Steve had expected it to, but it was still a shock, to see Bucky emerge from beneath the mask of the Winter Soldier. Bucky looked down at his hands, seeming to suddenly realize what it was he held, and flung the mask as far away as he could. It hit the wall next to Natasha with a soft _thump_. She didn’t seem to notice, staring at Bucky in almost as much surprise as Steve himself.

“I thought you were dead,” Steve whispered. Automatically, without conscious thought, he moved to grip Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky flinched, and Steve pulled away as if burned.

“I thought you were smaller,” Bucky tried to joke back, like nothing had changed. But his face twisted suddenly in pain and he leaned over, coughing, body jerking hard. Steve started to reach over, to help or just to touch, but he caught himself in time and clenched his hands into fists on his knees while Bucky struggled for breath.

“God, Bucky.” Steve’s voice broke, embarrassingly, and he swallowed. “What happened to you?”

Bucky wheezed, coming upright, then leaning against the wall and letting his head roll back. “Fell, Steve,” he gasped. “Fell a long way. Then they were waiting.”

“Who? Who was waiting?”

Bucky just _looked_, and across the cell, Natasha tensed. Steve hissed between his teeth. “The Red Room.”

“ Wanted me to…” Bucky’s voice trailed off, muttering, and Steve knew with the clench of cold fear in his chest that everything wasn’t all right, not by a long shot. Not when Bucky was looking at Steve like he couldn’t be sure if he was real or a mirage. “I wouldn’t do it, Steve. I wouldn’t let them make me.”
“Of course not,” Steve soothed, and hated himself for lying, because if there was one thing that was abundantly clear here it was that they had made Bucky do it after all.

“Just had to hold on,” he whispered. “Until you came.”

Steve swallowed and had to do some deep breathing. No one would have come for Bucky; they had all believed he was dead. Steve had believed it. Even thought of it as a comfort in the last minutes on Red Skull’s plane. He’d done his part and thought he was following in Bucky’s footsteps, all unknowing that Bucky was alive and in the hands of people no one in America had even known were their enemies at the time, fighting back and holding on and waiting for Steve to come for him.

All this time thinking that Bucky had gone and left him, and it hadn’t been that way at all. The fourteen-year-old Steve had had it right, that cold night in the orphanage when Bucky had tugged him out of bed and handed him his coat and bundled up the thin blanket from the bed they’d shared. Bucky would never have left Steve.

“You,” Bucky whispered. Steve turned his head and saw Bucky staring at Natasha with a mixture of fear and confusion. “I feel like I know you, but…”

“I’m Natasha,” she said carefully. Natasha eased out of the crouch she had been in when the Winter Soldier had started screaming, settling herself into a loose tailor’s seat instead. She let her hands lie palm-up and obviously empty in her lap. “I…” her jaw worked, and it was clear she was choosing her words carefully. “The Red Room had me, too, for a while.”

“Black Widow,” Bucky said suddenly. “They wanted me to… that doesn’t make sense.” He shook his head. “But that was later, that was… What’s going on?” He twisted a little, stared up at Steve. “Steve? I wasn’t there long, was I? You look the same, but…” Bucky frowned, looking back at Natasha.

“I don’t know,” Steve answered, fighting for calm.

“I don’t remember,” Bucky whispered. He sounded fuzzy and confused and lost.

Steve glanced up for a moment and met Natasha’s gaze. She was looking at the two of them like they had transformed into strangers before her eyes. Maybe in Bucky’s case that was the literal truth. She had known the Winter Soldier, after all. And Bucky – wasn’t him.

Steve looked back down at the familiar face. Those years in cryosleep might have preserved Bucky’s apparent youth, but the hundreds of cycles of freezing and unfreezing had left other marks on his face. There were lines at the side of his eyes that hadn’t come from laughter. An ugly, jagged scar carved Bucky’s – no, the Winter Soldier’s left cheek, and a smattering of smaller cuts marked his right temple. That had the look of shrapnel, to Steve’s eye. The metal arm was heavier than the rest of his body, and Bucky leaned awkwardly to one side to counterbalance the extra weight. “Bucky,” Steve whispered helplessly.

Once again, the sound of footsteps echoed down into their prison.

Natasha’s eyes narrowed, and she gestured at Steve frantically, who had not needed this signal to roll to his feet dart to the far side of the cell. Leaving Bucky alone against the wall like that twisted something uncomfortably tight inside him, not really helped by Bucky’s blink of surprise at Steve’s rapid withdrawal – but letting their captors know that the Winter Soldier was secretly Captain America’s long-lost boyhood friend was most definitely not on the menu.
“Good morning, comrades,” Karkoff’s smooth voice called as its owner rounded the corner and stood before their cell.

Natasha hissed softly between her teeth. Steve was more used to taking verbal jabs with relative equanimity, but his calm was already being tested by the sight of Bucky across the cell, the sudden straightening of his spine and the stillness settling back over his features. No, Bucky, come back, Steve thought helplessly. It was like watching him fall all over again, as the spark of recognition died behind his eyes and all that was left was the Winter Soldier.

“Not getting along, then?” Karkoff enquired genially.

Natasha spat something in reply to Karkoff, harsh and growling and Russian. Steve didn’t have to know exactly what she said to approve the sentiment wholeheartedly.

Karkoff tsked at her, though. “You should not say such things to me, young lady,” he said chidingly, still in English. Steve wasn’t entirely sure why he was willing to converse in that language. “Especially since I am not here for you.”

Four hulking brutes in infantry-knockoff jumpsuits seemed to materialize out of the dank air of the cell corridor. Two of them were holding massive sidearms. Carefully, they trained their weapons on Natasha and Steve.

Natasha stiffened. Then, carefully, making no sudden moves, she put her hand on Steve’s wrist.

“Do not move, comrades,” Karkoff said, and chuckled. “Just be thankful that right now, I am not interested in you, yes?”

One of the other thugs slid the door open, careful to stay out of the line of fire between their compatriots and the two Avengers. Then both men advanced into the cell.

Natasha’s hand on Steve tightened like a vise.

They would shoot him, Steve had absolutely no doubt of that. It would cost them nothing. The Avengers were a bonus for Karkoff, a little side dish, not the main event. And even if they killed Steve, they would still have Natasha. If he started acting up, if he chose the wrong moment to make his move, they would kill him without a second thought and then proceed regardless.

It was that knowledge, flashing through his mind in the moment of clarity Natasha’s grip bought him, that kept Steve still and compliant while the two thugs manhandled Bucky out of the cell and away. The emotionless set of the Winter Soldier’s face did not change; there was no quick glance from Bucky to Steve, as there had been in similar situations in their shared past, for comfort or encouragement or reassurance that everything would be fine. Steve didn’t know if he could have handled it. It was hard enough staying still when it was quite obviously the Winter Soldier, and not Steve’s closest friend, that Karkoff’s men were dragging away to do God-knew-what to.

“Good children,” Karkoff smiled with tooth-achingly false benevolence. He rolled the door closed himself, so that neither of his remaining goons had to move their weapons from Steve and Natasha’s chests until they were securely locked in again. “Just you sit tight, then.”

“Tell me about him,” Natasha said.
Steve looked up, startled out of his thoughts. He’d been pacing restlessly, wishing for a punching bag, or a rifle range, or knitting, something to do with his hands and his energy while his mind whirled in circles. Bucky. Karkoff. Bucky. Escaping. Bucky. Natasha. Bucky.

Natasha was watching him with a too-patient expression on her face. “There’s nothing we can do until he comes back,” she said, leaving it unclear whether she was talking about Bucky or Karkoff or both. “And I need information. So tell me about your friend.”

Steve shook his head and kept pacing. “He, um.” God, how could he even begin to answer that? “He died.” That was the part Steve kept coming back to, the fact painted on every wall he approached. “In 1944. We thought he died.”

“Start at the beginning,” Natasha said patiently. “Tell me how you met.”

Steve took a deep breath, reaching for calm. “We were in the orphanage together.”

“In Brooklyn?”

“Yes.”

Natasha waited. After a moment, she prompted, “When?”

“Um.” Steve ran his hand through his hair. “1924. I think.” He shrugged a little, self-consciously. “I was pretty young, it was the middle of winter, my mom had just died – I could be off by a couple of months. I wasn’t keeping too close track of time.”

“And he was in the orphanage?”

“Yeah. We ended up – there wasn’t a lot of extra stuff, we had to share, so everyone had a ‘buddy’. Bucky and I were buddies.” Steve had always liked the sound of that word. The way buddy sounded like Bucky and both words meant friendship and comfort. But saying it out loud in the cold air of the cell, it seemed to lose some of its punch.

“And then?”

“Bucky got a job. When he was fifteen. And that let us get out of there.”

“Both of you?”

“We took care of each other. There wasn’t really anyone else to do it but we did it for each other. And it worked out okay.” Mostly, anyway. That first job had kept Bucky out in the city from dawn till dusk in all kinds of weather, carrying things too heavy for him and getting mugged every time he went west of the river – but it had also kept them out of the orphanage. And eventually Steve had been able to get a job too, and Bucky had found something else, and the Depression had eased and things had gotten better.

“So you lived together after the orphanage.”

“Yeah.” Steve remembered those first days, scrambling to make ends meet. They’d gotten a room from old Mrs. Dietrich on 33rd street. She had had too many cats and not enough savings, but made up for it by renting to street urchins and eating cabbage at every meal. There had been no heat in the winter or air in the summer and the place always smelled, always, and there had only been one bed, but it wasn’t the orphanage. There had been four shirts and three pairs of pants and five shoes – not pairs but shoes – between Bucky and Steve, and if they were eating cabbage, it was a good meal, a feast. But it wasn’t the orphanage, and they had been together.
Natasha rearranged herself into a loose tailor’s crouch and tipped her head back against the wall, obviously tired of tracking Steve’s manic progress across the room. Steve tried to stop, feeling guilty, but a moment later the emotions fizzed back up under his skin and he was pacing again.

“What happened next?”

He shrugged, trying for nonchalant and probably missing by a mile. “The war happened.” By then life had been better for them for a while, Steve old enough to work too, and they hadn’t gone hungry in a long time. It was Pearl Harbor that had changed everything. Steve had wanted to fight because his father had fought and died, and because other men his age were fighting and dying, and what right did he have to do any less? And also because Bucky had gone out one day without telling Steve and come home in khaki. Steve couldn’t bear the thought of Bucky choking to death on mustard gas without him, leaving Steve behind just as his father had and his mother had and everyone else he’d ever known.

“Your friend enlisted.”

Steve swallowed. “Yeah. He – he was afraid that what happened to Pearl Harbor was going to happen to New York, too, and all the rest of the country. And he joined up to stop that from happening.” Steve had dreamed of Bucky dying on the front with a bullet in his heart, and Bucky had dreamed of Steve’s body being pulled out of the rubble left by a Japanese bomb. So Bucky enlisted, and Steve tried and fought and begged and pleaded to enlist too, but no one would take him.

No one except Doc Erskine, and just look how all that had turned out.

Steve tried to smile and failed miserably. “I guess you know how I ended up in the army.” Natasha nodded once, coolly. “Well, they had me doing the rubber-chicken circuit for a while, but eventually I got out to the front. I had a commando unit and Bucky was part of it.” He looked down at the floor and shook his head. “He was our sniper. He was the best.”

“You got to pick the members of this unit?” Natasha sounded a little surprised.

“It was an unusual group,” Steve said, understating the case dramatically. “And it was formed under unusual circumstances. I got lucky.”

“All right. And then?”

And then. Then the SSR got intel that a key HYDRA asset would be moving through the Austrian Alps, light on protection and heavy on strategic value. Then they raided the HYDRA base in Bavaria and captured the radio that let them eavesdrop on HYDRA’s dispatch center, confirm that there really was a train, and it really would be passing through the alps, and Arnim Zola would be on it.

And then –

“Bucky died.”

Just like that, Steve could hear the rush of the wind through his ears, see the mountains looming up all around him. Feel the train vibrating underneath his feet as he inched out a little farther, just a little farther, a few more precious inches. Bucky’s fingers outstretched to meet his, and then – nothing. Just a single dark speck falling away from him, not even looking like a man anymore.

Natasha nodded, clearly choosing not to press for details at that moment, for which Steve could only be grateful. Instead she said, “And you?”
“I went after Red Skull,” Steve said after a moment, fighting back the rush of nausea that moment could still evoke in him, even after all this time and therapy. “He was planning to attack the entire United States with some kind of bomb he’d built using the Tesseract. I was able to get onto the plane he was using to deliver the bombs, and – well – I guess you know the rest.”

When Steve had pointed the nose of Red Skull’s plane downwards and accepted that this was the one he didn’t walk away from, it had been Bucky he’d been thinking about in those last moments. After Peggy’s voice had stopped coming over the radio and the compass with her picture in it had fallen to the floor as the plane shook apart, when the impact had thrown him across the cabin and the water had come rushing in, he’d thought about the newsstand and the park and the row houses and even the orphanage. Bucky wouldn’t have thought his own death had been meaningful; he hadn’t saved anyone’s life or prevented any major catastrophe. But Steve had watched him fall and learned that sometimes the good guys died. That truth and justice and righteousness only took you so far, and war was a place where the last full measure of sacrifice could be demanded of you. And that was the lesson that made Steve accept that there wasn’t going to be another way, whatever Peggy said about getting Howard on the line and figuring something out; that was the example that had made Steve push the throttle down, and purchase the lives of everyone in New York at the highest cost he could pay.

Bucky had never gotten to do that, but it was fitting, in a way, that Steve had done it for him. He had taken that thought with him into the darkness and although he could still wish things had come out differently for them both, it had still been easier than he would ever have thought death could be.

Natasha maintained a tactful silence. Steve had to stop moving and focus for a moment on just moving air in and out of his lungs, past the weight of emotion that had settled over his heart like a physical thing. Just breathe, Steve, Bucky whispered to him from the past, and Steve almost choked, and the horror of it all suddenly rushed up and ambushed him.

“But is it really possible?” He looked up abruptly, meeting Natasha’s wide eyes. “The Winter Soldier is supposed to be a communist, Russian, how could it be Bucky of all people? We grew up in Brooklyn together, he enlisted as soon as America joined the war. How could he have worked for them?” He knew he was pleading, but he just needed something to make sense. He’d almost, finally, begun to accept that Bucky was dead. Gone, not coming back, pulled out of Steve’s hand and out of his life on a mountain in Austria. That had been hard enough, but now to find his friend again in the least likely of places… someone had to have the answers for how this was possible, and the only other person here was Natasha, so it was to her that Steve turned, pleading.

Natasha shook her head slowly. “The Red Room was not a nice place,” she said steadily, and Steve had the barest glimpse of something beneath her detachment that made his throat go dry and his heart contract. “He said ‘I won’t do it. You can’t make me.’” She pressed her lips together. “Well. Take it from me. The Red Room was very good at making you.”

“God.” Steve swallowed hard, thinking again of the train running through the mountains, Bucky falling forever. He had thought Bucky dead at the bottom of the cliff face. He had thought there was no way he could have survived. “Is it like brainwashing?”

“A little like,” Natasha said quietly. “Harder. Harsher on the subject. The original personality is supposed to be destroyed.”

Steve scrubbed his face with his hands, shaking with helpless rage. “Oh, hell.”

“It’s like you become someone else,” Natasha went on, so calm and controlled that she had to be absolutely coldly furious. “Sometimes you can hide part of yourself away. If you bury it deep
enough. The problem with burying something that deep, is that it’s not always still there when you go back for it.” She held Steve’s gaze. “I wasn’t the Red Room’s pride and glory. Whatever they did to him will be worse.”

“But he – God.” Steve wiped his face with one trembling hand. “He knew I would help him. The Winter Soldier. He came looking for me, he took that contract. When he shot me, he missed. You said, If he missed at all, it had to be part of his plan. And it was.” Natasha was looking at Steve doubtfully, and he shook his head at her, trying to make her see. “He did it on purpose. Somehow – somehow Bucky made the Winter Soldier miss, to attract our attention and get us involved. To get me involved. He was calling for help. He told us so. He said he knew I would help him.”

“Steve,” Natasha said waringly. “He’s still going in and out. When he comes back again, he might not be your friend.”

“We have to get him out of here, Natasha. We have to get him back to SHIELD.”

“They may not be able to help him.”

“They’ll help him.” Steve angled his head to pin Natasha with his most authoritative glare. “They helped me. And Doc Banner. And Clint, after that thing with Loki. They can help Bucky.” Stamford would be able to help, Steve was sure. Alvarez too. Heck, maybe even Martin could do Bucky some good: Steve’s personal discomfort aside, the man was well-qualified. And there were a dozen more like them in the SHIELD psychiatric corps. Surely, with all of that talent, they could figure out a way to help Bucky.

Natasha returned his gaze steadily. After a moment, she gave Steve a cautious nod. “That’s your call. You’re still in charge of this mission. But right now, I want you to tell me this isn’t going to interfere with your ability to put him down if he turns on us.”

“I’ll knock him out if I have to,” Steve answered. Natasha’s eyebrows drew together in disapproval, but Steve kept his voice firm. “I know how to win a fight, Widow.”

She stared at him for a beat, then said, “Fine.” And the way she said it told Steve that she wasn’t the least bit convinced, that she had in fact just moved Steve into the ‘potential liability’ category in her head, but Steve didn’t care. Natasha ought to understand, given that when she’d had to fight a Loki-controlled Clint she’d let herself get pretty knocked around while holding out for a nonfatal blow. He just had to rely on that, hope that Natasha would extend the same courtesy to Steve.

“Anyway. We’re all in this cell together, right? The Winter Soldier was waiting for me, ‘Tasha, he’s not going to turn on us. He’s expecting me to help him, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

Natasha raised a skeptical eyebrow. “And after we break out?”

Steve projected a certainty he didn’t quite feel, but Natasha didn’t need to know that. “Way I figure it, we have pretty good chance he gets on the Quinjet willingly.”

Natasha nodded thoughtfully, but didn’t let the subject drop. “And if he does try to run?”

“I knock him over the head with my shield and carry him on board,” Steve replied, letting the steely core behind his words bleed into his voice. Whatever happened, he was not letting Bucky go. He’d only ever let go of Bucky once, and it had featured in his nightmares ever since. Never again, Steve promised himself silently.

Natasha studied him. She nodded once, firmly. “I believe you will.”
Steve’s mental clock told him that six hours had passed between the time Bucky was taken away and the Winter Soldier was returned.

It was obviously the Winter Soldier, even though the domino mask was still lying forgotten in a corner of their cell. A litany in Russian echoed off the walls even before anyone was in sight, overwhelming the sound of footsteps. The words were clearly curses, but the two men dragging the Winter Soldier back to the prison weren’t paying any attention. They had their hands full with the struggling assassin. The other two men, the armsmen, were impassive. Probably chosen for their stolidity – or else their stupidity. It worked out much the same way. Karkoff wasn’t present; a fifth bullyboy brought up the rear.

They went through the full process of pointing guns at Steve and Natasha, opening the door, throwing the Winter Soldier back inside and closing it again. Then they clomped off in much the same manner of their entrance. The man in the rear hung back, took an extra moment to watch the prisoners, staring Steve particularly in the eye. Steve couldn’t figure out if the look was threatening or sadistic or just bored. At the moment he didn’t much care. He wanted the man to go away so that he could focus on Bucky. And after a long moment, he turned away and followed his compatriots out of the prison block.

The echo of their footsteps had barely faded when Steve darted across the cell and almost to the Winter Soldier’s side. Prudence restrained him at the last minute and kept him out of the other man’s personal space, despite the instincts screaming at him that this was Bucky and they’d shared a twin-sized bed in an apartment in Brooklyn for ten years, what on earth was Steve doing standing here?

The Winter Soldier had been shoved gracelessly into the cell and sprawled face-first on the floor. Now he pushed himself up to a seated position and leaned back against the wall, looking up at Steve. He hadn’t been in the best of condition when they’d hauled him out, but this was immeasurably worse. The clothing doubtless covered the worst of it, but there was the stippling of electric burns on his flesh-and-blood arm, and the rough sound of his breathing told a dreadful tale. Despite that, though, the eyes that glared up at Steve were filled with defiance, and he spat a string of Russian at them both in a harsh, broken voice. The effect was not at all spoiled when the Winter Soldier leaned over and spat blood onto the floor a moment later.

Steve tensed automatically, and his instincts did a full reverse and started clamoring for Steve to back away. He forced them down and stayed put, crouched a few feet in front of the Winter Soldier with his hands loose on his legs. Not starting a fight, but ready to finish one.

Natasha pinned the Winter Soldier with an indignant glare from where she sat cross-legged across the cell and responded with something sharp and frosty. He laughed in return, but it was raw and harsh.

Steve hesitated, then got down into the floor, putting himself on eye level with the Winter Soldier. “Hey,” he said after a moment, not sure how to proceed. Half of him wanted to just say Bucky, it’s me, now let’s break out of here and go home. The other half wanted to say My god, what have they done to you? Neither instinct was particularly helpful at the moment.

He considered Steve for a moment. Then the Winter Soldier said, “Hey.” The accent was back; if anything, it was worse than before. But at least he was back to speaking in English. It was
Steve pushed back the urge to ask the other man if he were okay. This was still a battlefield, and practicality had to rule. “How much of the route out of here did you see?”

The Winter Soldier stared at Steve. Without the mask, it was much easier for Steve to read him, and the set of his features now was equal parts disbelief and anger. “Why I should tell you?” he demanded.

Steve blinked and backedpedaled mentally. “Because you said you wanted my help,” he answered, making an effort to keep his voice calm.

The Winter Soldier snarled, back to Russian again. Steve felt like swearing himself. Earlier the Winter Soldier had had an almost Hulk-like calm, despite being captured and held in a cell with two people he should have hated on sight. The man in front of Steve now wasn’t calm or reserved. He was volatile, almost bubbling over with rage, and he looked like he’d have taken a swing at the red-white-and-blue if he could do it without falling over. But it was still Bucky, even if he didn’t seem to know it right now, and Steve had to help him somehow.

“We don’t want to be here any more than you do,” Steve said, tamping down on his rage and grief. “We should work together to get out.”

The other man laughed mirthlessly. “And why should I trust you, American dogs?” He turned his head and looked at Natasha. “Or traitor dogs, yes?” He followed that pronouncement up with something long in Russian, the unmistakable overtones of lewdness making Steve twitch. Bucky was never crude towards women. He’d loved women, freely, impartially, constantly. Yeah, he’d spent a lot of time and energy chasing women. But never… like that.

Natasha, to her credit, didn’t even blink at whatever it was he’d said. She just answered him calmly, and after a moment he looked back at Steve.

“We’re not your captors,” Steve said, answering the original question. “We want to get out. It’s not a matter of trust. It’s a matter of mutual benefit.” This was the tricky part, because Steve could never, ever, lie to Bucky. Not even a little bit, not even a minor exaggeration, because Bucky just knew him that well.

But this wasn’t Bucky, Steve reminded himself. If it were, there would be no need to lie. “After we leave here, we go our separate ways. No obligations. No debts. You don’t even have to tell anyone you worked with us.”

“You think I trust anything you say?” His features contorted with something like rage. “Maybe you arrange this. You and Karkoff, working together, yes?” He leaned forward, into Steve’s personal space, and Steve was abruptly certain that he would have been grabbing Steve by the collar and shaking him at every word if not for the fact that the other man needed his arms to be sure he didn’t collapse prone onto the floor. “Or maybe –”

“Or maybe I’m in a cell and I want to get out,” Steve snapped, consciously ignoring the way the familiar face recoiled in surprise. “Karkoff’s plans aren’t favorable to either of us. Why on earth would I work with a corrupt Soviet-era arms dealer? You think I care about guns?” He did his best to straighten his spine and look imposing.

The other man stared at him in something like shock. Steve held his position and tried not to let his worry show on his face.

“Do you have plan?” the Winter Soldier finally asked, seeming to make an effort to modulate his tone to evenness.
“I have a few ideas,” Steve answered. “But I need to ask you a few questions first.”

Again the long pause as the Winter Soldier considered Steve. Steve could see the moment where he shoved the rage back into a box in his mind, focusing on the practical aspects of the situation. “Ask.”

Steve opened his mouth to begin and found himself saying something unplanned. “What do I call you?” Because Steve couldn’t keep calling him Bucky, not even to himself, not if he was going to stay focused long enough to get them out of here.

The other man looked surprised, for a fleeting moment, before the emotion was chased off by suspicion and – was that fear? Guardedly, he said, “I am called Ivan.”

Ivan. Steve swallowed. You can do this. Just get out of here. Get Bucky’s body out of here and worry about his mind later. With an effort, Steve wrenched his mind back on task. “Your arm,” he said, gesturing at the left one, the metallic one. “How much force can it withstand?”

The Winter Soldier shook his hand. “I do not…” he turned to Natasha and said something in Russian.

“I don’t need an exact figure or anything,” Steve said quickly, before Natasha could respond and the two of them could get dragged off into a conversation Steve couldn’t understand. “But if you were to stick it in that door—” he gestured at the entrance to their cell. “Would it hold the door open?”

“Da, I think so,” the Soldier said, eyeing the door critically.

“And if it got shot, how badly would it be damaged?”

The Soldier stiffened, but answered guardedly. “Some damage. Depends on the bullet. Too many shots and it will not work, of course.”

“All right,” Steve said, thinking furiously. It wasn’t as good as his vibranium shield, but even the ability to deflect a few shots would be helpful. “And – can you take it off?”

The Winter Soldier did not visibly flinch, but the tightening around his eyes was all Bucky Barnes, an unspoken reaction to the horror of the world. Steve had to fight back a wince himself, because that look was far too familiar, and none of the memories that came with it were the kind he cared to revisit.

“If it is necessary,” the Winter Soldier said at last. “But before I do anything like that, you must tell me what your plan is. It is not…” he trailed off and looked Steve in the eye defiantly. Steve knew that this was as close as a trained Soviet assassin would ever get to admitting to his capitalist opponent that the story behind the arm was raw and painful. Bucky had never been very good at letting Steve know when he was hurting, either. Bucky had always viewed it as his job to get between Steve and the world.

“Right,” Steve said, shoving all of that away and focusing on the matter at hand. “Here’s what I have in mind.”
“Something’s wrong with this picture,” Natasha said. Bucky – Ivan – the Winter Soldier was out of the cell again, having another talk with Karkoff about reviving the Soviet cause. This time Natasha was pacing, while Steve sat on the cot, tired into stillness. He hadn’t slept again since being woken up by Bucky’s nightmares. “If the Winter Soldier wants your help, and Bucky wants your help, why didn’t he just walk up to SHIELD Tower and knock?”

