**Project Vesna**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/5438207](http://archiveofourown.org/works/5438207).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Captain America - All Media Types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes &amp; Steve Rogers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Clint Barton, Scott Lang, Alexander Pierce, Hydra Agents, Laura Barton, Natasha Romanov, Sharon Carter (Marvel), Wanda Maximoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Action/Adventure, Mpreg, Medical Procedures, Medical Examination, Medical Experimentation, Non-Consensual Body Modification, Pregnancy, Forced Pregnancy, Forced Feminization, Forced Orgasm, Male Lactation, Violence, Surgery, Hurt/Comfort, Captivity, Breeding, Restraints, Laboratories, Body Dysphoria, Brainwashing, Parenthood, Family, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Childbirth, Pregnant Sex, Hydra (Marvel), Sad with a Happy Ending, Non-Consensual Oral Sex, Hurt Bucky Barnes, Hurt Steve Rogers, Dehumanization, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Drugged Sex, Gaslighting, Harm to Animals, Post-Captain America: Civil War (Movie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2015-12-16 Updated: 2016-11-18 Chapters: 34/75 Words: 120140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Summary**

Even in the wake of the Accords, Steve Rogers has a job to do. But when his raid on a HYDRA base uncovers an old enemy, HYDRA not only regains possession of their Asset - this time, they have Captain America, too. With his DNA now at their disposal, HYDRA seeks to mass-produce Erskine's original formula by any means.

Illustrated by Drawgirl.
"You sure you wanna do this, Cap? We got no intel on how many are in there."

"Aw, we got five Avengers, man, we're good."

"I'm sure, Sam."

"Yeah, see, we're good."

"You don't think that we should maybe focus on our own, you know, very big problems before we go trashing HYDRA bases?"

"The situation with Ross and Stark will only get worse the longer I refuse to comply. And I've got no plans of complying. There's no help for that now. It doesn't mean we get to stop doing our jobs."

"...Alright, fine. What's your plan?"

"We run on Bucky's intel. Standard infiltration and attack procedure. Neutralize the base and take any data they've been storing on private servers, and we release and aid prisoners, if they have any."

"So...I go in first and take out security. Is that the plan? Or, like, part of the plan? I get lost when all you military guys start using big words, sorry."

"I'd say cutting their security is a good place to start, Lang."

"Cool. See, I'm catching on quick, I'm one of the guys. I've got this. So, I can get all the alarms disabled and then, what? A distraction? Is that something you could use? I'll come up with something ant-related on the way over."

"Can you get us in?"

"Oh yeah, I'm excellent at opening doors I'm not supposed to. Leave that one to me."

"Buck. You and I will go in quietly. Who are we considering A-level targets?"

"Erik Wentzel and Christopher Montgomery."

"Ex-STRIKE?"

"Technicians."

"Like, field engineers, weapons tech?"

"Programming, conditioning, and maintenance."

"Of...?

"Of me."

"...Jesus, man. Alright. We're with you."

"We run silent until Bucky IDs our guys. Once they're eliminated, he and I will give the green-light
to take out any other operatives we encounter.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Pff.”

“Whatever, man, I’m pumped. Fuck HYDRA. Wilson, drop me on the roof. I’ll cover Cap and Sarge on the approach and take down any of the bastards who try to wait the raid out up there while you, you know, do circles. Watch the perimeter. Back me up. You been inside this one, right, Barnes?”

“Yes.”

“Ballpark figure, how many guys we looking at?”

“It’s not a command station. Just labs. But STRIKE security teams will be on-site. West Seneca’s their largest remaining R&D facility. They’ve moved most of their major projects here. Eighty to a hundred guns.”

“So, worst case scenario, we kill twenty apiece. Easy.”

“What’s our time-table, Cap?”

“We’re leaving.”

CHANNEL-3 >> Shit, Barton's down, Cap!

CHANNEL-4 >> Shut the fuck up, Wilson! I'm back up! It just grazed my calf.

CHANNEL-1 >> Talk to me, Sam.

CHANNEL-3 >> We're in the stairwell. We were on the roof watching the perimeter and something hit us – I don't know, looked like military drones. I counted three. Shot me right outta the sky.

CHANNEL-1 >> What's Barton's status?

CHANNEL-4 >> I repeat: Barton got an ouchie on his leg and Wilson is a fucking alarmist. Status report over.

CHANNEL-1 >> Sam.

CHANNEL-3 >> Not hurt, but I'm grounded. Left wing's gone. Sorry, Cap.

CHANNEL-1 >> Lang?

CHANNEL-5 >> I'm in the walls. Got half the charges set. This place is gonna be a dollhouse when we're done. Sergeant Barnes can take it home later, if he wants to. Therapeutically smash it with a hammer or something.

CHANNEL-4 >> Where'd this fucking airstrike come from, Barnes? Me and Falcon are majorly out-gunned up here.

CHANNEL-2 >> Army base nearby. They must have control of it.
CHANNEL-3 >> Or Ross knows we're here.

CHANNEL-1 >> Bucky and I are on sub-level 3. Just hit the labs but they were empty. We're entering the server room now. We'll get their database cleaned out, then go after Montgomery and Wentzel. Sam, Clint, you two work your way down. We'll clear the sub-levels and meet you on the ground floor.

CHANNEL-5 >> Just so you're not surprised when you get to the lab on the west side of sub-level 1, these dudes just shucked their underpants.

CHANNEL-1 >> What?

CHANNEL-5 >> Fire ants.

CHANNEL-2 >> Hm.

CHANNEL-5 >> Testicles.

CHANNEL-1 >> Oh.

CHANNEL-2 >> Steve. Got everything.

CHANNEL-1 >> Good. Lang, stop playing around and fry the servers.

CHANNEL-4 >> Yeah, Scott, quit playing with HYDRA's balls.

CHANNEL-5 >> Already on it, Cap–

CHANNEL-2 >> Fuck—AH! – ah–

CHANNEL-5 >> Shit, shit, shit, did I fry him?

CHANNEL-1 >> No, he was clear! – Buck, come on, get up–

CHANNEL-2 >> STE–nng–AHH!

CHANNEL-4 >> The hell's happening down there?!

CHANNEL-1 >> What's–? Bucky!

CHANNEL-3 >> Cap, status!

CHANNEL-1 >> –God damn it–

CHANNEL-2 >> GAH – help – it – AH–

CHANNEL-4 >> Steve! Is he holding his ears?

CHANNEL-1 >> He—yeah, Barton, do you know what this is?

CHANNEL-4 >> I don't know, but I got it, too. Ears are ringing like hell.

CHANNEL-3 >> I got no interference, Cap. Lang, are you hearing this?

CHANNEL-5 >> Nothing!

CHANNEL-1 >> Oh, God—Bucky's down. We need backup—
CHANNEL-5 >> Just Barton and Barnes? Cap and Falcon and me are all fine?

CHANNEL-4 >> I got a bad headache, but I ain't hearing whatever Barnes is hearing—

CHANNEL-5 >> Cap, it's a resonant frequency. Out of our hearing range. Ants are hearing it but they're fine, so it's targeted. Barton and Barnes are both ex-HYDRA, they must have some kind of intracranial implant. Someone's transmitting a tone at the same resonant frequency as the receivers."

CHANNEL-1 >> Lang, slow down!

CHANNEL-5 >> There is a piece of hot metal in Sarge's brain and it is buzzing. That is what I'm saying.

CHANNEL-1 >> What do I do? He's screaming, our position's compromised—

CHANNEL-5 >> Get him the fuck outta there! It's not affecting Barton 'cause he's too far from the transmitter!

CHANNEL-1 >> Too late. Engaging—

CHANNEL-5 >> I'm in the vent! If I can find the broadcast point and disable it—

CHANNEL-3 >> Damn! Barton and I got hostiles! Lots of 'em!

CHANNEL-1 >> Sam, how many?!

CHANNEL-1 >> Whoa, motherf—um, too many!

CHANNEL-4 >> Lang, little help up here, if you get the chance—

CHANNEL-5 >> Transmitter's gotta be—

CHANNEL-1 >> Lang, get up there—I'll handle this.

CHANNEL-5 >> But Barnes is—

CHANNEL-1 >> I'm covering him, go!

CHANNEL-5 >> Yes, sir. Falcon, Hawkeye, be there in two minutes.

CHANNEL-1 >> AH!

CHANNEL-3 >> Cap?!

CHANNEL-1 >> Ah—I'm...I'm hit. The three of you, pull out.

CHANNEL-3 >> Just stay there! We're coming down to you!

CHANNEL-1 >> Like hell you are! You can't leave Barton without backup and if you bring him closer to that transmitter we'll be two men down, now pull out!

CHANNEL-4 >> Sam, go! I've got these guys.

CHANNEL-1 >> Pull. Out. That's an order, Barton!

CHANNEL-3 >> Steve, you're not gonna—
CHANNEL-1 >> Scott, get 'em the hell outta here!

CHANNEL-5 >> Fuck! Fuck, okay. Okay. Don't die, Cap.
With a communications blackout and a bullet in Steve's leg, Steve and Bucky struggle to blast their way out of a HYDRA compound.

There's a bullet in Steve's leg and four STRIKE operatives at both potential exits from the dark lab. Red lights flash above the doorways. Someone has triggered a manual failsafe alarm, something Lang couldn't disable. Steve drags Bucky into one of the alcoves beneath the workstations and kneels down in front of it, covering them both with his shield. Bucky's trying not to scream, gritting his teeth and letting his breath out in quick, stifled hisses, but he's been reduced to curling in on himself on the tile floor, clutching his head as he desperately tries to escape the heat and noise inside of it. Steve grabs one of the Glocks off of Bucky's hip and rises as quickly as his injured leg allows. Bucky's sidearm in his right hand, he shoots at one set of operatives with intent to kill, and he raises the shield on his left, protecting himself from a peppering of bullets from the other group. He wounds two and another shot lands squarely in the middle of another's exposed throat but, true to form, more are there to replace them within seconds. He ducks back down three times to reload and repeat the futile cycle. When he tries to rise a fourth time, he stumbles.

His leg is numb.

He doesn't even feel any pain from the bullet wound now. Nothing at all.

Even through the haze of excruciating pain and pressure in his skull and red-hot alarm bells ringing somewhere in his temples, Bucky sees Steve falter. Flesh hand shaking, he reaches into a pouch on his thigh-holster and pulls out two metal orbs. He lets one drop to the floor and roll toward Steve. He pulls himself together, drawing a few ragged breaths and lightly kicks Steve's ankle to draw his attention downward. Steve catches sight of the silver ball wobbling at his feet and takes cover again, watching Bucky carefully as he twists the two halves of the sphere apart until they separate with a click. Understanding, he immediately follows suit. Steve provides cover as Bucky drags himself forward, into the pale wash of the floodlights, where he can see that Bucky's eyes are a mess of broken vessels and his nose is bleeding freely. Steve is suddenly sure that whatever that signal is doing to Bucky isn't just to hurt and subdue him – it could kill him if it goes on long enough at this intensity. If Bucky's plan doesn't work, he's just going to have to charge into the fray and clear a path if he wants to save his friend from a fatal hemorrhage.

Steve grabs Bucky's metal hand and helps him pull himself to his knees. They wait another moment and then, on Bucky's cue, they toss the grenades toward the doorways. And not a second too soon. They barely have time to throw themselves down on the tile, heads covered by Steve's shield, before the grenades detonate with awesome force for their size. Debris rains down and the building's foundation judders violently. Glass from the lab's windows, drywall, and smoldering equipment parts pelt their exposed legs. Within seconds, the smell of charred flesh rushes in hot from the hallways.

Steve and Bucky don't waste any time dragging themselves up off the ground. The hallway they'd entered the labs from has collapsed, and they both know that neither of them are in any state to traverse the mess of burning ceiling tiles and bursting pipes and naked electrical wires. The way
ahead will have to be the way out. Fortunately, they're close to the building's northeast corner. If
they can make it back up to the ground floor, they should hit an exit quickly.

Bucky is stumbling like a drunk man and Steve uses every object within reach as a crutch, but they
manage to get out of the wrecked lab before more STRIKE personnel arrive. Supporting each other
as well as they can, they duck below the smoke and fight their way past the bodies in the narrow
hallway. Steve uses his shield like an umbrella to protect them from the burning debris falling from
the ceiling and the intermittent showers of sparks as fluorescent bulbs burst above them. A lone set
of double doors at the end of the hallway seems to be their only escape route. To their right is a
staircase leading deeper into the complex, but Bucky has been in enough HYDRA bases to know
that it would take them straight down to the barracks and more hostiles. Reinforcements would
almost certainly be loading their weapons and donning tac gear, now that the alarms had been
sounded and every radio was calling “Code Yellow,” signifying a raid.

Steve throws his shoulder against the locked steel doors twice, but his deadened leg doesn't allow
him much force or finesse. Bucky spits out a mouthful of blood from his bitten tongue, draws his
Gerber, and shuffles back down the hallway, shielding his hair and eyes from the flames with the
Weapon. Steve loses sight of him as he disappears into the thick smoke.

Bucky returns, coughing, with a bloodied knife and the most undamaged right hand he could find
among the corpses. He flips open a hidden panel beside the door and presses the thumb into the
newly revealed screen. The doors unbolt with two mechanical chirps and a heavy metallic
\text{click}, and the soldiers fall through, gasping for better air.

They're at the end of a long hallway now, which stretches out down the length of the building to
their left, with cement floors and cinder-block walls. Every door in the hallway is also on their left,
which must mean they're on the building’s north edge.

Steve stumbles over to rest against the wall and removes his earpiece, checking for damage on the
mic or the receiver, but everything looks intact.

“Sam, do you read me?” he tries. No response.

Bucky is weaving down the hallway away from Steve, SIG-Sauer held loosely at his side,
seemingly in a daze.

“Buck, wait—”

Bucky motions over his shoulder for Steve to hold, and then Steve hears it, too – boots, just above
their current position, heading west toward the other end of the hall. Steve hauls himself back into
an alcove by one of the locked doors as Bucky does the same thirty feet ahead. They both listen as
the heavy footfalls – at least seven or eight operatives – descend a flight of stairs, showing them
their way out, and then hold their breath once they hear another set of doors open at the far end of
the hall. Bucky finds the shadows and keeps still and silent as they pass, waiting for them to trap
themselves in between his gun and Steve's shield.

The shield flies out of Steve's hiding place right on cue, bouncing off the cinder-block wall and
stunning the two STRIKE ops leading the squad. They tumble into the second row, but the four in
back have time to raise their guns. Luckily, they aim them forward at their apparent attacker, and
while Steve keeps his cover, Bucky opens fire on the agents closest to him. He unloads the SIG-
Sauer and tosses it aside as he brings the elbow of the Weapon down hard on a HYDRA agent’s
radius, catching the M4 as it drops from the bastard’s limp hand. The machine gun makes quick
work of dispatching the remaining agents, and Bucky comes out of it with only a bad tear in the left
sleeve of his jacket and an impermanent scorch mark on his metallic bicep. Bucky finds, reloads,
and holsters the SIG-Sauer and confiscates a second M4, this one fully loaded, and plunders the agent's combat vest for more ammo to match. His teeth remain clenched and bared all the while, and finally he hits the ground again, breathing heavily as a steady stream of blood drips from his nose, and empties his guts onto the floor.

Steve knows that neither of them are going to last much longer.
Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky locate one of their A-level targets. Steve hates feeling like a burden. Bucky sees a face he didn't think he'd see again.

“Bucky, talk to me, please,” Steve begs.

“Getting worse,” Bucky chokes out between dry heaves.

“We've gotta get you away from that transmitter, Buck, this could kill you,” Steve orders firmly, but Bucky's not listening to him. He's listening to the new wave of boots on the stairs, coming down faster than the last squad. “Shit,” Steve curses under his breath.

Bucky collects the shield and Steve reaches out to receive it, but Bucky doesn't hand it over. Instead, he ducks behind it, keeping the M4 tucked close to his body, and charges forward to meet the operatives as they exit the stairwell. The head-on attack doesn't stun them for long and Steve has to throw himself back against the wall for cover as they open fire. Bucky waits it out, protecting himself without returning fire, and his bet pays off. Turns out they want their Asset back alive.

The operatives decide he's either unarmed or without ammunition, and the front-runners take their hands away from the triggers for a split second as they circle around him to reach their stun-batons and incapacitate him. He takes the opportunity to turn their formation against them. He drops low and sweeps his left foot out to floor the first agent and uses the shield to block the stun-baton that comes down on his right. The charge buzzes hotly through the vibranium. He surges up, using the edge of the shield to break the agent's jaw, then drops it, catching the man as he crumples and wrapping the Weapon around his throat, using the agent's armored body as cover as he reveals the M4 and opens fire. Six out of eight are down now, and the M4's forty-shell magazine is spent because it's difficult for even the Asset to aim while holding a thrashing body. He slams his boot down onto the convex rim of the shield and kicks mightily. It crashes into the bridge of number seven's nose, giving Bucky just enough time to snap number two's neck, drop the M4, and raise the dead agent's Galil to put two rounds in eight's forehead. Number one, still dazed from connecting with the concrete floor, he kills as an afterthought.

Steve watches with grim pride as Bucky dispatches the squad efficiently. He hasn't wasted his respite, either. Concluding that the bullet in his leg must be pressing on a nerve, he's drawn a pair of surgical tweezers out of the compact med-kit on the back of his belt, and after a long minute of searching – painless, despite the blood – he pulls the bullet out and drops it into the palm of his left hand. It's longer and thinner than any standard slug, with a sharp tip. A crack in its side reveals a hollow core. He's been dosed. Perfect.

He stows the bullet in his med-kit with the bloody tweezers and drags himself up, clinging to the wall. He limps toward Bucky as quickly as he can as his partner falls to one knee, dry heaving and clutching his head again. “We have to go back! Bucky, listen to me—“

Bucky doesn't listen. He looks up, bleary-eyed, to the door at the end of the hallway, then experimentally drags himself closer. Steve watches the pain intensify as Bucky's left fist slams
down, cracking the concrete. He pushes himself to his feet by the butt of the Galil and weaves toward the door, swaying in front of it for a few seconds before he musters the strength and rage to kick it in, gun hefted. Steve stumbles on faster, terrified that Bucky's throwing himself into danger when he's in no state to fight.

“Steh auf, Wentzel!”

Bucky's ragged yell echoes down the hallway. A clatter follows.


Wentzel must be alone.

“Wo ist es?”

"Das ist ein Befehl, Soldat. Nimm die Waffe—"

"Antworte! Wo ist der Sender?"

“Okay, okay, in Ordnung.” Wentzel sounds truly panicked now. Steve falls back to the wall for support. He's only twenty feet away now, but it might as well be a mile. “Er steht auf der Ecke des Tisches. Genau da. Bitte, nimm die Waffe—” Wentzel is cut off as a black box with two antennae flies out of the lab door and crashes into the wall on the other side of the hallway. Steve throws a hand over his face as pieces of it go flying from the impact. Bucky's voice sounds exhausted, but clearer when he speaks again.

"Auf die Knie und Hände über den Kopf."

Steve stops, the door only five five away. Bucky's no longer in danger, and he has no desire to witness this part. He knows he should take charge. He should stop this. He knows Wentzel could have valuable information. But part of him knows that Bucky needs this, however wrong it is.

“Hör mir zu, Soldat. Ich habe dir einen Befehl—"

“Vielen Dank für Ihre Mitarbeit.”

Steve covers his ears just as the shot rings out, making the wall under his shoulder buzz briefly. Bucky emerges seconds later, wiping his bloody nose on the sleeve of his jacket, and gathers up Steve's shield. He hands it to him without a word, almost reverently, and then throws his shoulder under Steve's arm to support him.

“Broken?” Bucky asks, his voice weak and rough.

“No, numb. The bullet delivered some kind of paralytic.”

“Hold on,” Bucky says firmly. He says nothing about Wentzel, and expects Steve to do the same. With Bucky taking the weight of his leg, they make good time to the stairwell and up to the ground floor.

By time they reach an exit, Bucky is practically dragging Steve along beside him. Steve glances over to him apologetically, and finds Bucky's jaw set and brow creased with worry. He's obviously aware that Steve's condition is deteriorating fast – one leg is dead weight and the other is nearly useless. If they encounter more hostiles, Steve will be nothing but a hindrance. He loathes that thought.
The exit, thank God, is open. Bucky shoulders his way out and drags Steve a few more feet into the blind darkness, then stumbles. Their eyes adjust quickly. It's an open space, with unfinished floors and a wall with high rows of dusty, cracked windows. They're in the base's outer facade – the shell of a crumbling warehouse, left standing around the new interior of labs. Bucky lowers Steve carefully to the ground, then grips underneath his armpits and drags him over to a stack of shipping pallets and props him up there. He finds a tall rusted metal rack nearby and tips it at an angle, then rams it against the double doors. It's not perfect, but it'll give them a little warning if pursuing agents figure out they're no longer in the labs.

“I'm sorry, Steve. I thought I cut out all their implants.”

Steve can't help the way his lip curls at the statement. He hates HYDRA with every cell in his body. He should have let Bucky have his way with every one of them, intel be damned. “It's not your fault. These bastards are gonna pay for this. We're pulling out for now, but we're coming back and hell, I'll look away if you want to dig around in their brains. Hook 'em up to car batteries if you want.”

That actually gets a wry laugh out of Bucky. He opens up one of the zippered pockets of his jacket and checks that the drive made it out intact, then stows it away again. “Let's get you out of here, Rogers.”

“Let me see if the communication's back online. We'll set a rendezvous point.” Steve fumbles with his earpiece in the dim light from the windows. He says nothing to Bucky, but the stiffening and numbness is quickly creeping into his fingers. “Sam, come in.”

Nothing. He tries again.

“Sam, Clint – does anybody copy? This is Rogers. We're in the warehouse outside the labs, ground floor, on the west side of the building. We need medevac. Do you copy?” He waits.

Radio silence.

Steve lets his head fall back against the wooden pallets and groans softly. If he's honest, it was getting pretty hard to hold his head up.

“Buck. Hate to ask, but are you spry enough to carry me out of here?”

Bucky approaches him with a deep frown. “You're not shaking this.” It's not a question. “You usually shake off drugs faster than they can pump them into you.”

“Yeah. It's – it's still spreading, though. Maybe it just has to run its course. I don't know what's wrong with me—”

“There is nothing wrong with you, Captain Rogers.”

The voice, accompanied by the sudden electrical buzz of the overhead lights, sends a shock-wave through the lofty room. Bucky actually stumbles back a step, like he's taken a blow. HYDRA agents, at least a dozen, move in on them with fluid steps and firearms raised and aimed.

“In fact...you...are absolutely perfect, unlike the soldier we first tested those paralytic rounds on.” Alexander Pierce doesn't seem particularly interested in making his entrance dramatic. He emerges from the cluster of agents, stowing his M&P on his belt without a hint of concern, as if Steve and Bucky should have been expecting him. He inclines his head toward Bucky. “He stopped breathing.”
Pierce shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks, strolling forward at a relaxed pace. Bucky's Glock is still stowed on Steve's belt and Steve wants more than anything to draw it back out and send Pierce right back to hell, where he ought to have stayed, but his arms are like lead and he can no longer so much as twitch a finger. Pierce gives Bucky a cursory glance, pursing his lips as he appraises his Soldier, then sighs with irritation, which he covers neatly with a half-smile. “Ready to get back to work?”
Transport

Chapter Summary

Jack Rollins plans to make the most of the ride to the airfield, and there's absolutely nothing Steve can do about it.

“Get fucking.”

Steve would laugh, if he could. If Bucky's insolence didn't earn him a sharp prod in the temple from one of the agents' muzzle breaks. If the head of HYDRA, one of the most dangerous men in the world, weren't alive and well and holding them captive. If this weren't the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

But it's not, Steve thinks, trying to slow the rage and panic making his head spin. This isn't the worst thing that could happen. Bucky is alive. HYDRA will want to keep him that way. They won't kill either of them. They're still too valuable as lab-rats and potential weapons. Steve knows he can use that to his advantage. As long as they're alive, they can still escape. He's going to make damn sure that they do just that.

Pierce motions for the agent threatening Bucky to step back. He smiles expectantly. “I'm sorry—what was that, soldier?” He raises one eyebrow, like he's daring Bucky to disrespect him a second time. Steve knows that Pierce is seeing a much different man than he's used to—Bucky is no longer his Asset. His Soldier. He's not his at all. He's regained his person-hood, and he's proud of it. Steve is proud. Pierce only seems amused.

“Пошел на хуй, Сашенька,” Bucky answers, his voice deriding and falsely sweet. Steve knows just enough Russian to discern an obvious fuck you and the name Sasha.

Pierce's face hardens. “Got that out of your system?”

Bucky scowls. “I remembered a lot. Bet you wish you could forget Lukin and his little pet names, huh? That how you moved up the ladder so young, Pierce?” he spits. “'Cause you let the old man have what he wanted?”

“Ooh,” Pierce winces like he's been stung. “That hurt, Soldier. Hell, I'll probably remember that for a long time. You, on the other hand—” Pierce checks his watch. “You're only gonna remember for about three more hours. I'd enjoy it while it lasts.” He turns and addresses the security officers. “Take them to the airfield. I'll meet you there in forty-five minutes. Restrain the Asset and keep guns on the Captain.”

“Sir, the paralytics won't wear off for another hour, even with his—”

“Keep guns on Rogers. If the Asset attempts escape, shoot his friend.”

“Sir.”

The HYDRA ops secure their prisoners' wrists and ankles with mag-cuffs. Steve doesn't even feel them snap shut. He's completely paralyzed now. The feeling is horrendous. An utter loss of control—enough to make panic and bile to rise up in his throat. His head hangs limply to the side as they
restrain him, and when they kick him to the ground, he only feels a strange, painless pressure when his nose breaks against the concrete floor.

“Anderson, you son of a bitch, I'm compliant!” he hears Bucky screaming.

“Buck, don't,” Steve slurs.

Steve watches helplessly as his friend allows himself to be hauled up, searched, and disarmed. “You don't have to hurt him!”

“Bucky! I'm okay. Can't feel it.”

“Calm down, Soldier,” Pierce advises coolly. “Anderson's just doing his job. I don't pay him to keep Captain America from hurting himself.”

Pierce takes it upon himself to personally disarm Steve. He plucks the comm out of Steve ear and lets it fall to the floor. Steve can see Bucky watching, silently pleading with him not to worry, not to be afraid, but he can see murder in Bucky's eyes, hot and venomous.

“How'd you get out of the Triskelion?” Steve manages to ask. He forces it to sound nonchalant, conversational. He wants Pierce to know he's never going to be threatened.

“Called for a ride. Rollins came and extracted me. Nick and Romanov didn't really stick around to make sure the job was done, Captain. They were too busy running and hiding.”

“And you did what, exactly?”

Steve thinks he can hear Bucky's teeth grind as Pierce unceremoniously removes the shield from the magnetic holster on Steve's back. Pierce spins it once between his hands, thoughtfully, considering it, then tosses it easily into an old waste bin. Steve's eyes follow it ruefully. It's going to be a bitch to find when he busts himself and Bucky out of this. But not impossible.

They lead Bucky toward the door, but stop short of exiting. They must not want the two of them separated, since they're using Steve to keep Bucky in line. Two more agents hurry inside with a stretcher, which it takes four of the largest operatives to shift the dead weight of his body onto. They lay him face down and keep his wrists and ankles cuffed, despite the effective paralytic. Steve takes a little comfort in knowing that these assholes are scared of him, even when he's completely immobile. He watches blood from his nose drip onto the white plastic board underneath him as they lift him and carry him toward the door, using the absence of pain and movement to allow his brain to come out of its previous state of panic, quiet down, and think of a way out of this.

Usually, a transport would provide the perfect opportunity for escape, but unless Bucky can pull off the impossible, HYDRA has already cost them that opportunity. Even if Bucky managed to find his way out of Pierce's checkmate, he'd still have to worry about moving Steve. Steve detests the thought that in every scenario of escape, his own helplessness is the point of failure. They pass through the warehouse doors and they load his stretcher directly into the open hatch of a dark van. The cab rocks gently as the driver steps out.

“Mason, take the wheel. Anderson, in back with me. I wanna talk to the Asset.”

Steve overhears Anderson's low laugh. “Yeah, get back here, Jack. You gotta see this. Cap's a fucking mess, man.”

“He's about to be.”
Jack Rollins. Steve curses inwardly. That degenerate hadn't even been able to hide how sick he was while working undercover at SHIELD. Steve has no desire to see him for who he really is. He hears the click of Bucky's ankle cuffs releasing. The cab sways again underneath him as Anderson pushes him inside.

“You remember the drill, princess. On your knees, face on the floor.”

“Oh, this is gonna make me feel so much better.”

“Yeah, like finally getting some closure, huh?”

Anderson and Rollins' boots reverberate against the steel floor as they jump in behind Bucky. Rollins bangs the doors and another agent shuts them from the outside. Steve suddenly feels sickeningly claustrophobic. The back of the van is dim, but he can smell everything – the exhaust, Rollins' cloying aftershave, Anderson's acrid sweat, the sharp metallic tang of his own blood, and Bucky's clothes, saturated with the heavy scent of gunpowder and smoke. The grate behind the driver's seat clangs open.

“You got about thirty minutes, faggots!” the driver yells.

“Shut the fuck up and drive, Mason!” Anderson calls back, cocking his pistol as he settles heavily onto the ledge near Steve's head. A barely noticeable pressure near the base of his spine tells him that Anderson is resting his feet on top of him. He wants to shiver as he feels the barrel of the agent's gun ghost against the hairs on the back of his neck. He strains his eyes to look upward toward the front of the van, and sees Bucky's downturned face, gaze intent on Anderson's gun and his jaw clenched tightly. Steve blinks slowly, hoping that Bucky will recognize it as, I'm okay. Don't worry.

Mason starts the van. “I'll let you know when we're five minutes out. Leave some for the rest of us,” he shouts, and slides the grate shut.

Rollins takes his seat near the van's back door, where Steve can see him easily in profile.

“So,” he grunts, stowing his own sidearm in its holster. “You wanna be called Bucky, now, huh? That your name?”

Steve's stomach churns. He wishes fervently that they'd just go back to calling him Asset and Soldier. The sound of Bucky's name coming out of Rollins' mouth feels like something is being stolen from both of them. Bucky doesn't answer.

“Hey, Anderson, do me a favor. Every time Bucky decides to act like a little ice-queen, put a hole in the Captain. Somewhere non-fatal.”

Anderson's gun moves downward. From the corner of his eye, Steve sees it hovering over his right calf.

“Don't! Yes! Yes, sir, that's my name.”

Rollins snorts. “Bucky. Campy fuckin' name, huh? You two queers?”

“No, sir.”

“Aw, come on, Bucky Barnes, you never sucked Captain America's dick?”

“No, sir.”
Steve’s heart hammers. It makes no difference whether Bucky tells the truth or not, but his blood still boils at the thought of Rollins and Anderson forcing their long-kept secret out of Bucky. Then again, Bucky may not even remember. He hadn’t worked up the courage to ask yet. He wishes desperately that he had, now. That he’d at least once ducked away from the team and kissed him again, reminded him how much he loved him before this had happened. Now he might not get the chance.

“You don’t wanna suck his dick? You sure?”

“Yes, sir,” Bucky bites out through gritted teeth.

“Suit yourself, Bucky. You can suck mine.”

Steve can’t stay quiet and let this happen. He forces out a laugh. “Come on, boys,” he taunts. “You’ve been wanting to do that to me since our first mission together. Not like I can fight back, anyway. Mouth still works fine.”

Anderson roars with laughter. “Goddammit, Jack, he's fucking precious.”

“Get up here, Buckaroo,” Rollins chuckles. “Cap won't mind, if you two aren't attached. Don't be shy, boy.”

Bucky hesitates momentarily. Steve can’t bring himself to look up toward Bucky’s face. He watches Rollins, praying that the man can still be baited. “Rollins, come on, just let me do it.”

“Shut up, Rogers,” Rollins orders dismissively, lowering his fly as Bucky begins to drag himself past the stretcher to kneel between his legs. “Wait for your turn.”

Bucky's bowed head obscures Rollins' hands as he works himself free of his slacks, but Steve can still see the smirk on Rollins' thin lips as he takes him by the hair, pulling him closer.

“Okay, Bucky, you heard what Pierce said,” he croons. “Back to work.”

Steve squeezes his eyes shut so tightly he sees red. He tries to listen to the noise of the engine. He wishes he could lose himself completely in his fantasies of ripping these bastards apart limb from limb, but he can still hear Bucky's stifled choking over the hum of the van. He’s going to get them out of this if it kills him.

“Little out of practice, aren’t you?” Rollins laughs, yanking Bucky's head back. Steve makes himself open his eyes, and watches Bucky gasp for air. He doesn't know what to say. Nothing he could say to Bucky can make this right. He can't help. He's dead weight.

“Stop. Please,” he begs. He knows it's useless. He knows that Bucky's probably ashamed of him. He couldn't stop himself.

“Steve, shut the fuck up,” Bucky rasps. It's sharp, cutting. Rollins' eyebrows shoot up with surprise. “I'll be alright.” He shakes Rollins' hand away and leans back down, this time of his own volition.

“There you go, Barnes. See, Cap, he's fine.” Rollins groans softly, laying his hand on the back of Bucky's neck. “He's good at this. Can't believe he never offered his Captain a demo.”

Steve shuts his eyes again. Red has turned to white. He's going to make them all suffer.

He's going to make them wish they were dead.
Crash

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve don't have much of an escape plan, but that's never stopped them before.

It happens so quickly that Steve barely has time to register that Bucky is busting them out. For five minutes, he continues silently, debasing himself at Rollins' feet, and to Steve's disgust, Rollins and Anderson really get into it. Steve's teeth grind when Rollins growls low in his throat, and he has to restrain himself from spitting out a litany of profanities when Rollins has the gall to meet his eyes. Behind him, Anderson chuckles between heavy breaths. He leans his weight down on Steve as he bends forward to get a better view.

After thirty seconds, Rollins isn't smirking anymore – he's sighing, and Steve thinks with a twisting rage in his gut that Bucky is really trying, he's making this feel good for him. Steve would have gladly taken a few bullets if it meant he didn't have to see this. He doesn't want Bucky to do this to himself. He hates the notion that Bucky is letting it happen just to save him a little pain. Gunshot wounds will heal faster than this will.

After five minutes, Steve hears Rollins' breath hitch violently and his eyes snap open again. Even in the dark van, Steve can see that Rollins' pupils are blown. Bucky's face is pressed into his lap, and Steve can see the Weapon behind Bucky's back, clenched into a tight fist. A few more seconds and Rollins' hips jerk, making Bucky gasp through his nose and choke, but he holds out until Rollins lets out a long, low groan. Bucky's head snaps sharply to the side.

And then Rollins is screaming. And it no longer sounds like he's enjoying himself. In the same second, Bucky throws his weight onto his left knee and kicks his right foot out behind him, knocking Anderson's aim toward the back door of the van.

It takes Anderson a minute to figure out what's happening, but Steve knows as soon as he catches sight of Bucky's face in the split second it's visible and sees him, teeth bared, blood streaked along the side of his mouth.

Bucky throws himself bodily backward into Anderson's lap and Steve hears the horrific crunch of the back of Bucky's skull smashing into Anderson's nose.

“Fuck! Fuck!” Rollins roars, groping for his sidearm as he lurches forward to try to restrain him, but as soon as he's within reach, the steel toe of Bucky's boot connects with his lower jaw, rewarding him with the wet pop of Rollins' teeth clacking together right through his tongue. Rollins falls back, dazed, and Bucky doesn't waste any time – he keeps his weight on Anderson and whips his head back again and again against the man's unprotected face. Steve feels the warmth of blood spattering onto his cheek.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Steve whispers excitedly. Even if this doesn't work, even if it gets them both killed, he has no words in that moment to describe how much he loves Bucky Barnes. He had almost forgotten how wonderful it was to watch his best guy tear HYDRA agents to pieces.
Bucky must have beaten Anderson unconscious, because he's able to duck to the side and get ahold of the agent's hand. With his own hands secured behind him, he has to turn his body around to aim for Rollins. Steve could care less that Bucky is standing on top of him. Even aiming blind, shooting behind his own back by squeezing another man's trigger finger, Bucky looks perfectly poised to send the bullets straight into Rollins' brain.

But the van lurches. The driver has undoubtedly heard the commotion. Steve suddenly feels the stretcher skid toward the front of the van as Mason pulls over to the shoulder and slams on the brakes. The slug buries itself in Rollins' left shoulder and the wounded agent goes flying forward as the van stops, along with Anderson's dead weight. Bucky drops to his knee beside Steve, bracing himself against the ledges.

Bucky watches Anderson and Rollins for a moment, making sure they're not getting back up and then spits out a mouthful of Rollins' blood. He drops to his back on the floor beside Steve and rolls up onto his shoulders, kicking his legs over his head so that he can loop his cuffed hands around his body. He scrambles in the dark until he's found Rollins' gun, which still has a full magazine.

They hear the car doors slam. “All agents, I got a Code Black,” Mason shouts. Steve hears the static of a radio. “I need back-up, they're fucking loose!”

Bucky cocks Rollins' M&P, and then – then the impossible does happen. His head dips down as he's dragging himself to his feet, and he plants the briefest, clumsiest kiss on Steve's temple, and Steve is so elated that he can't even bring himself to care that it leaves a little smear of blood on his forehead.

“Stay there,” Bucky pants raggedly.

Steve manages a breathless laugh though a haze of adrenaline and terror and rage and joy. “Hilarious, sweetheart.” He hopes Bucky can hear the I love you so much that he doesn't verbalize.

Bucky leans toward the left side of the van and presses his ear to the steel wall, eyes shut, whispering softly to himself, “Respond, you fuckers.”

Steve hears the crackle of static again and then a muffled voice over the radio. “Do not engage, we're turning around!”

Bucky doesn't hesitate. He aims just to his right, setting the barrel of the M&P flush against the steel and shoots straight through it. Mason lets out a brief, strangled yell, and then Steve hears his body hit the asphalt heavily.

Bucky shuffles back toward the cab, takes a breath, then rushes the doors and throws his left shoulder against them. Thankfully, one of them gives on the first try, flies off its hinges, and skids noisily onto the roadway. Bucky tumbles out with it and rolls toward the passenger side.

“Oh, shit, he's—” but the agent who'd been riding in the passenger's seat doesn't get to deliver the rest of his warning. Bucky shoots twice, and he's down.

Steve can already hear the other two vans approaching. There have been no other cars on the road – he would have heard them passing. The HYDRA base they'd attacked had been well outside the city limits, and it must be getting close to four in the morning by now. Bucky acts quickly, jumping back into the van beside Steve.

“Those electromagnets on your arm,” Bucky requests urgently. “The ones your shield attaches to, how do you activate them?”
Steve likes where this is going. “Button's on my glove. Hold it down.”

Bucky presses the heel of his boot down into the palm of Steve's left glove. The miniature electromagnets hum and crackle as he leans down and holds the mag-cuffs against them. It takes about fifteen impatient seconds before the cuffs weaken enough for Bucky to pull them apart without breaking his right wrist. They can both hear the other vans accelerating toward them just up the highway.

“Head South, back toward the city. We can shake 'em in traffic!” Steve yells as Bucky scrambles back out of the van and slams the remaining door against the bent frame. Before Bucky can get himself in the driver's seat, Steve hears the burst of machine gun rounds and feels the vibration of impacts at the front of the van. Bucky sends out return fire as he gets in, and then the tires are screaming and burning on the asphalt and everything lurches into reverse, and then Bucky hits the accelerator hard enough to make Steve's stretcher slide precariously toward the open back of the van.

“Buck?!”

The grate opens.

“Buck, you hit?”

“They were aiming for the tires!”

“They hit 'em?”

Another car's tires screech nearby as Bucky swerves onto the shoulder. “No! Stop talking to me!”

Steve obliges immediately. With no other way to help and Bucky handling their escape, he focuses on trying to regain some movement. It takes eight minutes and a lot of willpower, ignoring Bucky's berserk getaway tactics, but he eventually manages to wiggle his fingers and even turn his head from side to side.

Then the other vans start to catch up. He hears their engines getting closer and closer, and then rounds of machine gun fire erupt, and bullets puncture the bumper and the back door. Thank God he's lying down, or there would be holes in him, too. He feels the van drift a little toward the shoulder and then single shots from just outside – Bucky must be returning fire. Steve squeezes his eyes shut and prays fervently that the jack-ass doesn't run them off the road.

“Still doing alright?” he yells, deciding to risk annoying Bucky again rather than drive himself crazy wondering if his friend is sitting up front with a bullet in him.

“I miss Dugan!” Bucky shouts back. Steve grins, and finds that he can now wiggle his toes on his uninjured leg. Dugan had been the Howling Commandos' transport specialist – and one hell of a driver. It was the first time Bucky had mentioned him since Steve and Sam had found him, and Steve wondered if the heat of this particular chase was what it took to bring a few memories of Dum Dum back. Dugan would have loved to know that this was how Bucky remembered him.

Another round of gunfire, then an ear-splitting bang, and then the van spins hard to the right, back end stuttering around the front. Steve has just enough time for one lucid thought – Damn, they got a tire – before he feels the vehicle tipping in slow motion, and there's absolutely nothing he can do, paralyzed and strapped to a stretcher, except hope that he and Bucky come out of this alive, and then the stretcher's not on the floor anymore and the metal frame is groaning and he's weightless for a split-second, wondering mid-air if the landing is going to snap his neck.
He doesn't even remember hitting the wall. One second, he hears the side of the van screaming against the concrete, and then everything is upturned and wrecked, but totally still. And he's alive, he notices with no small degree of shock.

“Steve?”

And so is Bucky. Steve doesn't respond immediately – he can't. His ears are ringing and he's still not totally convinced he survived the crash – not sure if he's in the back of the van or in a cock-pit, sinking into an icy ocean, praying that he's imagining the sensation of drowning in cold water—

“Steve?!”

“I'm alright,” he says, and his voice is shaking and weak, but working again. That seems to break the spell. “I'm fine. Anderson broke my fall.”

Steve is still too dazed to really comprehend what happens next. He hears Bucky extricating himself from the wreckage, and he hears the passenger's door tear away from its hinges, and then an exchange of gunfire. They must be pinned between the other two vehicles. He couldn't say how long it goes on, but eventually, he sees Bucky step in front of the opening at the back of the van, aiming his shots carefully at the four agents, who are keeping their cover, trying to reduce their own casualties while holding the two of them under siege. The magazine in Rollins' M&P has to be one or two rounds away from empty.

Bucky ducks inside and instead of taking more ammo out of Rollins' pockets, he tears off the entire bulletproof vest and throws it on, then reloads. Steve can see the other agents' boots advancing slowly across the concrete. “You think this stretcher floats?” he asks, tightening the straps that hold Steve to it.

Steve doesn't know how to answer that, which doesn't matter much, because Bucky doesn't wait for an answer. He grabs the end of it and drags it and Steve out of the car, gunning down two of the agents closest to them and shooting haphazardly at the two on the other side.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Steve demands, yelling over the blasts of gunfire as Bucky sets the end of the stretcher up against a concrete median.

“Don't worry, I'll be right down!”

Down? Steve thinks as Bucky grabs the end of the stretcher by his head and lifts it into the air. Steve is already tipping over the median before he realizes that they're on a bridge, over water, and he's strapped to a plastic board and Bucky is throwing him off. His heart jumps into his throat. “Buck, wait, no—”

Too late. He's in free-fall. Steve holds his breath and hits the cold water.
R&R

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky have made it out of HYDRA's custody alive. Sometimes, you just need to stop, take a deep breath, and laugh.
Steve isn't in the water for long. The stretcher does, in fact, float very well, and it buoys back up the surface within just a few seconds. Bucky splashes into the creek just about five yards upstream.
and gunfire follows close behind him, but he swims away quickly, catching up to Steve under the safety of the overpass.

“You ass, you crazy son of a bitch—” Steve sputters, barely maintaining enough presence of mind to keep his voice low. “Was that really the only – you couldn't think of a better—” He gives up.

Bucky doesn't say a word in response, just grabs the side of the stretcher and rips the straps loose, then pulls Steve close to his chest, treading water against the light current as he overturns the board and sends it floating downstream, hoping the agents will guess that Steve's still on it, face down, and Bucky is following close behind.

The adrenaline and cold water have pushed Steve's body into overdrive and he's finally beginning to shake the effects of the paralytic. He's able to hold his own head up out of the water, provided he leans it against Bucky's shoulder, and although he knows it's not doing much to help, he paddles weakly with his forearms, trying to take even a fraction of his weight off of Bucky.

Bucky gets them to the muddy bank just as the HYDRA agents above open fire on the stretcher. He drags Steve's body into the thick undergrowth by one of the bridge's concrete supports. He checks him over feverishly in the dark.

“You hurt?”

“Guess I won't know until the numbness wears off,” Steve whispers. “Hell of an escape, by the way. I owe you one.”

“We've got to move. Fast,” Bucky tells him, looking up toward the highway, listening to the shouts of the remaining agents, indistinct over the sound of the creek rushing past. “They'll search down here. I don't think our decoy will fool them. Still can't walk?”

Steve clenches his jaw, ashamed, but he makes one more attempt to force his legs to respond, even though he already knows the answer. “No. I'm sorry.”

Bucky nods, stands, throws Steve's upper body over his shoulder, and lifts him up. Steve can tell it's a strain, even for someone else who's enhanced – he's not exactly light, he's soaked, and Bucky has been through hell. He's probably got a dozen injuries from the crash alone that he's just not complaining about or acknowledging.