“I don’t know.” Steve thought of the struggle he’d seen behind the Winter Soldier’s eyes when Karkoff had spoken to him of Soviet glory and shivered. There was a battle going on there, one he didn’t fully understand. “Maybe it’s something in his conditioning? Something that won’t let him come to us on his own?”

“But we had to talk him into working with us, just now. He was angry. A lot angrier than he was been before.”

Steve’s hands tightened into fists. “Karkoff’s idea of persuasion might have something to do with that.”

“When someone’s interrogating you, you don’t lose emotional control. You either stay frosty or you break.” Natasha shook her head. “This is something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

A thought bubbled to the top of his mind. Steve bit his lip, wondering if the comparison was fair. “He reminded me a little of Banner. When he’s got the Other Guy riding too close to the surface.”

Natasha tipped her head to one side. “Hmm.”

“Before, when he said he wanted me to help him, he was calm,” Steve said slowly, feeling his way into the idea. “Like, really calm. Way more than he should have been considering he’d just been captured by one enemy and thrown into a cell with two more.” Natasha made a thoughtful noise, motioning Steve to continue. “Just now he was much more what I would have expected, before… before I knew he was Bucky.” Steve swallowed.

“The angry one called himself Ivan. He was talking about American spies,” Natasha said. “He called me ‘Black Widow’. That bit in Russian? It wasn’t about his arm. He wanted me to help him knock you out.”

Steve choked. “You should have told me that sooner!”

Natasha shook her head. “The next minute, he asked me how far we were from East Germany. And the minute after that, he was back to English, and working with you on our escape plan.”

“What on earth is going on here?” Steve demanded of thin air, frustrated and tired and confused. “First he wants me to help him, then he’s Bucky, then he wants to knock me out. It’s like he keeps going back and forth in – “

He shut his mouth with a snap, sudden realization darting through his head. Natasha finished the sentence for him: “In time.”

Steve swore. “You said the Red Room used something like brainwashing, but more advanced. Could it mess with your sense of time, so you weren’t sure when you were? Could it affect your ability to remember things?”
Natasha’s face was set, giving nothing away. “Yes. There were some agents who – yes.”

“When he’s calm, he knows what year it is,” Steve said intently. “He knows that he used to work for the Red Room, but now he’s a freelance assassin. He knows he tried to shoot me, he knows he wants my help.”

“When he’s angry – when he’s Ivan – he believes we’re in the middle of the Cold War,” Natasha continued grimly. “He views you as his enemy. He’d never ask you for anything.”

“And when he’s neither of those things, he’s Bucky.”

“Memory manipulation.” Natasha turned her head to one side and spat. “That’s the Red Room all over.”

“SHIELD will be able to help,” Steve said, trying to convince himself of that.

“Hopefully.” Natasha answered. She pursed her lips in thought. “If we can figure out how to get him to stay Bucky, or the modern one, we’d have a better chance of getting out of here. The middle one – ” she shook her head. “Ivan. I don’t trust him. He’ll turn on us if he can.”

“I’m afraid to mess with it too much,” Steve said warily. “We’re guessing. Maybe it’s a good guess, but we’re not psychiatrists.”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at him. “You pick up a thing or twelve.” At Steve’s look, she shrugged. “Welcome to SHIELD. Mandatory psych evals twice a year and after every undercover assignment.”

Which meant that Natasha could probably lay claim to the dubious honor of having spent more time in therapy than any of them, from Steve to Banner, but still. “We’re more likely to mess it up than get the result we want.”

She tipped her head slightly to one side, an acknowledgement more than an agreement, but Steve would take it for the moment. It meant she wasn’t going to immediately ignore him, anyway, and if things went according to plan they wouldn’t be here long enough for it to become an issue.

“Then the sooner we can get him back to SHIELD, the better,” Natasha said, more as if she were talking to herself than to Steve, but Steve was in wholehearted agreement with the sentiment.

“As soon as he gets back – next opportunity, we’re going for it,” Steve decided.

“Steve.” Natasha’s voice was even flatter than usual. “Remember. We might need to use force to get him on the jet.”

“Yeah.” Steve nodded. “I know.” But that was a price he was completely willing to pay. He could apologize to Bucky later.

He glanced up at the ceiling, as if he could see through to the room where the Winter Soldier currently was.

*Come back soon, buddy. We’ve got a prison to break out of, and I’m not leaving without you.*
The thing about Karkoff was, he was predictable. He put all of his prisoners in one cell to conserve the need for guards. The Winter Soldier had reported that there was only one door leading into and out of the basement level where they were being held, at the top of a flight of stairs, and the guards were stationed at its foot. Better yet, Karkoff rotated those guards on a regular basis. Maybe Karkoff thought that the three in the cell couldn’t keep track of these things effectively, but any good soldier could count off hours and make scratches in the walls or arrange debris into a rough method of timekeeping. They’d been doing it with strands of Natasha’s hair, red being the best color for showing up against the slate-grey floor of their prison.

And it meant that, while Karkoff had done the standard prisoner check and taken Steve’s shield and Natasha’s stingers, he hadn’t gone the extra mile and scanned them for implants. Which meant in turn that he hadn’t broken out the scalpels and excised the minute GPS locater and beacon embedded in both Natasha and Steve. This far underground, they were all but worthless. But once either of the Avengers were able to get to the surface, or even just pretty close to it, help was a short Quinjet ride (or repulsor ride, or hammer ride, or whatever) away. They didn’t need to escape the entire facility by themselves, especially not when Hawkeye should still be in the area, searching for them. They just needed to get far enough up to summon a little help from their friends.

So the plan was simple. The action comics always had the hero making a break for it when the villain came by to gloat, but Steve had no intention of trying anything when Karkoff was around. The guards would be more vigilant in his presence, and Karkoff himself seemed to be well attuned to narrative conventions. From what the Winter Soldier had been able to see, when Karkoff had attempted to persuade him to join his cause, they were several levels deep in an underground facility, well staffed with Karkoff’s men. That wasn’t something Steve wanted to try fighting his way through if stealth was an option.

No, their best time to act would be the quietest. The guards posted at the entrance to the cell level were on a six-hour shift. Five hours in, they’d be yawning and bored, daydreaming about getting a break in the monotony. In other words, perfect.

As for getting the guards’ attention – that was a job for Natasha. She had proposed a classic method, but one no less effective for all that. It was her job, and Steve had deferred to her years of experience, even if the whole thing made him more than a little uncomfortable.

The Winter Soldier – back in the present with them, at least for now – was laid out as if asleep, conveniently near the part of the door that would slide away when the cell was opened. He was close enough that he would be able to stick his arm into the door while it was still attached. That would limit his mobility in a fight, requiring him to stay within arm’s reach of the bars, but it was a tradeoff Steve had been more than willing to make after finding out how complicated it would be to reattach the metal arm after it was taken off. A one-armed Winter Soldier might make SHIELD more comfortable, but they were likely to need everyone at full fighting strength later in the facility, if they were going to make a successful escape.

Steve and Natasha were entangled with each other, far against the back of the cell. Natasha’s back was flat to the wall. Steve held her up and against it, palming the sharpest rock their cell had had to offer amidst the debris on the ground and wishing futilely for his shield. Carefully hidden by the angle of their bodies, Natasha was ready to garrote someone with the strips from the Winter Soldier’s mask. But none of that was what the guards would see when they rounded the corner. They would see Steve apparently taking advantage of Natasha. It was even odds whether the guards would move to pull Steve off and protect Natasha or just shove him aside to take turns of their own, but Natasha and the Winter Soldier both assured him that there was no way ex-Soviet infantry would stay uninvolved.
“Ready?” Steve asked.

“Anytime,” Natasha answered, and flashed him a cheeky grin, feeling him up.

“Da,” the Winter Soldier muttered quietly from across the cell.

“All right then,” Steve said, giving Natasha a quelling look. “Do it.”

Natasha immediately threw her head back and moaned.

Steve hadn’t been sure about starting with the moaning before moving into the shrieks of rage, but Natasha had given Steve a long look and asked him if he wanted to challenge her expertise on this matter, to which his answer had of course been no. She’d tried to explain that it was important to start with noises that really sold the idea of sex before moving on to the cries for help. The guards had to be sure something titillating was going on, since the whole point was to bypass their rational brains and go straight for the brainstem. Steve wasn’t sure how a woman moaning erotically was compatible with shrieks of rape, but he guessed that was another of those ‘rationality’ things that weren’t supposed to matter in this situation. Anyway, Natasha really was the expert, so Steve just hung on and tried to look menacing as Natasha’s voice got louder and throatier, moving into a range of sound that would have had Steve blushing like a schoolgirl if his mind hadn’t been firmly fixed on the upcoming fight.

Then, just as Natasha was working up to the masterpiece, she suddenly changed mid-cry and started making high-pitched sounds of anger. Steve manfully resisted the urge to wince or clap his hands over his ears in reaction. He knew those sounds had to make their way down to the guard post at the end of the hallway, but it was hard to stay put when it sounded like a cat was being strangled right next to his ear. Interspersed with the cries were words in Russian, presumably things like get off me and no don’t and help rape. It went on for a good deal longer than Steve was at all comfortable with, and he was seriously starting to think that it wasn’t going to work at all. Then he heard footsteps come pounding down the corridor and grinned fiercely, unseen, into Natasha’s neck.

The sound of the cell door rattling open was loud in the enclosed space, since Natasha had chosen that moment to let her cries fade off into choked, helpless-sounding gasps. And maybe there really was something in that whole non-rationality thing, because Steve knew that ‘Tasha was faking the whole thing, but he still felt a jolt of adrenaline shoot through his system, hands instinctively curling around her hips. Well, damn, guess it works after all.

The guards charged the cell, and all hell broke loose.

The Winter Soldier came up off the floor like an uncoiling spring, catching one gangster cleanly in the jaw with his right hand even as he jammed his left arm – the metallic one – into the space between the wall and the closing cell door. The servos controlling it whined, trying to complete their assigned function, and the Winter Soldier made a noise that sounded remarkably like pain. Steve hadn’t known the metal arm could get hurt like that, and he grimaced at the curl of guilt and shared pain that uncoiled in his gut. But then the servos cut out, their mechanical brains telling them that they’d moved the cell door far enough to close it. No force feedback sensors in a facility this old, Steve thought exultantly. The Winter Soldier gave a hoarse battle yell and swung his free arm again, cold-cocking the guard who had stayed outside the cell so as to let his buddies back out when they were done rescuing Natasha from mean old Steve Rogers. The gangster went down in a crumpled heap, and Steve turned back to his own problems.

Natasha had given one of the guards a solid kick to the gut and was currently occupied strangling another into unconsciousness. Steve turned his attention to the first man, staggering back to his
feet in the aftermath of Natasha’s blow, and dealt him a precise jab to the solar plexus. He doubled over, gasping for breath, and a quick chop to the back of the neck took care of him. Steve straightened, not even breathing hard, just in time to see Natasha’s man sink down, eyes closing. Ever practical, Natasha tied off the makeshift noose, restraining his airway enough that he wouldn’t regain consciousness anytime soon. Steve thought of double-checking that she’d left him enough air that the guard wouldn’t die outright, but discarded that idea as soon as it came. Natasha wouldn’t appreciate Steve treating her like a rookie instead of a professional, and when it came right down to it Steve didn’t much care either way. Karkoff’s men had been operating under wartime rules when it came to the treatment of their prisoners; Steve had no problem giving that right back to them.

Instead, Steve bent and grabbed the sidearm from the guard he’d downed. Natasha was doing the same with hers. Steve hesitated a moment, then went over and picked up the gun of the third man who’d rushed into the cell, the one the Winter Soldier had taken out with his first blow. Then Steve walked over to the door and raised an eye.

The Winter Soldier grinned Bucky’s familiar, reckless grin, and with one strong shove wrenched the cell door open. The servos screamed in protest and the metal arm seemed to flex, but the door rocketed open, and Steve and Natasha ducked through. Steve caught the Winter Soldier – he’d overbalanced himself in that shove – and dragged him through before the door rebounded and slammed closed again.

For a moment, they all stood there, catching their breath. Then Steve flipped one of the two guns he was carrying around and offered it, grip first, to the Winter Soldier.

The other man stared at it for a second in surprise. Then his eyes rose. “Steve?” he asked suddenly, and Steve actually jumped. “What on earth are we doing here?”

Steve swallowed. The scars and the jumpsuit told one tale, but the voice and the eyes said differently. “Escaping,” he said thickly. Then he grabbed a hold of himself and waved the gun, carefully, at Bucky. “Come on, take it, let’s go.”

“Right,” Bucky said, taking the gun automatically. Something passed through his eyes then, and he said “Da.” But his mouth quirked up in a bit of a grin.

“Let’s move,” Natasha said urgently. Steve slung an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, and they ran.

As far as Steve could tell, Karkoff’s warren had been laid out by three blind mice and built by the US Army Corps of Engineers. There was no rhyme or reason to its layout that he could determine; corridors looped in on themselves and ended in walls unexpectedly. The lighting was patchy and flickering, the floors were wood more often than they were concrete, and the stairs between levels were wood that felt as if they would give way with every step.

Steve and Natasha had both been unconscious when they were brought down here, so it was the Winter Soldier in the lead, doing his best to piece what he’d seen on his way to and from interrogation into some semblance of a floor plan. Steve was caught off guard every time the man in Bucky’s body changed personalities. It was happening faster, and Steve wished he knew whether it was because of the stress of the situation or if it was always like this for him now. Ivan coming into focus was always a shock. He would stop almost in place, looking around suspiciously, and a
few times Natasha had had to talk quickly to keep him focused and on point. Bucky also didn’t seem to be remembering what was going on between one appearance and the next, and worse, he didn’t seem to have a firm grasp of time. Sometimes he thought they were on a mission with the Howling Commandos; once he called Natasha Peggy and she stared after him, looking lost. Other times he thought they were escaping from the Red Room. But regardless of where his mind was, Bucky was always willing to follow Steve’s lead, and that kept the trio up and moving through the guts of Karkoff’s complex.

Winter Soldier never asked questions, but Steve could tell he didn’t have any answers either.

Their goal was simple: go up. Close enough to the surface and Steve and Natasha’s transmitters would punch out, sync up with Clint’s and whoever else SHIELD had gotten into the area. Once SHIELD knew where they were this whole thing would be over in a hurry. So they climbed stairwells and, in one memorable case, a ladder, all the while dodging the guards they could and taking down the guards they couldn’t. Natasha was good at that, and so was the Winter Soldier, whenever they had him. Once Bucky came back in with a snap right after Ivan’s hands closed around someone’s neck, and the guard spasmed in his grasp, and Bucky jumped and dropped him in shock and had to spend a few minutes leaning up against the wall breathing while Natasha checked to make sure the man was really out for the count. But they kept moving.

By their combined best estimates, they were three levels from the surface when they peered around a corner and spotted the first real checkpoint of armed guards. There were a solid dozen of them. Four looked to actually be on duty, rifles held in the ready position and eyes watching outward. The rest of them appeared to be keeping their buddies company. They were talking and joking in Russian, passing around what had to be alcohol, and their weapons were only sidearms. But closing would be a problem. It was a good three hundred feet of fairly clear hallway between the corner and the guard outpost, and it was hard to figure out how to cross it without becoming sitting ducks. Not for the first time Steve wished longingly for his shield.

Natasha had picked up another pair of pistols from some of the downed guards. Bucky was carrying one of their rifles, and he looked so familiar with it that Steve had to swallow past the lump in his throat. He stayed one step behind Steve and one to his right, ready to bring the weapon up in an instant to cover Steve’s back. The angle largely hid the metal arm from Steve’s view when he glanced back at Bucky out of the corner of his eye, and with Bucky’s face turned partly away, the scar was in shadow. They could have been standing outside any HYDRA objective from their Howling Commando days. Steve almost felt the ghostly presence of the other commandos at his back, all the pre-fight rituals they’d engaged in. Jones and Dernier swapping letters for their girls back home, just in case. Dugan taking a fortifying swig from his flask and offering it to Falsworth, who would decline, and Morita, who would accept, then gasp and choke and accuse Dugan of trying to poison him. And Steve and Bucky, sharing a look, confirming and affirming all over again that yes, they were going to charge into that hell together, and yes, damn it, they were both going to come out again, because that was just how it was, and any other outcome would be unacceptable. Bucky seemed to catch Steve’s sudden mood and turned to meet Steve’s gaze, one corner of his mouth quirking up in the familiar, shark-like grin, and he gave Steve the same small nod that said, **Yes. I’m ready. Let’s go.**

The lighting overhead flickered, and the scar and the arm came back into sharp relief. Steve’s returning grin stuttered and failed. Something moved behind Bucky’s eyes, and then it was the Winter Soldier looking back at him, blank-faced and professional. Steve carefully turned back to the guards, and did not let himself think about what had just happened.

Steve nodded, following the rest of her logic without the need for speech. Take them out and the guards would be shooting blind. Human reaction times would mean it would take them precious seconds to react, to reorient, to decide to fire down the corridor. At a full sprint, Steve could cover the distance before they had time to get off more than a few shots, and the odds were excellent that they’d miss.

“Your shield,” the Winter Soldier said quietly, and came up next to Steve and pointed.

Steve squinted. Behind the guards was a small, closed-off area, unmistakably a communications and alarm terminal. Through the glass of its enclosure, Steve could just make out something roundish and metallic tucked under a desk. He wouldn’t have been able to say with certainty that it was his shield, but trips out into the field with Hawkeye had taught him to trust a sniper when he said he saw something. He did flick the Winter Soldier a look – you’re sure? – and received a nod in return.

Okay, then. Steve gestured to his team and hoped Bucky was translating the signals for the Winter Soldier. The order of battle wasn’t too fancy, anyway – there wasn’t room to maneuver, and they had absolutely zero experience working together as a team. Just everyone doing what they did best and hoping no one changed sides mid-fight.

Steve raised his eyebrows inquiringly and got a nod from both of the others. Then he held out his hand, palm-up.

Natasha touched her fingers to his quickly, grinning a little in anticipation of the fight. The Winter Soldier hesitated for a moment, looking at Steve searchingly. Then, a little awkwardly, he reached out and gripped Steve’s shoulder for a moment. The look in his eyes was still that of the Winter Soldier, but the gesture was pure Bucky. Steve returned it after a moment, and the other man nodded once and moved away to take up position in a runner’s crouch.

Go, Steve signaled Natasha.

The report of her pistols was unnaturally loud in the enclosed space, even though Steve had had the advantage of being ready for it. The guards shouted when the lights first flickered and then went out entirely, plunging the corridor into blackness. Steve gathered himself up and lunged forward.

Luck was with him. He barreled down the hallway untouched by any of the shots he could hear whistling around him and went straight through the startled men still milling around the guard station. An emergency light shone dully inside the glassed-off enclosure, and Steve snatched up his shield, using the light’s illumination to deliver a precision smash that took out the communications and alarm terminals in one economical movement.

Then he turned and waded back out into the fight. The Winter Soldier was right beside him, alternately firing into the crowd and delivering devastating punches with that metal arm of his. Natasha had joined them while Steve dealt with the technology, a whir of limbs and bullets marking a deadly path. Her trajectory took her outside the feeble illumination of the emergency light, but the sounds of destruction coming back to Steve’s ears told him she was still taking care of herself. The Winter Soldier stayed behind Steve and the cover his shield provided, taking advantage of the light to put precise shots into the guards trying to charge them both. And underneath the adrenaline rush of battle came another, better feeling – the steady buzz of Steve’s SHIELD tracer, vibrating beneath his skin, indicating that it had made contact with another Avenger and that help was on the way.

Which was good, because alarm or no alarm, their fight was generating a lot of noise, and the door behind the guard outpost swung open. Light spilled down the stairway, and what looked like
another dozen men started charging into the fray.

It was just like the fight on the rooftop; like a hundred other fights during the war. Steve and Bucky were in perfect sync, moving and acting together, dividing up targets and covering each others’ backs like they’d been born to fight this way. One guard, braver or just luckier than the others, got past Steve’s guard while his shield was still curving its way back to his hand from a throw. Steve didn’t even blink. The sound of the trigger mechanism cycling was loud in his ear, and Bucky put a bullet right between the man’s eyes, working the release and loading his next round before Steve had even finished catching his shield.

It should have been horrible, but it felt more right than anything had felt for Steve for a long time.

Then the ceiling fell in.

Steve ducked into the extremely relative safety of the guardhouse on sheer instinct, hoping that it was at least constructed against a load-bearing wall and he wasn’t about to get his heroic head caved ignominiously in. The Winter Soldier was there next to him; Steve looked frantically around for Natasha. She wasn’t in the guard shack, but then the entire area lit up in a very familiar blue-white light, and he saw her standing calmly next to Hawkeye as Iron Man casually blasted the one guard lucky enough to still be standing after his typically overdramatic entrance.

“Cap?” Tony called.

“Over here,” Steve called back, then coughed. Calling the air ‘smoky’ would be far too generous. The back of his throat abruptly tasted like concrete, and he thought he’d swallowed a piece of debris.

“Sorry, sorry, I may have crashed through several levels of asbestos,” Tony said, suit clanking as he made his way over to the guard shack. Clint was handing Natasha a climbing line; squinting, Steve could see more lines running through the hole Tony had made in the ceiling, presumably going all the way back to the surface. “Try not to breathe too much; I'll have you out of here in a second.”

“What took you so long?” Steve demanded, ignoring this warning. Visible over Tony’s shoulder, Natasha shook her head in exasperation and started climbing.

“Reinforcements,” Tony said blandly in reply. He shoved an imposing-looking pile of debris out of the way and waded up to the guard shack. “This our guy?” he asked, indicating the Winter Soldier. The other man stared, more in surprise than suspicion, and Tony barely waited for Steve’s nod to grab them both. “Yeah, okay, hang on tight.” Steve curled his fingers around the external hooks Tony had thoughtfully designed into his suit after one too many missions playing air-taxi. Opposite him, Bucky visibly steeled himself and did the same. Tony slung an arm around both of their waists anyway, gave them a three-count and hit the repulsors.

They were on the surface before Steve had time to blink, in a run-down alleyway that barely looked the worse for its giant hole in the ground. Natasha and Clint were unhooking their lines, and the Quinjet was idling at the mouth of the alley. “Hey, Steve,” Tony said abruptly, catching Steve by the sleeve and tugging him a few steps before Steve could object. “Come over here –”

“In a sec,” Steve said, turning to look around for the SHIELD agent in charge.

He didn’t expect to find himself staring down a SHIELD high-threat response team, surrounding them with weapons drawn.
“Down on the ground!” several voices yelled at once. Steve jumped reflexively, pulling out of Tony’s grasp, trying to catalog the threat. He was completely disoriented for a moment, every instinct on high alert but unable to identify the enemy.

Then there was an almost feral growl behind him, and a harsh voice shouting something in Russian.

Automatically Steve ducked away and spun, putting himself among the ranks of the SHIELD team and turning to face the threat. Then his brain caught up.

Bucky.

The Winter Soldier.

And he was still holding the gun he’d been using in their escape, which put him squarely in the realm of threat.

The confusion was terrific. Bucky was shouting and a member of the SHIELD detachment was yelling back; Clint had climbed on top of a dumpster and was throwing his own two cents in. Steve gripped his shield harder, ready to throw it between bullets and bodies if that became necessary.

Someone had to be in charge of this mess. Steve looked around wildly and spotted Coulson standing several steps back, supervising the operation with a look of calm control that Steve wanted to shake right off his face. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Steve had never intended to just let the Winter Soldier go off, of course, but dropping a SHIELD task force on his head was not helpful, damn it. The Winter Soldier had stiffened up completely and was glaring around himself in shock and betrayal, still shouting something harsh in Russian. Natasha was talking back to him rapidly, gesturing in a way Steve sincerely hoped was at least meant to be soothing, but the agents were still yelling for him to get on the ground and the situation was deteriorating fast. Steve was going to have to jump out and try to establish some order, but the minute Steve made it look like he was in charge of the SHIELD strike team was the minute the Winter Soldier lost any remaining trust for him completely. And Steve honestly had no idea what he was going to do about any of that except that he would not, absolutely could not lose Bucky again –

Then there was a sudden clatter, and everyone’s eyes followed the gun as it fell from the Winter Soldier’s hand to land on the concrete. Steve looked back up in sudden hope, in time to see the look of confusion cross the Winter Soldier’s face. Bucky blinked slowly, taking in the many SHIELD agents pointing guns at his face, Hawkeye and Iron Man ready to pounce, and the high-tech hardware everyone was sporting. It was painfully clear that he was suddenly lost in a sea of unfamiliar things, and the relief that showed on his features when he turned his head and spotted Captain America was hard to miss.

“Steve?” he called, voice not quite steady. He kept his hands in the air where the Winter Soldier had left them, but Steve could see he was badly shaken by the situation. “What’s going on?”

Several of the watching SHIELD agents muttered in surprise. Steve Rogers’ identity wasn’t exactly a secret, but it would require digging in WWII-era records to uncover, since no one in the modern day had shouted it from the rooftops. That the Winter Soldier would choose to invoke it now…

The sound of a dozen hammers being cocked was a lot like the stomp of the jackboot, actually.

Of course. They think he’s trying to play me.
Steve’s first instinct was to try to wave the agents off, tell them all to holster their guns and find a medic, double-time. His second instinct was to throw himself between those guns and Bucky, or possibly to get Bucky’s back, since SHIELD training was no joke and Bucky was pretty well surrounded. He stomped on those instincts hard. That wouldn’t help; it would just get Steve thrown in another (though nicer) cell to be checked for Stockholm Syndrome while Bucky was treated as the Winter Soldier deserved.

“Believe it or not, these are the good guys,” Steve called back instead, trying to put the right amount of humor in his voice. *Just another crazy situation, how do we get ourselves into these messes?*

“Yeah?” Bucky looked around. “Then why are they trying to shoot me, Steve?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Coulson step forward. Apparently he’d decided he was the senior officer present at this debacle and it was time to assert some control. “I’m Agent Coulson, with SHIELD. May I have your name?”

Steve relaxed marginally. Coulson, at least, was willing to play this straight for the moment. “James Barnes,” Bucky answered him, still tense. “What the heck is SHIELD?”

“It’s new,” Steve jumped in before Coulson could respond. Coulson looked absolutely shell-shocked – *Jesus, he’s probably got a Bucky Barnes trading card in that collection of his* – and Steve really, really didn’t want Bucky finding out he’d been ‘gone’ for seventy years by having the information shouted across a run-down alley if he could help it. “They made it up to deal with people like me.” He gestured to the red-white-and-blue self-deprecatingly, then flapped his hand at the other Avengers to demonstrate their solidarity.

“You get your own division now?” Bucky joked weakly. “How high are they going to promote you based on a silly costume?” Steve laughed a little out of sheer tension, but it trailed off quickly when Bucky caught sight of Tony, standing there with his headgear off, and his eyes widened in confusion. “Howard…?” Steve winced, and Tony straightened and stared in shock. “No,” Bucky answered himself, sounding unsure. “Not quite, but… you look a lot like him.”

“That’s my father’s name,” Tony said before either Steve or Coulson could answer. His voice was hard with suspicion and anger, which for Tony meant he was off-balance and didn’t want anyone to know it. It wasn’t helpful at the best of times, and Steve wanted to kick Tony for busting it out right now.

“Your father?” Bucky was getting visibly less calm by the minute as contradictions piled up around him. “You’ve got to be at least forty, man, what the hell? How can Howard have a son that’s older than as he is?” He turned again and pinned Steve with that devastatingly charismatic look, the one Steve could never resist. He’d followed that look out of the orphanage, to a war, into a POW camp in northern Austria and back out again. “Steve,” Bucky pleaded and his voice actually broke. “What the hell is going on?”

Steve saw Coulson mouth *a son that’s older than he is*, the beginnings of understanding dawning on his face. “It’s a really long story, Buck. You were gone for a while, you…”

“What happened?” Bucky demanded. “Where have you been? Where have I been?” He shook his head in frustration. “We were on the HYDRA train, we were planting the explosives! What happened to Zola and Schmidt? Where are the Commandos?”

“Retired,” Steve said, and now it was his turn for his voice to crack.
“Retired? What about the war?”

Steve sighed. “War’s over, Bucky. War’s been over for a long time.”

Bucky stared, and the lost look on his face twisted something up inside Steve.

“You were gone,” Steve said, struggling to find the right words, the ones that would help ground Bucky in the more-or-less present without dumping the entire weight of history on his shoulders. “You were a POW, for… for a while. You have amnesia or something. I know you don’t remember, it’s okay, it’s just… these agents are worried about what you might do.”

“What I might do? What does that even mean?” Bucky’s hands were drifting downwards as he forgot to hold them up, and he looked at Steve like a drowning man looking at land.

“Look, I know you’re not gonna do anything,” Steve said, trying for comforting and hoping he was at least in the right ballpark. “The agents just want to be sure.”

Bucky visibly sagged. “You never could lie to me, Rogers,” he said quietly. “You do think I might do something.”

Steve looked away for a moment, closed his eyes. “Bucky – ”

“Okay.” Bucky tipped his head back to look at the sky. “Okay.” He took a deep breath, then carefully got on the ground, making no sudden movements, and laced his fingers together behind his head.

As soon as he was down, SHIELD agents swarmed him. They secured his hands and feet with some kind of plastic ties, snapped a tracking bracelet onto his wrist, then got him back onto his feet and started dragging him away, into a waiting helicopter.

“Bucky!” Steve called, trying to follow. Coulson stepped in his path.

“Catch you later, Rogers,” Bucky called back over his shoulder, and then the heavy metal door slid shut behind him.
“You wanted to see me?”

Steve pushed open the door to Stamford’s office. He’d been in the gym when she called, trying to work off some of the stress from not knowing what was going on with Bucky. It had been nearly three days since their escape from Karkoff’s facility, and the waiting was wearing pretty thin. Stamford had assembled a team of specialists entirely devoted to Bucky’s case, and they were working round the clock, but they were in a complete information lockdown.

Steve was effectively shut out, both from Bucky’s treatment and from his presence. He’d tried pumping Martin, who was the only member of the SHIELD psychiatric corps he was able to get a hold of, Alvarez having disappeared into Bucky’s black box. Unfortunately, Martin knew almost nothing, and it wasn’t any comfort that he seemed as frustrated about it as Steve himself. Steve had been reduced to planning ways to infiltrate the psych department when the word finally came down that Stamford wanted to see him.

“Come in,” Stamford called, gesturing Steve to a chair around the small table nook set up in one corner of her office. It was a much less threatening place to sit and talk than the massive desk covered in paperwork. Steve obeyed, settling into a seat, not surprised to see that Fury was present as well. The director shut the door behind Steve, and then it was just the three of them.

“How have you been, Cap?” Fury asked.

“Staying busy,” he answered neutrally. He looked at Stamford. “This is about Bucky.”

“Yes, it is,” she said. She folded her hands together neatly. “We’ve reached a preliminary understanding of his condition, and it’s time to make some decisions about his treatment.”

“Decisions?” Steve sat up a little straighter and looked from Fury to Stamford and back again. “What kind of decisions?”

“Stamford tells me that we find ourselves in a position of having to choose between a more traditional approach and a riskier one with a potentially greater payoff,” Fury told him.

Steve shook his head. “I’m not a psychiatrist. I don’t really….” He tried to smile. “I just want Bucky to get better.”

“That’s what you have me for,” Stamford said briskly. “But you’re here because the final call on how to proceed is yours.”

“Mine.” Steve blinked. Frankly, he’d expected to have to fight tooth and nail for every inch of inclusion Stamford and Fury were willing to give him. “Not that I’m not grateful – but – why?”

Fury smirked a little. “You’re on the books as his next of kin.”

“His – ” Steve shut his mouth with a click. It made sense, once he stopped and thought it through. Bucky had had no other living family, and he had to have named someone on his enlistment forms. Steve had never been offered that choice; the terms of his enlistment had required him to have Erskine as his next of kin, and he had no idea what had happened after Erskine’s death. Probably the paperwork had never been changed.

“That means you have the authority to make medical decisions, since Barnes isn’t capable of it at
the moment,” Stamford explained. “You will get the very best advice SHIELD has to offer, but the ultimate decision is going to be yours.”

Steve looked over at Fury. “Are you seriously telling me you don’t already have a plan in mind?”

Fury shook his head. “Patient confidentiality is taken seriously in the future. Doctor Stamford won’t brief me on Barnes’ condition without his permission. Or, since he’s not able to make that decision at the moment – your permission.” Fury smiled humorlessly. “I’m hearing all of this for the first time right now.”

Oh, boy. Steve took a moment to do some deep breathing. When he’d walked into this office, he’d expected to be briefed on whatever Stamford and Fury had already decided. And he had absolutely been prepared to argue with them if he didn’t like what they had to say, but the decision being placed in his hands was unexpected.

Get it together, Steve told himself. Time to be a leader. Bucky needs you.

“All right,” he said steadily. “Let’s hear it.”

Stamford folded her hands together. “The situation is complex. This is going to be a summary. A very simplified summary. In addition, there are a number of areas where we’re still guessing. I don’t have to tell you psychiatry doesn’t work by the numbers.”

“Just give me what you have,” Steve said, trying to look confident.

“Here’s the background,” Stamford began. “In addition to working with Barnes, and getting the reports from yourself and Agent Romanoff, SHIELD recovered copies of classified Red Room documents from Karkoff’s facility. We knew that some of their information had leaked onto the black market, but Karkoff had an inside source. A former Red Room scientist.”

“Part of the original Winter Soldier project?” Fury asked intently.

“Based on these records, we think not. But they were familiar with the original process, and were intending to recreate it, with a few optimizations.”

“How far did they get?” Steve demanded, horrified.

“This is where it gets technical, and we’re fortunate to have recovered these documents.” Stamford tapped her nails against the table. “Based on what we’ve been able to reconstruct, the Red Room’s original procedure was to attempt to delete Bucky entirely in favor of the person who calls himself Ivan. We now believe that Ivan was developed to fulfill the Red Room’s ideal of the communist hero.” She sighed. “Brainwashing is an extremely inexact science, especially given the time frame in question. The Red Room wanted more, so they tried something new. In Ivan, they hoped to create someone who would willingly and enthusiastically submit to their training, eventually becoming the Winter Soldier.”

“I’m guessing it didn’t work.”

“With sufficiently advanced techniques, it might have,” Stamford said soberly. “The theory is sound. But their approach was unrefined and their methods were beyond crude. Modern psychiatry is still struggling with alternate personalities and multiplicity.” She pursed her lips. “Instead of a cohesive fighting unit, the Red Room ended up with three competing personalities. Bucky, your friend and a trained soldier in his own right. Ivan, the patriotic communist. And the Winter Soldier, who got all of the skills they were trying to teach Ivan, but none of the ideology.”
“Okay,” Steve said slowly, nodding to show he was following along.

“All of them had different goals and desires. The Red Room attempted to suppress the unwanted elements of each personality with memory manipulation and traditional brainwashing techniques.” Stamford shook her head. “It’s no wonder they kept him in storage between missions. Keeping him stable while he was conscious would have represented a major drain on their resources.”

“But he’s been out on his own for months,” Steve argued.

“And he’s been becoming increasingly unstable.”

“The contracts he broke?”

“Those are just the tip of the iceberg. As the programming breaks down, Bucky is resurfacing, and the Winter Soldier is gaining strength. Meanwhile, Ivan is losing cohesion. They’re competing for control. The rapid changes in personality you witnessed during your exit from Karkoff’s facility are the result of the acceleration of that trend. This acceleration has not slowed.”

“It’s going to get worse?” Steve asked, dismayed.

“This leads us to the problem.” Stamford folded her hands together and looked seriously at Steve. “Ivan is degrading. He’s losing the ability to recall details about conversations that just took place. His emotional control is also fraying. He’s spending more time delirious or raving every time he surfaces.” Stamford shook her head. “As Ivan’s condition worsens, it will affect Bucky and the Winter Soldier to an increasing degree. They’ll have more trouble keeping control from Ivan. Ivan himself will become increasingly erratic and dangerous, and the effects on their collective sanity are not even worth discussing.”

“I thought you said he was degrading,” Fury pointed out. “While the process doesn’t sound pleasant, won’t it resolve itself, given time?”

“No. Ivan won’t disappear; he will only lose cohesion. Without therapeutic intervention, they will be left with a blank in their collective memory and fragments of an uncontrolled personality that could manifest in unpredictable ways and at unpredictable times.” She punctuated her points with taps of her fingers against the table. “Imagine a ruthless, highly trained communist killer who could take over your body at any time and begin wreaking havoc. Now, imagine that he’s also insane, and that he hates you for trying to keep control from him.” Stamford waited for that to sink in, then added, “Ethically speaking, choosing not to intervene is barely one step above putting a bullet in his brain right now.”

“All right,” Fury said patiently. “We’re listening.”

“We have a couple of treatment options. The safer path is the standard one. Talk therapy. Meditation. Medication. We try to stabilize the other two personalities as Ivan degrades. Our chances with Bucky are fairly good. He has twenty-plus years of history as a cohesive individual to use as a focus. Winter Soldier, who knows? He’s been the dominant personality since they left the Red Room’s control, but he doesn’t have a stable foundation to draw on the way Bucky does. The odds are good we’d lose him.”

“Would that be a problem?” Steve asked, squeezing his hands together.

“Yes.” Stamford flattened her hands against her desk, her face carefully bland. “It would. The disassociation would be severe. There’s also the fact that, if we lost Ivan and the Winter Soldier, we’d be effectively deleting everything that happened to Bucky after he fell off that mountain in
nineteen forty-five.”

Steve stared at his hands. “What’s the likely result?”

“Ivan and the Winter Soldier degrade. Bucky mostly remains stable enough to keep them locked in a box. He has gradually lengthening phases of lucidity, mixed with occasional periods of… dubious control. With therapy and medication, he could probably live a relatively normal life, within certain constraints. SHIELD housing, for example. And staying away from anything that could give Ivan any traction.”

Steve swallowed. “For how long?”

“Impossible to say. Possibly the rest of his life.”

Steve stared back in dismay, honestly lost for words.

“All right, Doc, that’s option one,” Fury said calmly. Steve wanted to shake him. “Let’s hear option two.”

“Riskier.” Stamford looked at the ceiling for a moment to gather her thoughts. “To try to put it in layman’s terms: Ivan is unique in that he was deliberately created by the Red Room instead of evolving naturally. His existence is therefore predicated on certain fundamental assumptions. Most significantly, Ivan’s purpose is to undermine the capitalist agenda.”

“Okay,” Steve managed to say, when Stamford paused and looked at him in concern. He had no idea what he looked like right now, but he gestured for her to go on, and after a moment she did.

“With enough time and control, the best way to proceed would be to play that motivation out to its logical conclusion. Construct a scenario in which Ivan believes he’s accomplished his underlying mission, dealt America a fatal blow. Then the Ivan personality could fade, and be reabsorbed into Bucky and the Winter Soldier, hopefully in a more healthy fashion.”

“Hm.” Fury looked thoughtful.

“And Winter Soldier?” Steve wanted to know. “Does he come along for the ride?”

“It’s very likely,” Stamford answered.

“So – we avoid the problems with disassociation and everything?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t understand.” Steve looked between Stamford and Fury. “Why isn’t this just the obvious choice?”

“Because there’s a lot more that could go wrong,” Stamford said gently. “This is uncharted territory. Ivan is something completely new; something implanted, not the natural creation of Bucky’s psyche. We could just as easily do irreparable harm. More easily.”

Fury raised an eyebrow. “In your estimation, Doctor, what are our odds of success if we pursue the riskier treatment path?”

“I can’t give you numbers,” Stamford said tiredly. “I know you like them, but it just doesn’t work that way. I’m sorry. Bigger than zero, less than one. That’s all I can tell you.”

“But it’s possible,” Steve insisted.
“Yes,” Stamford said.

“Best case?” Fury pressed.

“With a little creativity, a lot of luck and a metric fuckton of therapy?” Stamford grinned suddenly, the neutral medical demeanor reshaping itself into a flash of life and daring. “Captain Rogers gets his friend back, and you get a new Avenger.”

Steve gazed off into space, trying for detachment, weighing probabilities and possibilities against consequences and risks. It can’t just be about me wanting my friend back. It’s got to be about what’s best for Bucky.

“I’m not accepting any decision from you right now,” Stamford said to Steve, sensing the direction of his thoughts. “In fact, your schedule’s been wiped for the rest of the day. Do whatever you want and think it over. If you want to stay and talk, you can. If you need more time, just say the word. If you need to come back later, walk in or call me. I’m not working on anything else but this right now, understand? I don’t care what time it is or what else is going on; this is my priority.”

“Okay.” Steve had to swallow past a dry throat. “I understand.” He stood up from the table, absently noticing that his legs felt a little shaky. “Thanks, doc.”

“Captain,” Fury said. Steve looked at him; for the first time, he saw nothing but kindness in Nick Fury’s eye. “Whatever you decide, you’ll have the full resources of SHIELD at your disposal.”

“Thank you,” he said again. He tried to think of something else to add, something a little more grateful or appreciative, but nothing came to mind, and after a moment of silence he turned away again.

“Good luck, Steve,” Stamford said as Steve walked out the door.

Steve’s first instinct was to go home, but he figured out pretty quickly that that wouldn’t be a good idea. There was far too much tied up with the concept of home and Bucky for him to be able to think straight back at his apartment. He considered the gym, but that sounded like a fast track to self-inflicted injury. He could have turned right around and walked back up to Stamford’s office and tried talking to her, but he didn’t have the words to say any of the things going through his head. If he had, he wouldn’t have left in the first place.

Finally Steve went outside and just walked aimlessly. He’d have to get out of New York entirely to avoid any possible association with the past, but the billboards and shop lights were a soothing cacophony, all but drowning out the gentle familiarity of the city. Steve tucked his hands in his pockets against the crisp fall air and let his feet carry him wherever they wanted to go while his mind turned in circles.

At first, all he could think about was the past, the Bucky he remembered from their young adulthood. Cabbage and cats and leaving the window open to hear the ball game on Mr. Jackson’s radio next door. Working as an errand boy, then a newsstand boy, then a clerk at the five and dime. Those were his favorite memories of the two of them, the years when they’d put everything they had together and found a way to make it go far enough, long enough, so that the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months and they realized they were going to make it. Steve remembered feeling like a king when they started having meals twice a day. When he’d done
twelve portraits in one week and Bucky had a new pair of shoes. The way little things became so important, and a small kindness became a priceless gift.

The army had given Steve food and clothing and a duty. But worrying about an entire unit of men depending on him to lead them had never been as natural and uncomplicated as Steve and Bucky just looking out for each other and doing what needed doing. He missed that time. Waking up in the modern world, everyone had expected him to pick right up where he’d left off, leading the Avengers and working for SHIELD and making the world a safer place. It was good work, worthy work, and Steve was glad to do what he could. But there was something missing. The familiar presence at his side, the profile out of the corner of his eyes, the automatic comfort of knowing that Bucky would cover his back. In the middle of a battlefield or in the back alleys of Brooklyn, Bucky had always been Steve’s anchor, a firm constant in an ever-changing world.

He’d never even let himself think about it. Never let himself realize what it meant when Bucky’s smile was what made getting through the day possible. When doing something for Bucky made it worth doing. When he’d bundled up the blanket and snuck away from the guarantee of three square meals a day in exchange for coming closer to starving to death than he would ever be comfortable remembering, because safety meant nothing if Bucky was out there somewhere risking his life.

What would Bucky want, if he were able to make the decision himself? That was easy. He’d want to go for it. Bucky would hate the idea of settling for less. He’d hate living in uncertainty over how much control he was going to have tomorrow. He’d hate being told he had to stay away from things because they might be dangerous.

All right. But Bucky wasn’t able to make this decision. That was up to Steve, and as much as Bucky would hate losing control of his life, he’d probably hate going crazy – crazier – even more. What if things went so completely wrong that Bucky was never able to live outside a padded cell again? What if they ended up losing him – killing the part of him that was Bucky and leaving behind the part of him that was Ivan? Would Bucky thank Steve for turning him into the sort of villain they’d both died once trying to defeat? He doubted it.

And he was terrified, with a fear completely different from anything he’d ever felt in a fight, of making the wrong choice out of selfishness. He wanted Bucky back so badly he could taste it, and the breeze blowing past him turned unpredictably into the sound of wind screaming in his ears through the hole in the side of a train through the mountains. Steve had led Bucky to that place. And Bucky had gone, because he would follow anywhere Steve led.

If he’d given Bucky the choice of staying back with the radio team instead of joining in the strike on the train, Bucky would still have chosen the train. But it hadn’t been his call; it had been Steve’s, and Steve had ordered him to grab his weapon and come on. He’d lived that moment over and over again in his dreams, wondering what would have happened if he’d called Falsworth’s name instead, or Dugan’s, or anyone’s but Bucky’s. At the time, Steve had never even considered it. He’d wanted Bucky at his back, where Bucky belonged. Where Bucky would have wanted to be. But the nobility of Steve’s intentions was no protection, and he was scared nearly out of his wits at the prospect of screwing up that choice again.

By the time the sun set, Steve was no closer to an answer than he had been when he started, and he still didn’t want to go home. He went back to SHIELD Tower instead, climbed the thirty-four floors to the rec room and pushed the door open to see Tony, as he’d hoped, already in the act of pulling down two scotch glasses from the cabinet.

“Heya, Steve,” Tony said softly. “I thought you might come by.”

“Been here long?” Steve asked, noticing the small pile of technology heaped on one of the
“Getting some work done,” Tony said nonchalantly, and Steve let it drop, knowing Tony wouldn’t appreciate being thanked or having any possible unselfish motives discussed. “Thought it was time for a break, though.” He poured two drinks, and for once Steve took his without demur. Maybe he couldn’t get drunk, but he sure as hell wanted a drink.

“I heard you’re Barnes’ next of kin,” Tony said, picking up his glass and walking around the island. “Well, okay, I looked up his old army records. They dump the legal responsibility on you?”

“I would have wanted it in any case,” Steve admitted, settling into one of the armchairs. “I just thought I’d have to fight harder to get it.”

“That’s Fury for you. He’s never what you expect.”

“Yeah.”

Tony studied him seriously, dropping into another chair. “I broke into SHIELD’s psych files,” he announced abruptly.

Steve laughed a little, entirely without mirth, but also without anger. It was just such a Tony thing to do that he couldn’t even muster up a little righteous indignation on Bucky’s part at having his privacy violated. Anyway, after having almost had a nervous breakdown in plain sight of an entire SHIELD high-threat response team, there probably wasn’t much in the way of secrecy left. Every agent SHIELD had was probably gossiping about the Winter Soldier over their burnt coffee and cafeteria meatloaf.

Tony was shaking his head in bemusement at Steve’s reaction. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

A few moments went by in silence. Steve sipped at his scotch.

Slowly, Tony asked, “What do you think he would have wanted?”

“To go for it.” Steve shook his head. “He’s kinda reckless. He would have wanted the guts-or-glory route.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yeah.” Steve swallowed. “Yeah, I am.”

“Then what’s the question?”

“It’s a big risk,” Steve told his liquor. “If it works, sure, it’s great. If it doesn’t work…”

“And since when do any of us ever take the easy way out?”

“Since taking the high-risk jobs are what got him killed last time,” Steve snapped.

Tony sighed, bringing a hand up to run through his hair. “If you didn’t know what Bucky wanted, I’d be right there with you,” he said after a moment. “Trying to do the right thing, it’s hard sometimes. I get that.”

Steve shrugged his shoulders, uncomfortable.
“But if you know what he would have wanted? Then you’ve got no right to go letting your fears get in the way. Yeah, maybe it goes down in flames. But that’s not your call to make. Your friend deserves at least that much respect.”

Steve’s knuckles turned white around his glass. *Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice,* Peggy whispered to him from a lifetime ago. He swallowed a bitter laugh. Everyone kept saying something like that to him, and every time it ended up as a memory of something he’d lost.

“That’s not how being in command works,” he answered, words heavy on his tongue.

“Fuck command,” Tony said, so calmly that Steve almost couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “This is your best friend. And this is a decision he’s going to have to live with for the rest of his life. Which, by the way, might be a long time.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Steve demanded.

“I think you’re too busy worrying that you don’t know which way is up.”

“Gee, Stark, what gives you that idea?”

“I’m a genius.” Tony set his glass down with a *clink.* “And you’re being an idiot.”

“Well, now I’m definitely going to listen to you.”

“Look.” Tony jabbed a finger at Steve. “If this goes wrong and he spends the rest of his life in an institution, yeah, that’ll suck. But if he comes part of the way back and spends every day cursing you out over what his life has become, that’s going to be a billion times worse.”

Steve looked down, avoiding Tony’s gaze, and stared at his hands. Each of them was large enough to wrap all the way around his glass; together, they looked enormous. Strong. All of that power Doc Erskine had given Steve, charging him in return to be a good man. How was he supposed to know what was good and evil in a situation like this? Strength wasn’t a guarantee that his choices were pure. Power hadn’t been enough to save Bucky back then, and it was worse than useless now.

“…I’ll think about it.”

Tony stared at him and shook his head in sheer disgust. “I thought you were better than this, Rogers, I really did.” He turned and stalked towards the door. Stopping with one hand on the handle, he turned back and added, “I bet Bucky thought you were better than this, too.”

Steve didn’t move or answer, and Tony banged the door behind him.

After a moment, Steve got up and picked up Tony’s abandoned glass, placing it in the sink next to his own, just as if this were any other night.

Three AM saw Steve shaking awake in a cold sweat, Bucky’s name on his lips and his hand stretched out in front of him, as if that was going to do a damn bit of good.

He was still in the rec room, sprawled over one of the couches with his head against an armrest and his feet sticking over the end. He’d meant to go home, or at least to one of the on-site bunks, catch some real shut-eye and try to make a better decision in the morning. But before that he’d sat back
down to stare at the wall and try to push away the sense of unease Tony had left him with. Somewhere in there, he must have fallen asleep. And these days, sleep meant bad dreams.

Really, Steve had always had more than his fair share of nightmares. He had a lot of memories that were prime nightmare fodder. Watching his mother cough and cough until there was nothing left of her, until she lay there empty and still and someone led Steve out of the room. Curling up under a thin blanket with Bucky while New York temperatures hit record lows, wondering if they would make it until morning. Peggy’s voice crackling desperately over the radio while he pointed Red Skull’s plane downward and waited to die. But though he could and did dream of those times, by far the most common nightmare was the one where Bucky slipped away through Steve’s outstretched hand, fingers just brushing together as his eyes went wide and he fell forever.

Their fingers hadn’t actually touched. Steve wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

*Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice,* Peggy said again, insistently. And then Tony: *He deserves at least that much respect.*

*Sometimes there isn’t a way out,* Tony, Steve’s own voice answered from the past. He’d been talking about Coulson, his act of futile heroism in going up against Loki alone. When Steve had said that, Coulson had just become the latest in a long line of good men who had died in spite of that fact.

But Coulson had ended up coming back from that. And Steve himself had walked away from the wreckage of Red Skull’s plane - seventy years later, to be sure, but he’d survived. Now Bucky was here, too, snatched away from the abyss. The pattern of loss was changing, like the tide going back out from the shore.

Maybe it was about time Steve started reconsidering a few things. And maybe it was time to start believing once again that being a good man really did count for something in this world. Steve remembered wondering, not that long ago, what kind of dreams the Winter Soldier had. He thought about what Bucky’s dreams had to be like now. And, finally, he imagined a life that was one long nightmare with no way to wake up except death.

When the sun rose, he went to Stamford and told her he wanted to take a leap of faith.

The planning got underway immediately. The resources Fury had promised came with Coulson to ride herd on the entire process, and every Avenger in New York insisted on being involved. It seemed like overkill to have three-quarters of the team spending their time on one man, but Steve was too grateful for the moral support to protest their involvement as much as his conscience thought he should. Tony went straight to his lab, Natasha in tow. Steve, Clint and Coulson assembled in the big conference room in Stark Tower to talk tactics.

Step One, according to Clint, was The Villain.

“Don’t you mean ‘The Hero’?” a skeptical Coulson wanted to know.

Clint shook his head decisively. “No way. In Ivan’s mind, he’s the hero. Whoever he goes up against is the villain. If we’re going to sell this to him, we need to think of it from that point of view.”
Coulson closed his mouth and gave Clint a considering look.