“How's your head?” Steve asks quietly as Bucky hefts him into a more stable position on his shoulder.

“Hurts,” is Bucky's curt reply. That worries Steve. If Bucky will admit that it hurts, it must really hurt. “I remember when they tested that thing on me now, though – that implant,” he adds, grinding under Steve's weight as he starts up the hill toward the trees that line the creek and the highway. “Didn't take long to heal. No permanent damage.” He shifts Steve higher on his shoulder and holds him steady with the Weapon so that he can have Rollins' sidearm at the ready in his right hand.

He's careful and silent as he moves through the trees by the road, keeping them hidden in the shadows cast by the headlights nearby. He stands completely still as the vehicles begin to move out, heading back toward the city.

“They're sending at least a few agents back the way we came,” Bucky whispers. “Do we still risk going back to the safe-house?”

“Have to,” Steve replies, dizzy from all the blood in his head. “We've gotta get back to the others,
and we can't contact them to set another rendezvous point. And we've got to let them know Pierce is alive.”

Bucky takes a breath, then lets it out resolutely. Steve knows he'll carry him the whole way if he has to. He feels guilty – God, does he ever – but he can only promise himself that he'll make this up to Bucky once they're both somewhere safe.

Bucky carries him deeper into the woods, but keeps the highway in view on their right, so that they can follow it back toward the city. It's slow going – the terrain is muddy and cold and overgrown, and Steve is still nothing but dead-weight, but in spite of all that he figures that they manage – or rather, Bucky manages a little over two miles within the next half hour. There are street lights lining the highway again, meaning they're getting close to the city limits.

Steve clenches his fists experimentally. Everything – every single minute movement – tingles painfully, like blood coming back to a deadened limb, but he's doing better. Well enough to give Bucky the surprise of a light pat on the backside. “Hey, put me down. I think I can walk.”

Bucky sets him down carefully in front of a tree, letting Steve grasp the trunk for balance while holding on to the shoulder of the Weapon for support. Steve hisses when his weight comes to rest on his injured leg. It's radiating pain now, which he supposes is good news – at least it's not numb anymore. Bullet holes in your thigh should hurt. The lack of pain had been disconcerting.

Bucky holds him up, taking a little weight off of it, and then slowly helps him lower himself to sit at the base of the tree. He circles his arms around Steve's waist and pulls both the compact first-aid kit and a small flashlight off his belt. He turns on the flashlight and holds it in his teeth, then opens up the kit, first examining the bullet and its fragments, making sure Steve hadn't left a piece of it inside the wound. Once he's satisfied that each of the three fragments can be puzzled back together without a gap, he frowns at the slug and stows it in his own pocket. Steve doesn't ask why.

Steve's leg must have started bleeding again when he'd fallen into the water. Bucky takes a hard look at it, shaking his head, presumably in response to the mess Steve had made of the wound while digging out the bullet. He goes straight for the antiseptic and cleans it out thoroughly, which Steve has to admit, is better done sooner rather than later, after his dip in that dirty creek.

“That little pen in there—”

Bucky sorts through the tools and locates it.

“Just stick it in there and hit the button on top. That should cauterize it.”

“Hm.” Bucky makes a bemused noise around the flashlight, as if to say, “Nifty,” and then does it before Steve has a chance to change his mind or think about it.

“Wow!” Steve rasps softly through his gritted teeth, smiling in spite of the burn in his leg as a cool sweat suddenly beads on his forehead. “That little bastard sure stings,” he groans.

“Mnhm,” Bucky confirms, bandaging the wound tightly and efficiently. He repacks the kit and takes the flashlight out of his mouth, then wraps his arms around Steve again to snap them back on to his belt. “Looked like it.”

But Steve's mind isn't on his injury or their escape anymore. It's on Bucky, and it's not coming back until he does something, anything about the knot in his stomach. He refuses to wait any longer. Not when Bucky is so close. Hell, not when Bucky started it, anyway, with that tease of a kiss back in the van. He can't afford to waste any more time.
Before Bucky can finish securing the provisions on his utility belt, Steve turns his head and catches his lips in a sudden kiss. It's not forceful or particularly insistent – just hopeful. Bucky is caught off guard and gasps against Steve's mouth, but then kisses him back with so much intensity that the back of Steve's head hits the bark of tree just hard enough to hurt. Neither of them care. Steve lifts his arms even though they feel like they weigh a thousand pounds apiece just to cup Bucky's face and hold him, feel him, pull him in closer. Bucky doesn't let the kiss end until they both absolutely need to breath.

Steve grins, heart beating so hard that he wonders if Bucky can feel it. “I needed that.”

Bucky smiles. Steve doesn't miss that it's a little halfhearted. “I did, too.” His eyes wander back to the highway, but Steve can tell they're seeing something else.

“Hey.”

It takes a moment for Bucky's gaze to escape wherever his mind has taken it and refocus on the woods, Steve, the road. He meets Steve's eyes unsteadily, swallowing down whatever he'd been thinking about saying.

“Pierce?”

Bucky's head drops in answer, like the very name puts an unbearable weight on his shoulders.

“Buck...God. I can't imagine what it must have been like to see him again. For you.” Steve wets his lips. He doesn't know how anything he could say will lessen the shock for Bucky. It's an ugly situation – he himself had barely known Alexander Pierce, but he'd learned enough during the Insight crisis to see that the man was pure evil. He had found out about Pierce's connection to Bucky after the Triskelion fell and HYDRA's files became publicly available, but he hadn't pressed him for any details. He had decided to let Bucky tell him only when and if he ever felt ready, after seeing how Bucky's jaw would clench at the mere mention of the man's name. “Never mind everything else that just happened...I know that must have been...difficult.”

Bucky gives an immediate shake of his head, biting his tongue. “I'm – I'm just angry. Fucking – I'm – I just want that piece of shit dead.”

Steve waits, listening. Bucky doesn't usually tell him how he feels, and he'll take whatever his friend is willing to divulge, even if it's rage.

“I wanted to kill him so bad. And I couldn't. He took your shield, Steve! How dare that Nazi son of bitch even touch you—”

Steve interrupts him with a scoff. “Oh, Bucky, that's what you're angry about? It's a piece of metal, Bucky – just a big, metal thing. He didn't get you. That's all I care about,” he smiles, reaching up to grip Bucky's tense shoulder and squeezing hard, just to reassure himself that Bucky really is still with him. “And she always finds her way back home. Every time.” He watches Bucky's face slowly soften. “So...” he says, trying not to sound as shy as he suddenly feels. That kiss had taken every ounce of gumption he could muster. “When did you remember? About us.”

“That I love you?” Bucky asks quietly, as serious as Steve has ever heard him. Steve's heart suddenly feels fuller. He's never heard Bucky be quite so plain about it. “On the helicarrier. Didn't really remember. Just felt it. The other stuff took a long time – remembering that you loved me back, stuff that we'd done, the things we always said to each other...it's still not all there,” he admits. “But I knew I wanted that. That kiss,” he adds sincerely, helping Steve up. “Just wasn't sure if you still wanted it, too. Been a long time. Thought you might have found...”
somebody...couldn't have blamed you.”

“I'm not exactly great at moving on,” Steve chuckles, brushing dirt off the back of his uniform. They turn south and continue their trek toward the city, albeit slower than before. “Do you...” Steve cringes as he stumbles and puts too much weight on his wounded leg, but in all honesty, it just covers the fact that he doesn't know where to go from here – how to ask Bucky exactly where this is going. “Are you still...I know you've been through so much, Buck. I don't want you to feel like you – like we have to rush back into things—”

Bucky politely saves him from any more pathetic floundering with a smile. “Yes, I'm still interested in sex,” he laughs. “Anytime.”

“Oh, well,” Steve chuckles, relieved. “In that case, we're getting out of West Seneca tonight and we'll have our own damn room at the next motel.”

“You don't think the others would catch on,” Bucky states, implying that Steve is being a little stupid and over-eager.

“Who cares? This is the future,” he argues, making an expansive gesture. “That sort of thing is pretty normal now.”

“It's not normal to be an invert.”

“We're not *inverts*, Bucky, we're – I don't know – we're just...we just have a close relationship. Besides, they can wonder all they want.” Steve smiles, trying to look bashful, even though he's a little too frazzled and exhausted to bother with Catholic guilt at the moment. “But they won't know for sure unless I pound you so hard we shake the walls. Which might happen.”

Bucky's eyes widen and his jaw drops. His gaze slides slowly over to Steve's unapologetic face. Steve just eats it up and shrugs cockily. “Hey, it's been a while.”

Bucky frowns with what might be genuine surprise. “Wait a minute, I thought I was the pitcher, here.”

“No, that was definitely me,” Steve assures him playfully. “And you loved it.”

“No, it was me. I remember.”

“*Maybe* once, Buck. I don't know, for your birthday or something,” Steve concedes, grinning. “But that was it. Don't play the 'amnesia' card on me, you jerk. You remember just fine.”

“*Cause nobody* could forget making love to you,” Bucky teases.

“No, they couldn't.”

“*Cause I might not know my own name, but I better not forget what an amazing lover Captain America is,* huh?”

“Damn right.”

They continue on in companionable silence for a few more minutes, before Bucky just *has* to have the last word.

“Let's compromise. Just let me swing on it.”

Steve clutches his stomach, desperately trying to keep his burst of laughter quiet. “Hell no, never
Bucky smiles at his own joke. Steve hasn't seen him look so pleased with himself since '44, after he'd taken out a HYDRA officer at twenty-two hundred yards. “Oh, it won't be like that,” he simpers.

“I will never want that again. I'm ruined. I'm not putting it anywhere near those teeth.”

Bucky smirks, offering his hand to help Steve up a steep embankment, and as he pulls him closer and steadies him, he brings his lips up against Steve's ear. “I give you two days tops, pal.”
Bucky and Steve are nearly in the clear, but Pierce always keeps an ace up his sleeve.

Fifteen more minutes of walking go by quickly, and they're back within the city limits of West Seneca. Steve leans on Bucky when he needs to, as they cross low muddy patches and drag themselves up leaf-covered hills, but the serum is already doing its job. Two more days of healing, and Steve knows he won't even have a limp.

The distant light pollution that had acted as a beacon as they trudged southward has engulfed them. To their right, the trees stand out in sharp black relief against the rows of sodium vapor lamps along the highway, and to their left, they can see a steep dip in the landscape about a quarter-mile east and above that low horizon, the first patches of cool gray sky. Steve can taste the damp chill of predawn in the air.

As the woods thin out, their path leads them across a few scenic driveways. Once, they come close to stepping out in front of a truck – some third shift worker pulling in to her gravel drive – but they manage to tuck themselves behind a briar at the last second and stay hidden in the dim light. The last thing they need is some suspicious homeowner calling the police to report two strange men, one bleeding, both in soaking wet clothes, wandering around their property – especially considering that one of them is Captain America, recent subject of divisive media attention, and the other is wanted by Interpol on multiple charges of terrorism and espionage.

They've still got a long way to go if they continue to travel on foot (and Steve sees no viable alternative), but once they're in the city they might be able to blend in with the morning commuters and make their way safely back to the motel where they'd improvised a base. Even if the rest of the team has been forced to leave without them, Steve knows the motel office has a phone, and Clint and Sam probably still have their burners on them.

Steve can see that they've only got a few thousand yards of tree-cover left before they hit an industrial park, so he leads them toward the thickest patch of woods he can find, detouring briefly away from the interstate. They need to rest and regroup. Even for two enhanced, seasoned veterans, it's been a long and trying night. He can see his partner's exhaustion in every uneven step he takes as the weight of the Weapon starts to bow his back, and he can hear Bucky's once silent footfalls starting to drag carelessly in the wet leaves under his boots. Admittedly, his own leg could also use a break.

They find a secluded trench left by the fall of a big sycamore and slide down into the deep gulley where its roots had once been buried. Bucky finds an earthen step and helps Steve sit, then collapses heavily beside him, rubbing his face tiredly and scratching at the stubble on his jaw with the knuckles of the Weapon.

Steve watches him, worrying, even though his own eyes are suddenly blurry and itching from lack of sleep, and wonders if he should bother to comment on how rough Bucky looks. In the growing
light, he can see red bruises blooming on Bucky's face; around his eye-sockets, cheekbones, and forehead, his skin is mottled with broken blood-vessels – probably a lingering effect of the activated implant – and his long hair is lank and dirty, still damp from his plunge off the bridge.

He knows he probably doesn't look a whole hell of a lot better, so he simply asks, “How you holding up?”

Bucky takes a break from rubbing his sore eyes to give Steve a look that says, "How the fuck do you think I'm holding up?" It breaks into a smile as Steve frowns apologetically, realizing that he shouldn't have even asked. “I'm really hungry,” Bucky laughs, the upward turn of his lips not quite reaching his eyes.

“Well,” Steve snorts, rubbing Bucky's bent back soothingly. “Not really what I expected you to complain about – actually, yeah, it is,” he chuckles. “As soon as we're out of town, we're going to find some breakfast. Priority number one. Promise.” He looks down at himself. “But not in these clothes.” He hadn't even realized he was still in uniform.

“You need to borrow something of mine? I've got a spare jacket on, and two shirts.”

“Maybe a t-shirt.” He stands up and reaches for the back clasp at the neck of his uniform. Bucky helps him with the concealed zipper. As brilliant as the design of his suit is, it's still easier to get into than out of. He flinches when Bucky's fingers touch the bare skin of his back. “Buck, you're freezing!” He detaches the top of his uniform from his pants and tosses it aside, grabbing Bucky's right hand in his own. “And you're shaking.”

Bucky pulls his hand away and immediately starts divesting himself of Rollins' tattered bullet-proof vest, leather jacket, hoodie, and long-sleeved shirt. “It's January and I'm wet, Steve, of course my hands are cold.”

Steve takes the long-sleeved shirt, then turns the top of his uniform inside out to reveal a nondescript dark lining – one of Stark's innovations. Inside out and with the closure in the front, it passes for a moderately stylish jacket, with only a little tightness through the shoulders, and left unattached from the pants, it's long enough to conceal his belt.

Steve's ears prick up. Bucky pauses as he's redressing and listens, too. They can both hear it. A helicopter, a few miles north, making passes over the highway.

Steve zips up his uniform and tests his leg. It feels much stronger, even after such a brief rest. Bucky looks back to him, worried. “It's probably a news crew,” Steve guesses. “We left a pretty big mess on the highway.”

“Still dangerous,” says Bucky, zipping his jacket. “I think we should keep moving.”

“Buck, you only sat down for a few seconds,” Steve argues. “We're not going to be able to stop again once we run out of cover. Just rest for a minute. I'll keep watch.”

But Bucky's spooked, still turned north, focused on the faint noise of the distant helicopter. Steve can tell that he's not listening to him. “No,” he says simply, then turns to Steve and bows his head apologetically. “I...I just want to keep going. Please. Can you keep walking? With your leg like that?”

Steve can see nervousness and paranoia etched into Bucky's face and he hears the notes of fear in his voice. There's no point in arguing. “It's fine. A lot better.”

Bucky nods. “Sorry. Just a real bad feeling,” he mumbles, climbing the wall of the gulley and
reaching down to help Steve up. “Let's try to pick up the pace.”

They resume their march, moving quickly through the open areas and watching the highway from the cover of what little woods remains. Steve doesn't miss that, even with his injured leg, he's still ahead of Bucky. In fact, his partner seems to be working hard to keep up. The sun is a little higher now, and Steve can see a sheen of sweat on Bucky's forehead. He looks pale, too. Steve doesn't like it, but it makes him press forward even faster. The sooner they're safe, the sooner they can both rest.

In five minutes, they've reached the industrial park Steve had seen up ahead. It turns out to be the remains of an old smelting plant – the empty parking lot and cracked, weed-covered asphalt suggests that it's been closed for some time. At the edge of the lot, Bucky stumbles, catching himself on a tree, and sinks to the ground. Steve is at his side in an instant.

“Buck. Something's not right. Talk to me.” He lifts Bucky's face up in his hands to get a look at his eyes. His cheeks are cool and clammy with sweat and his lashes flutter weakly as he tries to focus on Steve. Now that their footfalls aren't making the leaves rustle, Steve realizes that he can still hear the beats of chopper blades in the distance. “Bucky!”

“I don't know, I don't know,” Bucky slurs, head heavy in Steve's hands. “Just feel hungry.” He reaches up and holds on to Steve's wrists, trying to steady himself. “Head hurts.” Steve can tell just from looking at Bucky's wandering eyes that he's dizzy even when he's sitting. “Bad taste in my mouth.”

Steve is panicking now. “Like what? What are you tasting?”

Bucky swallows, eyes drifting uncontrollably over Steve's face. “Mm. Metal. Like after...after the chair—”

“Jesus,” Steve whispers to himself. He knows these symptoms. He drags Bucky back toward the trees, away from the parking lot, and sits down on the ground, laying Bucky's head in his lap.

Bucky is totally incoherent. “Please, please don't. I want to remember—don't take it, don't let 'em—God, don't—” he trails off.

Steve sits there in the dirt, knowing in his gut what's coming, scared out of his mind. He forces himself to think, roll Bucky onto his side, get a good grip on his head, support him as he feels something like a shiver run though his partner's body. “I've got you, baby doll, I've got you. I'm right here. I've got you.”

He keeps talking to Bucky as the seizure hits him full force, as delirium and half-conscious pleas turn into violent convulsions. He doesn't know if Bucky can hear him anymore, but he keeps on talking, comforting him, because if it's not doing anything else, at least it's making it harder to hear the sound of grinding teeth and the approaching helicopter.

Please, God, I know it's not right to love him but please, please, don't take him.

“I'm right here.”

Let him live, let him be alright, don't take him away yet. He doesn't deserve this, God, please, help him. Help me.

“I'm right here, sweetheart.” Steve's breath catches in his throat as he lies, “You're safe.”

please just hear me, just this once I know haven't been praying much but you can't take him away
from me yet I'm not ready God I'm not ready

“Gonna be alright, Bucky—”

I can't lose him he's all I've got not here not like this

“I love you so much.”

Please. Just not like this.

The convulsions subside within a few minutes. Steve doesn't realize that he's crying until he sees the tears spatter on Bucky's jacket. Bucky's eyes are just starting to refocus, recognizing Steve's face, remembering where he is.

“Hey. Hey, baby,” Steve whispers gently, stroking his thumb over Bucky's cheek. “You with me?”

“Yeah,” Bucky rasps, barely able to open his mouth to speak.

“Okay. Keep talking to me, baby doll, you're going to be okay. I'm going to figure this out.”

“Steve,” he mumbles dazedly, “Stevie, can't see...”

“I'm here.”

“Please, don't go.”

“I won't, Bucky, I won't—”

“Steve, don't go...you...I can't see—don't...” Bucky's head snaps back against the cradle of Steve's arm as he loses consciousness again.

The helicopter is nearly over their heads now, but there's nothing Steve can do about it. He thinks about flagging them down for help as a second seizure starts, but there's no need. It descends into the parking lot, about a hundred feet away. Not a news station. Dark brown, unmarked. Military. Probably from the same base that had sent out the drone attack yesterday evening, the one the vans had been taking them to. HYDRA.

He pulls Bucky's spasming body closer to his chest as he watches the chopper touch down on the asphalt, tall weeds whipping in the gusts of wind coming off the blades. He waits, heart hammering, holding onto his friend like he's afraid the whirlwind is going to pull him out of his arms. No one gets out. He has to make a call.

The convulsions end. Bucky doesn't regain consciousness. Steve doesn't think – it's too late for that – he just adjusts his grip on Bucky's limp body and struggles to his feet, lifting him up and cradling him against his chest, and he begins to walk forward. He doesn't have an alternative.

Pierce gets out of the helicopter, in no real hurry as Steve breaks into a run. Bucky's lips are quickly fading from rosy, chapped pink to pale blue. Pierce calmly flashes a thumbs up toward the pilot, and the side door slides open to reveal two agents and two medics. Steve ignores the voice in his head, screaming, begging him to turn and run, find another way, any other way, and he closes the distance between himself and the helicopter and hands Bucky's body over to the medics.

He watches them, wordless, everything in slow motion as they cut away his jackets and shirts until he's bare from the waist up, and roll him onto his side. Steve can see his face, bleakly white under the yellow interior lights inside the helicopter. One of them opens a panel in his metal arm and hits
something, then detaches the limb entirely, right at the shoulder joint, leaving only a naked metal port. The other opens a leather case and readies an injection. They make a cut down the side of his jeans to expose his hip and plunge the needle in. They're cutting away the remainder of his clothes, cuffing his right wrist to the stretcher, and wrapping his body in blankets when Steve finds his voice again. He looks over to Pierce, who's standing beside him, watching his men work and waiting patiently for Steve to speak.

“He dies,” Steve growls, voice rough with emotion as he points to the body of his friend, “you die. You know I'll find a way.”

Pierce scoffs at the promise. “I don't want my Soldier dead, Captain Rogers, I wanted him back.” He doesn't even bother to look at Steve as he watches one of his agents secure the Weapon inside a metal case. The medics are starting an IV drip in Bucky's arm. “I've got a lot of money and time invested in him. We cut it a little closer than I would have liked.” He brings his hand up to shield his eyes from the wind. “He's not out of the woods yet. We need to get him to a better equipped lab, make sure there's no long-term damage.”

Steve loses it in an instant. The agents have guns on him long after he's grabbed Pierce by the jacket and thrown him bodily against the side of the helicopter. He could have snapped his neck right then. There was time. But beneath all the rage that's finally boiling over, he knows Bucky needs help and right now, these criminals are all they've got. He doesn't kill him. “You goddamn son-of-a-bitch, you did this to him!” he shouts over the deafening gusts and the rumble of the engine. How dare this piece of shit act concerned, after he orchestrated this from beginning to end.

Pierce is winded from the impact, but collects himself quickly, motioning for the agents to lower their guns. They get out of the chopper and stand at the ready behind Steve with an open pair of mag-cuffs. “I know you're upset, Captain, but if you want your friend to live, then I'm afraid time is of the essence.”

Steve doesn't even realize that he's blacked out until his vision starts returning. His own white knuckles, clenched around Pierce's collar, come into focus first. Then Pierce's face – calm, expectant, unfazed. Finally, in his periphery, Bucky's unconscious body, and he knows as well as Pierce does that his friend's survival is more important than revenge, right now.

A lingering, rational voice in his head tells him that this is it. He's lost. All he can do now is damage control. So he gives up, and lets go of Pierce, raising his hands in the air in surrender. He takes one last look at Bucky, at the heart monitor beside him, slowly climbing up from a mere twenty-eight beats per minute, before he turns toward the agents waiting behind him. For now, he's done all he can. It's over.

He lays his hands in the cuffs and watches them snap shut.

Chapter End Notes

Beta-read by Parent Nacho.
Alexander Pierce has forced Steve to do the unthinkable. He has turn Bucky back over to HYDRA.

They had been so close to safety.

And that makes Steve even angrier.