“That’s easy,” Steve said. “I’m doing it.”

“No,” Coulson said at once.


“You’re not believable,” Coulson answered. “You’re like this unstoppable superman. Ivan will never believe he’s defeated you.”

“Um. Thanks, I think. But I really think – ”

“Yeah, but there’s no way Hulk stays on-script for this,” Clint said to Coulson.

“Hang on a second here,” Steve insisted. “We need to make Ivan feel like he’s defeated capitalism, right? Not the Jolly Green Giant.”

“Actually, I was thinking of Thor, if we can get him back from Asgard,” Coulson replied.

“Does Thor even know how to throw a fight?” Clint asked skeptically.

“Thor is a Norse legend,” Steve protested. “Ivan would probably start worshipping him!”

“And Ivan needs to feel like he’s defeating capitalism, or at least America,” Tony chimed in. “Thor doesn’t fit the bill.”

“Exactly,” Steve said emphatically. “Whereas I am the perfect symbol of capitalism. I’m Captain America. My costume is basically the flag with tights. My theme song is ‘The Star-Spangled Man’! You don’t get much more American than that! And before anyone forgets—” he rode right over Coulson, who had opened his mouth to argue further – “I am the one Ivan tried to kill in the first place.”

There was a moment of silence, where Coulson and Clint exchanged considering looks. Clint broke the impasse to jerk a thumb at Steve. “Man’s got a point.”

“He really does,” Tony added. Steve gave them both grateful nods.

“All right,” Coulson said abruptly. He pointed at Steve. “If you understand that you absolutely cannot bring your shield into the fight with you. I am not running the risk of a clinically insane communist assassin somehow evading our precautions and running loose armed with something that can deflect Mjolnir.”


Coulson looked surprised at Steve’s quick acquiescence. He shook his head. “I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“So I hear you’ve decided to go for the riskier option for Barnes’ treatment,” Martin said to Steve.

“That’s right,” Steve answered warily. Martin was doing the standard neutral therapist how-does-
that-make-you-feel voice, but Steve thought he heard disapproval in Martin’s tone and tensed. “Are you involved in the process, doc?”

“Hm?” Martin’s gaze flicked to Steve. “Oh, not much. Everyone’s pitching in a little, but this isn’t really my area of expertise.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes.


Steve had meant to lighten the mood a little, but the sharpness of Martin’s features implied that he hadn’t succeeded. “Just so,” Martin said flatly, and something passed through his eyes too quickly for Steve to spot. Then he seemed to shake off the mood and smiled a little more naturally. “So. How are you holding up? This was a pretty big decision for you to have made by yourself.”

“I had advice from Stamford and Fury,” Steve pointed out.

“But the final call was yours, correct?” Steve nodded. “And how do you feel about your choice?”

Steve didn’t answer right away, staring at his hands, taking an extra moment to stop and really think. He’d spent so long going back and forth on the decision that it didn’t seem right to answer quickly. But though he still felt apprehensive and uncertain about the future, he also felt like he was on firm ground for the first time since waking up in the recovery room in New York City. The course was chosen, the plans were being laid, and Steve was going to go out there and do his best.

“I think... good,” Steve said slowly. He nodded, feeling the conviction from his predawn decision still settling solid and firm on his shoulders. He looked up, face set in determination. “When we go for the final event, doc, you should watch. It’s really going to be something.” Steve realized he was grinning. “It’s going to be amazing.”

“I have no doubt that it will,” Martin said.

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Step Two was The Dialogue.

“No, no, no,” Tony said, reading a draft of Steve’s proposed opening verbal salvo. Although this whole thing was quickly going to become more of an ad-lib than a command performance, Stamford still thought it wise to have a few set speeches on hand. To set the tone, she’d said. So Steve had dutifully sat down with his notebook and pen and started writing dialogue in the best tradition of his chorus girl days: overblown, hyperpatriotic, and ideally suited for dealing with someone who thought the Cold War was a current event.

Or so Steve had thought. “I’ve actually got a lot of experience here, Tony,” he protested, trying and failing to grab his draft back.

Tony was having none of it. “You’re used to preaching to the choir, man. All of those audiences wanted to hear about how great America was. Ivan wants to hear about how you’ve come to eat babies and destroy the glorious communist something-or-other. You’re not used to being a villain.”

“And you are?” Steve demanded.

Tony grinned. “I used to sell weapons for a living. Who better to beat the drums of war?”
“We’re not trying to sell him a missile, Tony. We’re trying to convince him I’m a symbol of America. Somehow I don’t expect that to be difficult.”

“Just let me polish this draft up a little bit.”

“Tony – ”

“Five minutes, I promise. Look, have a drink, order a pizza on me. I’ll just be right back.”

Steve stared at his retreating back, then went looking for the takeout menus stuffed in a drawer next to the rec room fridge.

Tony was not back in five minutes.

While the planning was taking up the time and attention of SHIELD’s senior staff, Bucky continued to be on the receiving end of the most aggressive psychotherapy Fury could command. Once Fury decided to go for something, he apparently put his full muscle into it, and the amount of effort that produced was frankly terrifying. There were enough PhDs working on Bucky’s case to staff a university. Steve was forced to get his reports secondhand from Stamford. She was busier than any two other doctors on the team, but she always made time to give Steve an update when she found him loitering forlornly outside the high-security wing in medlab where Bucky was staying.

Stamford told him that they had briefed both Bucky and Winter Soldier on the planned reintegration and gotten their consent. “It was Winter Soldier who shot at you,” she explained to Steve after one particularly long session. “He has bits and pieces of both Bucky’s and Ivan’s memories, and was able to recognize that something was wrong with Ivan. He’s been keeping Ivan suppressed as much as possible, with Bucky’s help, but his control was slipping as Ivan started to degrade. When he got the contract to kill you, Steve, he realized you were someone who would help him and deliberately attracted your attention.”

“And he’s really okay with being reintegrated?” Steve asked dubiously.

“Absolutely,” Stamford said firmly.

“But he doesn’t want to… well, to live?”

“He doesn’t think of it as dying – and neither should you. Remember what we talked about. The Winter Soldier won’t disappear. From his point of view, he’ll be getting himself back.” Stamford saw the confusion on Steve’s face and sighed. “Of all people, you’re in a unique position to really understand… Think about what he’s been through. One day you wake up in a strange place. You’ve got all the skills and the physique and everything else, but you don’t know how you got here. All you remember is who you used to be back in 1945. That’s what you went through, and that’s confusing enough. Now add that sometimes you remember being someone completely different. The two sets of memories don’t make sense, and you’re sure something is wrong with one of them. But you have no control over these memories. On top of all of that, sometimes you black out, and when you wake back up you’re in a different place, and time has passed, and you have no idea what you did or said in the intervening time. How would you feel?”

Steve shivered. “I’d be scared out of my wits.”
“Right.” Stamford nodded. “Now imagine that you had a chance to get rid of the ‘bad’ memories and fill in all the missing gaps in your mind. You’d no longer have to fight for control of your own body with a hostile force. You’d have a sense of identity and a purpose. Would you think of that as dying?”

“No,” Steve had to admit. “I’d think of that as getting better.”

“Exactly. It’s true that your friend has been through a lot,” Stamford said gently. “So have you, I expect, since you saw him last. Life is change, Steve, but that’s also what makes healing possible.”

Steve looked away. “Next time Bucky is…” He swallowed. “The next time Bucky’s awake. Can I talk to him?”

Stamford considered Steve seriously. He waited, trying not to fidget. “I think so,” she said at last. “The reintegration’s going to be a jolt. We’ve talked it through with him already, but I think it would do him good to get to talk with you too.” She nodded decisively. “The next time he’s lucid, we’ll ping you. Keep your communicator handy.”

“Roger,” Steve said in relief.

“Now I’ve got to get back to it. I know you’ve been working a lot of hours on this. That’s probably a good thing. Stay busy now, and there will be time to process later. Just keep in mind that there is going to be a later, Rogers.”


Stamford eyed him, as if she suspected that her admonition wasn’t having the desired effect, but settled for rolling her eyes. “All right.” She gave him one last look, then started off. “Two more things,” she added, pausing at the door and turning back. “First – I know I just said it was good to stay busy, but make sure you get at least six hours’ sleep before the main event.”

“Yes’m,” Steve agreed.

“And second…” She paused.

“Yes?”

She looked at him and sighed a little. “I know this wasn’t an easy decision for you to make, and I know you’re still very worried about how this is going to turn out. I’m going to do my very best to make sure that at the end of this, Bucky is as stable and intact as possible. It won’t be easy and the result won’t be perfect. There’s going to be lingering trauma. I will work to help you both through it, but it’s going to be hard and it’s going to take time.”

“But you’re working to get Bucky back.” Steve clung to that.

“Yes,” Stamford said calmly. “That’s the goal.”

Step Three was The Setup.

“He needs to be under enough pressure that he decides to fight instead of run,” Steve said to Tony, arm-deep in a pile of components that Steve didn’t pretend to understand. Some of the parts were
physical and some were holographic; JARVIS muttered a stream of updates in the corner on some fabrication process, and an endearingly annoying robot bumped up repeatedly against Steve’s shins. This was why he didn’t usually come down into The Lab, but for Bucky’s sake Steve was doing a lot of things he didn’t normally do. “They have to be able to threaten him. But not so much that he actually gets hurt.”

Tony gave Steve a long-suffering look. “Yes, mom.”

“I’m just saying,” Steve protested. “I’m not sure about these robots you’re building. And what about the symbolism? Should we paint them? He’s got to be thinking about destroying America! What if the robots don’t look American enough?”

“God, please tell me he’s not stupider than you,” Tony muttered. Steve glared.

“It will be fine,” Natasha said from where she was tucked safely away in a corner of the lab, correcting Tony’s proposed design aesthetics to bring them more in line with old Soviet perceptions of capitalist military technology. “The robots will be convincing. Why don’t you go back upstairs and help Coulson select the terrain?”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay down here?” Steve asked anxiously.

“Dear lord in heaven,” Tony said, rolling his eyes and uttering a put-upon sigh. It was probably a devastating combination when leveled at beautiful women, nannies, and shareholders. Against Steve it worked not at all. “We will be fine, I swear, now get out of here before I put you back into cryosleep.” He used some tool to adjust a thingamajig. Sparks flew everywhere, and the robot screeched and sprayed everything with fire suppressant. Steve beat a hasty retreat.

On his way out, his communicator pinged.

“They say I’ve been gone for a long time,” Bucky whispered. “They say some pretty incredible things, Steve… is it true?”

“Yeah.” Steve had to stop and clear his throat. “It’s all true.”

“Jesus,” Bucky said, then fell silent.

The medical bay seemed cold and bright, two things that did not, in Steve’s experience, go well together. The high-security wing could hold several patients at once, but only one treatment room was occupied right now, for security’s sake. Bucky and the Winter Soldier weren’t interested in causing trouble, but Ivan had to be treated as a prisoner. So Bucky was sitting in one of the high-security rooms, the kind where the observation window was also made out of some bulletproof material that looked like glass but felt like plastic, and getting in and out required three keycodes and a level four access or better, which no one had given Steve. So despite his wishes, he wasn’t sitting next to Bucky on the cot, their shoulders bumping familiarly as they talked about everything and nothing. He was standing in the gallery while Bucky perched there alone, looking at each other through the glass and talking over a two-way speaker. Steve watched Bucky sitting among the 21st century tech and the harsh fluorescent lights, wearing the scars and the lines of a lifetime not his own. He thought that Bucky looked like a ghost, and wished more than anything he could touch Bucky to make sure he was really there.
It got easier if he kept his gaze focused slightly to one side and just listened to Bucky talk. Bucky’s voice was still the same, the familiar tone, the cadence of his speech. It was only when Steve looked at Bucky that he was hit with the sudden and yawning gulf between them. Bucky bore the scars of the Winter Soldier on his face and his body. The arm alone had figured prominently in several of Steve’s recent nightmares. Doc Stamford hadn’t gotten the story behind that out of Ivan yet, and Steve knew it had to be giving Bucky an even bigger fit of the creeps than Steve.

“I can hear him, you know,” Bucky said finally. There was no need to ask who he meant. “Both of them. I think they can hear me, too. I think we’ve been talking this whole time.” He shook his head abruptly, frustrated. “I still can’t remember. The doctors say I’m not laying down long-term memories right anymore. They think it’s a side effect of what the Red Room did… every time I wake up I ask the same questions over again.” On his lap, his hands curled into fists. “What if that never changes?”

“It will.” Steve tried to sound as sure as he could, but the shake of Bucky’s shoulders told him he hadn’t managed it very well. He cast about for something more reassuring he could say. “Stamford says – she thinks that when this is over, you’ll be able to share memories with the Winter Soldier. So he can remember things for you.”

“How are you so calm about this?” Bucky asked abruptly, looking up at Steve with dark eyes like twin bruises in a pale, pale face. “Why don’t I horrify you?” He shook his head. “I’m sure as hell scaring myself.”

“Well.” Steve shrugged, trying for a nonchalance he didn’t feel. “It’s a lot easier than it would have been before the war, that’s for sure. But hey, I got shot up with vita-rays and turned into Atlas. I’ve got a shield that can repel the power of a Norse God. I’ve met a Norse God – two, in fact. I’m on a team that includes a man in a flying suit of armor and another man who can turn into a giant green monster, and for our first act we repelled a full-scale invasion of an alien race in the middle of Manhattan. I fell into some ice and woke up seventy years later! Man,” he shook his head and discovered, to his utter and complete surprise, that he was laughing. “This is, at most, the fifth weirdest thing that I’ve ever seen.” The laughter was a little too loud, had an edge of hysteria, but it felt good. After everything else, the sleepless nights and the therapy and the nightmares, Steve didn’t even try to stop it.

Bucky stared back at him in unvarnished surprise, and then he was laughing too. “My God.” His shoulders shook, and he actually had to wipe a tear out of his eye. “Thanks, Steve,” he said when he finally had his breath back, an endless moment later. “Thanks. That actually makes me feel a lot better, believe it or not.” He shook his head. “What’s going in my head is not the most fucked-up thing ever. God, that’s good to know.” He smiled. “Even if I don’t really to know how to deal with it.”

Steve said, “I don’t think SHIELD knows how to deal with it any more than we do. They act like they’re on top of all of this, but they’re running two steps ahead of the wrecking ball, you know?” He shook his head. “When they first woke me up, they tried to put me in this room they’d done up like it was still 1945. They had a ball game on the radio, but it was the one we went to, back in ’41, do you remember? They didn’t have a clue what they were doing, they just wanted to keep me from freaking out. It didn’t work. I thought I had been captured by HYDRA.”

Bucky laughed a little more, gaze flicking around him. “So it could be worse, huh?”

“Yep.” Steve tried a grin.

“So what have I missed?” Bucky asked, changing the topic with in a determined tone of voice. “Seventy years…”
“Well, you know.” Steve shrugged a little. “A bunch of technology. Um, some medicine. You know, they cured polio.”

“Yeah? That’s pretty cool.”

“Everyone owns cars now. And everything’s a lot more expensive. And…” Steve shook his head. “I’m not caught up on it all yet either. They only defrosted me a couple of months ago, and it’s a lot to take in, so I haven’t… Actually, I’ve pretty much been sleeping and fighting and going to therapy. It’s a lot like the army.”

Bucky grinned a little at that. That’s the goal, Steve thought. One smile at a time.

“Sounds about right,” he said, and Steve could hear the light humor overlaying the darker shadow between them. “Sounds like you, after all.”

“I haven’t changed,” Steve protested reflexively. He didn’t want Bucky to think that anything between them would be any different, frozen sleep and Soviet reprogramming be damned.

“Yes, you have,” Bucky said, but without rancor. Then a little bitterness crept into his tone. “We both have.”

“You’re gonna be okay,” Steve insisted. Automatically he reached for Bucky, took the steps that brought him up against the plastic separating them and raised a hand to clasp Bucky’s shoulder. The glass stopped him, and Steve flattened his palm against it. “You’ll get better, and then we’ll figure out what the future’s like together, okay?”

“Gotta figure out the present first, buddy,” Bucky said softly. “Gotta figure out who we are before we can understand the world.”

“We’ll do that then,” Steve promised. “I’ve got it all taken care of, Bucky. My turn this time, right?” He tried another smile. “I’ve got a room on 33rd Street, and a good job with the government.” That was an old army joke, and Bucky grinned for a moment, a flash of his old uncomplicated self peeking through. “Just like old times. You and me.”

“Okay.” Bucky nodded. “Sounds good.”

“So you just get better,” Steve said firmly. “Stamford’s good. She’ll patch you up.”

“Yeah.” Bucky pushed off the ground, swinging his feet around and laying back down on the bed. “Tired,” he apologized, turning his head to look at Steve. “They’ve got me on a bunch of stuff, makes me sleepy.” He tried a smile. “You still be there when I wake up, Rogers?”

“You bet,” Steve swore. This time I will be. “Always will be.” I’m not going to let anything stop me from being there again.

“Good.” Bucky’s eyes were already sliding closed. “Catch you later, Steve.”

“Later, Bucky,” Steve answered. He stood there a while longer, watching Bucky sleep, and making himself all sorts of promises. Bucky was going to be okay. They’d get rid of Ivan, and things would be better than they had ever been before. Bucky would join the Avengers, and they would never have to worry about hunger or cold or clothing ever again. The people who talked about Captain America would learn to rave about the Winter Soldier, and their exploits would be legendary, and they would do so much good that the shadows would vanish from Bucky’s eyes forever.

And at the end of every mission, every briefing, every dog-and-pony show Coulson cooked up to
keep the press interested, Steve would come home and Bucky would be there. Bucky would forgive him for not rescuing him, and maybe one day Steve would forgive himself. Bucky would smile at Steve, and everything would finally be right in the world.

Steve nodded to himself and pushed away from the plastic wall, straightening up. He had a lot of work to do to make sure that future happened, and none of it was getting done while he stood around here.

But he lingered there a few moments longer and listened to Bucky breathe.

Step Four was The Terrain.

“We can close off vehicle access between Gerard Avenue and the Betsy Ross Bridge,” Coulson explained as a group of SHIELD agents scurried around with incomprehensible technology, taking all sorts of samples and readings. “The buildings are mostly old construction, brick over steel frames, which will serve two purposes. Firstly, it will reinforce the illusion that we’re still in the Cold War era, and secondly, the two of you shouldn’t be able to inflict any major property damage.” He smiled. “That’s an advantage of having you play the villain that I hadn’t thought of. Thor could level a skyscraper with that hammer of his.”

“Thanks. I think,” Steve muttered, looking around. As highways went, this one was pretty unremarkable. The concrete was starting to fade with age, weeds growing up through cracks in the roadbed, and the factories looming on either side looked decrepit. Steve didn’t know what it was about factories that made them all lose windows like that, but he privately thought that any property damage would be a blessing around here. The owners might use the insurance money to actually build something worth looking at. Of course, Coulson’s point of view was somewhat affected by the fact that SHIELD would owe substantial reparations in the event of Avenger-sponsored destruction.

“No charge,” Coulson replied smugly. Then he turned and called out to one of his agents. “Get me a few more soil samples, would you? Let’s make sure we’re not going to release anything unsavory.” He consulted a clipboard. “One of these factories used to produce dry cleaning chemicals,” he said as an aside to Steve. “Nasty stuff, if it gets into the air or the water.”

“Mmm,” Steve said noncommittally. “So. We lure Ivan in here…”

“The robots handle that part. You’re already inside the zone. Once Ivan’s on the main thoroughfare, we close the road in both directions. The buildings are evacuated in advance. We put eyes in the sky to take him down if he tries to go overland. Of course, if my agents have to contain him, the mission is already a failure.”

“That’s not going to happen.” The determination in Steve’s voice was audible even to him.

“Right.” Coulson regarded him steadily. “You do your little song and dance here in the containment zone. Ivan thinks he’s taken you out. Dr. Stamford says it could go one of three ways at that point.”

“Ivan could vanish immediately,” Steve said hopefully. “Then I just get up and call in the all-clear, and Bucky and I come home.”
“Yes.” Coulson checked his clipboard again. “Two. Ivan starts to fade, but Bucky isn’t immediately coherent. You stay down. We hold the cordon. Bucky wanders the quarantine zone for a while until he gets back to himself. Doctor Stamford and a few assistants are on standby in case it looks like Bucky needs therapeutic intervention during this period.”

“Bucky gets it together, I get up and call in the all-clear, and Bucky and I come home.” Steve was firm on this point.

“Or, alternatively, option three. Ivan flips. Instead of a sense of accomplishment, finishing his mission leaves him feeling disassociated and cut off. He exhibits one of a range of frankly terrifying symptoms, all of which seem to include bloodlust. Ivan breaks for the cordon, and we have to put him down.”

Steve stared out across the highway, not really seeing it. “That won’t happen.”

“Captain Rogers – ”

“It won’t,” he repeated, and turned to face Coulson. “Because if it looks like it’s going that way, if that’s – if Bucky’s really gone – ” he swallowed. “I’ll take care of it.”

Coulson considered this. “Agent Rogers, I appreciate the sentiment, but my men are still going to be armed. And if it looks like we’re in ‘option three’, and they have the shot – my orders are going to be for them to take it.”

Steve wanted to argue, but he’d led the commandos through too many raids to think about ordering someone not to protect themselves if the situation seemed to call for it. It was just going to be up to him to make sure that it didn’t come to that.

Bucky was going to come back – or Steve was going to take care of Bucky himself.

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“Steve.”

At the sound of his name, Steve looked up. Natasha was standing in the doorway of one of the rooms SHIELD had set up as temporary bunks for personnel. Since the plans for Bucky’s reintegration had kicked into high gear, Steve had practically moved into SHIELD headquarters. There was so much to be done and so little time to do it, it had just seemed like the thing to do.

“We’re going for it tomorrow,” he told her, sitting up. Steve had been trying to sleep, mindful of Dr. Stamford’s instructions. But counting sheep wasn’t doing it, and he figured he might as well have this conversation semi-upright. “Stamford’s confident they can wake Ivan up when it’s show time, and everything else is in place.” Everything else was the result of a lot of hard work and many sleepless nights, because Steve had been bound and determined that everything be perfect, triple-checked and as redundant as government work could make it. At last even Coulson had declared that there was nothing left to be done, and Steve had been politely thrown out to catch what sleep he could before the curtain rose on the main event.

If Steve were being honest with himself, the rapid pace of preparations wasn’t the only reason he had moved into SHIELD headquarters. The real explanation was the same reason he couldn’t seem to get any sleep: he was back to being alone. Steve had, he thought, been making good progress before, adjusting to a life where there weren’t five commandos within arm’s reach at all times and
people took insane amounts of dwelling space for granted. But now that Bucky was sleeping in a cell twelve floors beneath ground level in SHIELD Tower, even the walk back to the apartment Steve had tried calling ‘home’ was too much to handle. The buildings had changed but the trees and the sidewalks and the sky were all the same, the shapes of passing birds and the shadows cast by the streetlights. He’d get to the end of one street and lift his head, but there wouldn’t be the familiar landmarks of the newsstand on the corner and the barber’s sign swinging overhead. Just a Starbucks and one of those new stoplights that weren’t done with light bulbs anymore. And the knowledge that when he finally got to 33rd street Mrs. Dietrich’s row house wouldn’t be there. No smell of cabbage. No cats. No Bucky.

“Coulson told me,” Natasha said, taking a few steps into the room and letting the door slide shut behind her. Steve swung his legs over the side of the bed, intending to offer Natasha a seat next to him; there weren’t any chairs in the room. She saw him move and shook her head. Instead, she put her back to the wall across from him and slid to the ground in a comfortable, practiced movement, sitting half on her back and half on her heels. “I’m not here because of that. Well. I am, but… I need to ask you something.”

“Anything,” Steve said at once.

“About you and Bucky.”

Steve was quiet a moment, but then said, “Go on.”

Natasha had to tip her head back against the wall to meet Steve’s eyes from where she sat on the floor, but her gaze was clear and steady on his. “Were you lovers?”

Steve almost choked on his next breath. “Lovers?”

“Physically intimate,” Natasha clarified. One corner of her mouth quirked up. “I don’t have to ask about how you felt about him.”

Steve felt the tips of his ears turning red. “I, um. Well.” He rubbed one hand on the back of his neck. And he had told Natasha she could ask him anything, but he found himself hesitating. “Why do you need to know?”

“I need to understand what your actions will be tomorrow.”

“You know the plan. You know what I’ll do.”

“I know what the plan says you’ll do. But you and I both know this isn’t going to go exactly according to plan. I need to know what you’ll do when things change; I need to understand how you feel to predict how you’ll react.”

“And knowing if Bucky and I were – if we – that will help you understand?” Steve was deeply skeptical.

“When we were fighting Loki, I went to interrogate him,” Natasha said softly. “He wanted to play me, of course. I let him think I was willing to bargain for Clint’s safety. He laughed at me and asked if I was really going to betray everyone and everything for love.”

“Loki didn’t understand love.”

“He understood it too well,” Natasha disagreed. “It’s powerful, but wild. Untamed by its very nature. You can embrace it, and ride it, and let it take you where it will. You can fight it, and be destroyed. Or you can reject it, and it will pass you by.”
“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. Living when love has left you is just different. Emptier. Colder. But cleaner. Clearer.”

“And you’re asking which it is that I intend to do?” Steve asked.

“I already know what you intend to do. That was obvious, as soon as you saw that the Winter Soldier was your friend. I need to know that you realize what your intentions are, fully. Because if you attempt to ride the storm without knowing it, it will certainly destroy you.”

“We were never lovers, not like you mean,” Steve said, a little distantly, lost in his memories. “We should have been, maybe. Looking back, the way we were, well. But… it’s easy to see that, in this time and place. Back then? I don’t know if Bucky ever thought of it. I didn’t. Not in those terms. It was just natural, that we were together. That we took care of each other. And we both had… other people.” He fell silent for a moment, considering, while Natasha’s cool gaze rested on him. Steve thought of Peggy, of what he’d thought he’d felt when he was with her. It had been a little exciting, thinking he’d finally gotten a piece of what everyone was always going on about, but… they’d never gone past that early, slightly breathless feeling of something new and different.