If he had tried just a little harder, pushed his muscles just a little more, moved faster, not stopped to rest, they could have made it back to town. If Bucky hadn't been forced to carry him half the way. If he hadn't let his guard down back at the base in West Seneca, gotten himself shot. If he'd thought to remove the bullet just a little sooner. If he'd just aborted the mission when he should have, when Barton and Sam got hit on the rooftop, if he'd just pulled them out of there, he could have kept everyone safe.

But he hadn't done any of that.

Steve sits rigidly in the back of the helicopter, an armed agent beside him and another across from him. Bucky still hasn't regained consciousness. The heart-monitor the medics have attached to him still reads a dangerous thirty-five beats per minute. In the cock-pit, Pierce seems to be carrying on a quiet, casual conversation with the pilot, occasionally laughing at something Steve can't quite hear over the engine. He can see a small screen in between them, showing a thermographic map of the ground below. That must have been how Pierce had found them.

Rage and guilt and anxiety flood over him until he feels physically ill. They're in the air for a long time before he can speak, and think of much to say other than,

I'm going to kill every last one of you, and I'm going to make you suffer first.

His first cognizant thought is of Bucky. If he wants answers, he's going to have to be careful. Play their game.

He keeps his eyes forward, and addresses the two guards with forced respect. “Am I allowed to speak?”

The agents look at each other. Steve can't see their eyes behind the dark visors of their riot helmets, but they must come to some sort of silent agreement. The one sitting across from him nods. Steve looks over to the medics, who are adjusting the dosage on the IV in Bucky's arm.

“What...what happened to him?” Steve almost doesn't expect them to answer.

One of them rolls his eyes. The other, a blond man in his mid-forties, seems a little more willing to talk. His gaze flashes nervously over Steve like he'd rather not make eye contact, as if Steve is some sort of barely subdued predator, but when he speaks, his voice conveys something like understanding – maybe even pity. “We triggered a mechanism in his arm remotely. It released a controlled dose of insulin.”

“He's in insulin shock?” Steve snaps, louder than he'd meant to. The agent across from him grips
his fire-arm tighter. He lowers his head in obeisance. He asks, softly, “Has he recovered from this before?”

“Once, to my knowledge,” the blond medic responds. “I’ve been working with the Asset for the last thirteen years. I’ve fixed worse than this,” he says, almost smiling. “But I really hated to suggest the insulin. It’s a pretty extreme measure, but we had to get him back.”

Steve bites his tongue and lets the man continue.

“We’re headed to a fully equipped lab, but this was a much closer call than we’d planned. His vitals don’t look good, right now. Hopefully, we’ll be able to get him functional again.”

*He is not a God-damned weapon.*

Steve steels his nerves. “And what about me?”

Pierce has apparently been listening in from the cock-pit. He turns in his seat to glance sidelong at Steve, flashing him a half-smile. “I think you already know the answer to that question, Captain,” he calls back to him smugly.

The medic clears his throat uncomfortably, then takes a small flashlight out of his pocket and opens one of Bucky's eyes to check the dilation of his pupils. He answers without looking at Steve. “You're going to be conditioned. Same as him.”

Steve has to remind himself not to laugh. He's not going to let them get that far. Not in a million years. He forces himself to respond without provoking the armed guards. “And if that doesn't work out?”

“Not my call,” the medic responds dismissively. “I assume they'll keep you at the lab for research. Sorry. It's not personal.”

This time, Steve can't contain a soft, humorless laugh. “It never is.”

He's probably pushed his luck as far as the agents will let him, so he doesn't ask any more questions. He's got to start forming some kind of plan. There's nothing he can do until Bucky is stable, so any attempt at escape will have to wait until they're already at the facility. That adds a huge risk. It allows HYDRA scientists access to his blood, his DNA, everything they could use to potentially replicate the serum.

And he has no idea when they'll start conditioning him, or what exactly that implies. From what he's gleaned from Bucky's files, he knows full well that their methods will be brutal, possibly debilitating, even to him. But he learned from the same files that it had taken years to turn Bucky into their Soldier, that he had been able to resist what they referred to as “compliance programming” and cause them problems at least until the early 1950s. So their original methods took time. That's good.

Granted, HYDRA has had decades of experience and research in the matter of behavior modification and memory erasure since then. They've used Bucky to hone the pseudo-science of brainwashing into an art. In the interest of making Captain America, arguably their greatest and longest-standing threat, into another one of their human “assets,” Steve is certain that they'll spare no expense and waste no time. And he's worth a lot to them. Security will be tight.

But he'll just have to cross that bridge when he comes to it. For now, he reminds himself that their plans actually work in his favor, that he and Bucky are worth so much to HYDRA as soldiers. It means that they're likely to keep both of them alive.
His first step, as far as he can figure, should be feigning some degree of cooperation. Complete complacency will look too suspicious, but defiance could potentially force them to use Bucky as leverage against him. Additionally, if he lets them win a few rounds, there's a chance that he'll eventually be able to maneuver them into a false sense of accomplishment, of victory over him. That may be the only key to catching them off-guard in the foreseeable future.

And their dependence on Bucky as a means of keeping him in line could also work to his advantage. It almost certainly dictates that they won't risk separating the two of them, which in turn means that Steve will always know where Bucky is and, hopefully, what condition he's in. He knows there's a good chance that he won't be able to get them out of this before they start putting Bucky through the same torturous routine that was once his daily life, and Steve is absolutely, grimly sure that Pierce won't let his Asset's long escape from HYDRA go unpunished, not to mention his failure to protect the Insight launch.

So they're going to hurt Bucky. They'll be aggressive. He has to be prepared for that, and take comfort in knowing that Bucky suffered this kind of treatment for seventy years and still managed to recover. As long as Bucky is alive and Steve can find a way for them to escape together, James Barnes is unbreakable. Steve has faith in that. And if Bucky could bear this for seventy years, Steve can endure it for however long he has to in order to get them out safely.

His second step will be gathering as much information as he can. The layout of whatever facility they're brought to, names, faces, dates, times, schedules, any drugs they're given, and any data that HYDRA's scientists are able to collect. Starting the second step is easy enough. Steve forces himself to quiet his anger and his panic.

Think. Take an inventory of what you know.

Start with something simple. The date.

They had planned their raid on the base in West Seneca on the night of Saturday the twenty-third. Today is Sunday, January twenty-fourth, 2016.

Time.

The growing light outside means that it's around 06:00.

Okay. Figure out where they're taking us. Start with what you know.

The position of the sun, as far as he can tell given his limited view of the window in the cock-pit, suggests that they're traveling north-east.

How fast?

The controls he can see in front of Pierce include an infra-red screen, as well as night-vision and an automatic flight control system. He remembers the size of the craft as it had landed. This is an HH-60 Pave Hawk.

Those are meant for search and rescue, and as far as Steve can remember from his work at SHIELD, they top out at about 180 miles per hour.

We're not going that fast. Think.

Judging by the skyline, they're at about 10,000 feet.

By the rate the trees he can see below are moving past, they're flying at around 100 miles per hour.
How far have we already traveled?

They've been at a steady altitude for almost forty minutes, so that means they're sixty miles out from West Seneca.

That makes the body of water he can see up ahead Lake Ontario.

Landmark.

The lake is close and the pilot isn't starting a descent, so they're going to pass over it. The labs are somewhere past the Canadian border.

That's important. Remember that.

If he continues to keep track of their speed and direction, he should be able to figure out exactly where they land.

As for the two agents, he'll have to learn more once they've reached their destination. He can't infer much about them — their faces and bodies are covered by the riot gear. The one beside him, judging by his build and posture, is a man and no older than forty. The one on the other side might be a woman — slimmer shoulders, no taller than 5'7", and small feet. Their armor has all the standard weak points. Throat, shoulder socket, lumbar and kidneys, hamstrings, Achilles tendons. He knows this gear like the back of his hand. It shouldn't slow him down, if he needs to do some damage.

As a final observation, he adds:

Blond doctor. Mid-forties. Technician for thirteen years, at least that long in HYDRA's service. He'll be directly involved in the research and conditioning. Willing to talk. Good source of intel. Potentially sympathetic.

He looks him over, this time with attention to detail. No sidearm. Underneath his bullet-proof vest, civilian clothes. Average musculature. Wedding ring.

Likely to respond to threats of violence.

That's as good of a start as he can hope to make.

These idiots should have put a bag over my head.

Steve sits in silence for another fifty minutes. Their speed has remained fairly consistent, so that's another 85 miles, always traveling north-east. The helicopter is still over the water, but he can see the shoreline of the lake coming into view through the cock-pit window.

And then he hears something that breaks his train of thought.

A weak groan, then a cough.

The two medics recognize some warning sign that Steve doesn't see. The blond kneels down and lifts Bucky's head while the other grabs a plastic bag from a dispenser on the wall. Bucky vomits, but it's not much more than water and bile. He hadn't had much to eat on Saturday. (Steve remembers this with a fresh pang of guilt – if he'd pressed Bucky to eat something, the effects of the insulin could have been reduced.) The blond medic leans over to get a better look at his face.
once the heaving stops.

“Are you awake? Can you understand me?”

No answer, just another groan. His head seems to become heavier in the medic's hands. He's lost consciousness again.

“Have we got some protein bars ready?”

The other medic replies, “Yeah, but he's not waking up. Vitals are still too low.”

The blond checks his watch. “We're still an hour and forty-five minutes out. He might improve. Have them ready.”

Steve silently thanks the man for his careless mistake. An hour and forty-five minutes. A little over one hundred and seventy miles. They'll probably stay their north-east course and maintain their speed to conserve fuel. He can see the Saint Lawrence river up ahead. The image of a map forms quickly in Steve's head. Another hundred miles along the river puts them right on the Canadian border. And another seventy…

Montreal on the west side of the river. Brossard on the east.

Either way, Steve knows the area. He'll be able to get them to safety.

Montreal. An hour and twenty minutes later, Steve can see the port coming into view below them. Bucky has been fading in and out of consciousness since his first bout of vomiting, but he wasn't lucid enough to eat or speak. The medics had raised the dosage on his IV a second time. His heart rate is at forty beats per minute now, but Steve had watched as one of the medics had taken his blood-pressure, which was at a critical 70/45. There would be no reason to attempt escape once they landed. Bucky needed medical attention as soon as possible. Hearing the medics' report on Bucky's vitals, Steve hadn't been able to keep himself from shouting over the engine to Pierce, “Wherever we're going, we need to hurry! He needs help.” The pilot, at a nod from Pierce, had increased their speed, thank God.

They land somewhere on the north edge of the city, on top of an unmarked complex. The landing pad suggests that it had once been part of a small hospital, but there aren't many cars in the lot. Someone within HYDRA must have bought the facility and repurposed it as private laboratory space. Steve is instructed to stay seated while they unload Bucky's stretcher. Once the doors open, Steve can see that a team of medical personnel is already rushing out to meet them with a gurney. The medics deboard first and update the new doctors on the situation. The agents get out next, and keep their guns trained on Steve, motioning him to come forward. As soon as his feet are on the ground, he rushes after the team taking Bucky inside, and the armed guard is forced to follow him at a run. One of them shouts a warning at him, which he ignores, but Pierce evidently decides to allow it until they reach the elevator.

As they medics wheel the gurney in, the blond man motions for Steve to stop. “We need some room to work. Sorry.”

Steve grudgingly obeys, and lets the doors slide shut.

Pierce walks toward him slowly, hands in the pockets of his coat, with a strange expression on his aged face – almost an impression of sympathy. “Let them do their jobs, Captain. We're just as interested in keeping him alive as you are, believe me.” He lays his hand on Steve's shoulder.
Steve manages to resist the urge to grab Pierce's wrist and crush it. “Look,” he laughs suddenly. “I don't have the time or energy to waste on being cruel to you. You won't be interrogated, and we're not going to hurt you just for the hell of it. I assume from the state of things back on the highway that Captain Rollins committed a serious breach of conduct and for that, I personally apologize.”

Pierce pauses and hits the call button on the elevator to bring it back up to the roof. “Now, I'm going to let you stay close to your friend, at least until he's stable. You'll be restrained and supervised for as long as I feel you're a danger to my men but I want you to know, upfront, that I'm willing to make compromises.” The elevator chimes, and the doors reopen. Pierce puts a hand in front of the sensor to hold it. “As long as you're willing to talk.”

_Play into their hands._

Steve steps into the empty elevator and stands up straight, his lips a thin line, jaw tense. He takes a few steadying breaths through his nose, and responds tightly, “Yes, sir.”
Admission

Chapter Summary

Until Bucky regains consciousness, Steve can't do much but wait. But the longer he waits, the more HYDRA gets out of him - blood samples, DNA, maybe even enough information to finally replicate the serum. Not to mention that Alexander Pierce now has a captive audience.

The buttons on the elevator show six above-ground levels, not including the access to the roof, and four basement levels. Pierce hits B3 – the second lowest floor. They'll be kept pretty far underground, then, so no windows. No opportunity for escape or outside contact there.

The elevator opens onto a wide hallway. A set of double-doors at the end, two doors on the left, four on the right, all protected by key-card scanners. Good. Cards can be stolen. To Steve's immediate left is a single metal door with a red exit sign. That must be the stairwell. Neither the stairs nor the elevator seem to have any locks. Unbelievable.

Pierce lays a hand on Steve's shoulder and nudges him out into the hallway. “Second door on your left.”

He walks forward obediently, feeling the guards' presence behind him, heart trying to pound its way out of his chest because what if Bucky's not behind that door and what if he is. Pierce swipes his key-card and holds the door open for Steve.

The first door on his left had lead to the same large lab that Steve now steps into, and Bucky is there. Steve can hardly see him – he's surrounded by several carts and machines, the blond medic and two other men in civilian clothes – all doctors of some kind, judging by the surety with which they all work and study the monitors. Steve stands stock-still in the doorway, watching them.

“—adrenal glands didn't respond like they should have—”

“That's the damage to the pituitary I was telling you about.”

“Yeah, BP's 75/50, heart-rate's at forty-one—”

“We gave him a two milligram dose of glucagon first thing, another an hour later, supplemented it with dextrose—”

“He's metabolizing it all too fast.”

“Keep him on the dextrose, get a feeding tube in him and hit him with epinephrine. BP's gotta come up.”

It's all happening so quickly that Steve barely has time to process what they're saying. Pierce gives him another push, reminding him to keep walking, so he looks away and steps forward. As much as he wishes that there were, there isn't any help he can offer his friend right now. He finally takes in the rest of the room, assessing each section as quickly as he can.

The lab is large and well-equipped. In the far left corner, there's a small surgical suite, and along
that same wall, additional monitors and carts are stored. Steve can see a dark storage room beyond the compact OR.

Then, in front of the first door, a metal exam table, currently occupied by Bucky's unconscious form. Most of the machinery has been moved there.

There's a large workstation in the center of the room – counter-space, cabinets, two desktop computers and one laptop.

Directly in front of Steve, a second exam-table – this one padded and adjustable – the same that he's seen in a hundred doctor's offices, and additional counter space and a hand-sink.

Against the wall to his right there are stacks of metal cases which presumably contain any additional equipment or drugs the doctors might find use for, and in the back corner there's some kind of chair, black, with built-in restraints. The chair is cradled beneath a mechanical arm which holds various attachments that Steve can't identify, and there's monitoring equipment on either side, though all the screens are powered down. Behind that, another dark room behind a locked door.

And on the back wall, two identical holding cells. They're almost bare: a metal shelf extends from the wall in each to serve as a bed, and there are stainless steel toilets in the corners, but nothing else. Both are sealed with thick glass, into which is set a sliding door with a small slot – probably for food.

Pierce guides him toward the padded table, releases his mag-cuffs, and leaves him there. He heads over to the workstation and retrieves something from one of the drawers – something wrapped in stiff plastic, by the sound of it. “Now,” says Pierce firmly, approaching Steve with the kind of intent that demands his full attention. “You've got to promise me that you won't cause any trouble, Captain. You make a scene, that team of doctors can't focus on your friend. So if you're going to fight me or try anything stupid, I'd let it wait until they're done. Deal?”

“Deal,” Steve bites out.

Pierce sets the package down on the exam table. It's a hospital gown. Obviously, he won't be allowed to keep his suit. He's already grudgingly prepared himself to lose it.

Pierce wheels a low stool out from under the exam table and takes a seat, crossing one leg over the other and folding his arms across him chest. “Strip down. Everything. Lay your clothes on the floor and slide them over to Agent Hartley with your foot,” he instructs, nodding toward the smaller guard, who Steve is now certain is a woman.

He removes the top of his uniform and kicks that over first, then his utility belt and Bucky's long-sleeved shirt. He bends over to unlace his boots, and hands those over as well.

“You're going to have to cut this off,” Steve informs them numbly, looking down at the dressing Bucky had placed around his injured leg.

Pierce nods to Hartley, who lays her gun and riot helmet aside on the nearest counter and takes a pair of nitrile gloves and bandage scissors out of a pack on her belt. Dark blonde hair, slight tan, stocky build, eyes a little too close together. **Hartley**, Steve memorizes.

“Place your hands on your head,” she orders.

Damn, Steve thinks, they're taking every precaution. He folds his hands on top of his head and keeps his eyes forward as she cuts the bandage away. His thigh is throbbing like hell after all the
walking and the cramped helicopter ride, and Hartley is less than gentle, but he manages not to flinch. She disposes of the bloodied dressings and her gloves in a receptacle beneath the exam table, labeled “BIOHAZARD.”

Steve's leg is still weak, so he has to lean on the exam table to step out of his pants, compression shorts, and jock-strap. He takes them all off at once and slides them across the linoleum toward Hartley. Better to get it over with quickly, he tells himself.

“Agent Hartley, go through his gear and get everything cataloged while Agent Reeve searches him.”

The other guard, Reeve, removes his riot helmet and reveals dark hair, just starting to recede at the temples, heavy eyebrows, and a neatly trimmed beard. Reeve.

“We should keep at least one gun on him, sir,” Hartley counters.

Pierce looks pointedly at Steve. “No need. Captain Rogers said we had a deal. No trouble, right, Cap?”

Steve's skin prickles in the cool air. Despite being naked and feeling sickeningly over-exposed, he stands up straight and makes sure his voice doesn't shake when he answers, “None, sir.”

Agent Reeve dons his own pair of gloves. He starts with Steve's hair, combing through it, probably looking for hidden lock-picks. When Steve is instructed to open his mouth, he turns his focus back to Bucky. The doctors are no longer crowded around him, blocking Steve's view. He's wrapped in blankets, still positioned on his side, and they've inserted a feeding tube into his nasal passage and secured it with tape. Both his heart-rate and blood pressure are now climbing steadily. Even while Steve grimaces at the taste of the man's gloves as he searches along the insides of his cheeks and under his tongue, he can't help but feel like this was the right choice. Bucky is almost stable. If this is what it took not to lose him, then fine, it's absolutely worth it.

“Grab your ankles,” Reeve orders.

“He's got a gunshot wound in his leg and broken ribs,” Pierce reminds the agent sharply. “He can lean over the table or lie down.”

Steve tries to keep his brain quiet and passive as he steps to the end of the exam table and bends down to rest his elbows against it, keeping his face toward Bucky, and as the agent pushes a finger inside him, he reminds himself that Agent Reeve probably isn't enjoying this either. Remembering that makes the friction of the dry glove burn and sting a little less. Reeve is decidedly thorough, but mercifully quick with the cavity search.

“He's all clear,” Reeve announces uncomfortably, discarding his gloves. Steve stands up and makes intentional eye contact with the agent. Steve has only been subjected to a full body search a few times in his life, but he's already learned that the best way to handle them without feeling utterly violated is to make the other guy feel just as embarrassed. Reeve looks away first and hurriedly retrieves his gun, then resumes his post a few feet away, clutching it stiffly. Good riddance.

“You can put on that gown, now,” Pierce instructs coolly.

And there's an order that Steve has no problem following. He rips the plastic open only to discover that the garment itself is made of pretty similar stuff, with adhesive strips on the left shoulder and down the side to hold it closed. He puts it on, because it's still better than nothing. But not by
“Chris,” Pierce calls across the lab. The blond medic from the helicopter looks up from a file-folder he's been studying as Pierce motions him over. He hurries to join them, hastily shoving his pen in his shirt pocket and fixing his hair. “Is the Asset stable?”

“Vitals are improving,” the man nods. “I won't be able to make a more in-depth assessment until he regains consciousness, though.”

“Until that happens, I'd like you to look after Captain Rogers. We hit him in the right thigh with a paralytic round earlier, so take a look at that, otherwise, let's follow standard intake procedure.”

“Should I start basic compliance programming?”

Pierce purses his lips, considering it – whatever it is. Steve figures it can't be good. “No, let's give him a day.”

“Sir, it would be more effective if we—”

“We're going to let him rest.” Pierce looks over to Steve, who's watching him carefully, fully aware of the good-cop-bad-cop routine Pierce is playing with his staff. Pierce gives him a look that tries for pity, but comes off as a condescending smirk. “He's probably pretty upset with us right now. Let's not add to his list of complaints.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain, this is Dr. Christopher Montgomery. He's a very gifted neurologist. It might interest you to know that I originally brought him on to fix some of the damage done to your friend by the...ah, idiotic methods of my predecessors.”

This is the other A-level target. Steve wonders if he already knows what Bucky had done to his friend, Wentzel, back in West Seneca. “Dr. Montgomery, yeah,” he says, as if he were meeting the guy in a bar, introduced by a mutual friend. Pierce's eyebrow twitches upward, obviously recognizing that Steve is mocking his own casual handling of the situation. “You, know, it's funny, Buck and I were just on our way to kill you.”

Montgomery visibly pales and takes a step backward. Pierce lowers his head, like he's swallowing something disgusting, and sighs with disappointment. “Sorry, Christopher. Rogers has had a rough day. Captain, look, I know you don't agree with us or our methods, but Dr. Montgomery has – and I know you're not going to believe this – has been a great advocate for your friend's well-being over the years. Take a seat so he can have a look at you and I'll explain what I mean by that.”

Pierce stands, relinquishing the stool in case Montgomery needs it. Montgomery collects himself and hurries over to the counter to wash his hands and get a pair of gloves, giving Steve a wide berth with an awkward side-step. Pierce waits patiently until Montgomery has taken Steve's temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure. The doctor continues with what appears to be a basic physical as Pierce speaks, and Steve listens warily, knowing that all that Pierce says is probably a lie, or at least a very creative reworking of the truth.

“Now, this may surprise you, Captain, but I am not a fan of HYDRA. Rather, I'm not a fan of the majority of its members.”

“Odd career choice you made, there,” Steve interrupts, obediently following Montgomery's finger as he tests for head trauma.
“Look, I detested a great deal of what SHIELD was doing. I'm sure you can relate. I also detested a great deal of what HYDRA was doing, and I know you can relate to that. In the same way that I used HYDRA to affect change within SHIELD, I used SHIELD to keep HYDRA's more problematic factions under control. Captain, do you know how many people Project Insight would have eliminated?”

“Twenty million,” Steve grunts, laying back on the table. Montgomery pushes the gown up to his chest to palpate his abdomen, looking for internal organ damage. He tolerates the obvious, embarrassing exposure by staring up at the drop-ceiling, trying his best to dissociate from the nagging sense of violation. “Mass genocide on a global scale.”

“And do you know who our targets were?”

Steve scoffs. Pierce is bound to refute any answer he gives. “From what I gathered, anyone Arnim Zola didn't like.”

“Close,” Pierce laughs. “I used the list determined by Zola's algorithm as a jumping-off point, true. But by the time Project Insight was in the air, I'd reduced the targets from forty-five million down to fifteen. After that, I made some additions of my own. Took me ten years and the work of some of the best scientists and statisticians in the world to develop a list I was happy with, and it was a nightmare because our targets kept eliminating themselves through warfare, natural causes, and new threats kept popping up. The variance in the Middle-East alone was practically enough to make the project impossible. Now, bear with me, because the break-down is a little complicated.”

Steve is allowed to sit up and pull the gown back over himself as Montgomery heads back over to the counter and starts filling out his charts. He keeps him in his periphery while holding Pierce's gaze, watching as he collects a few items on a tray –five vials, two packaged needles, alcohol prep-pads, and a few plastic containers.

“When you took down those helicarriers, you had no idea what you were fighting against. That's my problem with you, Captain. For years, you looked at SHIELD and the SSR and, for God's sake, the Avengers and assumed that whatever they were doing was inherently good. And we both know how wrong you were. Nick Fury was just as involved in illegal and 'immoral' projects as I was, if not more, and you go running back to him, you help his cause. Why? Because he's your friend. You liked him better than you liked me,” Pierce shrugs.

“I made damn sure Fury knew he was the lesser of two evils,” Steve cuts in. “And yes, I sided with the guy who didn't want to execute millions of people based on what some Nazi thinks they might do.”

“But he did,” Pierce remarks. “Nick was on-board with Insight, and you know it. Neutralizing threats before they became threats – that was Nick's agenda. Insight was Nick's project, Captain. Zola's algorithm isn't original – Zola was an engineer and biochemist, not a psychologist or a mathematician. All he did was adapt the algorithm developed by your friends at SHIELD to fit HYDRA's agenda, and then I adapted it to fit my own.” Pierce rattles off the numbers from memory, or else by very careful contrivance. “The largest demographic was common to all three iterations of the algorithm: twenty-six percent of Insight's targets were violent criminals. Many were already incarcerated, some were paroled, and some had done their bare-minimum community service. Most of those were easy to find via sex-offender registries. Now, you can sit here and tell me that I shouldn't kill child-molesters and wife-beaters, but I'm stubborn and I'm not gonna listen.”

Steve keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't necessarily agree, but this isn't the time or place for a debate. This is just padding, anyway. Propaganda. Montgomery ties a tourniquet around his arm.
and swabs the crook of his elbow. He begins drawing the first of five blood samples as Pierce continues.

“Another eighteen percent were determined by internet search history. Kiddie-porn, snuff-films, potential shooters, bombers – all of them scum, but Insight would have prevented them from ever doing any real damage. Robert Lewis Dear. Dylan Storm Roof. Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik. Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez. Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer.”

Pierce recites the names, faster and faster, every syllable louder than the last, and Steve realizes that he's never actually heard the man raise his voice. Pierce's teeth clench when he finally pauses. His face is a little flushed. Either the anger is genuine, or he's one hell of an actor.

Pierce lets out a breath. “Now, Captain, can you imagine how angry I was when I saw those names on the news one right after the next, all just in the last year, and do you know, every single time, I couldn't sleep until I checked. Every single time, I'd go back to those files from Project Insight, and search the name. Every last one of those shootings, which killed dozens of innocent people, I could have stopped with one mass shooting that would have only killed the scum. But I screwed up. You certainly didn't help, but you didn't know what was going to happen. I did. That's on me.”

Propaganda, Steve tells himself. Good propaganda. Manipulative, like everything else Alexander Pierce does, but that's all it is. Montgomery starts in on the third blood-sample.

“And it will keep happening. Those are just the targets who acted in the first year. There are about 3.6 million more out there who just haven't gotten hold of a gun, who haven't yet worked up the nerve to move on from pictures of kids to the real thing.”

Pierce lets that information hang in the air. Steve watches his blood fill the third vial. This one's taking longer than the first two.

“15% were domestic and foreign terrorist cells, drug cartels, human-traffickers, arms-dealers. Targets that could have prevented the attack on the Bataclan theater. 11% were foreign political and military targets. In both cases, my targets were hardly different from SHIELD’s. I did end up adding about 400,000 domestic political and military targets, because I recognize that the US had a hand in certain matters for which SHIELD was obligated to hold them blameless.” Pierce laughs at how ridiculous the notion seems to him. “And, yes, Captain, before you ask, of course Tony Stark was on that list. That man armed Al-Qaeda and ISIL single-handedly, then created one of deadliest crises in the history of Europe with his little science project,” he adds without a hint of apology.

“8% – and I'm not proud of this but I realize it was necessary – were elderly and sick individuals in overpopulated, underdeveloped nations – especially those where water or food was in short supply. Water is scarce, war breaks out. Always been that way. It's my least favorite part of Insight, but, arguably, the most important in the long term. Hardest choice that could have saved the most lives.”

Pierce pauses again, reflecting, then abandons whatever train of thought that statistic had started and continues, now rushing though each category as if they're statistically insignificant. Steve has to remind himself that some of the percentages that Pierce throws out in that casual tone actually mean one million people. Third vial finally full, Montgomery tapes a cotton ball to Steve's arm, removes the tourniquet, ties it around the other bicep and swabs again. Steve hadn't realized how sore his left arm had gotten until he feels the relief of the easy slide into a new vein.

“5% were religious and political extremists, 5% in the business sector...ah,” Pierce waves his hand vaguely. “Wall Street garbage, execs from Big Banks, Big Pharma, Big Agro. Men who are actively destroying the planet, hiding behind their industries – oil and fracking, coal, copper, diamonds, lumber and land-development. 0.5% determined by voting record. Then we get down to
groups comprising about a tenth of one percent: bad scientists, mostly climate-change deniers; lobbyists, journalists, radio hosts pushing dangerous agendas; a few potential threats determined by the algorithm with no previous offenses, who didn't fit another category.”

Fifth sample. Steve is starting to feel a little light-headed, probably due to the blood he'd lost earlier that morning. Granted, he's still cognizant enough to count. “And the other two million targets?” he asks softly. Pierce's lecture hasn't convinced him of much of anything – just reminded him that he's exhausted.

“The other 11% - two-point-two million targets, to be a little more precise – were added in part by Nick, then removed by Zola, and then restored and expanded upon by me. They were HYDRA, Captain Rogers. It all had to go.”

Montgomery packages up the last blood sample and labels it, but Steve isn't watching him anymore. Something struck a nerve and struck it hard, and suddenly his own voice is playing in his head like a looped recording.

**SHIELD, HYDRA...it all goes.**

Pierce is right about that much. SHIELD, in the end, had been just as bad as HYDRA. Steve had finished his mission: he had stopped Project Insight and disassembled or exposed the better part of both organizations. In the end, Pierce was forced into hiding, and so was Fury. For however drastically their methods had differed, Pierce had pursued the same goal as Steve: the destruction of both SHIELD and HYDRA, to save the world from being caught in the cross-fire. And for however plain it is, if he chooses to believe Pierce, Steve finds himself grasping for evidence that he can’t be that much like this man, even if they made the same call. Then again, it was a pretty big, earth-shattering call. Not many people would have chosen to take down their own side, and yet Steve had done it and so had Pierce.

*It all had to go.*
“Cap? Cap, come in!”

Two more HYDRA agents burst through the doors below and open fire. Sam and Clint are two flights above them, driven back to the stairwell by the swarm of operatives in the hall. Now, they're trapped in between the circling drones outside and the advancing agents. Lang had said he could be there in two minutes, but that was five minutes ago. There's no answer from Steve's line or Bucky's.

Sam leans over the banister and returns fire, squeezing the triggers of his Steyrs until his elbows ache from the recoil. The agents' bodies eventually join two of their comrades on the floor of the landing. Sam throws himself back to cover and shouts up to Clint, a flight above him.

“Pretty sure the radios are dead!”

Bow lowered, Clint throws his body against the door leading out to the roof and fires an arrow, not waiting to see if it makes its mark. Sam hears it detonate as Clint ducks back in, restringing his bow. “No,” he says sarcastically. “Really?”

“EMP?” Sam yells, reloading.

“No, jammer. EMP would have knocked out my hearing aid, and I can still hear you distracting me —” He shoulders the door open again, firing twice before he comes back in. This time, he waits and watches, and lets the door close only when Sam feels the structure shake under the force of a downed aircraft crashing into the lot outside. “Where the fuck is Lang?”

“No idea. How many more you got up there?”

Clint cracks the door open and squints up at the dark sky. “Uh...two down, four to go.”

Sam decides to take advantage of the apparent lull on his end. He unbuckles his pack and drops it on the stairwell. Lang might be in serious trouble. Cap and Barnes are definitely in serious trouble. And the rooftop's not looking like a viable escape option. “Hey, Barton, forget the drones. Back me up while I do something stupid!”

“Sam? Sam, do not run back out there! They sent three squads up!” Clint hollers, panicking.

“Well, now there's four less dudes, so,” Sam argues, taking the stairs two at a time and stepping over the bleeding agents at the bottom. “You gonna back me up or not?”

“Ugh,” Clint groans, limping down the stairs as quickly as he can. Sam hears his complaints echoing though the concrete stairwell. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, this is so fucking stupid. Why am I doing this...” He readies his bow anyway.
“Ready?” Sam asks, and as soon as Clint nods, he bursts through the door, guns raised, and tackles an agent who'd made the mistake of standing too close. He's only partially aware that he's actually *yelling like a maniac* as he charges the squadron in the hall, but it surprises them just enough that Clint has time to get two solid shots in before they raise their guns.

Sam doesn't even aim – just sprays the HYDRA ops with bullets until his hands are tingling against the grips of the SMGs as he charges forward. They fall back, raising their riot shields, and he holsters the Steys and opts to just barrel on in. Not how he likes to fight, but he's seen it work for Cap. And it works in videogames. Sometimes.

Sam crashes into the first pair of shields and just keeps on pushing. He fights like he's back on the damn *schoolyard*, thinking to himself that this has got to be the dumbest thing he's ever done. Barton downs another one. Sam doesn't – *can't* slow down. He forgets everything he ever learned about military combat and focuses on fighting dirty, kicking backs of knees, feinting every which way, punching any throat he can reach, and more than once driving his knee full-force into a cup.

He manages to get one agent, a big hefty guy, into a choke-hold, but the motherfucker just *refuses* to pass out. The other operatives advance as he squeezes the guy's neck in the crook of his arm as hard as he can. The son of a bitch is still thrashing. Once they've got him surrounded, they switch to stun batons and one of the bastards gets him good, right in the side, but adrenaline wins out. He doesn't drop, and he keeps holding on, screaming in pain, and *finally* the big guy stops fighting back. He gets a hold of the agent's M4 and empties the magazine on the surrounding agents.

Sam is absolutely *shocked* when he looks around and realizes that all eight guys are down. His ears are ringing from the gunfire, but he's pretty sure he hears himself laughing. His brain function is currently split half-and-half between *How am I even alive* and *Cap is never gonna believe I did that.*

“Where'd the rest of 'em go?” Clint shouts, killing Sam's post-berserker buzz.

Sam's ears strain, fighting off the fuzziness left by the SMG blasts. Around the corner and down the dark hallway, he can hear the sounds of another scuffle. He grabs a new M4 and a magazine off one of the downed agents and moves forward slowly. He ducks briefly around the corner, just long enough to see the other two squadrons fighting…nothing? *Wait, there's Lang.* And then Lang disappears again. And then he's back. Scott seems to be dispatching all sixteen of them pretty easily. Sam fights the urge to roll his eyes. These guys and their crazy-ass science projects. When was somebody going to build him a super-suit?

“Lang's taking care of them!” he yells back.

Clint limps out to join him and takes a quick look down the hall. “Man, Lang's kicking ass,” he says, obviously impressed.

“And I did what?” Sam counters. “Did I not just kick ass?”

Lang finishes off the last few agents and vanishes again. When he reappears, he's right in front of them. His feet hit the floor like he's just jumped off of something. Probably an ant.

“Sorry,” he pants, raising the suit's face-guard. “I grabbed all the PPDs I'd set on the way back up. I got an idea. Barton, how many arrows you got left?”

Clint yanks the three arrows he'd fired earlier out of the dead HYDRA agents and wipes the tips on his pant-leg. “Uh, four.”
“And how many drones are still up there?”

“Four.”

“Cool! Let me see those.”

Clint hands over all his remaining arrows as Lang jogs back toward the stairwell, studying their tips as he runs.

“Wait!” Sam shouts. “We gotta get down to Cap and Barnes!”

“Not an option,” Lang replies, going for the door handle.

Sam's blood boils. “What the hell do you mean, 'not an option'? They need our help, we're not leaving them down there!”

Lang jiggles the door handle again. “Uh, why is this locked? Didn't you guys just come through this door?”

“Forget the damn door, Scott, we're going to find that transmitter and then we are going after Steve,” Sam snaps.

“Wait,” Barton interrupts, rubbing his eyes. That chip thing must still be hurting him. “Lang's right. Door on the roof was open and so was this one, and no guards on the perimeter.” He walks as fast as he can down to the other end of the hall, where there's another set of double doors. They're unlocked. He takes a quick look out into the hallway and finds it empty and pitch-dark, then steps through and lets it shut behind him. The doors shake. Clint raps on them. Sam steps forward to let Clint back in, already knowing what he's thinking. “We didn't break in to this base, they let us in,” Barton groans, limping back through the doors. “And they didn't plan on letting us back out.”

Lang looks nervous. “Way more guys than Sarge projected, too, which, by the way,” he adds, looking back toward Sam, “is why fighting our way down to the sub-levels is not an option. It's thick all the way down, every floor. We wouldn't make it.”

“Not to mention the air-strike,” Barton bitches, gesturing upward with his bow. “They knew we were coming. Must have found a way to track Barnes.”

Lang nods. “We need to get back down to ground level and come at them again. It'll put us closer to Cap.”

“Fine,” Sam agrees, then hefts the M4 and opens fire on the door handle. Once it's weakened, he throws his shoulder into it. He's going to have one hell of a bruise, but it's open. He can hear more squads on the floor below them, and he's not sure he can pull off that videogame-mêlée bullshit a second time. “Whatever your idea is, do it quick.”

Sam ushers the two of them through the door, watching for more combatants. They're not far off, now. From the next landing up, Lang looks back at him expectantly. “Go, I'll be there in a minute.”

Sam doesn't wait for a reply and shuts the door. Whatever Lang and Barton were up to, they probably couldn't do it with a dozen HYDRA ops shooting at them. He had to take out the stragglers.

Think, Wilson. Think like a soldier.
Their gear. Even without his flight array, he still had something they didn't. All the agents he'd seen so far were wearing regular riot gear – the shit they gave police. Not even military-grade. Clear face-shields on a big bulky helmet. Night vision goggles didn't seem to be standard issue. And boy, had Tony Stark ever made him a nifty pair of goggles. He backs up slowly toward the double doors Clint had gone through earlier and waits a few seconds, staying in motion, and as the first two agents jog around the corner and take a shot at him, he slips past the doors, leading them in.

A button on the side of his goggles switches them over to a night-vision targeting system. They're even picking up the agents' heat signatures right through the steel doors and giving him an image overlay. They're headed his way, and fast. To his left, on the interior wall, there are two labs, both with big open windows into the hallway. Oh, that's money.

The labs aren't as well secured as the other doors in the facility. Two really good, desperate punches against the oblong glass window on the first door (okay, maybe his pinky is broken) and he can get a hand inside to unlock the door and let himself in quietly.

He backs up into the room and positions himself in front of the window, and all but stops breathing, straining to hear the agents' voices out in the exterior hallway.

“That's a dead-end,” one of them yells. “They got nowhere else to go.”

Good. They think Lang and Barton are with him. Come on in, he thinks, taking a few quick, steadying breaths.

They move in, fan out, and open fire. One of them holds the door open, but the light from outside doesn't reach the end of the hall by a long shot. They must think they've got their targets pinned down and full of holes. For Sam, it's a shooting gallery. He downs all eight before they even look toward the window. Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Even the Winter Soldier is going to have to admit, that was smart. And ridiculously cool.

Glass from the destroyed window crunches under his feet as he makes his way out of the lab and back into the hall, stepping over the HYDRA op whose body is conveniently propping the door open. When he gets back to the stairwell, Lang and Barton are leaned out of the roof access door. Clint lets what seems to be his last arrow fly, and they wait.

“Got him, we're clear!” Scott shouts. He turns when he hears Sam's boots on the stairs behind him. “You okay? Sounded crazy down there.”

“No, I'm good,” Sam says briskly, picking up his flight pack and strapping it back on. “Although you missed me pulling some master-assassin level shit. What'd you do?”

Barton steps out onto the roof and takes a look at the sky. Lang and Sam follow him out when they realize that no one's shooting at him. “Scott gave me some of those shrinky-dink things.”

“Pym Particle discs,” Lang corrects him.

Sam looks around at the empty sky in awe. “And that actually worked—ow, shit!” For a second, Sam thinks he's been shot, but then he realizes it was more a sting. He reaches up and touches his jaw – it's barely bleeding. “What is that?”

“Aw, A for effort, drone operators!” Scott looks eager to explain. “You just got shot in the face by an MQ-9 Reaper. We attached the PPDs to his arrows. They detonate on impact. Shrank all the drones, and their ammo.”
“Good thinking,” says Sam, running over to the edge of the building. “How we getting down? My wing's shot.”

Clint draws an arrow and waves it smugly.

“Thought you said you were out of arrows, Barton!”

“Out of weaponized arrows,” Clint corrects him. “What was I supposed to do, grapple-gun them to death?”

The arrow is folded in the middle, just off-center, so when he fires it at the brick wall behind them, only one end penetrates the rock. Three claws expand out from its shaft and bite in. Clint detaches the other half and yanks it, and thin, bunched cord stretches out of the hollow core. He shoots the other end toward the parking lot, which leaves the cord strung right through the center of his bow. “Spoon me, Wilson. You're riding bitch.”

“I'll call Antoinette and hitch a ride. Meet you guys down there,” Lang promises, hand on his belt, then shrinks.

Sam clings to Clint's back for dear life. He really prefers flying to zip-lining on what looks like fishing wire. But Steve and Barnes are still somewhere inside the base, and both of them are hurt. Like hell, he's going to leave them behind, not on Cap's orders or anybody else's. A few feet of freefall, and then the wire and Clint's bow catch their weight, and they hurtle toward the dark lot. This is going to be one hell of a rescue.

This raid was an absolute disaster.
Holding Cell, Day 1

Chapter Summary

Alone in the holding cell at HYDRA's lab in Montreal, Steve starts to wonder if he's made the worst mistake of his life.

Steve tries to quell the persistent, nagging temptation to see truth in Pierce's words. He knows he's not like Pierce. He knows Pierce is nothing like him. Pierce is a sociopath. Pierce is manipulative. Pierce was ready to gun down twenty million people without due process, millions of them completely innocent, guilty only of taking up too much space. And wiping out HYDRA? Steve had learned from the files that Natasha had uncovered that Pierce wasn't the only leader within HYDRA. There were dozens of other factions spread out across the globe. Killing 2.2 million of them was just a power-grab. He would have re-established HYDRA with himself as the sole orchestrator. And certainly, Pierce has some small redeeming qualities that Steve can pick out of his dangerous manifesto if he squints – environmentalism; progressive stances, both social and economic; disdain for a broken criminal justice system – but the solution was all wrong. A little too final, Steve thinks with sudden clarity.

Pierce excuses himself from the labs after a short, private conversation with Montgomery and a quick debriefing on Bucky's condition with the other doctors, which Steve strains to overhear. What he manages to catch isn't good news. They'll have to wait until he's regained consciousness to determine whether or not he's sustained lasting brain damage. Either way, he's going to be fragile for a few more days. Steve realizes that he might have to stay here longer than he'd intended. As long as Bucky needs medical care, they have him trapped. Pierce knows as well as Steve does that if anyone within the government (US or otherwise) finds Bucky, their orders are to shoot on sight. At least HYDRA wants him alive.

When Pierce leaves and Montgomery returns to the exam table, he takes a thorough look at Steve's leg and cleans it meticulously.

“Did the Asset administer first-aid?” he asks distractedly, disinfecting the inside of the wound with a cotton swab.

“Bucky,” Steve corrects him sharply. “Or James, or Sergeant Barnes, if you prefer, and yes, he did.”

Montgomery doesn't verbally acknowledge Steve's reproach, but he does glance up at him, a hint of fear etched into his forehead. “Well,” Montgomery continues, letting out a nervous breath. “He did a good job. That's all I was going to say.” He pitches all the bloodied swabs and gauze and changes gloves, then begins to redress the wound. “I've been working with him for a long time, you know,” he says, and pauses, like he's unsure of where he's going with the statement and painfully aware that if Steve suddenly decides that getting out is more important than keeping Bucky with the doctors, he could kill him rather quickly – especially at this close proximity. “I know you guys were – are good friends. But, look, he sustained a massively traumatic brain injury during that fall. If you had rescued him and he'd never come to Zola, he might have been a vegetable for the rest of his life, if he had lived at all. Zola's team kept that from happening. They did some not so good stuff, too. And from what I've read, Vasily Karpov's team was even worse. I think they undid a lot
of the progress Zola had made. And, you know, I'm only talking about the medical procedures they performed here – I'm certainly not condoning the conditions they subjected him to. Back then, they thought they could beat and shock malfunctions out of him, rather than actually fixing the malfunctions. I won't do that to him.” He secures the new bandage and steps away to shuck his gloves and wash his hands.

Steve isn't about to buy this. “Did you ever consider that he might just be a POW trying to escape captivity?” he asks, voice hard.

“Yes, I did,” Montgomery replies sincerely. “And look, when he escaped after the Insight debacle, Secretary Pierce didn't pursue him. He could have taken him out if he'd wanted to – could have triggered that kill-switch at any time. But he's both dangerous and valuable. It would be a huge waste to Secretary Pierce if he had died – which is why we only chose to step in once it became clear that there were so many other parties who wanted him dead – more than either of you could potentially handle.”

Steve's not sure if Montgomery actually believes the horse-shit he's repeating, or if it's more of Pierce's carefully contrived propaganda – just a script he's been handed. Either way, he's not going to debate him. It's a waste of time and energy – at least right now. This guy is probably in way too deep, too invested in HYDRA's ideology and Pierce's manipulation to sway. And Steve isn't going to waste his breath trying to wear him down. He chooses not to respond, even though he knows that if Pierce could have gotten his hands on Bucky sooner, he most certainly would have.