A lifetime unrolled slowly in his memory, and he found himself tracing the thread of Bucky’s impact on him, all the way back to the first time they’d ever laid eyes on each other in the Avondale Home for Boys. At all the major stops in his road, Bucky had been there with him, and he’d never wanted anything so much as he just wanted that to be true again. Whatever form that took.

“I think…” he said slowly. “That I would like that. If this works, if Bucky comes back, if he feels that way too… maybe we will be.” The words came back to Steve’s ears, sounding too light to bear the weight of all that they meant. Shouldn’t they be louder, bigger somehow, more momentous? Instead of just two comrades in a room, the night before a battle? But maybe that was appropriate, too, in its way. Life had been a battle for Steve and Bucky, even before the war, and they had always been comrades in that fight.

“But?” Natasha asked, when a moment had passed and Steve was still silent.

Steve shook his head, looking away. “But the physical aspect of it won’t mean that we’re suddenly… closer. Or that our relationship has become more significant. Because I don’t think that’s possible, really. I’d already… I mean, he died for me, once.” The train rose up in his memory again, but Steve put the recollection aside and looked farther back into his past. All the times Bucky had been there for Steve, all the times Steve had tried to return the favor. He never felt like he had given his friend back as much as Bucky had given him, but maybe that was just the way these things always worked. And maybe he wasn’t out of chances to catch up quite yet.

“We lived for each other, before that.” Steve let his eyes flick back to Natasha and smiled. “And I’d like to do it again. So, yes – I know what my intentions are.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Natasha said in return, and rose to her feet. Her smile was smaller than his, a little quieter, but understanding. “Good night, Steve.”

“Natasha,” he said as she turned to walk towards the door. “When Loki asked you if you were willing to betray everyone and everything for love, how did you answer him?”

“That love was for children. That I owed a debt.”

Steve considered those words. They had a peculiar ring to them. A half-truth? Or a truth once
believed, but since gone stale. No, replaced. Superseded by something still more true.

“When you said it - did you mean it?” he asked.

Natasha’s half-grin was secret and close, barely visible over her shoulder as she turned her head towards him.

The door swished closed behind her, and Steve laughed a little to himself, laying back down.

He fell asleep almost immediately, and dreamed of the future he wanted to build.

Captain America checked the position of the sun in the sky, fidgeted with his helmet, checked his tracker, and told himself for the hundredth time that everything was going to be okay.

The sun was hot against him, even through the lightweight nomex of his new, Tony-Stark-designed uniform. Trying to stage a battle on gleaming blacktop during the month of July was not a sweat-free proposition, and Steve was deeply thankful that his costume was no longer either the wool-and-cotton blend of his chorus girl days or the heavy armored canvas of his time with the Howling Commandos. The Kevlar plating Tony used was ten times lighter than whatever Howard had had to work with, and best of all, as Tony had put it, it ‘breathed like Egyptian cotton’. Well, Tony thought that was best of all. Steve was rather partial to the fact that it would stop a bullet. Not as well as his shield, of course, and only the first or second time it was hit, and he’d still have bruises and possibly cracked ribs if he had to rely on it, but it was a hell of a lot better than being dead. And since Steve didn’t have his shield, that was a rather important consideration.

The tracker in his hand beeped the ten-mile warning, and Steve took a deep breath.

The GPS emitter the Winter Soldier was wearing wasn’t the same wrist-mounted device that had been slapped on him when he’d been taken into custody. No one was quite sure how well the Red Room had kept up with the times, or how effectively Ivan could use the Winter Soldier’s memories, and no one was willing to take the risk that he’d recognize the wrist unit for what it was and destroy, disable or remove it. Instead SHIELD had waited someone other than Ivan was in the driver’s seat and inserted a tiny emitter under the skin at the base of his neck. Steve was glad of the ability to track him for the purposes of this exercise. But he also knew Fury was also preparing for the eventuality that this elaborate scenario would fall flat on its face, and someone would have to hunt the Soldier down.

Well, Steve was just going to have to make sure that didn’t happen. And Tony had already promised to help Steve track Bucky “20% faster, 50% closer and 100% better than SHIELD”, just in case it became necessary.

Coulson’s voice crackled in Steve’s ear. “Ivan has crossed the perimeter. The robots are disengaging and we’re closing off the cordon.” There was a brief pause and a burst of static, then Coulson came back on the line. “Cordon is sealed. All right, Captain. If you hit the button, or if your vital signs drop out, we’re sending in the cavalry. Otherwise – you’re on your own.”

Steve nodded, though Coulson couldn’t see. “Affirmative. Rogers out.” After a brief moment of consideration, he pulled the headset from his ear and set it carefully on a little outcropping of stone. If everything went well, SHIELD could retrieve it later. Steve was giving up the ability to punch the panic button and call for help, but that was a calculated risk; he didn’t want interruptions
for this, not even well-meaning updates from SHIELD personnel.

Some things a man just had to do for himself, and knocking some sense into his brainwashed best buddy’s head was one of them.

Ivan came into sight a few minutes later. Steve was waiting in full costume atop a two-story building with the sun backlighting his carefully chosen dramatic pose – because this whole thing would go nowhere fast if Ivan couldn’t actually find Steve, and theatricality was going to be half of the battle here. By contrast, Ivan was moving cautiously through the shadows of the abandoned buildings, staying low to the ground and making very little noise. There was nothing approaching a traditional weapon inside the cordon, but removing everything potentially fatal had been given up as a lost cause, and Steve was not surprised to see Ivan holding a twisted piece of metal in one hand.

Well, Bucky was always better with a rifle than in hand-to-hand. Just don’t let him get any real force behind the blow...

Steve cleared his throat and stepped forward, relying on the movement to draw the trained predator’s eye. They were a good couple hundred feet apart, including the difference in their elevations, but Steve was used to projecting. He filled his lungs and boomed out, “THERE you are, Communist Scum! I have been searching for you! I will destroy you, and the people’s revolution will be thwarted!”

(In the back of Steve’s mind, the chorus of The Star-Spangled Man started playing.)

Even from atop the roof, Steve saw Ivan reach automatically over his shoulder for the rifle he would normally carry. It was a reflex action for both Ivan and Bucky to go for his long-range piece when he was threatened. But the Soldier’s hand closed on empty air, and with a snarl Steve could see but not hear, the man stalked towards Steve’s building.

“Running away, coward?” Steve shouted as dramatically as he knew how. “The might of the capitalist war machine will crush your dreams of freedom!”

Ivan’s progress towards Steve was necessarily slow. He didn’t know that Steve was unarmed, and he was sticking to the shadows in case Captain America attempted to end the battle before it began with a dishonorable capitalist pig-dog potshot. Steve didn’t want to wait, because the longer this dragged out the more likely it was something would go wrong. And he definitely didn’t want to have to stand in one place shouting heavily slanted insults while Ivan closed. So he took the simple route and jumped off the building. It was only two stories high; he rolled with the landing, came back to his feet, and saw Ivan staring in well-hidden dismay. Steve grinned fiercely and posed again. “You are no match for my strength, feeble peasant!”

Ivan snarled in rage, and as Steve had been hoping he might, charged.

He led with the metal arm, and Steve ducked his swing, coming up around and behind the Winter Soldier to deliver a careful jab to the kidney. Ivan jerked away, absorbing most of the blow harmlessly, and countered with a right hook. Steve had been dodging right hooks for most of his life, though, and did so with ease, following up with a kick to the exposed stomach. Ivan took the hit well, but had to fall back a step or two anyway, not quite braced to encounter Captain America’s enhanced strength. Instincts screamed for Steve to take two rapid steps forward and deliver a knockout blow, but he deliberately slowed his movements, and Ivan took the opportunity, darting in with the speed of a striking snake and catching Steve with a smart clip upside the head. Serum or no, Steve saw stars.
Both men fell back, panting a little and circling. Steve caught his breath enough to deliver another round of appropriately anti-communist insults, but ended up using it instead on an ignominious leap backwards when Ivan attempted a slash with the metal bar he was holding. Steve kicked it out of his hand – it was the cybernetic one, so he didn’t pull the blow – and the bar sailed away from the fight. The faint clank from quite an impressive distance away said that Steve wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore, at least.

Ivan looked around hastily, obviously searching for some other kind of advantage. Steve personally thought that Ivan had the edge as long as Steve was without his shield, but of course Ivan wouldn’t believe that. Ivan was fighting communism’s greatest enemy – the unstoppable capitalist superman – and he was looking for an edge.

He found it in a broken bottle left carelessly by the side of the road, and Steve thought wrathful thoughts about both litterers and SHIELD cleanup teams that weren’t as thorough as they should be. Any hope that Ivan would share Bucky’s lack of skill at knife fighting died a swift and painful death when Ivan’s first slash and jab almost sliced Steve’s wrist clean open. Well, you needed it to look real, Steve thought, ducking back out of range. Now Ivan had a weapon in one hand, and the other was a weight of metal that could crush Steve’s skull. That’s real enough, all right.

After the first few minutes of testing each other’s strength and reach, the fight settled down into something grim and dirty. Steve split his attention between not letting Ivan skewer him for real and making Ivan think he was wearing Steve down. Slowly, Steve let his breathing become more ragged, his swings a little less controlled, and his movements a little less swift. Holding back that way was exhausting in an entirely different way than an ordinary battle would be, and Ivan started getting inside his defenses.

Steve swung at Ivan, deliberately slow, and Ivan ducked the swing and lunged forward. Steve managed to take the blow on his forearm, where the metal arm would leave a nasty bruise through the Kevlar but hopefully not much else. Ivan followed it up with a slash at Steve’s exposed torso, catching him in the side and drawing blood. Steve ducked away and shoved, sending Ivan stumbling forward and buying him a few seconds of breathing room to reorient, shaking out his arm. The cut edges of his uniform knit back together almost as soon as they were severed, keeping it from being too serious. The real damage came from the way Ivan seemed to realize that he could hurt his enemy, and he started pushing harder and faster.

If the good news was that Ivan took that as a sign that he was winning, the bad news was that Ivan was actually starting to knock Steve around. Forced to adopt a more defensive style, Steve gritted his teeth and turned his reaction times back up a little. This was a delicate balance between making Ivan feel like he’d really defeated the best America had to offer and keeping either of them from bleeding out on the ground.

Fighting to straddle that line, Steve ducked a heavy swing with the metal limb and didn’t see Ivan’s other arm coming up in time. The jagged glass skimmed down his scalp and across the bridge of his nose. Steve rolled back and came to his feet, shaking his head to get the feel of the cut. It seemed shallow, but it was bleeding freely, as scalp wounds tended to do. Steve blinked the blood out of his eyes but made no effort to otherwise wipe it away. It streamed down his face, wetting the dirt at his feet, and Ivan saw it and redoubled his attacks.

Steve’s world narrowed to its essentials, the familiar battle haze taking over his senses. There was the terrain, there were his allies (none), and there was his enemy (Ivan). The two men traded blows and ground back and forth, long past the time when ordinary men would have flagged and fallen. Erskine’s serum kept Steve on his feet, and he could only guess that the Red Room’s training did the same for Ivan.
At last, Steve let Ivan push him to the edge of an overpass, apparently desperate and at bay. He spat the blood from his mouth and snarled something vaguely anti-communist. Steve wasn't even quite sure what he was saying any more, but it hardly mattered; Ivan's English was barely passable and he was reacting more to the tone of Steve's taunts than their actual subject. Then he lunged forward in an obvious attempt to try and grapple with his foe. Ivan stepped aside easily and, for the first time, Steve didn’t twist away. The metal arm came down against the back of Steve’s neck with full, devastating force. It hurt, like taking a repulsor blast full to the chest or blocking Mjolnir with his shield, and Steve was never going to get a better opportunity. As it was, he hardly had to fake it when he collapsed bonelessly at Ivan’s feet, apparently defeated.

Steve pressed his lips together to keep himself from panting heavily, which would rather have undermined his otherwise excellent death scene, and focused instead on breathing as shallowly as he possibly could. Ordinarily, he’d expect Ivan to be more than capable of telling the difference between a dead man and a live one. But if things were going according to plan, if this was really working, Ivan shouldn’t be able to focus on anything but the perception of ultimate, final victory.

Almost more than anything in the world, Steve wanted to roll over and see what was going on above him. He could hear Ivan's breathing coming harsh and fast above him. There were exclamations in Russian, first quietly, then louder. And then, out of nowhere, a heartfelt scream of victory.

He's buying it. A rush of powerful emotion – hope/fear/joy/guilt – left Steve fighting not to tremble. Dear God, it's working.

A second, quieter cheer sounded, and then there was the unmistakable sound of someone collapsing to the ground next to Steve. The harsh voice muttered to itself. The words weren’t clear enough for Steve to understand, but as it went on some of the roughness seemed to leech out of it, until the tone and cadence sounded more like Bucky to Steve’s ear.

Steve stayed put, breathing carefully and playing possum as hard as he could while the voice next to him slowly trailed off. They stayed there together in silence, and Steve started counting minutes in his head.

At fifteen, he prayed a silent prayer in the deepest, quietest corner of his heart and opened his eyes. The other man was sitting next to Steve's ‘body’, gazing down at him with blank and empty eyes. He didn’t blink when Steve looked at him; he didn't twitch when Steve carefully levered himself to a sitting position, or when Steve ripped a strip from his uniform and pressed it to his forehead, still sluggishly bleeding.

"Bucky," Steve called, hand reaching out without conscious thought, but hovering an inch above the other man's knee, not quite touching. "Bucky, can you hear me?" No reaction. Steve swallowed.

"Ivan?" he whispered.

Still silence. Steve breathed a little easier.

They were most likely in 'option two', then. Steve could work with that. Steve could wait here as long as it took. He settled down next to Bucky, not too close, propping his back against the safety railing on the overpass and taking some deep breaths.

“Captain Rogers?”
The call was unexpected, and Steve jerked in no little surprise. The voice was familiar, though, and when Steve turned his head he saw Dr. Martin walking slowly up one of the overpass’ on-ramps. Steve raised a finger hastily to his lips and got to his feet, motioning Martin off across the highway. The psychiatrist looked amused, but allowed himself to be led several feet away, hopefully out of earshot.

“What are you doing here, doc?” Steve demanded as soon as he felt sure their conversation wouldn’t disturb whatever was going on in Bucky’s head. He was angry and worried all at the same time, torn between one fear that Martin was about to upset all of their hard work and another fear that Martin had spotted something wrong that Steve had missed, something that required immediate intervention.

“I needed to see how you were doing,” Martin said in a reasonable voice.

“I thought Stamford said no one was going to disturb us unless Bucky needed help,” Steve hissed. “She said breaking in on the process early could cause problems!”

“Believe me, I have no desire to cause any problems with Ivan’s removal,” Martin said earnestly. “But you got rid of your communicator, and I had to be sure the process was underway.”

“So far so good,” Steve answered, rubbing one hand on the back of his neck and turning slightly to keep Bucky in his peripheral vision. Martin turned more completely, studying Bucky with a professional eye.

“Yes, this looks very good. Very good indeed,” he approved, and Steve relaxed a little. The flash of unease that had curled in his gut with Martin’s appearance began to ease off. Nothing major was wrong after all. Steve didn’t understand why Stamford would send Martin in instead of coming herself, if she thought a closer look was necessary, but Stamford obviously had a lot of faith in Martin. She’d assigned Martin to Steve, after all, and that said a lot, even if Steve had never really felt comfortable around the man.

Martin frowned a little and took a step closer to Bucky. “Of course, we can’t let it go on for too long,” he murmured to himself. “After all, getting rid of Ivan is only half the battle.”

Steve frowned. “Doc?” He looked back at Martin, and something started prickling down his spine.

Martin smiled Steve that fake-comforting smile that Steve hated, and Steve gritted his teeth and reminded him yet again that the man was trained and skilled and vetted by SHIELD, and there was absolutely no reason for Steve’s instincts to all be screaming at him. “I’m going to take a closer look,” Martin said. “I want you to stay here, Captain Rogers. Having too many people close to him in this state could be a problem.”

“I – all right.” Steve swallowed and tried to look calm as Martin approached Bucky carefully and knelt down close. Closer than Steve had been willing to get, but Steve took a deep breath and reminded himself that Martin must know what he was doing.

Martin fished something out of his pocket, and all of Steve’s muscles tensed up without consulting his brain. “Doc?” he called, keeping his voice low but pitching it to carry. “What’s that?”

Martin didn’t answer.

Steve took a step closer, then another, moving to the side and craning his neck until he could see what Martin was holding –

“Please don’t move, Captain Rogers,” Martin said, and his other hand came out from the shadow
of his body to level a weapon directly at Steve.

Steve stopped in his tracks, because what Martin held was no ordinary gun. If it had been, Steve would have lunged forward and the bullet be damned. While he wasn’t invulnerable the way Thor or Hulk were, it would still take a world-class marksman to put Captain America down in a single hit with a standard handgun. But Martin was holding an energy weapon, one of the ones SHIELD had taken from the Chitauri invaders and locked away, supposedly for safekeeping. Steve had seen those weapons take chunks out of metal and masonry with equal abandon. Serum or no serum, Martin wouldn’t have to hit a vital spot to take Steve down in one shot; he’d just have to hit him at all.

Guess there are downsides to being built like the broad side of a barn, hey, Steve?

Steve blinked away the whisper of Bucky’s voice, focusing all of his attention on the kneeling psychiatrist who held an energy gun in one hand and a syringe in the other. He had to clear his throat twice before his voice worked properly, while Martin frowned between Steve and Bucky and tried to figure out how to pierce a vein without lowering his weapon.

“What are you going to do with him?”

Martin glanced up at Steve, and there, oh, there was the flicker of madness in his eyes that Steve had been praying he wouldn’t see. “I’m going to fix him, Steve.”

Steve swallowed. “SHIELD knows you’re down here. They’ve got eyes watching this entire area.”

“Ah, yes, SHIELD.” Martin grinned mirthlessly. “But why should they be surprised at seeing one of their own people here? The good doctor Stamford will wonder, no doubt, why I broke orders and came without being called. But she will deliberate and consider and ask herself what I might have seen that she missed. They are all so focused on helping. Idiots!” His eyes burned with anger, and the hand holding the gun on Steve shook.

“You said you wanted to fix him,” Steve said, keeping his voice even with a herculean effort. “Isn’t that what SHIELD wants, too?”

“They are like children, who destroy a work of art in their efforts to repair it,” Martin snarled. He looked back down at Bucky. Steve tensed, hoping for an opening, but Martin’s finger tightened warningly on the trigger. Steve settled back onto the balls of his feet. “Our efforts were imperfect, yes, I admit it, but that is still no cause for destruction. And now I will finish the work. I will create something amazing.”

“Our efforts?” The sick feeling was back in Steve’s gut, churning as realization broke over him slowly.

Martin set the syringe down, keeping the weapon trained on Steve, and began using his now-free hand to fumble with Bucky’s sleeve.


The doctor got the sleeve rolled up to the elbow and his fingers danced on Bucky’s exposed forearm, searching for a vein. “Very good, Captain Rogers. It took you long enough, but that’s still better than anyone in SHIELD has ever managed to do.” Martin glanced up and his lips pulled back from his teeth, something less than a grin but more than a snarl. “Shall I give you a medal for that? Write a little note in your psych file? ‘Captain Rogers finally figures out the obvious’. No, I think not.”
Steve took a deep breath. “What’s in that syringe, doc?” No answer. “What are you going to do to Bucky?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Steve realized it immediately, as the anger coloring Martin’s face flashed into rage. “Bucky! Who is Bucky? Some rat from America? You think he is special because he is your friend. He is nothing! The Winter Soldier is everything. All of my research, our years of effort… and you seek to destroy it all. For what? For whom? Nothing! Nobody!”

A low groan cut through Martin’s tirade. Martin stopped immediately, head turning away from Steve to focus completely on the man next to him. Steve’s heart leapt into his throat, because Bucky was looking straight at Martin, and his eyes were wide with recognition.

Martin lifted his free hand and ran it through Bucky’s hair, petting, like Bucky was an animal to be gentled. “Vanya,” Martin said soothingly, the anger ebbing from his face to be replaced by something even more dangerous. Obsession. A sick kind of love.

Bucky’s breathing sped up, and though his body stayed perfectly still, locked into place while Martin stroked and petted, Steve could see the fear in his eyes.

“It’s all right, Vanya, all right now,” Martin crooned. “Alexei is here to take you home.”

Steve saw Bucky tense involuntarily, and he shifted his feet, getting ready to take the lunge and pray. Martin’s gaze snapped up, focusing on Steve, and his finger tightened again on the trigger.

“Just one last obstacle to remove,” he said calmly, and madness glittered ugly and bright in his eyes. “One final loose end. This time there will be no one left who remembers ‘Bucky’.”

Steve threw himself forward desperately.

Martin fired.

The gun crackled, and the world abruptly lost cohesion. There were sparks shooting through his vision and it was like he was on fire. He felt himself falling, collapsing to the ground, and it hurt in a way a simple fall hadn’t been able to hurt since he was a very small child. He tried to breathe, but his lungs wouldn’t expand, and the world was rapidly turning grey.

His hearing remained long enough to hear Bucky calling his name, but then the darkness rushed up, and claimed him for its own.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…practically took him apart, man. With his bare hands, no less.”

“No weapons?”

“No one was going to give Ivan anything that could be a weapon, right? And Cap left his shield with Coulson just in case. Bare. Hands.”

“Jesus. And I thought Hulk was tough.”

“Nothing on our new friend there.”

Tony, Steve thought groggily. That was Tony’s voice. And the other one was… Clint.

“Glad he’s on our side,” Clint was saying.

“Yeah, well, that’s the question, isn’t it?”

“You mean it didn’t work?” Surprise.

“Seems to have worked, but that’s for the shrinks to say.”

“You were there. What do you think?”

Silence. “I think I’ve seen that look on a man’s face before. And if I had my way I’d never see it again.”

Steve Rogers pried his eyes open. This awakening was an eerie parody of the last time he’d come back to himself in SHIELD’s custody. There were bright lights, government-issue décor, voices murmuring in excitement on the edge of his hearing. Instead of radio static, though, the mechanical noises around him were recognizably the beeps and bleeps of modern medical technology. He blinked a few times, trying to focus, and wondered if he were dead.

“Whaaa…” he croaked. He had meant to ask ‘what happened’, but apparently that wasn’t happening right away.

Through his hazy vision, he saw Tony and Clint jump in surprise. Then Clint reached over, out of his frame of vision, and came back with some sort of cup-and-straw combination which he brought to Steve’s mouth. “Water. Drink.”

Steve obeyed, probably faster than was good for him, because it almost immediately turned into a coughing fit. Clint helped prop him up so he could breathe while Tony punched the intercom and called for a nurse.

“What. Happened?” he managed to get out, then wrapped his lips back around the straw and concentrated on drinking slowly.

“All hell broke loose,” Tony said, dropping into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs that seemed to be standard-issue at any government facility, decade be damned. “Martin showed up in the middle of your little training run. Hell of a thing. Apparently he’s a former Soviet scientist – ”
“We still don’t know how he got past the security screenings, and you’d better believe Coulson is shitting kittens about that,” Clint put in.

“He had one of the weapons the Chitauri brought with them when they invaded earth,” Tony continued. “Nasty thing. Tagged you with it.”

“Weapons clearance?” Steve managed to get out. That sounded better. More like his normal voice. Steve was proud of himself.

“Nope,” Clint said in disgust. “One of the junior agents manning the weapons locker was working with him. Mallorie James. She’s in custody now, and she’s singing like a bird.”

“Martin’s real name was Alexei Demidov, and he spend the first twenty years of his professional life working for the Red Room,” Tony picked up. “Came here after it was decommissioned, got himself a shiny new identity, and somehow or other ended up working for SHIELD. When the chance came up to get his hands on Bucky, apparently he couldn’t resist.”

“Bucky!” Steve reflexively started to struggle upright. Clint set the cup down and pressed him back to bed with a hand on each shoulder, and he was a pretty strong guy, but still Steve had to be really out of it for Clint to be able to hold him down quite that easily.

“Easy there, Cap,” Tony admonished him. “You took a pretty bad hit. That metabolism will have you back on your feet sooner than Bucky, but you’re still looking at a couple more days of bed rest.”


“Depends on your definition of ‘okay’,” Tony said. Steve stiffened, and Clint shot Tony a Look.


“Then why are people waiting for him to wake up?”

“They tranqed him,” Tony said, looking at Steve like he was a particularly dim robot. “Martin showing up was a major spanner in the works, and no one had any idea what was going to happen. They didn’t want to let Ivan on the Quinjet, if the whole thing was a bust, now did they? Figured it would be easier to get him back in lockup if he were unconscious. They’re gonna keep him under for a while longer and run a bunch of tests. Then they’ll wake him up and we’ll find out what’s what – ” Tony waved a hand vaguely at his own head. “Upstairs.”

Steve took a moment to grab the urge to dash immediately to Bucky’s bedside and stuff it firmly back in its closet. He’d Have Words with Coulson later – though, come to think of it, he could probably make a pretty shrewd guess who Coulson had tapped to put a tranq dart into the Winter Soldier from helicopter height. Steve flicked Clint a sharp look, and Clint had the grace to look slightly embarrassed, but shrugged his shoulders anyway. “Hey, man, what am I gonna do? It was that or leave him there on the ground.”

Steve shook his head. “Yeah. I guess.” He would have thought, after the army and all of the dangerous, reckless, life-threatening stunts they’d pulled as the Howling Commandos, that Steve would have been used to Bucky being injured somewhere Steve couldn’t follow. SHIELD’s medical personnel are top-notch, he told himself sternly. And you are not a doctor.

“What happened?” Steve asked instead.
“After you went down, Bucky tackled Martin and practically ripped him apart with his bare hands,” Clint said in an awed tone. “That was like nothing I’d ever seen before. Natasha maybe comes close for finesse, and Hulk probably has more raw power, but, Jesus. I don’t want to be on that guy’s bad side if I can help it.”

“Won’t have to,” Steve mumbled. He’d just woken up, but he could already feel sleep pulling at him again. He was familiar with the process from the war. His enhanced metabolism actually exacerbated the effect; he would heal faster than the average man, but the energy drain on his body was terrific. “’S gonna join the Avengers. When ‘e’s better.”

“Yeah?” Clint asked, sounding pleased. “That’s great.”

“Great,” Tony echoed, sounding less convinced and more worried. Steve wanted to ask him about it, but the effort of talking was abruptly too much. He closed his eyes and let the tide start to pull him under.