Until Bucky regains consciousness and can fight again, Steve has to keep his mouth shut. And he hopes that happens sooner rather than later. He has absolutely no desire to find out what basic compliance programming entails, but it sounds like it could potentially affect his reasoning and mobility rather quickly. It would be better if it didn't come to that, and Pierce's earlier order has given Bucky time to recover and him about twenty-four hours to figure something out.

“I'd like to start you on an IV, but we also want you to get some rest. So, if I leave you in the holding cell, I need you to promise not to remove it or hurt yourself with it. The guards will have an eye on you, anyway, but I'd rather just deal with you directly. If I leave you out here, I've got to keep you cuffed. This will be a lot simpler if you just cooperate.”

“Depends on what's in the bag,” Steve says. If Montgomery expects him to be more reasonable than that, he's a total idiot.

Montgomery seems satisfied with that level of civility, and picks up a full bag from the counter. “This one's just a standard rally pack,” he explains, holding out to Steve, allowing him to read the label. “Folic acid, thiamine, magnesium sulfate. The magnesium is going to help with the nerve pain and muscle cramps leftover from that paralytic round. I'm going to start you on another one, too, and that one will have oxytocin, sodium thiopental, and lorazepam. Those are just to calm you down and help with the discomfort in your leg. It'll make you sleepy, too. Reduce anxiety, help you get a little rest. The oxytocin should also speed up the healing process – not that you really need that – but it's a plus.”

The banana bag is harmless enough, but Steve doesn't like the sound of the other one. When Montgomery says calm you down and reduce anxiety all Steve hears is make you less dangerous. Slow you down. Easier to control. Usually, drugs aren't such an obstacle for him, but they've had a long time to find the right cocktails and dosages to keep a super soldier manageable. And he can't feasibly talk Montgomery out of administering the IV. In which case, the only option is to just go to sleep. Let the drugs do their thing, get some rest. If he's exhausted (and boy, is he ever) then the effects of any barbiturates or other drugs they dose him with will only be compounded. If he
appears cooperative and well sedated, there's a chance that security will get lax, and to date no
injury or even Banner's drugs have been able to put him out for more than fourteen hours. That
should still leave him more than enough time to strategize.

“Any complaints?”

Steve can't keep his eyebrows from shooting up in disbelief. “Yes. Quite a few,” he replies
ciaustically.

Montgomery gives him a truly pitiful, helpless look. The poor guy is really feeling the effects of
the all-nighter he just pulled, isn't he?

“As long as Bucky is alive and getting better, I'm not going to cause any problems,” he adds
quietly, hoping it sounds like a concession. But as soon as he's on his feet, I'm tearing this whole
place and everyone in it apart with my bare hands.

“Thank you,” Montgomery responds curtly, and leaves to go gather his supplies.

Except for you. I'm going to save you for Bucky.

The agents close in on him as Montgomery goes to retrieve an IV stand and a small cart. They
motion for him to stand, then walk him to the back of the lab toward the holding cells. They stop in
front of the one on the right. Damn it. The dividing wall between the cells means that the table
where they're keeping Bucky will be just out of view.

“Aw,” he groans, turning to Hartley. “Can Bucky take this one? I feel like the metal slab in the
other one is bigger.”

Neither agent responds, but Hartley briefly removes her hands from the muzzle of her SMG to tap
the stun baton on her belt. Steve raises his hands in surrender. He can't kill these bastards just yet,
so he'll have to settle for irritating them.

Montgomery returns, wheeling the cart and the IV stand along in front of him, then hits a green
button on the panel between the cells and leans down to present his retina to a scanner. That opens
up a secondary panel with a keypad. Steve watches the movements of Montgomery's thumb in his
periphery. Three, seven, nine, one, enter. Steve wants to burst out laughing. He had read The
Hobbit so many times by '43 that his copy was held together with tape long before he took it with
him to Fort Lehigh. Did they really think he hadn't been thrilled to wake up and find a thousand-
page sequel in every bookstore?

The glass slides open and the agents usher him in. Montgomery motions for him to have a seat on
the “cot” while he sets up the IV stand. It only takes him a few minutes to get the line in – Steve
has a fleeting thought that it's almost refreshing to get stuck by a doctor who doesn't make the
ubiquitous comment about how nice his veins are.

Outside the cell, three more agents have entered from the hallway. Steve can almost overhear their
conversation – he can't catch the exact words, but he can hear enough to know that one of them has
heard about the Winter Soldier, but has never seen him. The other two seem to be filling him in on
what precautions to take and past incidents. So, one of the agents is either still pretty green or very
recently retasked, while the other two have been under Pierce's command for a while. As the door
to the lab closes again, Steve thinks he can hear more voices in the hallway, and the scuff of heavy
boots. They've drastically increased security since his arrival, which was to be expected.

Montgomery gets the bags hung and takes a last look at the needle, ensuring that the drugs are
making their way safely into Steve's vein, then nods to Hartley and Reeve. He exits first, and the agents back out after him, guns still held at the ready. Steve doesn't look up at them as they leave. He has a lot to think about.

“Do you want a blanket?”

Steve lifts his head, caught a little off-guard by the question. Even though the lab was cool, he ran hot and he wouldn't be cold without one, but he's interested to see how much freedom Montgomery will allow him – if they're willing to offer him a blanket in this little attempt to win him over by demonstrating what hospitable captors they are, he might be able to request other things of them, too. And Steve had a talent for turning unlikely objects into deadly weapons.

He decides to see if Montgomery is serious. “Yes, please.”

Montgomery actually looks pleasantly surprised by the answer. Steve understands that to mean that Pierce has instructed him to play nice, make offers, show Captain Rogers that HYDRA isn't as bad as everyone thinks it is. Montgomery is playing Steve, and Steve can only hope that he's better at the game.

He comes back from one of the supply closets in the corners with a thick, crème-colored blanket, standard to most hospitals, and hands it to Steve, who makes himself keep his eyes low and say, “Thank you.”

One of the new guards replaces Hartley at her post just outside the cell. So shift-changes are staggered. Of course they are. That will make things a little harder. The new agent is a man, much taller than Reeve and a little lanky. He'll have to remember to find out his name later.

Steve doesn't move right away. This is the first moment of silence and solitude he's had in a while, and he needs to clear his head. He looks at the IV needle taped into his arm. It aches when he moves it, probably because of all the blood-draws. Even considering that he's damn hard to hurt, there are light red bruises forming already, visible just beyond the bandages on both his arms. His leg feels stronger, but Montgomery's thorough cleaning has set it throbbing all over again. He smooths out the plastic hospital gown, pulling it down over his lap and wishing distantly that he'd tested Montgomery's generosity and asked for his underwear to be returned. Too late now, unfortunately.

Out in the lab, the new guards are arranging themselves at both exits, their eyes trained on Bucky. Steve can't see him, but he'll know if anything happens by the guards' reactions. And if nothing else, he can still hear the steady beats of Bucky's heart-monitor – now indicating a normal pulse, thank God. He watches as Montgomery makes a quick stop at the workstation in the middle of the room and packs up his computer and some paperwork, then motions to the other doctors. One of them follows. The other has apparently been assigned to monitor Bucky's vitals.

And finally, in the silence of the holding cell, it all really starts to hit him.

He's a prisoner of HYDRA.

They want to weaponize him, just like they'd done to Bucky.

They have samples of his blood – means to replicate the serum. Means to create an army.

He has no idea if Sam and Clint and Scott are even alive.

He has no team of Avengers with vast resources who will be here to bust him out.
And if his old friends do find him, Bucky is as good as dead.

Alexander Pierce is alive.

HYDRA is still thriving.

They had put Bucky into *insulin shock*.

Bucky could be in a coma. He could have permanent brain damage.

But *he* was the one who had handed him back over to HYDRA. He had let them pump him full of drugs, restrain him, call him *the Asset* again.

He had let HYDRA put Bucky Barnes back on a lab table, after Bucky had spent two years as a free man. And he knows that Bucky would have happily chosen death over this.

He's put himself in check, and he's dragged the man he loves down with him. The only thing standing between HYDRA and checkmate is that Steve is an idiot who still thinks he can get them both out of this alive and unhurt. And if he fails to do that, then they'll take Bucky's memories away again. Memories he's devoted every waking moment to recovering. And who's to say he'll be able to get them back a second time? And even if he does, he may not ever forgive Steve, and Steve won't really be able to blame him.

But there wasn't another option. He should never have tried to take down the base in West Seneca in the first place. Once that mistake was made, every choice was wrong. He couldn't have sat there in the dirt and watched Bucky asphyxiate and die. And maybe this was worse, but there's still a slim chance that Steve can fix it. Bust them out. If he'd let Bucky slip away that morning...there was no fixing that.

He's not going to get them out of here by panicking. *Stay on task. Focus. Stick to the plan.* And right now, the plan is to rest. Sleep off the injuries, sleep off Montgomery's cocktail of drugs, make damn sure that when Bucky wakes up, they're both ready to fight their way out of this place and run like hell. And sleep is quickly becoming unavoidable, anyway. Those drugs are really working, and fast.

He wads the blanket up and puts it under his head like a pillow. His body is exhausted, and his brain is slowing down, too. Part of him wants to tear the IV out punch his way out of this cell and drag Bucky as far as he can before the agents inevitably shoot him down. Maybe not escape, but die trying. Hell, they'd probably find a way to stop him without killing him. And he'd wake up right back in this cell. Cuffed, drugged out of his mind. No allowance for a second attempt. Probably without the soft blanket.

Steve's not sure if he's awake or not. He had been dreaming about his old apartment in Washington. His bed there. Thought he could hear the alarm clock, blaring out 5:00AM. It's hard to open his eyes. His whole body feels heavy, like he's been asleep for days. Drugged.

He remembers where he is. He can still hear the alarm.

He feels a jolt of terror in his gut, wants to jump up off the metal cot. Body's too heavy. His eyes open. The lab beyond the cell is dim. The guards are still at their posts outside the door, but they leave, rubber boot soles screeching against the tile floor. The lights come up in the lab. All of the agents are running now. Fear and adrenaline win out over the drugs, and Steve sits up, stands, stumbles, catches himself against the glass. Listens. Not an *alarm* – the heart-monitor. Flat-lined.
Chapter Summary

Pierce is better at this game than Steve is.

This can’t be happening. Bucky was getting better. There's something wrong with the heart-monitor. He can’t be...God, he can't be dying. Steve is still dreaming. It's a nightmare. It's just the drugs. They're still in his system. Everything is moving too slowly. All the sounds are muffled, distorted, crashes of equipment in the lab sound like the explosions of the downed helicarrier fading in and out as he'd sank deeper and deeper into the Potomac. This can't be real.

Steve's brain is slowly starting to catch up to his body. His open palms beat desperately against the glass of his cell, ball into fists, try to punch through, but his arms feel weak. Blood on the glass. Splatter from his left arm. He's torn the IV out. He can hear his own voice just above the buzz of white noise in his head, shouting out Bucky's name, begging him to respond.

No, he's not dead. Resuscitation wouldn't require every agent in the room to abandon their post and run toward the lab table. This is something else. It not nearly as bad as losing Bucky, but it's bad. Steve's guess is confirmed as the flailing body of an agent flies back into view. The monitors are all dead because they've been torn off. Steve hears what must be the snap of the cuff holding Bucky's right arm down followed by the clatter of the whole lab table crashing to the floor. Bucky stumbles away from the wreckage into the middle of the lab where Steve can see him, covered in the same awful plastic hospital gown, bleeding from his nose where he's ripped out the feeding tube too fast, and oh God, his face. Steve wishes he could look away.

Steve has never seen him look so afraid in his entire life. Not even in that last moment before the handrail broke on that train, not even as he began to fall. The fear had been tempered with acceptance then – and now, that acceptance is gone. There's nothing left of Bucky Barnes right now. Under the harsh fluorescent lights of the lab, hair wild, arm missing, bare-foot and crouched low, he's an animal in a cage, wounded and rabid, as likely to hurt himself as anyone who makes the mistake of coming too close. Steve can see the whites of his eyes from across the room.

Steve pounds his fists against the glass as hard as he can. “Bucky! Stop! Look at me! You've gotta stop!”

Bucky turns toward him, startled by his voice, recognizes him, and suddenly there's heartbreak in his eyes just under the terror. He doesn't seem to have registered what Steve is shouting, but he sees Steve, locked in the cell, stripped, bleeding, yelling, scared, fists hammering against the partition, and Steve can suddenly discern a little of his Bucky Barnes in the man's ashen face. But in the end, all Steve has done is distract him. Bucky surges forward, running for the cell like he's going to put his body right through the glass, but the agent he'd thrown gets to him first with a stun baton. Steve hears it crackle and hiss against the small of Bucky's back and Bucky falls hard, knees screeching against the floor. The other agents descend on him rapidly.

The doctor Montgomery had left in charge is watching the scene from beside the doors, ready to make a quick exit if he has to. He's talking to someone on his cellphone, too quietly for Steve to hear. Probably calling in back-up.
“Buck! Stop fighting.” Steve yells at the top of his voice, doubtful that Bucky can even hear him, knowing that he probably won't listen, even if he can.

Somehow, Bucky twists and writhes out from under the knees on his back, catches a guard in the throat with his heel. He gets one of the agents underneath him. Without the Weapon, he has to pin the man's arms down under his knees. He tears the man's riot helmet off. It's the tall one, who had been stationed by Steve's cell. His right fist smashes once, twice, three times into the man's now unprotected face as the remaining agents surround him, press the stun batons into his back and ribs. Bucky screams at the burn, but his punches barely falter. One of them gets an arm around his throat, manages to pull him back a few inches while another scrambles up and comes around in front, loaded M4 trained on Bucky's head.

Steve can hear his own pulse pounding in his ears. “No, no, no! Stop! He's just scared! Don't hurt him!”

Scared is hardly the right word at this point. Bucky is out of his mind. The barrel of an M4 in his face doesn't deter him for even a second. Steve feels like he's going to be physically sick as Bucky lifts his head and sees it, then without hesitation reaches up and closes his fist over the muzzle and shoves it aside. The agent is caught off guard, flinches, shoots. Bucky's hand is blown back with the force of the gunshot and for a horrible moment Steve thinks that it must be destroyed, but he gets a clear look at it as Bucky pulls it back and sees that it's only caught the web of his hand, which is still a mess of burnt flesh and visible bone. Bucky barely seems to feel it. He pushes himself up on his knees and throws his weight back into the agent behind him, driving him to the floor. Steve is helpless to do anything but watch.

Reinforcements flood through both doors of the lab – more than a dozen agents, accompanied by Montgomery and the other doctor who had left with him earlier. It takes all of them to pin Bucky to the floor and tranquilize him. Steve presses his forehead against the glass, eyes dry despite the aching knot in his throat, trying to catch his breath. He's actually thankful, unbelievably thankful, that they managed to tranquilize him. If Bucky's hand had moved a little slower, if the guard had squeezed the trigger a moment sooner, that bullet would be in Bucky's brain instead of buried in the plaster above the door. If that fight had continued, Bucky might have been killed. Then again, that might have been exactly what Bucky had wanted.

Steve watches all the fight go out of him. One by one, the agents drag themselves up off the ground where they've piled on top of him. Once they're clear of him, Steve can see that Bucky's not quite unconscious, fighting the tranquilizers with everything he's got left, but his eyes are distant and confused and his mouth is open, trying to desperately to drag air into his suddenly depressed lungs. They pull the agent underneath him up off the ground, check to make sure he's alright. He nods shakily. The doctor who had left with Montgomery is beside the tall one who had guarded Steve's cell. Steve can see that the man's jaw is completely crushed. Both of his eyes are swollen shut. There's a bright trail of blood on his neck, leaking from his ear. The doctor checks for a pulse or breath, finds neither, looks to Montgomery and shakes his head.

“I can't fucking believe this.” Montgomery turns to the third doctor. “What the hell happened?” he pants, eyeing the older man with blatant accusation.

The doctor raises his hands, lost for words. “He...he regained consciousness, just — I mean, this...it was just instantaneous. Knocked me back, broke the cuff, just lost it, I don't know—” he babbles.

He doesn't get the chance to give anymore of an explanation that, and Montgomery doesn't get the chance to berate him further, though he looks like he barely restrains himself. The door to the lab swings open again and Pierce steps in. He had obviously come in a hurry. His jacket is missing,
shirt sleeves rolled up, cell-phone still in his hand from the panicked call he'd inevitably just received.

“Oh,” he groans, wincing. “You've got to be kidding me.” He shoves the phone into the pocket of his slacks as he takes in the scene. A mess of destroyed equipment, seventeen agents, one dead agent, and Bucky splayed on the floor, plastic gown in ribbons and hanging off one shoulder, blood pooling under his limp, singular hand. “Who was with him?”

No one speaks for a moment, until Montgomery says rather loudly, “Parsons.”

“Sir, there was nothing I could do, he just, he was too fast—”

Pierce raises his hand, effectively silencing Dr. Parsons. He doesn't even look at the man. Instead, he pushes past the agents surrounding Bucky and squats down beside him, eyes hard and stern. Steve is almost afraid that Pierce is going to kill him, right there. Decide he's too dangerous. Too volatile to waste any more resources on. Steve holds his breath. “Hey,” Pierce barks, and when Bucky's eyes flicker toward him, he knows he can be heard and understood. “You killed one of my agents, Soldier. Captain Rogers brought you here so that we could save your life, and the first thing you do is throw one of these little fits?”

Pierce raises his eyebrows, like he's waiting for a response, but the only acknowledgment Bucky gives is to drag his eyes over to Steve's cell, as if the only words that had really connected were Captain Rogers brought you here. Steve's heart sinks.

Pierce takes a sharp breath through his nose, lips tight and teeth worrying the inside of his cheek, then lets the breath out in a tired sigh. Finally, every word clipped short, he adds, “I'm pretty pissed.”

He stares down at Bucky a moment longer before Montgomery has the courage to speak again. “Sir...this really isn't the Asset's fault. We knew he was going to be hard to manage. He's gone over two years without maintenance.”

“And I'm just supposed to let him beat Garrick to death? Because he's erratic?” Pierce laughs incredulously, gesturing toward the tall agent as Dr. Parsons covers his body with a sheet. “The poor kid hadn't even been with us a week, and he gets beaten to death. That's unacceptable.”

“I know. It's unfortunate, but you have to try to see this from the Asset's point of view. Everyone – his friends, the media – his whole life, telling him we're the bad guys. He's just confused.”

Pierce seems to think hard about this. When he finally comes to a decision, he stands up and walks toward the holding cells, giving Agent Garrick's body a wide berth. He opens the door to Steve's cell, not seeming the least bit worried that Steve will go right for his throat, like he so desperately wants to. Pierce opens his mouth to speak, then looks down and notices the blood dripping down Steve's arm. His face is unreadable. “You alright?”

“What the hell do you think?” Steve growls.

Pierce rubs his forehead, and glances back toward Bucky. When he turns back toward Steve, his voice is quiet and earnest. “Look, we both know that you don't want to be here. I forced your hand. You're playing nice with my doctors, behaving, but whatever plan you had to get yourself out of here—” Pierce points emphatically toward Bucky, “—he is not in on it.”

Apparently, Steve hadn't been quite subtle enough. Then again, it's not like Pierce deserves a medal for recognizing how much Steve despises HYDRA.
“So let's both drop the act, Rogers. It's your job to try to escape, it's my job to make sure you don't. We're at odds, there. But I don't want any more of my team to die, and neither of us want Barnes to die—”

Pierce wants him to drop the act? Fine. “Get to goddamned point, you son of a bitch,” he interrupts.

Pierce takes the insult pretty well. “Shut up and listen, Captain. Talk to him. I don't give a damn what you have to say to him. Lie to him if you have to; tell him you didn't hand him over. Just make sure this doesn't happen again.”

“Maybe it should,” Steve spits.

“You don't want that.”

Steve takes a step forward. “Maybe I feel like throwing a fit of my own. Which puts you standing in a pretty bad spot, Alex,” he hisses, inches away from Pierce's face.

“Rogers, I'm eighty years old. I'm not interested in death-threats. But I've got two-hundred men at this base and two-hundred more a phone-call away. Let's be honest about your chances here. Our only common ground is this, Captain: both of us want to keep Barnes alive. That's not going to happen if he keeps killing my agents. Just talk to him. I'll put him in here with you and shut the damn door if you want, I don't care. Just get him in line before he hurts himself any worse.”

Pierce waits patiently for an answer that Steve can't bring himself to give. This is checkmate. Steve's remaining options are down to two: flip the board and let the pieces fall where they may, which means that he and Bucky probably don't get out of here alive; or accept this loss and start a new game with a handicap – talk to Bucky.

Steve forces his jaw to unclench so that he can respond. “Fix his hand up while he's still drugged. He's losing a lot of blood.” He tries to go on but the words are sticking in his throat. It takes a painful effort to push them out. “And then I'll talk to him.”
The remaining doctors and agents dispose of Garrick's body quickly. Montgomery and the doctor who had accompanied him earlier move Bucky to the small surgical suite to put his injured hand back together, while Dr. Parsons is left to clean up the blood and set the tables and equipment right. Pierce leaves Steve shut in his cell and accompanies Montgomery into surgery. Steve is alone for almost two hours all told, and he spends every second of it trying to decide what he should, what he can say to Bucky. When Pierce and his agents finally reappear and the cell door slides open again, he hasn't managed to string so much as a single sentence together.

“Come on,” Pierce prompts him, inclining his head toward the surgical suite in the corner. “He wasn't exactly in the mood to talk to me. Maybe you'll have better luck.”

Steve walks as slowly as he can with the two agents at his back driving him forward, but however fast his mind is racing through options, this isn't a problem that can be solved in a few extra seconds. There is no right thing to say.

Steve thinks he can physically feel his heart sink lower in his chest. Bucky is still on the operating table. His eyes are closed, but his breathing suggests that he's conscious. The bed has been raised to force him into a sitting position and his right hand, now heavily bandaged, is secured to a padded extension. The plastic gown is gone, but there's a sheet covering him from the waist down. Just underneath its edge, Steve can see the fastenings of several thick straps drawn tightly over his legs, and there are another two buckled around his chest and abdomen. They weren't taking any more chances with his compliance.

Pierce hangs back a few feet, motioning for the guards to do the same, as Steve steps forward. He reaches out tentatively and lays a hand on Bucky's knee, and Bucky's eye flicker open, predatory and full of warning and terror, until he recognizes that it's Steve standing over him. The fear and confusion in his expression morphs into something unidentifiable – an uncanny mixture of relief and a thousand questions and sympathy and sadness. And something else, something Steve had hoped to never see on Bucky's face. Suspicion.

“Steve,” he says softly, voice hoarse and weak, and in that singular word Steve hears confirmation of every emotion he can see in Bucky's eyes.

Steve's heart just breaks for him. For them. He still doesn't know what to say. The answer just won't come. Instead, there's an ache in his throat and a burning heat building up in his face. It's been a long time since he cried. Ever since that bombed-out pub in what remained of London, it's never been more than a few scant tears – always easy to hide, easy to get under control. Not this time.

“Steve?”

Steve barely feels the dam begin to crack before it breaks completely. When he lets his eyes fall shut, the tears are already so fat that they spatter right to the floor. He feels his face flush with the
effort of holding back a sob that bursts out of his chest anyway as he leans down over the table, 
bracing his elbows by Bucky's knees, his head hanging heavily. This isn't what he wanted. Bucky 
shouldn't have to see this, God, not right now. Grief, he can keep inside. Happiness, he can always 
manage to smile instead. If he's angry, he fights. But this, he can't disguise. Right now he's 
ashamed. He can't even look Bucky in the eye.

“I'm so sorry,” is all that he can force out. In his own ears, his voice sounds disgustingly pathetic – 
high and strained and choked. He tries to take a few breaths, but the sobs have taken root deep in 
his chest and all he can do is gasp for air before another one gets wrenched out. “Buck, this is my 
fault. Didn't know what else to do, please, I'm so sorry.” He raises his head, makes himself meet 
Bucky's gaze, even though he can hardly see through his swollen eyes. “You were in shock, Buck, you were gonna die.”

Bucky swallows hard. His eyes drag away from Steve and scan the room, the agents, Pierce, and 
his shoulders slump under an invisible weight, like he's claiming some undeserved share of Steve's 
guilt. When he returns his focus to Steve, he says with a low, earnest tone, “Stop crying.”

The words hit Steve full force in the chest, and they're sobering. Bucky's gaze is hard and stern. He 
knows as well as Steve does that Pierce won't give them long to talk, and he won't allow Steve to 
waste what little time they'll have together on useless apologies. And with that command, Steve 
remembers why Pierce allowed this meeting at all – what message he's meant to deliver. But there's 
no way to make Pierce happy and tell Bucky the truth: that he's not giving up. He's going to fight 
these bastards and win.

So he lays his hands on Bucky's leg and squeezes once, hard, with his right hand. He leans over 
him so that the guards can't see his fingers clenched on Bucky's thigh and says, “Listen.” Bucky 
glances down to where Steve's hands rest, then looks him squarely in the eyes. Steve reads it as a 
sign of recognition. “I'm sorry I had to do this.” He squeezes again, gripping for a second then 
letting his fingers twitch, just enough for Bucky to feel it through the sheet. “I know you're angry 
with me, but you're going to get yourself killed if you keep fighting them like this, Buck. Just do 
what they say. We lost this round.” Three more long squeezes as he speaks.

“No,” Bucky replies caustically. To the guards and Pierce, Steve hopes that it just looks like Bucky 
is being defiant and petulant. But now he's sure that Bucky read the N-O loud and clear.

“Stop it,” Steve argues, hoping it's believable. He lowers his voice, as if he doesn't want Pierce and 
the agents to overhear. “Please. I had to make a call, alright? I didn't have a choice.” And while 
Steve makes his quiet plea, his hand keeps moving, as subtly as possible.

Three short taps. S.

“You were in insulin shock. You were seizing. It was this or let you die, Bucky, and I couldn't do 
that.”

Two taps, squeeze. U.

“You would have made the same call if it was me. Somebody is going to find us. They'll figure out 
where we are, and they'll tear this whole place to the ground.”

Tap-squeeze-tap, tap-squeeze-tap. R. R.

“We've got to count on that. But, look, in the meantime, just don't cause any trouble. It's just going 
to make things worse for both of us.”
One tap, squeeze-tap, squeeze-tap-tap. E. N. D.

“I know you're scared, I know this feels like this is the worst possible outcome, but it's not.” Tap. E.

“I want to fight, too, believe me, but I'm going to do whatever it takes to keep us alive.”

Tap-squeeze-tap. R.

“Do you understand?”

Bucky stares back at him, never letting his eyes drift back down to Steve's hand. He looks up, studying Pierce and the agents, teeth clenched, expression divulging nothing but hatred and hopelessness, giving them no sign that he's received Steve's message. He does exactly what Steve had hoped he would - he gives in, but he doesn't make it look easy. He stays silent for a few more seconds, until Steve presses him again, “Bucky.”

He casts his eyes down to the floor and, sounding for all the world like he's disgusted with Steve, says, “I understand.”

“Okay,” Steve sighs, and scrubs at his face with the back of his arm, trying to clean himself up. “I told Pierce I'd talk to you,” he explains, turning back to the man in question and fixing him with a challenging stare. “But he didn't tell me what to say. Apparently, he's trying to play nice with us, so I'm sure he'd be happy to answer any questions you have for him.”

Pierce looks a little surprised by this play. Bucky knows how HYDRA works – he has decades of experience with their process of conditioning. Outwardly, this sets Steve up as a mediator between Pierce and Bucky – the traitor drawing in the soldier who's still fighting, resisting. But it accomplishes a very different goal for Steve – Bucky plays the middle-man, forcing Pierce to divulge answers to questions Steve hadn't known to ask. Either way, if Pierce wants to continue his current ploy to gain Steve's trust, he has to extend the same courtesies – however contrived – to his Asset, pitting him against both of them in his little game, rather than dealing with them separately. Pierce recovers quickly, and replies with forced ease, “Of course.”

“Are you conditioning both of us?”

“Yes.” Pierce doesn't seem to have any problem answering this, probably because he assumes Bucky already knows that much.

“Don't condition him,” Bucky pleads forcefully. “Use him in the lab – you want the serum anyway. I'll work with the techs. I'll be compliant.”

“That's a huge waste, and you know it,” Pierce counters firmly.

“Are you going to wipe him?”

Steve doesn't know what that means, but he's almost certain it has something to do with how HYDRA had suppressed Bucky's memories.

“We are,” Pierce concedes, this time with some hesitation. Bucky's breath quickens audibly – Steve can tell he's angry. “It's the gentlest way to do this, and the least likely to cause long-term damage,” Pierce adds, as if this qualifies as an excuse.

“No abuse from the operatives or the technicians. No beatings, no unwarranted punishment, no sexual contact of any kind. You know what I did to Rollins.”
“Soldier, I commend what you did to Rollins,” Pierce shrugs. “I'll have a talk with my team, and if someone pulls that shit again, you have my permission to stop them and have someone call me. I won't allow it, and they'll face consequences. If that sort of thing ever happened in the past, I wish you'd told me. I wouldn't have allowed it then, either.”

Bucky breathes a short, harsh laugh and his face twists, and for a second, Steve is almost certain that if Pierce were close enough, he'd spit in his face. He gets control of himself and presses on. “No surgeries, no implants,” he demands sharply. “You cut into his head one goddamn time, and I will kill until you have to kill me. And we stay together, so I know what you're doing to him.”

Tension is palpable in the air between Bucky and Pierce. Bucky is pushing him to use less effective means of programming. Methods that will buy them more time. Steve gleans from this exchange and Pierce's silence that brain surgery had always been HYDRA's back-up plan, in the case that "wiping" his memories didn't work, and an implant similar to the one that had nearly brought Bucky down in West Seneca would have been put in place to insure Steve's compliance. It's abundantly clear that Pierce doesn't want these options off the table. Bucky is forcing him to choose between losing those options, or losing his compliance and probably a great deal of his staff and equipment, as well as one of his Soldier's lives if not both. Steve gives Bucky's ploy a push.

“You said you'd make compromises as long as we were willing to talk,” he reminds Pierce. “And we're talking.”

Pierce nods. “Okay,” he agrees, voice light but decisive. “I'll tell the techs. No advanced programming. But you've got to behave yourselves. If either of you stops cooperating, we do things my way – the fast way – and I get to stay on schedule and within my budget. I'm not going to waste my time and money if you two aren't at least making this a little easier on my staff. Is that clear?”

It's as good of a deal as they're going to get, for now.

“Yes,” Steve says. Bucky lowers his head, and echoes it softly.

Pierce must feel that their conversation is over at that point. He checks his watch. “Alright, well, if I can trust you two not to cause any more trouble tonight, I'd really like to get some sleep.”

“Sir, I can take the overnight.”

Steve turns when he hears Montgomery's voice. The doctor hurries over from his work station, now wearing a fresh shirt, and comes to stand beside Pierce and the guards. “I got six hours in earlier and my wife's out of town, so it's no problem.”

Pierce nods in assent and turns to one of the two agents flanking him. “Get a few more guys down here for back-up.” The agent goes for his radio and leans away from the group to make the calls. Montgomery, undeterred by the fact that there's now only one gun on Steve and Bucky, steps forward into the surgical suite and inclines his head toward Steve's arm.

“You ripped the IV out?”

Steve looks down at his bruised elbow. “Guess so.”

Montgomery grabs a pair of gloves and some alcohol prep pads and approaches Steve. “Here, let me clean it up.”

Steve presents his arm and let's Montgomery wipe the blood away. Bucky watches the two of them like a hawk, as if even this harmless procedure is suspect.
“Is that very sore?” Montgomery asks.

“No, it'll be all healed up in an hour or two,” Steve remarks dismissively.

“I'll do it in the back of your hand when I replace it,” Montgomery decides.

Bucky raises his head and cranes his neck to see what Montgomery is doing. “What are you giving him?”

“Just a banana bag and something to help him sleep through the night,” he assures him. “Same thing I'm going to give you, except you're probably going to need some pain-killers.”

“No pain-killers,” Bucky argues adamantly, then, looking up toward Steve, he adds a quiet, “please.”

“If you're sure. I'll be around if you decide you want them later. But you don't get a choice about food. I'll give Rogers a few protein bars and he can help you eat them.”

Steve answers for both of them, eager to get something besides whatever liquid they'd force fed him on Bucky's stomach. “That's fine.”

“If he and I help you, do you think you can walk back out to the lab so I can keep an eye on you while I work?”

“I can walk,” Bucky replies.

Pierce decides that his technician has the situation under control, and takes a step back, catching Montgomery's gaze as he make for the exit. “Call me if there are any problems,” he instructs.

“Yes, sir.”

Where Pierce had stood, two more agents come forward and fan out toward the back of the OR, surrounding them. Steve steps back toward one of the new guards, giving Montgomery room to unfasten all the straps securing Bucky to the operating table. He leaves the sheet in place while he retrieves another disposable plastic gown from a drawer on one of the carts. To Steve's surprise, Montgomery hands this to him. “I'm going to go grab something for him to eat. Get him into that, then have the guards walk you to station four. That's the one where I did your blood work earlier.” And just like that, he leaves them with the guards.

Steve stand there with the sealed package in his hands, too drained to move until Bucky finally prompts him. “Come on, Steve.”

He lets Bucky hook his arm around his neck for support and helps him stand – for whatever a shred of dignity is worth in this hell-hole, he also tries to block the front of Bucky's body from the view of the guard while he tears into the package and unfolds the gown. “How bad was that gunshot wound?”

“Not bad. Took a lot of skin off, bad burn on my palm, fractured my thumb, but it'll heal alright.”

He fastens the garment quickly over Bucky's shoulder and down his side, then gives the bottom a little tug to smooth it out and add a few extra inches of length. Head still bowed over that task, he repeats quietly, “I'm so sorry, Buck.”

“So am I.”
He lets Bucky hook their elbows together and lean on him as much as he needs to while avoiding using his injured hand. Steve looks around expectantly at the surrounding agents, who begin to move forward as a unit, ushering the two of them out into the lab.

“They're putting on one hell of a show for you,” Bucky scowls. “It won't be like this later. Don't trust them. You haven't seen them yet, you don't know what they're capable of,” he advises, voice low.

Steve keeps his eyes on the guards around them, and says, loudly enough for all of them to hear, “And they got no idea what we're capable of.” He tilts his head in close to Bucky's ear, walking him slowly across the cold tiles, hoping that Bucky will focus on his voice, rather than the guns at their backs. “We're going to take care of each other. I'm going to take care of you,” he promises.

Bucky doesn't raise his eyes from the floor. “I know you'll try.”
Missing In Action

Chapter Summary

Back at the base in West Seneca, Sam searches for Steve and Bucky without much luck. In fact, whatever this is, it's the opposite of luck. Sam's ready to give 'em hell.

Sam, Clint, and Scott stay close together, moving along the side of the warehouse, hugging the shadows as they round the corner of the building and approach the entrance. Sam has been watching Barton since they hit the ground – Cap had been right about that transmitter. Once they were back to ground level, Clint had broken out in a bad sweat. He didn't say anything, but he kept squinting, then squeezing his eyes shut and giving his head a little shake, like he was trying to get the noise out of his ears.

A few squads come running out of the main doors and they still, hoping that they'll turn the other way. The first squad turns right and jogs off to circle the building, but the next heads directly for them. It's dark out – there's a slim chance they won't be seen, so they crouch low and hope for the best. Even three against eight and Barton out of arrows, Sam is pretty sure they could take them down easily, but the sound of a fight is just going to bring more squads to the door. Without knowing how many they're up against, it's best to let the agents split themselves up. Sam readies one of his Steyrs, just in case their luck doesn't hold.

The agents pass closer to them than Sam had guessed they would – so close that one of them nearly brushes against the toe of his boot.

Somehow, even though Sam knows it's ridiculous and impossible, the agents don't notice them. Not a single one of them even glances toward them. He can't make sense of it. Something's not right.

They hold their breath until the squad disappears around the corner. Clint turns slowly and stiffly back to stare wide-eyed at his teammates and mouths silently, what the fuck? and Sam can only shake his head, totally bewildered. There's no time to wonder, though. Cap and Barnes are still in there, and they need help. Clint leans out to check the doorway, then motions them forward again.

Clint plants himself on the other side of the entryway, shielded by the foyer wall as Sam sets a charge on the door. It's protected by a retinal scanner, so blowing it to hell and making a quick entrance followed by an aggressive sweep of the ground floor is their best bet for clearing out the HYDRA squads one at a time. “Barton, you better stay out here and watch the doors, man. I'll leave you with one of my Steyrs so you can pick them off from the tree-line,” Sam whispers.

“No way you and Lang can take out half a fucking base by yourselves,” Clint argues. “Bad plan.”

“No, the bad plan is bringing you in there with your ears ringing and blinding headache, that's what's a bad plan,” Sam snaps back.

“Just because you're Cap's second best friend doesn't mean you call the shots now, Wilson,” he bites out, uncharacteristically sharp. “I've got major seniority here and I say you need me – and – hey...” he pauses, looking around like he's just lost sight of something. “Moot point. It stopped.”

“They stopped transmitting the signal?” Lang cuts in.
“Or Cap and Barnes managed to find it and get it disabled,” Sam breathes hopefully. “Which means they're still on their feet. Let's go. They need a support team down there – *holy shit* –”

Sam is so startled by the *tap-tap* on his shoulder that he's left momentarily lightheaded. His arm swings back unthinkingly to push whoever is behind him away, sure that a squad of agents has circled back around for an ambush and capture, but his arm connects with a much smaller, unarmored body whose hand clamps over his mouth as she hisses, “*Be quiet!*”

“*Wa-uh!*” Sam's high-pitched interjection is muffled behind Maximoff's hand, which she finally removes, apparently deciding that he's got his bearings back and won't try to hit her again.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Clint grins. “I called you, like, ten times before we headed out, where were you?”

“Gathering intelligence on Ross. I saw the missed calls and came to meet you.”

“How'd you find us?” Lang asks, and Sam is pretty thankful that someone else raised the stupid question before he had the chance. It gives him the opportunity to remember that Wanda Maximoff has some borderline *magical* powers that, for the life of him, he doesn't understand.

Wanda, though, recognizes or senses that time is truly of the essence, and replies shortly, “I am very smart. Blow the doors up – there are squads waiting for you just inside. I will clear them.”

*You know what? Why am I even here? Why are any of us losers here? Maximoff doesn't need us, apparently.*

Sam really ought to have a sense of pride in himself – after all, had he not just taken out two squads *by himself* upstairs? Yeah, he'd done that. That was super soldier-level fighting, right there. But on the whole ground floor, he takes out *three guys*. Three. Out of about, oh, *forty*. Wanda hogs the rest.

Barton and Lang split up and start sweeping vacant hallways and labs for Cap and Barnes, while Sam is left to engage the combatants with Maximoff and honestly, she handles it on her own. Sam is pretty sure that he got to beat the shit out of those three dude just because Wanda didn't want to hurt his feelings too bad. She literally walked in, got mad really fast, put out her hands, and then there were agents shooting each other in the kneecaps left and right, throwing down their weapons, and once things calmed down, forty HYDRA agents marched their asses outside with their hands on their heads and waited for the police to get there. The entire ground floor takes a total of ten minutes. Damn. Superpowers.

Sam does a final sweep of the hallways and labs, checking for additional combatants, and finding the level clean, he jogs back to meet Maximoff at the doors. When the last squads had exited, she'd announced to Sam that she was going to make sure their statements to the police made no mention of them – especially of Cap or Bucky. Wanda is strolling back inside, barely out of breath, and apparently totally unconcerned that her captives are going to stay put.

“Where are the other two?” she asks, wiping her palms on her jeans. For as tired out as she looks from clearing forty (well, thirty-seven) agents, she might as well have just been making lunch or some shit. Sam wipes his arm across his forehead to keep anymore cold sweat from dripping into his eyes, feeling equal parts impressed and jealous.

“They're checking the sublevels. Comms are back up, so they'll radio in if they find anything or run
into more agents. Still no contact from Rogers or Barnes, though.”

“We will search the building shell – they may have tried to hide there.”

“Alright, I'll work my way to the west edge and you take the east side. Meet you back at the lot on the north side of the building,” Sam decides, hoping he sounds at least a little authoritative, even though he's well aware that he's got nothing on Maximoff's frankly ridiculous enhancements. They nod to each other, wishing a silent good luck and Sam takes off toward the exit.

Wanda turns back briefly to call out to him, throwing her hands in the air. “Why I must always take the East, Wilson?”

Sam's pretty sure she intentionally thickened her accent just to sass him. He lets himself laugh at her joke, despite the fact that he's pretty sure Cap is in serious trouble – it's the only way to take the edge off the adrenaline right now, and he needs to be calm and clear-headed. If he doesn't find his teammates, he at least needs to look for signs that they've been there, and he may very well run into more hostiles in the warehouse. Hopefully not too many, since Barton now has his other Steyr and half his remaining ammo.

That one Steyr is held low and ready as he shoulders the door open and lets himself out into the warehouse. There are lights buzzing overhead, but they're pretty dim, and the warehouse is a crumbling mess. Hard to move in quietly. He stops and listens, just to be sure that he's alone. He doesn't hear anything right away, but the air-pressure is all wrong and there's just a hint of a cold breeze. There's a wide open door to the outside, somewhere.

A car door slams. Not close, but there's no way to tell if it means that HYDRA agents are escaping or if more reinforcements are arriving to protect the base. Sam clenches his teeth, picking his way slowly through the industrial refuse, trying to keep his steps light. The soles of his boots grind against the gritty concrete floor anyway.

“Falcon, you copy?”

Sam feels like someone just poured ice water down his back. Here he was trying not to step on broken glass or trip on any old pipes or, you know, breathe too loud, and Barton decides it's a good time to yell in his ear. Not to mention, Sam had totally forgotten that he'd turned his comm up to full blast earlier, trying to catch a weak signal from Cap.

“Yeah, I copy,” Sam answers, trying to get a full breath in and stay nearly silent. He can hear blood pounding in his ears. “Pretty sure I'm not alone,” he adds slowly, moving along behind some old shipping pallets as he tries to locate the source of the faint engine noise. Luckily, all the wooden pallets and crates are enough to dampen the echo of his whispers.

“One of the sublevel labs is blown to hell, dude, destroyed. Found a way around, though – headed toward the northwest corner. Somebody left a nice trail – boots, blood on the right instep, look like Cap's. Looks like it moves to an even drag about halfway down the hall here, so somebody was holding him up, and – oh, goddamn.”

“Barton?”

“Yeah, Barnes was here, too. Found the transmitter, I think. Busted all to hell. And a guy – not an agent – white male, civvies. Brains all over the fucking lab, man. Definitely Barnes’ work.”

“Get up to ground level and meet me in the warehouse – west side. Possible combatants.”

“Copy that, be there in two.”
The sound of the engine fades as Sam clears the tall stacks of crates. He can't see the door, but he can see dust and papers on the floor at the far end of the warehouse blowing in a very light wind, down at the north corner of the building. No agents, though. Which means that some of them got away. They probably evacuated a few of their scientists.

Well, not all of them, thanks to Barnes. Sam wonders momentarily how the other two had fared – the guys Lang had ambushed with the fire ants. Sam sort of hopes that they're both sitting on their asses outside right now, ready to turn themselves in to the police, and he hopes they're still covered in ants.

Sam takes one more look around the wide expanse of gutted space in front of him before raising his sidearm and moving forward. He ought to wait for Barton, and the only reason he doesn't is that there’s a nasty feeling that's settling in his gut. Judging by Barton's report, it sounds like Steve and Barnes were heading this way. They could have been on the vehicle Sam had heard.

But they wouldn't have gone without a fight. Surely, they wouldn't have. Sure, Steve had taken a bullet, but Barnes was still on his feet and once the transmitter was destroyed, he was alright to haul Cap's ass to safety. And if Barnes wasn't dead or unconscious and someone tried to load them into a truck, Sam should have at least heard some gunshots, even from inside the base. Maybe he just hadn't noticed them in the initial fight. Maybe this was as far as Barnes had made it – that transmitter had hurt him pretty bad, and if Lang's hypothesis was accurate, it might have even caused some serious damage to his gray matter. Maybe they'd been ambushed. Sam can't imagine a scenario in which Barnes wouldn't fight tooth and nail rather than be dragged back to HYDRA.

And yet, there's a little voice in the back of his mind (in fact, it might be Tony Stark's voice) that tells him, yeah, maybe he would go without a fight. Maybe they have some kind of word or phrase to trigger him into compliance. Maybe they didn't even need to use it.

*Shut the fuck up, Stark.*

Sam searches the ground for any sign of a struggle.

And he finds one. It's not much. He finds a set of doors at the northwest corner, leading back into the labs. He can see the open doors from here, too, leading outside. In front of another stack of shipping pallets, there’s a spatter of blood smears into the concrete. It hasn't even been there long enough to start congealing. Shit.

And it only gets worse. There’s one earpiece on the floor and the other just a few feet away. Sam barely looks up when Barton shoulders the door open, checks for combatants, and joins him. Barton seems to read the situation instantly. Sam hands over one of the two comms he's retrieved, just so Clint can see that it's unmistakably one of their own.

“Car just took off outside. About three minutes ago,” Sam informs him numbly.

Clint, thank God, doesn't seem the least bit daunted. He gets right to work. “Lang, come in,” he demands. “Find Maximoff and rendezvous at the warehouse on the west edge of the building. We're heading back to the car after that. They took Barnes and Cap. We're pursuing.”