“What’s with you?” he heard Clint ask Tony as he slid towards dreams. “You should be thrilled to add more muscle to the pack.”

“I just don’t know how many more people with anger management issues we can sign up before we self-destruct. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not exactly the most functional team on the best of days.”

“You’re just jealous someone out here has more issues than you,” Clint joshed back good-naturedly.

“It’s a burden, being as awesome as I am,” Tony admitted without a trace of modesty.

Steve grinned a little to himself, and then sleep finally took him.

The next time Steve woke up, Stamford was sitting next to his bedside. She was apparently absorbed, typing rapidly on her laptop, but the moment Steve blinked his eyes open she closed the lid and set it aside.

“Good morning, Steve,” she said softly.

“Doc,” he said in return, pleased to find that his voice was functional right out of the gate this time.

“How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good,” Steve answered after a moment of self-investigation. “Mostly I’m just tired. That’s pretty normal for me after a big fight,” he added, just in case she hadn’t read his entire medical file. The quick twitch at the corner of her mouth proved that Steve could have saved his breath.

“That’s good to hear, but I was actually asking about your mental state.”

“Um.” Steve blinked. He attempted to find an answer to her question and failed spectacularly. “I have no idea.”

Stamford sighed, leaning forward. “Steve, I owe you a very large apology.”
Steve opened his mouth to ask what for, then shut it again. He nodded, slowly. “Martin.”

“Yes.” She shook her head. “I should have been monitoring his interactions with you far more closely. I’ve gone back through the transcripts, and it’s pretty clear he edited them heavily, but it’s still apparent that you haven’t actually been getting all the help you need.”

“You’re in charge of an entire department,” Steve said uncomfortably. “And I can’t be the only agent in therapy.”

“You’re not, but that’s not the point. Even if Martin hadn’t turned out to have his own agenda, you never clicked with him, and that would have been reason enough to reassign you. If I had read his reports in more depth that would have been plain. I’ve talked with Alvarez and some of your teammates, and I know you’ve been having more trouble than you were willing to let on.”

“I’ve been managing.”

“Yes, you have. You’re an incredibly resilient person, and I’m grateful Martin didn’t manage to do more damage.” She smiled at him a little, an approving expression.

“I’ll be okay,” he said, not wanting her to worry.

“Yes, you will. I’m going to make sure of it. I’m taking your case back over myself.”

“What about Bucky?” Steve demanded automatically. He started to push himself up to a more seated position, wincing a little as he leaned on what was probably an impressive bruise, but determined to look as healthy and normal as possible. “You’ve got to stay with him, doc. He needs you way more than I do.”

“Steve,” she sighed. “I am capable of having two patients at once.”

“From what I understand, Bucky already is two patients at once,” Steve answered, and wasn’t that just a hell of a thing, but it wasn’t important right now. What was important was making sure Stamford didn’t spend too much of her time on him. He wasn’t the important one here.

He looked up to find Stamford studying him critically. “That’s Martin speaking,” she said sternly, and it took Steve a moment to realize she was responding to his thoughts instead of his words. “Don’t look at me like that; when you get off onto one of your self-deprecating tangents, it’s written all over your face.”

“It’s still true,” he muttered.

“You’re naturally modest, and the circumstances of your childhood taught you to place the welfare of those you love before your own. Martin played on those tendencies to see how far he could push you.”

“And he was fishing for information about Bucky,” Steve said quietly.

Stamford was silent for a moment. “Yes.”

“He wanted to take Bucky somewhere,” Steve told her. “Finish what the Red Room started and bring the Winter Soldier back, the way he wanted him to be.”

“We know. SHIELD agents are trying to find his facility. We have two other known associates in custody, in addition to the junior agent who got him into the weapons locker.” Stamford paused. “They’re talking. It’s just a matter of time.”
“Okay.”

The silence stretched, finally breaking when Stamford shifted in her chair and drew Steve’s attention. “When you’re feeling better, we need to start talking about what Martin may have done to you, therapeutically.”

“Well.” Steve sighed, suddenly weary with more than battle-induced exhaustion. “In retrospect, doc, I think he was screwing with me.”

“I think so too,” Stamford said steadily, not rising to the bait. She folded her hands in her lap. “Did you sense anything off at the time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Yeah, kind of.” Steve scrubbed a hand through his hair. “We didn’t click all that well, but – everyone kept saying therapy was a process, and not to expect too much too fast. I was moving faster when I was working with you, but Martin said that was normal, that everyone made a lot of progress at first and then it slowed down. Alvarez said the same thing, and so did Bruce and Tony and… well… I just didn’t want to rock the boat.” Because after all, most of the Avengers had psychiatric problems of one stripe or another. Steve was nothing special, and they had all been dealing with their issues a lot longer than he had, and if they said that this was normal and they were all making do with the resources available to them, then Steve had no right to be any different. Especially not now that Bucky was lying unconscious in the high-security wing of medlab with seventy years of disassociation and brainwashing to deal with as soon as he woke back up.

“Steve.” Stamford’s voice was sharp. She was using her now-you-pay-attention-here-young-man tone. He’d heard it a lot in his first days out of the ice, and the familiar sound of it was almost enough to stop him in his mental tracks by itself. “No one wants to think of themselves as a burden, but you’re not depriving others of what should rightfully be theirs if you take the time to care for yourself.”

“Sure seems that way to me sometimes,” Steve finally whispered. He looked up, willing her to understand. “What I want most right now is for Bucky to be okay, and I know he’s going to need a lot of your time.”

“There is such a thing as too much therapy,” Stamford said calmly. “The mind can be overloaded, just as the body is if you train too hard or too long. There are more than enough hours in the day for me to attend to Bucky and you. The only thing that’s going to suffer is the state of my paperwork.”

Steve let out the breath he’d unconsciously been holding, letting himself slump back against the pillows and feel how tired he was. Physically and mentally; tired of working so hard at being ‘okay’ all the time. The truth was, he did want to go back to working with Stamford. She’d helped him so much when he’d first woken up, disoriented and confused after seventy years asleep. It was tempting to think of going back to that again.

“You’ll still be spending time with Alvarez,” Stamford said quietly, when it became apparent that Steve was mostly done arguing. “She’s been doing an amazing job, frankly, considering that every time she got you one step forward Martin was there pushing two steps back. Between the two of us, we’ll get you on track, all right?”


“Go back to sleep,” Stamford said, and Steve would have argued with her except that he was already falling backwards into darkness.
Two days later, Steve was just finishing a carefully-supervised workout cleverly disguised as physical therapy when Tony stuck his head into the gym. “Hey Steve,” he called over. “Just got it from JARVIS – Bucky’s awake. Thought you’d want to know.”

Steve sat up from the bench where he’d been lifting weights so fast his head spun a little and the nurse practitioner who had been spotting him frowned in displeasure. To mollify him, Steve grabbed his thermos and drank half of whatever medlab had put inside, something that tasted like sweaty socks but was probably full of electrolytes. “Is he okay? What’s going on?”

“Easy there, tiger, you can’t go in right now anyway. They called Stamford as soon as Bucky was conscious and Fury’s doubled the guard just in case. No one in or out until psych gives the okay.”

Steve groaned in frustration. “That’s not fair.”

“Want me to hack the door codes?” Tony offered, eyes bright at the thought of a challenge.

Steve rolled one shoulder, seriously considering it. “Not right away,” he decided finally. “I’m going to try reason and logic first.”

Tony scoffed. “Yeah, okay, and when that doesn’t work?”

“I’ll let you know,” Steve answered.

“Look, I appreciate your position, Captain Rogers, but you have to appreciate ours,” Coulson said sternly.

“And what is your position?” Steve asked, trying to hold on to his temper.

“That until Dr. Stamford makes her report, we can’t be sure that the man in that hospital room is your childhood friend, and not a murderous assassin out to destroy everything we value.”

“I was there,” Steve said desperately, trying to get through. “It worked, Coulson, I’m telling you.”

“You missed the end,” Coulson said firmly. Steve knew that tone of voice. That was the tone that said Coulson was going to dig his heels in, and neither hell, high water nor a personal appeal from his boyhood hero were going to move him in the slightest. Coulson must have seen Steve come to that realization, because his own stance relaxed slightly and his face and voice took on a more human cast. “It shouldn’t be long. I know how you feel, but we have to think of the wider safety implications. We’re in the middle of one of the most populated cities on the planet. Can you honestly say protecting all of those lives isn’t worth waiting a few hours longer?”

Steve winced. “That’s not playing fair.”

Coulson smiled. “That’s not my job.”
Stamford remained locked in with Bucky for the longest five hours of Steve’s life. Steve spent the time alternately pacing, trying to work out but being barred by the medical staff on the grounds of his continuing recovery, and repulsing the offers of various Avengers to talk with him and keep him company. They meant well, he knew, and if their positions were reversed he would be doing the same thing, but he just wasn’t up to dealing with anyone until he knew whether or not Bucky was going to be okay.

Natasha joined him after a few hours, but made no attempt to engage him in well-meaning conversation. She just appropriated a chair from an empty room nearby, placed it in a hallway nook next to a potted plant, and folded herself in without a word. When he glanced over, she had tucked her knees up to her chest and did not look back.

Steve thought that maybe that her presence here was a positive sign, an indication that her complicated relationship with the Winter Soldier was smoothing out into something more comfortable. He hoped it was, anyway, because he was planning a future where the Winter Soldier stood at Captain America’s right hand, and it was going to be hard to achieve any kind of team unity if Natasha thought Ivan was going to murder her in her sleep some night.

Steve was reduced to haunting the corridor outside the high-security wing when the door slid open and Stamford emerged, trailing Coulson and several junior medical and psych types. She looked unmistakably weary, but there was something in the set of her shoulders that Steve thought with rising hope bespoke triumph.

“Doctor Stamford, I need to hear your evaluation as soon as possible,” Coulson was saying, quickening his steps to catch up with her as she pushed into the hallway.

“I’m only saying this once,” she answered him, catching Steve’s gaze and motioning he and Natasha closer. “You’ll have my full report later, of course, and we’re going to continue round-the-clock attention – Jones, get Alvarez up here, she’s on in twenty.” One of the junior staffers nodded and took a few steps away, speaking rapidly into his headset.

“What happened?” Steve asked, heart in this throat.

Stamford smiled. “We did it.”

Steve actually swayed on his feet right then and there, and maybe he had been overdoing it a little for having just gotten out of medlab himself, but the rush of relief was so powerful he thought it would have left him lightheaded no matter what his physical condition.

Stamford continued on. “Martin’s appearance was a serious concern, but it may actually have worked out for the best.” She shook her head in what looked like astonishment. “With unexpected stressors like that, the main worry is that the subject will suffer a psychotic break. But in some cases it works to produce the opposite effect. The effect of the survival instinct on the psyche can be a very powerful thing. Steve, your being in danger caused both Bucky and the Winter Soldier to want to act to protect you. The basis they laid for jointly accomplishing that goal is amazingly strong. We’ll be able to build on that foundation.”

“And Ivan?” Coulson wanted to know. His assistants were scribbling furiously.

“Gone,” Stamford answered. “His skills will remain, as will occasional flashes of – let’s call it situational awareness. Learned habits that express themselves at an instinctual level. But the
scenario worked as intended. Ivan was already on his way to peacefully resolving when Captain Rogers was injured. The sudden cohesion of Bucky and the Winter Soldier successfully absorbed and subsumed what was left of him.”

“Will that have any side effects?”

“Of course.” Stamford looked at Coulson like he was nuts, which had to be a new experience for everyone present. “What you need to know is that Martin triggered an acceleration of the treatment path we had already planned, not an alteration. The side effects are those we’d already anticipated.”

Steve let this pass through him as background noise. Later he’d pin Stamford down and have her tell it all again, maybe more slowly and with a lot more detail. Right now he asked the only question that mattered. “Is he Bucky?”

Stamford smiled. “More Bucky than he has been since he fell off that mountain in nineteen forty-five.”

Steve let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and asked the second question. “Can I see him?”

“I’m afraid Agent Coulson will have the final say on that – ” she glanced at him “– but therapeutically, there’s no reason why not, and several very excellent reasons for.”

“I don’t want you going in there alone,” Coulson said cautiously. “Just in case.”

Steve looked around. “There’s no one really – ”

“Doctor Alvarez will be here soon,” Coulson suggested.

“Coulson,” Natasha said wearily from behind Steve. It was the first time she’d spoken aloud since she’d joined Steve in his vigil; she looked drained and ready to collapse. But she gave Coulson a Look Steve couldn’t interpret, and after a moment he nodded.

“All right. Five minutes.” He held up a finger. “And if you’re not out in that time, Captain Rogers, my men are breaking down the door.”

“Fine.” Steve grinned in sheer relief, already moving past the small group. “Just fine.”

“Five minutes!” Coulson called after him, and then Steve was through the door and into the high-security ward. He could see Bucky through the glass, still in bed and looking even more wiped than Natasha, but awake and watching back. He saw Steve looking and drew in a breath, startled and hopeful and hesitant all at the same time.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed. For the first time since they’d brought him here, the door between the observation lounge and Bucky’s room opened to Steve’s touch, and then Steve was perching carefully on the bed next to Bucky and brushing the hair back from his eyes, feeling Bucky’s hand find his and squeeze tight.

“Heya, Steve.” Bucky’s voice was rough and quiet but still understandable, and Steve didn’t even care because he sounded like himself. Not just the tone and the accent, but the confidence, the sense of self. Listening to Bucky going in and out of reality during the escape from Karkoff’s prison had been terrifying, the way Bucky had lost hold of things like time and place between appearances. He had sounded lost, confused, every time he spoke. Now, although his voice was weak, Bucky sounded clear, aware and rooted in the present. Steve squeezed their hands together
and laughed a little in sheer relief.

“Heya, Bucky.”

“You’re really here.” Bucky blinked nervously. “I was afraid it was all another dream.”

“Another one?” Steve sat cautiously on the side of the bed, not sure if Bucky could deal with having him that close but unable to make himself sit as far away as the plastic chair.

“Yeah, I… I used to dream about you.” He swallowed. “When the Red Room was conditioning me.”

“Jesus.” Steve swallowed. He didn’t know if this was anywhere near the right time or place, but he couldn’t go another minute without at least trying to apologize. “I’m so sorry, Bucky, I’m – God. I wanted to go after you – I thought you were dead, but I was going to come back and get your body, at least, but Schmidt – Red Skull – he had these bombs, he was aiming them at New York, and I had to take the plane down…” he shook his head, clutching Bucky’s hands tighter. “I am so sorry,” he whispered, unable to look at Bucky, and tried very hard not to cry in shame and frustration.

“No, Steve, don’t;” Bucky said softly. His hand tangled itself in Steve’s hair. “Please. They told me all about it, what you went and did. I wasn’t worth millions of people’s lives, Steve, God, of course not. No one is, and I’m not even…” Steve saw Bucky’s shoulders droop, the determined lines of anguish settling back in around his eyes and mouth. After the fleeting moment without them earlier, they seemed even more pronounced, and their presence hit Steve like a punch in the gut. Bucky shook his head, squeezed Steve’s hands where they held his own. “I’m just an ordinary guy. Or I was, anyway. Now I’m something else.”

“No,” Steve insisted, holding onto Bucky more tightly. He tried to say something else, about how Bucky had always worked twice as hard as everyone else, always thought of something to do when he saw someone in need. How Bucky falling off that mountain had been what gave Steve the courage to put Red Skull’s plane down in the water. But the words stuck sideways in his throat, and they wouldn’t come out.

“I did a lot of things,” Bucky told him, shadows moving behind his eyes and spilling out into the bright room. “I remember them all, now.”

“Ivan did those things.”

“Ivan wanted to do those things,” Bucky whispered. “But we all did them. He used my skills. My hands.”

“Bucky –”

“I’m not just Bucky anymore!” The cry was an involuntary one, laced with despair, and when Steve finally got Bucky to look at him again his friend’s eyes were wet. “Ivan’s gone, at least I think he’s gone, but the Winter Soldier is still here. He’s gonna be here for the rest of my life, Steve. I’m not the Bucky you used to know. I’m not the Bucky you wanted back.”

“Bucky.” Steve shook his head helplessly. “I don’t care.”

“I can still hear his voice, Steve. I can think like him, be him when I need to be. He’s me, too, now.” Bucky’s shoulders trembled, and he almost choked. “Devil’s gonna follow me wherever I go.”

Steve had never been good with words, something Stamford had bemoaned often, but he’d never cursed that trait in himself as thoroughly and feelingly as he did now. He fell back on action
instead, climbing bodily into bed with Bucky and pulling the smaller man into his arms. There were wires everywhere to be careful of, heartbeat monitors and IV lines and other things Steve didn’t understand. Bucky was simultaneously bigger than he’d ever been before, in the orphanage or as young men in Brooklyn, and smaller than he’d ever been relative to Steve. And all of that made wrapping Steve’s arms around Bucky awkward in a way it had never been, ever, but Steve did it anyway and held on tight and refused to let go.

“Then we’ll stand back-to-back, Bucky, and he won’t be able to sneak up on either of us,” Steve whispered, wishing he had something more than a military analogy to give, but offering it up anyway because it was the best he had and Bucky had always deserved his best, even when it wasn’t good enough.

Bucky swallowed up something that might have been a sob, and he shivered for a moment as if he wanted to rip himself away from Steve. But he let Steve go on holding him, and they stayed like that until Alvarez knocked on the door.

“Good evening, Steve.” Stamford stepped into the observer’s room quietly, seeming unsurprised to find him standing there, only a few inches away from the two-way glass, even though it was the far side of midnight and he was theoretically still on mandatory bed rest. “Trouble sleeping?”

“Think it’s morning now,” Steve said by way of reply. The lights in medlab were low; the speakers between partitions were off and the glass was set to its one-way configuration. Steve could watch Bucky sleeping without being afraid his presence would disturb him.

“Take that as a yes.” Stamford came up to the window beside Steve. Her gaze was directed towards Bucky, or… whoever she saw him as. What did any of the Avengers see when they looked at him? Steve saw Bucky, only Bucky, even through the scars, the deadness that was lingering in his eyes, the metal of his arm. But maybe the others still saw the Winter Soldier. God knew, when they had been running through Karkoff’s warren with three different people sharing space in Bucky’s head, or fighting Ivan in the scorching heat on an old highway choked with weeds, it had been hard enough even for Steve to see his best and oldest friend behind the façade of madness.

“I’m just... thinking,” Steve answered. “Like you told me to. Trying to figure out how to talk about things.”

“That’s good,” Stamford said, but her voice was cautious. “And how much of this thinking has included blaming?”

Steve tensed. “Not much,” he lied, while the voice in the back of his mind repeated your fault, your fault, your fault.

It still sounded remarkably like Bucky.

“Steve,” Stamford sighed. She was quiet for a moment and now her focus really was on Bucky, considering and weighing. “You know I’ve been working with Bucky around the clock since your little song and dance. And I can tell you that he does not blame you for what happened to him after he fell off the train.”

“He should,” Steve muttered. “I left him there, Doc. He was counting on me to come back for him and I didn’t.”
“No, you were too busy saving New York from a major disaster,” Stamford said firmly. “Steve, that’s what he would have wanted you to do. I know you’ve asked him yourself and he’s told you the same thing.” Silence. “Steve?”

“I should have been able to do both,” he said quietly. “What good is being Captain America if I can’t save the world and the person who’s most important to me?”

“That’s not how it works,” Stamford said gently. “You’re not a superman. Just an ordinary man with a little bit of a boost.” Steve shook his head, and she sighed. “Steve, Bucky does not blame you. Not ‘just a little bit’, not quietly where no one can hear him, not even subconsciously.” She turned to face Steve, leaning one shoulder up against the glass and cocking her head back towards Bucky. “I’ve been doing this a long time. Do you have any idea how rare that is? How complete the trust has to be between two parties before you get to that level of acceptance?”

Steve shrugged uncomfortably. “We’ve known each other for a long time, I guess.”

It sounded weak even to his ears, and Stamford made a noise of frustration. “It’s not about that. Certainly length of acquaintance is a factor in relationships, but no amount of shared experience can forge acceptance while trust is lacking.” She took a deep breath, modulated her tone somewhat. “There’s been a lot you haven’t been able to tell me out loud about your youth and early childhood. I’ve been waiting for you to be able to say it yourself, but that was because you needed that, not because I’m unable to read between your lines. So let me tell you for a change. You two were all to each other. You provided for each other, from the basic necessities like food and shelter to higher-order needs like emotional support and comfort. Siblings and married couples wish they were as close as you. And as someone who was part of that gestalt, you ought to know better than I do how much it would tear your friend apart if he knew you were standing here blaming yourself.”

Stamford tilted her chin up at the end of this pronouncement, and her eyes glittered with fire, daring Steve to object.

He didn’t. Instead he let his palm curl slightly where it was pressed against the glass separating him from Bucky. “I just slid beneath the waves,” he whispered, not looking at Stamford, “and went to sleep. While he…”

Stamford’s hand on his shoulder was meant to be comforting, he was sure. “Don’t say that what you went through wasn’t hard.”

“But don’t you see?” Steve’s hand clenched into a fist. “Whatever I went through, he had it a hundred times worse. If my journey was easy, that’s bad enough. If it was hard…”

Stamford was silent for a moment. “You thought he was dead,” she said finally. “I’m not downplaying what was done to Bucky; it was terrible, and it’s going to leave scars in places the eyes can’t see. But he never thought you were gone forever. Ivan spared him that, in a funny way. Bucky stayed in nineteen forty-five, where he got to believe you were going to come for him one day.” Her hand left his shoulder, and he automatically turned to follow its path, facing her. “Bucky had hope. You never did. I think that puts you on a more even footing than you think.”

Steve blinked. He opened his mouth and closed it again, because he honestly had nothing to say to that.

“Think about it,” Stamford said gently, and left him to his thoughts.
Once Stamford formally certified to Fury that Ivan was gone and Bucky no longer posed a danger to SHIELD personnel, Steve was allowed to visit in the late afternoons, after his own daily grind and Bucky’s were complete. Bucky was more together every time Steve saw him, slowly integrating memories from his missing years and learning how to balance being Bucky and the Winter Soldier at the same time. The ‘assassin’ thing was a whole different leg of therapy, but Stamford assured Steve that everything was proceeding remarkably well and he wasn’t to worry.

He did anyway, of course, and he was sure Stamford knew it, but that wasn’t the point.

“It’s kind of strange, remembering something that I did while I was him,” Bucky said to Steve one day. Steve was perched on the side of the bed, blatantly using the government-standard uncomfortable chair as a footrest. “It’s a little bit like watching back the footage they used to take of us, back when we were with the commandos. It’s all stuff you know you did, but there’s a little tag blinking down in the corner that reminds you it’s a recording someone else made.”

“Huh.” Steve considered this. “I never really liked watching those anyway. They always edited them to make me look like some kind of hero.”

“Steve, I don’t know how to break it to you, but those weren’t edited,” Bucky laughed. “You really were a hero.”

“Shaddup,” Steve muttered. He would have thought by now that he’d be used to people saying things like that, but however many times it happened he still wasn’t quite comfortable with it. He settled for punching Bucky lightly on the shoulder instead, a reflex action that was complete before he realized that the surface beneath his knuckles was metal instead of flesh.

Bucky fell silent for a moment, clearly lost in thought, and Steve didn’t interrupt. Silence was nice, too, with Bucky. Anything was nice with Bucky.

“Hey.” Bucky fiddled with the corner of his blanket, then took a deep breath. “Um, I don’t want to weird you out or anything, but. The Soldier. He, um, wants to talk to you.”

Steve blinked, not sure if he was weirded out or not, but definitely a little confused. “He can do that?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Bucky smiled a little. “It’s something we’re working on. We’re not really separate any more, the way we were for a while there, you know? We’re sharing memories now so we’re not confused all the time when we switch off. And eventually it’ll be less like switching and more like just being us all the time. But we can still do it at the moment and he wants to.”

“Okay.” Steve agreed. He was curious to know what the Winter Soldier had to say to him, and more than that he’d agree to anything Bucky thought would help, so there was really only one answer.

Bucky nodded. Then he closed his eyes and his fingers tightened on the blanket. His shoulders straightened slowly from their relaxed curve, and the tilt of his head changed. Not a lot, but enough to be obvious to Steve.

The eyes opened, and a stranger looked out.

“Captain America,” the Winter Soldier said quietly. His voice was less gravelly now, and his accent was noticeably less pronounced, some of the consonants flattening out into the familiar Brooklyn cadence. “I wished to thank you personally.”
“Thank me?” Steve frowned a little and shook his head. “I’m – ”

“For saving me,” he continued.

Steve took a deep breath of his own. “I wasn’t sure you’d approve of the result,” he said steadily, because however much it scared the heck out of him to say out loud, however much he wanted Bucky to just come back and be okay, he just wasn’t wired to lie about anything really important. And there was nothing more important than Bucky, so.

The Winter Soldier smiled. “But I do. I wished to say so because I think perhaps you do not understand, and someone was not doing a very good job of explaining it to you.” The smile turned inward a little. “Before, when I was working alone, it was not a very pleasant experience to be me. Often times I was not me. That is a very terrifying thing.”

“I can understand that,” Steve answered honestly, thinking of the first days after he’d come out of the vita-ray chamber, the way people who had known him before the change looked at him and acted around him. That had been bad enough, trying to figure out who he had become, an old mind in a new body. Being a new mind in an old body had to have been at least that scary.

“I wished to find answers,” the Winter Soldier continued. “To discover who I was, and who I could become. Now I have learned those things. You helped me, and I am grateful.”

“So you are… that is, you’re okay to…” Steve fumbled, wishing he had the right words.

“I have been dreaming for a very long time,” the Winter Soldier said. “Now I am awake. So I will say once more – thank you.”

He smiled at Steve, and then he was gone.

“Jesus,” Steve said faintly.

The grin turned wry, and the tilt of the head was unmistakably Bucky’s again. “He’s got a way with words.”

“You heard that?”

“Of course.” Bucky took a deep breath, like he was getting ready to charge a HYDRA base, and tucked his knees up to his chest – technically a no-no, with his injuries, but Steve recognized the position as one that meant Bucky was feeling vulnerable. “You gotta stop thinking of us as two different people, Steve.”

Steve bit his lip and looked down for a moment, trying to wrap his head around that. “Ivan was a different person.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed softly. “But the Winter Soldier and I – aren’t. Look, it’s like – you know how when you’re Captain America.”

“Well, sure, but that’s – ”

“It’s really not,” Bucky said, finishing Steve’s sentences the way they used to as kids. That made Steve smile a little, involuntarily, and blunted some of the weirdness of what Bucky was saying. Helped make it seem like less of a big deal, because Bucky still curled up when he was worried about something and could read Steve’s mind when they talked. “You think kind of differently, don’t you? You’re worried about your image or whatever, and the people who are depending on you, and the mission, and all that stuff. Captain America doesn’t always think the same way or do
the same things that plain old Steve Rogers would, right? It’s not any different. Or at least it’s not going to be.”

“I never thought I was Captain America to the exclusion of being Steve Rogers,” Steve said softly, hating himself for saying it but wanting desperately to understand.

Bucky shrugged a little. “Yeah, well, you never got worked over by the Red Room either.” He touched Steve’s arm swiftly, taking the sting from the words. “But I bet some of the people around here still think of you as the shield first and the man second, am I right?”

Steve swallowed uncomfortably. “Yeah.”

“Well, so,” Bucky said as if that explained everything. “Look, don’t worry too hard about it, okay? You’ll see for yourself. I’m better at showing than telling anyway.”

“All right,” Steve said finally.

“Hey.” Bucky gave him a look, because, yes, he could still tell what Steve was thinking. “When Doc Erskine fried you up with vita-rays, did you come out of that chamber the same way you went in?”

Steve hesitated. He really, really wanted to say yes; had been saying yes to anyone who asked, saying it loudly and repeatedly for seventy years. But Bucky had always known him better than anyone else, and Bucky could always tell when he lied.

“No,” he admitted. “I was – close, and I still thought and felt the same way about a lot of things. The core of me didn’t change, but – no, I wasn’t the same.”

“It’s a little bit like that,” Bucky said gently. “It’s still mostly me, Steve, really.”

Steve took a deep breath, considering that, and saw that Bucky was holding his own breath. It made Bucky look like he was afraid of Steve, like he was waiting for Steve to judge him or reject him, and that was just wrong. Steve reacted without thinking, as he often did when Bucky was involved, but that was okay because usually Steve’s heart knew what it was doing better than his head in these situations.

“Yeah, okay.” Steve nudged Bucky. “When did you start being so smart about this stuff?”

“When I started being under twenty-four-hour psychiatric care,” Bucky answered back, relaxing his posture and grinning in that familiar, charismatic, heartbreaking way Steve had thought he would never see again. Steve couldn’t help but smile back at it, and whatever else was going to happen, whatever form this new Bucky was going to take and however their lives were both going to change as a result of that, Steve couldn’t worry about it too much right now. Because Bucky was smiling at him, and as long as he kept doing that, Steve could believe that everything would be all right.

“I heard that SHIELD found Martin’s facility,” Steve said.

Stamford nodded. “Yes, we did.”
“How?”

She tapped her pen against her desk. “He owned a small Cessna he kept on a private air strip just south of Trenton. Not under his own name, of course. Once they tracked it back to him, they were able to pull his GPS and various radio beacon records. That was enough to let them figure out where he was spending all of his time off.”

“With Karkoff,” Steve said, because that wasn’t a question. He had already realized that Martin – Demidov – must have been the man behind Karkoff’s attempts to repatriate the Winter Soldier, the one whose notes SHIELD had recovered.

“And in Kiev.”

“Is that where his facility was?”

“Yes.”

Steve wet his lips. “Do I want to know?”

“Only you can answer that.”

Steve looked past Stamford, out the window and over the city. After a moment he said, “Tell me.”

She looked at him for a moment. “He had everything he would have needed to succeed. All he had left to do was get Bucky there.”

Steve swallowed.

“We stopped that from happening,” Stamford reminded him. “Martin – Demidov – is dead. SHIELD has destroyed his equipment. Even now teams are tracking down any copies of the Red Room’s notes that still exist on the open market. Information destruction is never an exact science, but they’ve been doing this sort of thing for a long time. Bucky’s as safe as he can be, realistically.”

Steve scrubbed his eyes with his hands. “Why?” he asked, finally. “What drives someone to – to do all of this?”

“We’ll never know for sure,” Stamford demurred. “He’s dead; we can’t ask him questions.”

“But you’ve guessed.” Steve held her eyes, and she sighed.

“Demidov was recruited into the Red Room in the seventies, well after the completion of the original Winter Soldier project. He was part of a group tasked to keep Ivan stable. Even with cryosleep, the Soviets were making enough use of the Winter Soldier that cracks were beginning to appear in his programming.” Her lips tightened. “My belief is that Demidov became obsessed with what he saw as the project’s failure. He felt that if he had been involved in the original creation of the Winter Soldier, their efforts would have succeeded.”

Steve shook his head. ‘Ego.”

“In the end,” Stamford agreed.

“But he got out of Russia after the Red Room was disbanded. He came to work for SHIELD. He passed all our checks somehow.”

“Yes,” Stamford sighed. “There are agents investigating what his motives were and what other harm he might have done. We don’t think he came here specifically for the Winter Soldier. At the
time he started working for us we were focused on the Avengers Initiative and dealing with the fallout from suddenly having people like Banner and Thor around. Human assassins just weren’t making our radar.”

“What changed?”

“Demidov had had access to the original Winter Soldier files. When I assigned him to your case, he read your file and realized that the Red Room’s subject and your childhood friend were one and the same.” She shook her head. “If I had to guess, I’d say that he was pumping you for information about Bucky to try and learn what it was that had prevented the Red Room’s methods from achieving their goal.”

Steve stared out the window. “And then, when SHIELD decided to try to bring the Winter Soldier in…”

“Demidov saw an opportunity to finally accomplish what he had been denied so long ago,” Stamford finished.

Steve shook his head. “The worst part is, I kind of know what Demidov felt like.”

“What do you mean?” Stamford asked sharply.

“When I found out the Winter Soldier was Bucky, and you said you might have a way to bring him back again, I felt like I had the chance to finally fix my old mistake, too. Like that would somehow make up for letting him fall.”

“Are you trying to tell me that that’s the only reason you acted?” Stamford challenged. “You weren’t thinking about Barnes’ welfare? You weren’t beating yourself up trying to choose the option that was best for him?”

“I tried to be.”

“I think you were terrified of making things worse for Bucky. And from what Tony told me, you had to be yelled at pretty hard before you could consider anything beyond your fear.” Stamford tapped her pen significantly. “That seems pretty different to me. Demidov wasn’t interested in what was best for Bucky. He was interested in what was best for himself.”

“I froze up,” Steve said in frustration. “I was so worried about being too selfish that I almost made the wrong choice.”

“It’s always easy to see which choice is correct in retrospect,” Stamford pointed out. “At the time, you had legitimate reasons to consider the safer path.”

“Maybe I did, but I’m not usually so…” Steve raked a hand through his hair, trying to explain. “Indecisive? Unsure?”

“You said that you were worried about being selfish.”

“Yes!” Steve leaned forward. “I was afraid that wanting Bucky back so much was keeping me from being objective.” He shook his head. “And now I’m not sure how much of that was really me and how much of that was Demidov.”

Stamford nodded slowly. “Some of both,” she said. “You have a history of feeling like your own feelings and needs are less important than those of others. But Demidov was definitely pushing your buttons on this subject.”
“And when I was trying to decide, and I kept thinking about Bucky coming back and maybe getting a second chance with him, I felt more and more like I was making the wrong decision.” Steve leaned back in his chair and sighed. This was leading straight to the big one, the thing that had finally started to crystallize for him when he’d realized exactly how many missing places Bucky used to fill up just by being present in Steve’s life. Natasha had put her finger on it, right enough, when she’d talked to him the night before the op. In retrospect, it had been there the entire time; Steve had just never stopped to realize exactly what Bucky had really meant to him.

He took a deep breath. “The whole thing, it really made me realize that I… well… I think maybe I have some feelings here.” He cleared his throat. “For Bucky.”

“Some feelings,” Stamford repeated neutrally. Steve looked up in surprise. Stamford looked as if she were doing her absolute best to keep her face straight, but failing miserably.

“Oh.” Steve swallowed. Out of the past, he thought he heard Peggy laughing at him, fond and indulgent and wholly unsurprised. Did Peggy know, too? After all, if Natasha had been able to tell…He tried to smile. “That obvious, huh?”

“A little,” she admitted, allowing something of a smile to peek through. “But you were clearly not ready to acknowledge anything before.”

“Yeah, well,” he sighed. “It’s a lot, you know?”

“Yes, I do,” Stamford said, and now her tone was serious. She tapped her pen against her pad. “Have you talked with Bucky about this yet?”

“No. He just got rid of Ivan, he’s got a lot to deal with. He doesn’t need this on top of everything.” Steve shook his head. “We just got him back. He’s still going to be… what I mean is, if it took me this long to figure out what I think I’ve been feeling all along, he’s not going to be ready to hear it yet, right? Even if he would be interested.” Which Steve had absolutely no proof would be true, except a dim longing and a sense that maybe all of the stuff Bucky had done for him wasn’t motivated solely by friendship.

Stamford tipped her head from side to side, a considering motion. “The psyche is a complex place,” she said thoughtfully. “We focus on one thing at a time as a way of narrowing the scope, but that doesn’t mean all of your issues aren’t interrelated. Bucky’s issues, too. If this is affecting you, there’s a good chance it will affect him through you. And he may be hiding feelings of his own.”

“I’d like to think so,” Steve said wistfully. “We’ve been through a lot together.” The words weren’t adequate to the weight of a shared lifetime, but Stamford was good at hearing what Steve didn’t say; he hoped she understood. “But he was always chasing girls back then. And… well… I don’t know.” That was uncomfortably close to the truth. Steve just didn’t know, and it made him afraid to try anything for fear of making things worse. He wanted what was best for Bucky, and maybe that meant going all the way back to how things used to be, when they were just two guys who looked out for each other.

Stamford shook her head and leaned back in her chair. “I’ve seen the video of Bucky’s fight with Demidov. It shows a fairly extreme reaction on his part. Why do you think that might be?”

“You mean after I went down for the count?” Stamford nodded, and Steve looked away for a moment, tapping one finger against the arm of his chair pensively. “Because he’s my best friend?” He shook his head. “Because he’s always had this thing going on where he thought he had to get between me and trouble?”
“That’s a powerful drive even for close friends,” Stamford observed. “I think maybe you need to
consider whether you’re not missing the forest for the trees, here.”
“Maybe.”

“Steve.” Stamford gave him a significant look. “You’ll never know unless you ask.”
“Right, right.” Steve sighed. “Talk about my problems. Communicate.” It wasn’t like he didn’t
know that was good advice. It wasn’t even that he was blind to the fact that, if he’d spoken up
sooner, Martin might not have managed to do quite so much damage. But Martin’s efforts were
still paying dividends even after his demise.

“Yes,” Stamford agreed. “Look. I don’t want you to feel pressured into this. Only you can know
when you’re ready to start dealing with it. I just want you to consider the evidence in front of you,
okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

Steve considered the evidence gravely while he worked up a sweat in the gym, then went over it
some more over a late afternoon snack. It was hard to peel back the blinders of a lifetime, and
Steve wished he’d never taken Bucky’s friendship and loyalty quite so much as a universal
constant, because it made it hard to step back and consider it impartially.

There was a lot there, but Steve honestly wasn’t sure if it meant anything at all.

Finally, he shook himself out of his daze and headed for the stairwell. The high-security medical
bay was only a dozen or so floors below the cafeteria, and all too soon Steve was pushing open the
door that led into Bucky’s wing.

“If you say so, doc.” Bucky’s voice was audible as Steve stepped into the observation room, and
Steve automatically slowed his steps. The glass was set to one-way, but the speakers must have
been left on. Bucky’s session appeared to be running late; Stamford was still comfortably
ensconced in a chair next to Bucky’s hospital bed, and didn’t look like she planned to go anywhere
anytime soon.

Steve turned around immediately, fully intending to walk right back out the door and leave them to
it. But a moment later the sound of his name caught his ear, and before he knew he’d done it he’d
walked right up to the glass. Steve had suspected, from some of the things that Stamford had said,
that Bucky was having as much trouble talking about Steve as Steve was talking about Bucky.
Maybe if he listened just a little, heard what Bucky had to say, it would be easier for him to speak
in turn.

Nosy, nosy, Bucky teased from memory. You just want to hear.

And since when have you and I ever had secrets from each other, Buck? he asked in return.

“That’s not what I mean,” Stamford was saying carefully. “I know that you and Steve have a lot of
history together – ”

“Look, just leave it alone,” Bucky whispered. Steve swallowed, breath catching in his throat a
little. He knew that tone of voice. Sometimes, Steve remembered uneasily, just sometimes, Bucky
would get a little… sad. Something melancholy would tug down his edges, something tired and
wistful and helpless lurking in the flicker of his eyes. When Bucky got that way, Steve would take that as a signal to do something special – go walk down to the park, maybe, or over to Coney Island. Or he’d sit down next to Bucky and start talking about anything and everything he could think of. The baseball scores, or a funny story he’d heard, or the woman he’d seen today strolling down Central Avenue, way too well dressed for the neighborhood and walking a poodle, of all things. Bucky would maybe laugh a little, and he’d lean into Steve a bit longer than usual, and pretty soon everything would be back to normal…

“Leave what alone?” Stamford asked slowly, like she was feeling her way into a new idea.

Bucky shook his head, something raw and painful visible now in his eyes. “Steve’s a good man,” he said, seemingly apropos of nothing, but the way Stamford leaned forward sharply told Steve that she, at least, had followed the mental leap. And Steve himself had a sinking feeling that he could as well. “He’s not like me, okay? He’s just a good person.”

“You’re very firm in your belief,” Stamford said carefully, and it would seem like an odd thing to say – everyone knew Captain America was A Good Person, like they knew water was wet and the sun was yellow and gravity pointed down – except that Steve was sure, now, sure with a cold feeling in his gut, that that was not really what this conversation was about at all.

“I’ve known him for a long time,” Bucky answered quietly. He paused for a long moment, then said, almost wistfully, “He’s kinda like my guardian angel, you know? They used to take us to church every week, in the orphanage, and the minister would talk about how you could figure out right from wrong by asking yourself what Jesus would do. Well, I never really got to know Jesus very well, so that wasn’t any good to me. But Steve’s another story. I could always figure out what Steve would do.”

“You’re saying that you looked to Steve as your moral compass.”

“I’m saying that Steve is a good man,” Bucky answered wearily, “so don’t – just – don’t. Okay?” There was another pause, as Stamford seemed to be staring at a point just past Bucky’s head. Steve had worked with her long enough to be able to tell she was thinking furiously. Bucky must have thought she was considering his request, though, because after a moment, he added, “Please.” And his voice cracked partway through it.

Stamford focused back on him at once. “Bucky,” she said slowly. “Steve…” And she stopped again.

“He doesn’t need to know,” Bucky said firmly, but underneath Steve could hear desperation. “We’ve been friends this long without… what I mean is, it hasn’t made a difference. You don’t have to worry about that, okay? It won’t affect anything.”

“I think we both know that’s not true,” Stamford said gently. “It’s affecting you a great deal. We’re trying to help you come back from the dead, and we can’t do that if there’s a part of you you want to leave behind.” She paused for a moment, then added, slowly, “And I think you’re wrong about it not affecting Steve.”

God. Stamford thought Steve was missing the forest for the trees; well, Steve had been missing the entire jungle. And there was Bucky thinking that Steve would reject him if he’d ever learned the truth. How long had Bucky loved him? Since the war? Brooklyn? The orphanage? On that well-remembered night long ago, when Bucky had woken Steve up and told him they were getting out of there, what had Bucky really been saying that Steve had been too deaf to hear?

“It’s fine,” Bucky insisted.
All those years of Bucky chasing girls like his life had depended on it. And maybe he’d even been right, in the army, in Brooklyn in the thirties. But Steve trying to emulate him, being dismayed at his failures, and turning to Bucky for advice – that was the awful part, because that would just have driven the point home further, that Steve wasn’t like that. That Steve was a good man.

He’d said something like that to Tony once, hadn’t he? When Tony was asking about Peggy – he’d said that Peggy had had faith in him, before the serum, and he’d wanted to reward that faith, show her that it was justified. Because back then, admitting that he’d felt that way about Bucky – even to himself – that would have been unthinkable. A violation of the trust everyone had placed in him. Doc Erskine. Peggy. Even Bucky himself, because Bucky had always thought Steve was a good man, and Steve couldn’t have borne letting any of them down.

“All right,” Stamford’s voice was firm. Bucky still had his head bowed, staring fixedly at his lap. “Look at me, Bucky.”

Slowly, Bucky did so. His hair fell away from his face, revealing desperation/defiance/fear/anger. The knuckles of his right hand were white with the force of his grip, and he looked ready to fight or flee.

Stamford took one look at him and shook her head. “You won’t believe a word I say right now,” she said resignedly. “You’ve spent too long hiding this from everyone to believe that I’m not trying to entrap you.”

“Maybe I know a little bit how government organizations work,” Bucky said flatly.

Steve felt his nails digging into his palms and consciously relaxed his grip, torn between wanting to go back in time to throttle his younger self, and walking right through that door right now to tell Bucky a thing or three about good men and Steve –

The motion of Stamford’s pen tapping against her notepad arrested both desires. “All right,” Stamford said, sounding surprisingly calm. “Let’s consider the problem from another angle, shall we?” She set her pad and paper aside, then leaned over and pulled an iPad out of her briefcase. Bucky eyed Stamford warily, but didn’t say anything as she tapped away at the screen. “Bringing you up to speed on what’s been going on in the last seventy years wasn’t going to be my first priority, but I can see that a little grounding in current events may be indispensable. It may surprise you to learn about some of the changes that have gone on while you were asleep. Socially as well as technologically.” Stamford handed over the iPad. Bucky stared, eyes wide.

“What is this?”

“The New York Times,” Stamford said with deceptive blandness. Steve recognized the glint in her eyes that meant she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. “I imagine it was pretty big in the 40s, right? It’s even bigger today. The views it’s expressing are representative of a majority of New Yorkers.”

“But this…” Bucky sounded absolutely bewildered.

“Mmm, yes.” Stamford leaned back in her chair, watching Bucky stare at the screen, then fumble with the device until he apparently figured out how scrolling worked. The look of shock on his face slowly began to give way to something that Steve couldn’t read. “It was a rather long time coming, you know. Quite the civil rights fight. There were parades, marches, sit-ins, the whole works. Nationwide support for that law has more than doubled in the last three years. The President has come out in support too, just recently in fact. It’s quite mainstream now. Certainly not illegal. And most definitely not at odds with being a good man in today’s world.”
Bucky swallowed and looked at the device he held in awe.

“You can use that to look up more information on the subject,” she said. “It will connect to general news archives.”

“I can hang on to it?”

Stamford nodded. “For the moment.”

“Thank you,” Bucky said, looking up to lock gazes with Stamford, letting her see his sincerity.

“You’re welcome,” Stamford answered with equal sincerity, then moved to get up. “Look into it, think about it, and we’ll talk more tomorrow, all right?”

She moved to begin gathering up her things, and Steve snapped back to reality. He ducked out of the room and backed several steps down the hallway. If Bucky made any response, Steve didn’t hear it.

A moment later, while Steve was wondering if he should retreat further or try to be mid-step when Stamford appeared, she emerged from Bucky’s room in a flurry of notepad, heels and folder. She stopped when she saw him and looked startled for a moment, then eyed him with something suspiciously approaching resignation. Steve swallowed and gave her his most disingenuous smile.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Stamford.”

“Good afternoon, Steve,” she replied, mirth dancing around the edges of her tone. “Here to visit Bucky?”

“Sure am,” he said warily.

“Well, don’t stay too long. He still needs a lot of rest.”

“Yes ma’am,” he agreed meekly.

“Good.” She started moving again, giving him a half-smile on her way by. Steve heard the elevator call button ding as he pushed the door open to Bucky’s room.

Bucky was still propped partly up in his bed, staring slack-jawed at the device in his hands. At the sound of Steve’s arrival he actually jumped a little, then winced, hands automatically going to press against his ribs. The movement caused him to drop the iPad into his lap, and even upside down Steve could read the headline: NEW YORK ALLOWS SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, BECOMING LARGEST STATE TO PASS LAW.

Bucky saw Steve staring and hastily grabbed the device back up, stuffing it under his pillow. “Just some reading material,” he said with a weak laugh. “Trying to catch up on what’s been going on. You know...” his voice trailed off. Hope and fear were visibly warring on his face, and he looked away, no doubt aware that Steve could read him easily. His shoulders trembled, and Steve ached in sheer sympathetic anguish.

Steve had to try a few times before his voice worked quite right. “Somehow no one got around to telling me about that one,” he said finally, hearing the surprise in his own voice.

“Huh.” Bucky was studying the weave of his blanket with great interest, steadfastly refusing to look at Steve.

Steve swallowed. Standing here in Bucky’s hospital room, watching Bucky look anywhere but
Steve, he wondered why on earth anyone had ever called Captain America brave.

*When it comes to therapy, shyness is kind of a four-letter word,* Stamford murmured in Steve’s memory.

Bucky was still looking down, fingers absently tracing patterns on the blanket, when Steve brought his hand up and placed it over Bucky’s. That part was easy, really, because whatever they had never said or done, physical contact had always come easily to both of them. Touch had been the only words they’d had often enough – after lights out in the orphanage, wrapped up together in the one bed back at Mrs. Dietrich’s row house, out the battlefront when reveille had been played and the campfires doused.

Bucky’s fingers twined around Steve’s now, tightened convulsively, and he looked up suddenly and caught Steve’s eyes. And though Steve couldn’t make himself say even a tenth of the things that were bubbling up in his throat right then, the lost look in Bucky’s eyes gave him the courage to speak. “I’m glad to find that out, though. Because I, I feel that way, you know, Buck. About you. I think I always did and I just didn’t know it, but. I know it now. And maybe now that it’s the twenty-first century and all… I mean, since we’re not in the army and, and everything, we could maybe… do something about it.” Pause. “If you wanted to.” Pause. “Oh, hell,” Steve said, and he had to laugh at himself, because the whole thing was just too much, he was either going to laugh or cry, and once he started breaking down he’d never stop. It would all catch up to him at once, Ivan and Karkoff and Demidov and all of the time they’d wasted, and he’d never be able to say all of the things he needed to say. So he laughed instead, helplessly, and clutched Bucky’s fingers tighter and said, “What I’m trying to say is, I love you, you punk.”

Bucky stared in shock, and for an instant the two of them were frozen there in silence. The words hung suspended in the air between them, and despite everything Steve had just heard Bucky say he still felt his stomach clench and his heart squeeze, waiting for the moment when Bucky yanked his hands away and looked back at him with shock slowly turning to disappointment.

Then Bucky blinked slowly, once, twice, a third time. He shook his head and said brokenly, “You utter jerk,” and then he was lunging forward, a sound like pain twisting out of him, tugging his hands out of Steve’s grip to grab his head instead and press their lips together.

Bucky tasted sweet on Steve’s tongue, fizzed down his spine and coiled in his belly like alcohol used to. Bucky’s hands cradled Steve’s face, thumbs stroking slowly down his cheekbones, and Steve wrapped one arm around Bucky’s waist to steady him and slid the other hand through Bucky’s hair and kissed him all the harder.

When they finally broke away, Steve was breathing hard and Bucky was red with embarrassment. Steve rested their foreheads together, unwilling to remove contact, and laughed a little with sheer exuberance. It turned out that kissing Bucky was *amazing*, and he planned on doing it again just as soon as he got his breath back.

“Wow,” Bucky whispered, and he was kind of starry-eyed, which Steve thought was pretty incredible. “Jesus, Steve, I… are you sure?” Underneath the stars, he still looked terrified.

“Absolutely,” Steve answered as firmly as he could, trying to reach the emotion still hovering just underneath the surface. “Yes, absolutely, I’m sure, you bet.” He was panting a little, like he’d been running a race, except running didn’t leave him out of breath anymore. He kind of liked that the way that thought felt, that only Bucky could really have this effect on him now.

“Steve, I…” Bucky shook his head a little, glanced away, and Steve could read doubt in the flicker of his eyelashes.
Steve gripped Bucky’s shoulders and took a deep breath. Bucky had always called him reckless, and willing to rush in where angels feared to tread, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Steve was only just now learning to put into its proper context. But Steve preferred to think of himself as *decisive*. When Steve Rogers figured out what he wanted, he just went out and got it, and that had always worked out pretty well for him so far. No matter how impossible his goal had seemed, determination and grit had gotten him through, and he saw no reason to stop now just because it was about his love life instead of enlisting in the army or blowing up HYDRA bases or saving the world. “Bucky.” He took another breath, waited for Bucky’s eyes to come back and meet his. “Marry me.”

Bucky’s eyes widened and he choked. “*What?*”

“You heard me,” Steve answered breathlessly. He kissed Bucky again, hard and deep like he was going to reach in and dig out all of Bucky’s insecurity and self-doubt with the simple contact of their mouths. “I mean it, Bucky, I really do. I’ve been an idiot – I didn’t want to let anyone down, not even you, don’t you see? I thought you wouldn’t like me – you always thought I was this, this…”

“You are,” Bucky whispered. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you differently, no matter what.”

“Not even you?” Steve asked. “Because this is how I feel. And if this is how I feel and that’s okay for me, then it’s okay for you too, right?”

“I.” Bucky swallowed, watching Steve like he was a mirage, like any moment he was going to vanish. “I guess so,” he said, sounding dazed.

“And what I want is you. I mean, all of it, not just…” he waved one hand somewhat awkwardly. “I want to share blankets and wake you up in the middle of the night with my nightmares and make breakfast at 3am and fight aliens together and come home to you and… and everything,” he finished, somewhat hurriedly. Bucky was staring at him and Steve swallowed. “What?”

“Your nightmares,” Bucky said faintly.

“Yeah, well.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “You don’t have a monopoly on that, is all I’m saying.”

“Steve.” Bucky shook his head fondly. “Never, ever change.”

“Right,” Steve said, and kissed him until he ran out of breath. “Hey,” he managed after a minute. “Um, I’m still waiting for an answer here.”

“Oh.” Bucky blinked a few times, and the tips of his ears turned red. “I, um. I think we should try having a few dates before we rush into marriage.”

Steve laughed again. He felt like he was laughing more right now than he had in the last eight months combined, but he couldn’t help it; things were finally right, the way they always should have been, and why shouldn’t he be happy? “Do I at least get a goodnight kiss?”

“Well,” Bucky started in what was probably supposed to be a low, growling, seductive tone of voice. The effect was somewhat ruined when he had to stop and cough, and Steve shifted his weight and helped Bucky lean to the side and spit into the attached sink before settling back onto the sheets with a wince. Bucky sighed a little, the light leaving his face as quickly as it had come.

“I’m still pretty messed up, Steve,” he said sadly. “I’ve got all this stuff going on in my head, and I’m never going to be quite the same. You know that, right?”
“Yeah,” Steve answered roughly. “But I don’t care. I just want you with me, Bucky. Yes, for the rest of my life,” he added, when Bucky’s gaze slid sideways and he looked like he was starting to doubt himself again. “It’s all I want.”

Bucky looked back up at Steve, and finally smiled like he meant it, like he was maybe starting to believe.

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After that, Steve practically moved into medlab. Kissing remained high on his new list of Favorite Things To Do With Bucky, but most of their time was actually devoted to talking. Steve thought that maybe they were making up for seventy years’ worth of lost conversations. They talked about the lives they’d once lived and the life they hoped to share. They reminisced about old times and made plans for everything they were going to do once Bucky got better, from heading back to Coney Island to saving the world from green-eyed aliens. They even, haltingly, talked about guilt and loss – Steve’s for never coming back for Bucky, and Bucky’s for having done the Red Room’s bidding.

Steve cornered Stamford as soon as possible after that first kiss and admitted that yes, she had been right all along, talking really did help, and could she tell him what the requirements were for getting a marriage license these days? She grinned and patted him on the shoulder fondly and promised never to tell anyone what an idiot he’d been. Then she told him there was no way they were making any kind of lifelong commitment until they’d been in therapy together for at least six months.

After time and therapy had done enough of their work so that the old wounds were healing and the new were no longer raw, Stamford folded Steve’s and Bucky’s afternoon sessions together and started talking seriously about the future. They talked about the Winter Soldier, and Captain America, and what it meant to live a life where going to work meant more than just putting on a jacket and tie and catching a train to the office. They were both signing up for jobs that involved danger and sacrifice and becoming a different person inside the suit than out of it, and Stamford drove them relentlessly through dealing with all the ways both Bucky and Steve had been irrevocably changed since they’d parted company a lifetime ago on the steps of the New York World’s Fair.

There was no magical moment where the grief and the pain and the guilt suddenly disappeared in a flash of healing light. But they held hands while they talked, and Steve kept his fingers pressed to Bucky’s wrist, feeling his pulse thrumming strong and steady against Steve’s flesh, and reminded himself that it was all over now.

“And just so you know,” Stamford said to them both one day, at the end of a long session as she was starting to pack up, “It’s okay to feel just a little bit glad about it, after all.”

Steve and Bucky both blinked at that, and Bucky asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Maybe you don’t realize it right now,” Stamford said, raising an eyebrow. “But once Bucky fell off the mountain, the odds against you ever being together again were enormous. It took a crazy series of events to bring your paths back together, from the way you both arrived seventy years outside your own time to the way you met again. It’s been a lot on you both.” Stamford finished putting papers back in her briefcase and closed its latches. “One of these days you’re going to wake up in the middle of the night and realize that there was no other way the two of you could have
been together again except to have gone through all of that. And then you’re going to feel glad you’re together, and guilty that you’re glad. Because even if you won’t listen to me when I say it, you’re both fundamentally good, decent men, and you’re going to think something must be wrong with you that you’re glad your partner went through hell if it means getting to see him again.”

Steve and Bucky shared a guilty look, and she smiled at the two of them. “So I’m heading that off at the pass right now. When you come to that realization – it’s okay. Better than okay, in fact, because it means you’re healing.”

“Healing?” Steve asked, faintly horrified.

“Focusing on the positive,” Stamford said gently. “Once you start doing that, once you start appreciating what you’ve got instead of obsessing about what you missed or how you messed up, you’ll be past the worst of it. When you get there, pat yourself on the back, because it means you’re finally starting to heal.”

As soon as Bucky was physically well enough to be let out of medlab, Steve went to Fury and insisted that Bucky be allowed to come home with him. Fury was less than entirely thrilled with the idea. He wanted Bucky to stay in SHIELD Tower, and he had an army of reasons. The ones he was willing to say out loud were “he’ll have better access to psychiatrists” and “the legalities of bringing someone back from the dead are complex”. The ones Steve heard in the silence between words were “we’re not sure we can trust him yet” and “we’re worried he might be a danger to himself, others, or you.”

Steve was stubborn, though, and to his surprise, Doc Stamford backed him to the hilt. She told Fury roundly that he had no business trying to do her job for her; physical proximity to therapists outside of treatment sessions had never yet been shown to markedly improve mental health, whereas a return to “as much normalcy as possible, given the circumstances” was not only desirable but downright vital to a successful recovery. Then she smiled politely at Steve and asked him to wait outside. Whatever Stamford and Fury discussed after that, he’d never know, because Fury’s office was soundproofed. But when they came out, Fury told Steve he could take Bucky home.

The doctors had a laundry list of things that Steve was supposed to do, including getting Bucky to take it easy and making sure he didn’t jostle his ribs or shoulder. Steve spent an afternoon setting up one of his spare rooms, stocking reading material, magazines, and water within easy reach. Tony tried to persuade Steve to take all sorts of things, from a robot who could vacuum and dust to a satellite TV package that included every channel on the planet. Steve resisted these offerings, not wanting to overwhelm Bucky – or himself, if he were being honest here – and Tony finally had to settle for promising to send them meals and an instruction manual for the coffeemaker so Bucky didn’t die of food poisoning or caffeine withdrawal while his ribs were healing. Steve protested that he could cook just fine, but Tony retorted that anyone who could eat the food from the SHIELD mess without complaining had obviously had their taste buds modified along with everything else in Doc Erskine’s chamber of vita-rays. Tony made Steve try some of his lunch as proof, and Steve stopped arguing in a hurry.

Steve brought Bucky home on a Wednesday. Tony loaned them a car and driver so they didn’t have to deal with the media or the hassle of maneuvering an injured man into a cab. When they crossed the bridge into the old neighborhood, Bucky grinned a little at Steve. “All the money they’ve got to be paying you in this outfit, and you still live here?”
Steve smiled back. “Who says you can’t go home, right?”

But when the car pulled up outside the towering apartment building and Steve saw Bucky looking around in vain for anything that remained of the neighborhood they had known, he admitted to himself that the saying was truer than either of them would like to think.

Bucky lasted about three hours in the guest bedroom before he was up and prowling around. Some of it was the ebb and flow of the Winter Soldier; Steve saw him checking the doors and windows with almost reflexive looks, brushing his fingers against the walls as he went by to check their strength, nodding approvingly at the alarm system Tony had installed in the entryway. But mostly Bucky just propped himself up against whichever wall or piece of soft furniture was nearest to Steve, and Steve didn’t have the heart to order him away. Steve had spent too much time in this place turning around because the shadows looked like Bucky. He didn’t want to have gotten Bucky back only to lock him in a room like some trophy. But Bucky was supposed to be lying down, and so the natural compromise was for them both to gravitate to Steve’s room, where Bucky could sprawl on one half of the bed while Steve read or sketched on the other, and they both laughed a little at the oddity of having enough bed that they could both be in it without touching. It just so happened that they did a lot of touching anyway, and Steve’s sketchbook lay unopened on the nightstand next to them. Whenever Bucky needed something Steve insisted on getting up to bring it to him, and by the end of the first week everything had migrated from the spare room to Steve’s room, which had somehow become Steve and Bucky’s room.

“Some habits just die hard, I guess,” Steve said, half-jokingly, as he hung up the clothes SHIELD had issued Bucky. Steve wasn’t a clotheshorse, and over half of the closet was empty anyway. Bucky would need more things, though. Maybe Tony or Natasha could help, take them shopping.

Bucky was watching Steve out of half-hooded eyes; Steve couldn’t tell if he looked more like a great cat, sunning itself, or a sniper waiting for his chance to strike. “Still time to learn a few new ones, I hope.”

Steve paused at that, then carefully hung up the last shirt. He walked back over to the bed and leaned forward, resting his weight on his arms to avoid jostling Bucky, and kissed him.

“Like that?” he asked.

“Mmmm,” Bucky said, and pulled Steve back in.

Later, when they were sprawled sweaty and panting on the sheets, Bucky rolled close and propped himself up and gazed down at Steve with eyes that were wide in wonder. Steve let him look his fill, unashamedly doing the same. He raised one hand and traced the scar down Bucky’s cheek. As his finger moved over the pucker of skin, it was as if it disappeared for a moment, and there were only dark eyes and dark hair and a youthful, unlined face, looking at Steve with astonishment and joy. Then Steve blinked, and the Bucky of yesterday was gone. In his place was the Bucky of today, patchwork and rough around the edges but here, alive, with Steve. There were lines on his face and shrapnel scars on his temple, but the look of love in his eyes was the same. Steve broke into a smile, still unbelieving and incredulous that he could be that lucky.

“God, I love you,” he whispered.

“You said it,” Bucky said breathlessly, and his hand tightened on Steve’s shoulder for a moment. His left hand, the cybernetic one, but Tony had disappeared into his lab for a week and come out at the end of that time unshaven, hollow-cheeked, and covered in flame retardant. Now Bucky had an arm for every situation: one specialized for frontal assaults, one for sniper work, one for infiltration, even one with a repulsor (though Tony had warned against trying to fly with it).
had taken to wearing the infiltration arm by default, the better to avoid frightening the neighbors, and it counterfeited flesh and bone so well that even when it brushed against Steve’s cheek he couldn’t tell the difference. The prints it left pressed into Steve’s hips were Bucky’s, taken from his enlistment file. Tony swore the fingers would bleed AB negative if Bucky got too aggressive chopping vegetables and the shoulder would bruise when Steve got a lucky body blow in sparring. And since it was Tony, there was also a sliding compartment in the forearm long enough for a bowie knife or a box of ammo, and a miniature first-aid kit that could be popped out from the bicep. It was the essential parts of the Bucky Steve had grown up with wrapped around the core of the man Bucky was now, and Steve loved the whole package with an intensity that still left him breathless, most days.

“Love you, Bucky,” he murmured now, unable to resist the urge to say it again, though God knew he’d said it a hundred times or more so far that night alone. “Love you so much.”

“You too, Steve,” Bucky swore in return. “You’re my guardian angel, you know.”

Steve laughed. Then he kissed Bucky, eager and firm, and Bucky kissed back until their limbs were tangled up in each other again and they were breathless for an entirely different reason.

The first time Bucky held a rifle after their escape from Karkoff’s facility, Stamford was in attendance, as were as several SHIELD agents, and the whole thing was conducted under Coulson’s watchful eye. Steve was fairly sure the men in suits were there in the hopes of distracting the Winter Soldier from Hawkeye’s unannounced presence in the rafters. He could have told them it was a waste of effort, but Coulson always did like planning for all the possibilities, and that included the one where he could use non-lethal force to restrain an unexpectedly manifesting Ivan. Steve appreciated the thought and stood quietly to one side while Bucky ran his fingers over the weapon. An abstracted, remote look came over his features. Some of it was the sniper’s detachment settling over him, familiar from their Howling Commando days. Some of it was new, but none of it seemed like Ivan, and Steve breathed a little easier.

Bucky lifted the weapon gently and walked down to the range. The subtle set of his shoulders was proof enough to Steve that he knew everyone in the facility was watching him, but he ignored them all completely in favor of studying the target and adjusting the sights on the rifle.

Then he swung the weapon to his shoulder in one smooth motion and fired.

Almost everyone tensed the moment Bucky’s finger touched the trigger, but he paid them no mind and went smoothly through the entire clip. Steve felt a familiar sense of awe as he watched. Bashing things with a shield was one thing, but this was more than that. This was an art, and Bucky was one of the best.

Bucky brought the rifle back down to the rest position and thumbed the button that would bring his targets back into sight. He’d been shooting at full range for his weapon, testing both his eyes and his steadiness of hand. For a few moments the entire range was silent, only the soft whirring of the motors audible as his targets came back into view.

One of the junior SHIELD agents whistled. Stamford quirked an eyebrow and even Coulson looked impressed.
Bucky settled the rifle against his leg and turned to grin at Steve. “I still got it, hey, buddy?”

“Yeah.” Steve grinned back. “You sure do.”

“Nice shooting,” Clint said unexpectedly into the silence that followed this exchange. Steve turned, startled, to see that Clint had materialized next to Coulson without fanfare. He, too, was smiling. “Want to see who’s better head-to-head?”

Steve studied Clint closely, looking for a sign that the archer was trying to test Bucky’s skills against his own for a sinister purpose, like figuring out who would win if Fury ever gave the order to put an arrow in Bucky’s skull. He saw nothing but the eager look of a man who had found a kindred spirit and a challenge.

“You bet,” Bucky said cheerfully. He waved to the range sentry. “Hey, man, slot me another box of ammo!”

Once Bucky was cleared for access to the full range of SHIELD facilities, Stamford asked Fury to put Steve back on the active roster.

“You need to get back out there,” she told Steve when he protested. “It’s going to be a while longer before Bucky is ready to work out into the field. Having you sitting around is a waste of time and talent.”

“I should be around,” Steve argued. “We’re still doing joint therapy! You said six months!”

“Steve.” Stamford stopped mid-stride and turned to face Steve. Around them in the hallway, SHIELD personnel dodged the pair. Steve maybe should have waited for a more private place to have this conversation, but he’d come out of Fury’s office to see Stamford waiting, almost as if she’d expected his reaction. “Listen to me. No one is sending you on any kind of extended deployment. You know very well that most of the time being on the active roster is exactly like being on the inactive roster. But there is no reason why you can’t return to field work. If there’s a world-ending threat, your teammates are going to need your help.”

“If there’s a world ending threat, of course I’ll be there,” Steve said, aggrieved. “But being on the active roster means they’ll start sending me to bust child smuggling rings out in Nevada.”

“And you think the children should just go ahead and get smuggled?” Stamford raised an eyebrow. “Okay, bad argument,” Steve admitted.

“Look.” Stamford drew Steve out of the flow of traffic and into an adjacent, empty office, tugging the door closed behind her. “He’s not going to stop being Bucky the moment your back is turned.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“That is exactly what this is about,” Stamford admonished him.

“Are you going to tell me that this is part of the recovery process?”

“Yes. It is. Bucky is not going to fall apart if you go away, and the sooner the two of you get that through your heads, the better.”
Steve blinked. “The two of us?”

“Oh, Steve,” she sighed. “Yes, the two of you. Bucky’s just as worried about this as you are. Paradoxically, your mutual fear makes something more likely to happen, not less. And the longer it goes on like this, the better the chance gets that that something will happen when you are eventually forced to spend a significant amount of time apart. Not a catastrophic reversion – that’s unheard of at this point in the process – but a minor break, or clinical depression. We don’t want that. The two of you need to get back on the horse. You are going to be sent on some suitably minor mission; two or three days, tops. And while you are gone, Bucky is going to be just fine. He is going to go to therapy, work out, spend time at the range. He will eat and drink like a normal human being, and if we are all very lucky, he will even sleep. Although considering your previous insomnia, I’m not holding out too much hope for that.” She grinned briefly, then let her face grow serious again when it became apparent Steve wasn’t in a mood for humor. She touched his arm gently. “You can’t live the rest of your lives afraid of what will happen if you relax your grip. I am your therapist, and I am telling you that not only will it not be a disaster, but it will in fact be a good thing. You will both be stronger if you have the ability to function apart.”

Steve sighed. “I can’t talk you out of this, can I?” he asked, dismayed.

“No, you can’t. And you should be glad about that. This really is for your own good.”

“You’re here to help me,” Steve said, trying to convince himself.

“And I’m even from the government,” Stamford said cheerfully. She patted Steve’s arm, probably enjoying the look of horror on his face. “Relax. It’s going to be fine.”

Steve spent the entirety of his welcome-back milk run (small-time arms dealers in New Mexico) resisting the urge to call Bucky every five minutes. SHIELD communicators were wonderful things, and there was no technological reason why he couldn’t stay in constant contact even from halfway across the country. But Coulson had given him a very pointed lecture on proper use of SHIELD equipment before Steve had left, and Stamford had stressed the need to let go and give each other some space and be independent. So Steve sweated and fretted and counted the minutes until the Quinjet dropped him back off at SHIELD Tower, the dealers having been left securely in custody with the New Mexico police.

He jumped the stairs down to the landing pad. Bucky was waiting for him, leaning against the shed containing the air controller equipment.

“Welcome back,” Bucky called, and Steve saw his welcoming smile and knew everything had been just fine.

One mission turned into two, and then ten, and time started passing before Steve was even really aware of it. Slowly things began slipping back into a routine; a new normal, but a good one. Bucky started to get back into the swing of things, shooting down at the range with Clint, practicing hand-to-hand with Natasha, and meditating with Bruce. Steve had to talk Thor out of taking Bucky back to Asgard and hosting a feast in his honor, but encouraged him to try his newfound skills at barbequing on top of SHIELD Tower with Tony’s fire-suppressing robot in close attendance. Tony told JARVIS to put Bucky on the Stark Industries approved list and gave him a keycard for access to the Avengers floors in Stark Tower. Bucky did a full, formal debriefing on his time as the
Winter Soldier with Coulson, went to therapy three times a day and even reported learning to sleep when Steve was away.

In between missions, Steve and Bucky slept in late, cooked each other breakfast, and went to as much therapy as they could stand. Steve watched Bucky shooting against Clint and saw the Winter Soldier in the careful lines of his shoulders and arms and the intensity of his focus, but saw his childhood friend in the slope of his jaw and the careful press of his trigger finger, and made his peace with the combination. They practiced fighting as a team, and it was more than a little different, because while they were used to Steve becoming Captain America, Captain America was used to working with Bucky. There was a hardness to the Winter Soldier that left Captain America on edge at first, a mercilessness and a willingness to do violence that had not been part of Bucky’s character. They put in long hours in the gym, alone at first and then with Black Widow as an intermediary, because she understood. And once they’d gone that far it was natural for Hawkeye to join them too, because Black Widow and Hawkeye knew what it was like to work as a team up between a close-range fighter and a sniper. They bounced techniques off each other and sparred two-on-two until everyone had gotten better and Steve and Bucky were again as tight a fighting unit as they had been in the Howling Commandos.

The night finally came where neither of them were awoken by nightmares, actually sleeping quietly and peacefully together until morning. Steve woke up refreshed and watched the sunlight gild Bucky’s hair and realized that he had finally started to believe that all of this might be real.

That day, Coulson asked Bucky to sign his trading cards, and Steve knew they were home free.

Steve was sitting in the mess, shooting the breeze with Tony and Clint over cups of coffee and what the cooks had sworn was something called ‘dinner’. Steve had his doubts, but it wasn’t worth getting worked up over; he’d eaten worse in the army, at any rate. Tony, though, Tony was bitching, poking at Clint’s meatloaf with a plastic fork and swearing darkly to import his own personal chef next time he had to visit SHIELD’s New York HQ for longer than two hours. Clint was egging him on with tall tales of health violations at meat-packing plants. Steve watched their byplay with amusement, refraining from pointing out that Tony would have had to walk all of a thousand feet to get back to Stark Tower and his personal chef, but immediately abandoned them when the door slid open and Bucky ran in.

“Steve!” Bucky looked around and spotted him over in the corner. He dashed over.

“Bucky – nothing’s wrong, is it?” Steve fought down his sudden alarm. Right before dinner was usually when Bucky wrapped up his daily therapy grind. Today it had run late, which wasn’t unusual, and Steve had gone ahead and eaten without him, but – what if something was wrong? He searched Bucky’s face for any hint of problems. Anything of Ivan cropping back up, or something new surfacing from the Winter Soldier’s past that cast doubt on his ability to be trusted, or a medical issue, or…

“No, no.” Bucky shook his head, beaming. “Good news.”

“What is it? Tell me!” Across the table, Tony and Clint fell silent, looking at the two of them with interest.

“Stamford’s giving me the all-clear,” Bucky said breathlessly. “Coulson did the paperwork. It’ll
take a few days to process, but when it does, I’m an Avenger.”

Steve whooped and all but tackled Bucky then and there. Bucky laughed and Steve backed him right against the wall and kissed him, hard, careless of the roomful of people who might be watching. Tony chuckled indulgently. Clint whistled like he was at a baseball game, and several watching SHIELD agents cheered or clapped. Bucky himself startled, eyes widening and the tips of his ears turning bright red. But what the hell; as everyone kept reminding Steve, it was the twenty-first century, and it was about time that started working out in Steve’s favor. After a moment, Bucky gave up being embarrassed and kissed back.

“They’re gonna tell stories about us, buddy,” Steve promised, smiling from ear to ear. “They’re gonna write our names up in lights.”

“They already write your name in lights,” Bucky retorted, but he, too, was grinning like a loon.

“Yeah, well, they’re gonna need some bigger lights.”

“And a forklift for your ego,” Tony joked.

“Maybe they’ll borrow yours,” Bucky shot back.

Tony grinned in appreciation of the jibe and raised his hands in the universal gesture for surrender. “Patent pending.”

“Stark Industries, only the best,” Clint added, coming back over and offering Bucky his hand. Steve had to let go so Bucky could shake it, which wouldn’t have been his personal choice for what to do next, but he figured that even the modern world wasn’t quite ready for a full-on show. He settled for slinging one arm around Bucky’s shoulder like a particularly proud parent while Clint congratulated him and Tony clapped Bucky on the back.

“We gotta get you a costume or something,” Tony said thoughtfully.

“No way, man,” Clint said at once. He gave Tony a jab in the gut and looked meaningfully at Bucky. “He and I are gonna be hanging out on rooftops together keeping you idiots from getting your heads shot off. We don’t want flashy clothing for that.”

“Right,” Bucky agreed. “If they can see you, they can shoot you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to emulate Hawkeye here, though,” Tony protested in mock horror.

“What, black leather and muscles?” Bucky asked, raising an eyebrow. “I think that might be just the ticket, actually.”

“Oooh,” Steve said immediately.

“Ugh, you two are so cute it’s sickening,” Tony said, rolling his eyes and stomping off to dump his tray. “I can’t even rag on you right now. You need to have a domestic or something.”

“No thanks,” Bucky called back.

“You coming to the briefing, then?” Clint asked, glancing over at the digital clock prominently displayed on the far wall of the mess. It was almost time for the wrap-up meeting that was the end of the scheduled work day for on-duty Avengers, whenever they weren’t otherwise occupied saving the world or posing for pretty pictures.
Bucky shook his head. “Not yet. As I said, paperwork’ll take a couple of days to process. I’m not cleared for briefings yet.” He grinned at Steve. “I’m going to grab some dinner myself. Meet you back home?”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, liking the sound of that immediately. He let Clint and Tony pull him towards the main conference room, turning back to wave at Bucky, already in line for his meatloaf.

The briefing should have dragged, too, but to Steve it actually seemed to go by quickly. He was distracted and didn’t pay very good attention, but everyone seemed to have entered into a tacit agreement not to notice. Fury had announced at the beginning of the meeting that the Winter Soldier was soon to be an official Avenger, and everyone had clapped and Steve had been ready to burst with happiness. The rest of the meeting was routine, and by the time they all pushed their chairs back, Steve was nearly vibrating with impatience to be gone.

“Want a ride home, Rogers?” Tony offered.

“No thanks,” Steve replied, smiling. “Tonight I want to walk.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “I don’t care how good that serum is, the car is still faster.”

“Yeah, but…” Steve flapped a hand, knowing Tony wouldn’t understand about the crazy intersection of past and present that was his life. When he and Bucky had first gotten out of the orphanage, they hadn’t had rich friends with cars who would offer them a ride. Tonight he wanted to walk home, just as he had back then on their first day of freedom, because both of these times were the start of something new and amazing.

“All right,” Tony shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

The SHIELD building was a lot farther from 33rd street than the orphanage had been, or the newsstand where first Bucky and then Steve had worked, or the grocer’s, or the main drag where Steve had drawn pictures for tourists and supplemented their income. Steve made up for the extra blocks by jogging, at first, until he had crossed the bridge into Brooklyn. Then he slowed back down to a walk, shoved his hands into his pockets and took a deep breath.

It wasn’t the same, of course. Back then he’d been a scrawny kid, short, asthmatic, with too much spunk and not enough strength. He’d worn suspenders over a ragged shirt three sizes too big, pants with holes in one knee and both pockets, and mismatched shoes. His hair had been long enough to fall into his eyes and he’d shivered in the early autumn wind. Bucky had been compact but tough, filled with fire and a grim determination to do whatever it took to keep both of them out of the orphanage and off the streets, and it had been Steve’s job to keep him from killing himself in pursuit of that goal.

Now Steve was tall, broad-shouldered, and muscled. He wore slacks and a button-down shirt, and Tony kept trying to explain something called ‘business casual’ to him, but Steve didn’t really pay attention. Bucky had a killer’s grip and an assassin’s eye; he had gone from an earnest boy to a world-weary, scarred young man, and Steve hadn’t done nearly as well as he ought to have in keeping Bucky safe from his own worse demons. But Steve was going to an apartment that had heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer and plenty of food in the pantry, because SHIELD paid well and being an Avenger paid better, and they were never going to know any kind of material want ever again. And they were going to keep working on everything else until they got it right, because now they had all the time in the world.

The neighborhood wasn’t the same, either. There was a Starbucks on the corner and the building he finally turned into was a gleaming edifice of chrome and glass as unlike Mrs. Dietrich’s old brick-front row house as Steve could imagine. The elevator whisked him silently up a dozen floors,
and the carpet was thick and plush beneath his feet, and the door he pushed open at the end of the corridor moved smoothly instead of creaking and rattling like the bones of an unquiet ghost.

But he stepped through confidently from the old world to the new, and called, “Bucky?”

In the kitchen, visible across the wide expanse of the living room, Bucky was pressing buttons on the ridiculously advanced coffeemaker. It was vibrating like it was about to explode; lights were flashing and Bucky looked about ten seconds away from heaving the entire thing out the window. He abandoned the effort at Steve’s approach, though, and turned around and smiled.

And Steve was home.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks have to go to the incredible tsukinoaerii, without whose beta efforts this fic would look nothing like itself and probably really suck.

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