Sam is ready to leave now, without them. Without Barton, if he has to. No wings, no sleep, bruised ribs, one gun, two magazines left, and he's ready to chase these motherfuckers down on foot. He stares down into the trashcan in front of him and ignores a confused stare from Barton as he reaches into it.

Holding this thing feels wrong. Too light for its size, clumsy, made for bigger hands, a stronger
arm. Not for him. It's like Thor's hammer – when Steve touches it, it's magic, but when Sam picks it up, he gets the sense that he's not worthy. Like he's trying on his dad's shoes or something. It just doesn't fit. He brushes the dust and grime off. No matter how wrong it feels, Sam is one hundred percent sure of one thing – he's not putting that shield down until he can put it back in Cap's hands.
Hold Onto Something

Chapter Summary

Steve is handed over to Dr. Cervenka Řezník. If Steve is planning to escape HYDRA unscathed, this might be his last chance.

Steve can't sleep.

Dr. Montgomery had allowed him to help Bucky eat a some dry protein bars and drink a few cups of water, but they were constantly surrounded by agents, and Montgomery's seat at the workstation was only a few feet away. Steve hadn't really expected the opportunity to talk with Bucky and certainly not to do so privately, so it's silly to let himself feel so disappointed now, but that hardly helps matters. He wishes he could have kissed him. Told him he loved him. What did it matter now, if they knew? And yet, it somehow seems too private, too close to expose to their captors. And what's more, it would be better if they didn't know how important Bucky is to him – they might realize what kind of leverage they had against him. Right now, if they made him choose between fighting for HYDRA and losing Bucky for good...he's not so sure what he'd choose.

Once Bucky had something on his stomach, Montgomery had taken a single blood sample from him and a urine sample, checked the drain on his injured hand, and then had them both escorted back to the holding cells. An IV for Bucky was set up, and Steve's was repaired. Steve had requested a blanket for Bucky, and Montgomery had acquiesced once again. He'd asked the time. Just after midnight, meaning it's now Monday the twenty-fifth.

In the morning, he's going to have to deal with HYDRA's idea of “compliance programming,” and there's not a whole hell of a lot he can do to stop it. The thought ties a knot in his gut and it's keeping him awake, despite Montgomery's previously effective cocktail of drugs.

“Just try to hold on to something,” Bucky had advised him quietly, between bites of the protein bar. Steve hadn't known at the time what he was talking about – the statement had been unprompted. “When they do it. Your serial number or something you know really well. It helps, sometimes.” And he hadn't elaborated beyond that.

Steve guesses that he was talking about the memory erasure. Even after seventy years of it, Bucky had managed to remember him, even though it had taken months to recall the details. It was clear that its effects weren't permanent – whatever it was, HYDRA would have performed the procedure regularly to insure that their Asset remained unaware of his identity and original allegiances.

54985870.

Steve repeats the numbers to himself a few times, even though they're just as familiar to him as his name and rank. He makes the list into a mantra. Name, rank, serial number. The combination and the repetition of it is second nature to any soldier. He remembers when he'd found Bucky in Zola's lab in '44, endlessly repeating them as per standard training – this was the only information a captured soldier was ever allowed to divulge. It had probably been the last memory Bucky had lost. That made it a good control – he could use it to gauge how well HYDRA's memory erasure worked through each cycle. If the numbers and name came easily, he wouldn't have to worry that other memories might be missing. If they began to fade, he would need to find other ways to
remind himself of who he is, what HYDRA is, and what Bucky means to him.

Steve turns his face toward the dividing wall between the holding cells, wishing vainly for the ability to see through it. He wonders if Bucky has managed to fall asleep, and briefly considers calling out to him, seeing if they can hear one another. The guards might not like that, and he's not even sure what he would say. More importantly, if Bucky is asleep, Steve wants to let him stay that way.

*Rogers, Steven Grant. Captain. 54985870.* He repeats it again.

*Rogers, Steven Grant. Captain. 54985870.* When the drugs finally overpower him and he falls asleep, he's still repeating it. The dreams are heavy, uncomfortable. The numbers won't come. And then the name won't come either. He grasps at them like loose papers blowing away, but just when he thinks he remembers, he realizes that they're jumbled. Wrong. The name doesn't sound like his name any more. And then the carnage and mournful sounds of the war creep back in, and it's raining and cold. Field. Winter. Bare trees in the distance. Abandoned rifles, shell casings littering the marshy ground. He pushes his tired legs through knee-deep, oil-polluted mud, dizzy, stumbling, hands sinking into it as he looks for his dog-tags in an endless, empty battlefield. He knows his name and number is on them. He needs them. He drives his hands deeper into the thick mud, searching blindly.

But he never finds them.

Steve wakes up overheated and so short of breath that he's sure he's having an asthma attack. He had slept through the lights in the lab coming back up and the sound of the cell door opening, as well as the approach of one of the doctors, who is bending over him when he manages to pry is eyes open. To his surprise, it's not Montgomery. It's not Parsons, either – Parsons had been watching Bucky when he'd regained consciousness and trashed the lab yesterday night and had very short, dark hair, balding on the top and sides, with a light accent, like he'd grown up speaking Hindustani. This was the third doctor who had returned with Montgomery later that night. He was the oldest of the three – at least in his late fifties, with gray hair which he frequently swept back with his fingers and a short beard and mustache.

By the time Steve's eyes focus, the doctor has already removed the IV needle and replaced the bandages on the insides of his elbows, and he's moved on to take a quick look at the gunshot wound on Steve's thigh.

“Good morning, young man,” the doctor greets him. Steve is immediately wary. He has the sort of false, condescending, drippingly polite tone of an untrustworthy man who believes he can trick the world into liking him. His accent might be Russian, but it's so slight that Steve can't be sure. “My name is Dr. Cervenka Řezník,” —*must be Czech*— ‘and I am a psychologist.” He says the word just a little slower – as if Steve might not know what it means. “Other doctors here might not want to hear what you have to say, but you may talk to me all you like. You are upset right now, but you might want to ask questions – I'll be happy to answer them.”

“Where's Bucky?” Steve asks immediately, sitting up. There's hardly anything else at the forefront of his thoughts.

“Zima is in the surgical suite with Dr. Parsons,” Řezník answers, fluidly replacing Bucky's name with HYDRA's codename for him. Steve bites his tongue. “He is not anesthetized – Dr. Parsons said you had a word with him yesterday – I hope you told him that it is dangerous to grab the barrels of guns,” he laughs. He apparently finds his
own joke to be a little more amusing than Steve does. “He is behaving much better today, thanks to you.”

Steve’s breath catches in his throat. There are a thousand well-deserved refutes and insults he’d like to hurl at that statement, but there’s no point in making enemies into greater enemies in his current situation. All of these doctors have the ability to make both his life and Bucky’s far worse, with little more than a word. He’s got to try to remember that.

Řezník takes a clipboard out from under his arm and a pen from his coat pocket, smiling pleasantly. “I want to ask you some questions. Is that alright?”

Oh, and Steve was going to try so hard to be polite. And then Řezník just has to go and make it difficult by...talking. “That’s very considerate of you to give me a choice in the matter. Go right ahead,” he replies, mimicking Řezník’s disingenuous tone and crossing his legs like he's sitting down for an interview. He can't help himself; this guy makes him sick. He would probably despise Řezník if he didn't know about his involvement with HYDRA.

Řezník's forehead knits with offense and a disgusting air of concern, like he's regarding Steve's blithe sarcasm as some kind of symptom which, in all fairness, he probably does think it's something he can cure. That thought makes Steve nervous. “Okay. Let's start very simple. What is your full name?”

Steve fires back without hesitation, stone-faced. “I don't know. Don't remember. Well done, doc.”

Řezník raises his eyebrows. He certainly doesn't smile – he wants Steve to know that he doesn't find him the least bit amusing. He presses on. “And how would you like to be addressed?”

That question is just too laughable – if there's a serious response to be given in light of his situation, Steve can't conceive of it. He scoffs in total disbelief and looks up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “I don't know, how about 24601? That has a nice ring.”

This time, Řezník looks truly confused. So not only is he a neo-Nazi headshrinker with no personality to speak of, he's also uncultured, Steve decides. He records something on his clipboard. Steve smiles inwardly, thinking to himself that whatever he's chosen to write must be some variation of Initial diagnosis: subject is an asshole. Poor Řezník quite simply has no idea how many times Steve has been interrogated and questioned during his career; as a Howling Commando, as an Avenger – not to mention all the psychologists he's spoken to as requisite to his work as a SHIELD agent. Maybe it's just the times he grew up in, but Steve doesn't like headshrinkers, and he sure as hell doesn't trust them. Pair that profession with HYDRA, and Řezník is sure to have his work cut out for him conditioning Steve.

“What is your relationship with Zima?”

“Who?”

Řezník actually humors him with a response this time. “With Zima, Captain Rogers.”

“Bucky?”

“If that’s what you prefer to call him.”

Steve turns his head back toward the wall, glancing in the direction of the other holding cell, pretending that the question doesn't make his hands feel a little too cold, and his face a little too hot. “Neighbor?” he retorts simply.
“And what is your opinion of me?”

Oh, this guy is pitching easy hits, isn't he? “Well,” Steve says thoughtfully, looking Řezník up and down. “You're a little old for me and you could use a gym membership, but you look pretty rich. That makes you a solid six.” Řezník goes back to his clipboard without a word, so Steve adds, “If you need a point of reference for your notes, Pierce is easily an eight.”

“And of Dr. Montgomery?”

“Love the bow-tie.”

“What about HYDRA?”

“I really hope this is some kind of exit survey.”

Řezník puts his pen back in his pocket. He's apparently been pushed far enough that he no longer sees a point in taking notes. “A serious answer would be appreciated, Captain Rogers.”

“I bet it would,” Steve says lowly, his voice carrying a threat in lieu of sarcasm.

Řezník smirks. “And you had such a reputation for your manners,” he sighs.

“Oh,” Steve laughs. “That's just my public image. Brooklyn, show-business, the army, living with Tony Stark...guess my manners didn't stand a chance.”

“Captain,” Řezník begins, looking Steve square in the eye. “I am going to recommend that Dr. Montgomery performs electroconvulsive therapy on Zima when he returns. We refer to this procedure as a 'wipe.' Do you know why?”

Steve's doesn't know when his jaw clamped shut, but he finds it difficult to pry it open again to speak. “Memory erasure.”

Řezník nods. “Yes, a clean slate. Not only that – greatly increased compliance. Beneficial not only to us, but to Zima, as well. This procedure calms him, eliminates distress, lessens the likelihood that he will hurt himself. Regretfully, it is a painful procedure. He is far more resilient than any other patient I have worked with – his mind is notoriously difficult to alter. So we must use an average of 110 volts. He can tolerate more, though. Would you like him to tolerate more?” Řezník lowers his head inquisitively.

Steve, in turn, lowers his and shakes it plaintively.

Řezník stays silent, considering Steve's sudden surrender, and Steve fights the urge to back up toward the wall, to press himself right though it, if he could. “These are not the tactics I want to employ. I do not want to threaten you. Mr. Pierce does not want me to threaten you. Certainly, any sane man does not want to be threatened. This is counter-productive,” he says, voice high and clipped, unblinking eyes bearing down on Steve with weighty disappointment. “Please stand up and follow me.”

Steve does as Řezník orders, lips shut tight and twisting with disdain. He hates this – hates that Bucky's still in no state to fight at full capacity, hates that he has no ground to stand on, hates that he has to allow people like Řezník to treat him like a chastised child. As he exits the holding cell, he sees that Parsons, accompanied by four agents, is leading Bucky out of the surgical suite to the table where Montgomery had examined him yesterday morning. He watches Bucky for a moment, taking in his posture and gait just long enough to determine that he's alright. He seems a little drowsy and drugged, but aside from his bandaged right hand, he's not hurt. They still haven't given
back his prosthetic arm, and Steve doubts that they will anytime soon. They don't want to make him any more dangerous.

Řezník leads Steve to the lab's corner and stops in front of the black chair, flanked by the two monitors. Steve can still feel Bucky's eyes on him, but he doesn't turn to look. Instead, he studies the apparatus closely, trying to dissect its function. Over at the table, Parsons' comments and commands indicate that he's performing the same intake physical that Steve had received yesterday, probably trying to determine if all of Bucky's vitals are back to normal after his brush with insulin shock.

“Sit, please,” Řezník asks, his tone suddenly polite again.

Steve cringes when he hears something clatter to the tile floor over by the workstation.

One of the guards' voices follows, a panicked, “Whoa, whoa!”

Steve turns on his heel, ready to reprimand Bucky himself if he has to. They're not ready yet. *Wait.* If they aren't aren't careful about their escape, then it'll all be for nothing. And this isn't the time, with two doctors and a total of twelve armed agents surrounding the lab. But Bucky's not fighting – not like he did last time, anyway. Two of the guards have closed a gap where he'd tried to push through to get to Steve, and Bucky is still, leaning against their outstretched arms. They look more like they're supporting his weight now, instead of hold him back. Bucky's face is bloodless.

“No, no, no,” he begs, looking to one of the agents barring his path, then to Řezník. “Don't.” The agents push him back toward the table, but his feet don't budge. “Don't.”

Bucky doesn't want him to sit down. That's what got him so spooked. Steve's eyes shoot briefly back toward the chair behind him, then lock with Bucky's again. Pupils blown wide and jaw tight, Bucky shakes his head at Steve, warning him.

Řezník apparently thinks he knows how to diffuse the situation. He excuses himself from Steve's side and approaches Bucky slowly, voice low and soft and pacifying as he urges him, “Have a seat, Soldier. It's alright. Sit back down so I can talk to you.”

Bucky hesitates, but finally stumbles backward a step, pulling his feet from the tile as if he'd been glued in place. He backs up, keeping a few feet between himself and Řezník, until the small of his back connects with the exam table behind him. Parsons on one side of him and Řezník on the other, Bucky finally allows himself to be pushed onto the table. Steve watches with a lightness in his chest, something between intense anxiety and boiling anger tightening in his gut. Řezník's back is turned toward him now, and he's speaking so quietly that not even Steve can hear him. Bucky looks down at the floor, listening. Řezník's head lowers and tilts – he's asked a question. There's a long beat of silence, and Bucky gives a faint nod. Řezník doesn't budge yet. Asks another question. This time, Bucky nods twice, quickly, face relaxing from terror to tired discontent. He blinks slowly, still watching the floor. Finally, Řezník straightens up and gives him some space. Steve thinks he hears Řezník say softly, “Can you be calm?” and Bucky raises his eyes to the level of Řezník's chest, showing that he's attentive while avoiding eye-contact.

“Yes, sir.”

Steve sees Bucky's mouth form the words, but they're almost inaudible.

Řezník offers Parsons a polite apology which, from where Steve is standing, seems more like a way to shame Bucky than an expression of actual remorse. He turns and steps quickly back toward Steve and the chair, pasting a smile on his face as he meets Steve's hard expression. “Everything is
fine, now,” he assures him. “You may sit down.”

Steve can't begin to guess what Řezník said to Bucky – why Bucky seemed so afraid, not only of the chair but of Řezník himself. His feet and hands suddenly feel cold and damp with sweat. With every exhale, it's getting more and more difficult to keep his breath steady. Bucky is cooperating with Parsons' examination now, but he's still watching Steve and Řezník and the chair, although Steve can no longer read his expression. Bucky stares pointedly at him, brow knitting momentarily, like he's trying to say something. Asking for something. No, trying to remind Steve of something.

As Steve seats down on the edge of the seat, Bucky's right hand shifts from the edge of the exam table to his knee. Straining against the bandages, his fingers tighten, gripping. Steve hears him. Understands, hold on. He hasn't forgotten.

*Rogers, Steven Grant. Captain. 54985870.*
Bucky never takes his eyes off of Steve, and Steve never takes his eyes off of Řezník. The monitors beside the chair emit a low electric buzz as Řezník turns them on, and Steve watches as all four screens cycle through a boot-up process and then slowly fill with empty boxes. Each box first displays an hourglass icon, and then a red stripe proclaiming NO DATA. The two screens on the outside show a circular region, gray-shaded – the outline of a brain.

On the other side of the room, a young man exits the surgical suite (short brown hair, brown eyes, light complexion, cheap watch) – Steve hears a door shut just before he sees him, which means he must have been in the storage room behind the OR. There's a sealed plastic package in his hands, but Steve can't see what's inside.

“Hurry, please,” Řezník says shortly. The kid is probably just an assistant, then. “Mr. Pierce would like for us to have a report ready by eight tonight.” The young man eyes Steve nervously as he gets closer and his fingers tremble a little as he tears open the package and takes out some adhesive pads and leads. Steve has seen them before, of course – his work with the Avengers has put him in critical condition a few times now, and he usually wakes up with four or five of those stuck to him.

“Mr. Epley, take down a full telemetry report. I'll deal with the brain scans. Thank you,” Řezník requests brusquely, in a single breath. “And Captain, if you wouldn't mind, unfasten the shoulder of the gown. You may leave it in your lap, but he'll need to see your chest.”

Steve reluctantly complies, allowing Epley (Epley) to start attaching the monitors to his skin. The leads feed into a little box beside the chair. The screens flash and recalibrate, then start reading his vital signs. “Any chance I could get some real clothes?” Steve asks sarcastically.

Řezník doesn't look at him, but Steve can see in the man's eyes that he'd been hoping Steve would ask that question. If Steve asks for things even sarcastically, if he allows himself to want, Řezník has leverage. Steve regrets opening his mouth. True to Steve's assessment, he replies with a note of triumph, “If you follow instructions today and do not misbehave, then yes. We will find you something.”

Well, if he's grovelling anyway… “Could you find something for Bucky, too?”

Řezník laughs – the sound isn't harsh or mean – he laughs at Steve as one would laugh at a child who has asked a silly question. “That would require either some good behavior of him, or a level compliance from you which I do not think you are ready to give me, but we will see.”

All the screens are full now – every vital sign accounted for.

“What did you say to Bucky? Earlier?” Steve dares to inquire. He's doing everything else they tell him to, no longer actively trying to piss Řezník off – that has to count for something, right?

Řezník gives him a pointed and stern look, then goes right back to calibrating his machinery.
“You said I could ask questions,” Steve reminds him, trying not to sound like he's pleading. He's tired today. Exhausted. He had barely managed to fall asleep, and then he'd had those dreams and the dreams are still hanging over him like heavy clouds, and he feels like whatever fight he had in him to get him through the day, he already spent on Řezník's stupid questions that morning. Even speaking feels like a chore. His mind feels too tired to form a sentence, and even the muscles in his throat feel weak and overtaxed. He's had a very rough couple of days. Yeah, he pleads a little. He promises himself that he'll do better tomorrow.

“You most certainly can. But you will have to do much better if you want Zima to have some clothes. You still want that, don't you?” Řezník offers, tone gentle and whittling.

Realization dawns on Steve, bringing with it a pang of anger and nausea. He knows exactly what Řezník wants to hear, and it drums up a little defiance in him. Thank God. All he had needed was a little push. “Changed my mind,” he replies firmly. “Buck and I are pretty partial to the plastic dresses. Can’t beat a good breeze,” he adds, and forces the muscles of his face into the shape of a smile. It’s about as difficult as lifting a small car.

“That’s fine,” Řezník says, and if Steve response has frustrated him, he doesn’t let Steve hear it or see it. “And in answer to your question, he was afraid I was going to perform electroconvulsive therapy. It is a harmless procedure, but as I told you, it frightens him.”

“And you’re not?” Steve asks, surprised, voice rough with that lingering exhaustion he still can’t seem to shake.

“No, but this is the same machine we use. But you are only here for scans today to establish a baseline of your brain activity. Now, no more talking, please. Lean back, put your arms on the rests, and hold very still so I can get a clear picture.”

Steve does it, keeping his eye on Bucky all the while. Bucky’s posture on the exam table is rigid, unmovable. Steve thinks he can see Bucky's jaw trembling a little. Steve barely keeps himself from flinching when a few restraints lock around his biceps, wrists, and ankles. Bucky does flinch. He looks away into some middle distance, eyes wide and nervous, searching the room for anything else to draw his attention. Steve feels like he's looking at a spooked horse, and it's painful, heart-wrenching. One of the large circular rings at the back of the chair rotates forward and stops level with his eyes, about a foot away. A stripe of dark glass runs along its interior, and within that, Steve can see a wheel spinning on the track inside. It picks up speed with a mechanical whir. The chair itself begins to vibrate as the scanner spins faster.

The sound seems to drive Bucky to a near-frenzied panic. He shakes his head back and forth, and Steve can't tell whether it's a gesture of denial or if he's just trying to get the noise out of his head, and he pushes Parsons away. He's not violent, but he is disoriented. The agents surrounding him raise their guns but don't intervene and Parsons raises his hand to make sure that they don’t. Bucky shuffles quickly toward the other end of the room, heedless of the armed guards following close behind him, and shoves himself into the corner by the door. Parsons gets out his cell and makes a call. Steve wants to close his eyes. Watching Bucky cower in the corner like that – it's sickening. It's terrifying. But at the same time, all of those emotions are distant, hard to reach through the haze of exhaustion.

The scan doesn't take but five minutes to finish. The agents don't make an effort to remove Bucky from the corner and Parsons doesn't even go near him – looks like the bastard learned his lesson yesterday. Or was it the day before yesterday? Steve's not sure. He's been sleeping at odd intervals and he doesn't know exactly how long he's slept each time. He takes his eyes away from Bucky momentarily to try to catch a glimpse of Řezník's clipboard, but the doctor has raised it to note
something down. Steve reminds himself to get a look at it later.

The doors at the other end of the lab open gently as the machine whirs back into its original position and the cuffs release. Montgomery pokes his head in, obviously wary — Parsons' call must have been to him. He looks relieved to find that no equipment has been overturned this time, but he still approaches Bucky very slowly, visibly cautious. He motions for Parsons to continue to keep his distance. They're out of earshot, but Montgomery manages to get close enough to Bucky to speak to him. Whatever he says, Bucky doesn't care to respond — he stares fixedly at the floor the entire time. Montgomery backs away, questions Parsons, and then gives instructions for the Asset to be returned to his holding cell. Bucky stands automatically and allows himself to be ushered out of the corner. Steve waits and watches, but Bucky doesn't look toward him again as he's lead back to the cell. It's like he's not even there.

“Soldier,” Řezník implores, as if it's not the first time he's had to say it. Steve finally tears his eyes away and loses sight of Bucky as he disappears behind the glass door. “Stand.”

Steve hauls himself up. Epley has removed the heart-monitors (although Steve couldn't say when he did it). He doesn't feel right. He can't focus, can't process what's happening around him quickly enough to respond. Waking up this morning to Řezník hovering over him had given him a kick of adrenaline and a few minutes of his old piss-n-vinegar self, but that's long gone now. He can grasp it for seconds at a time, but each attempt leaves him increasingly tired and...resigned. Just thinking the word resigned is like a punch in the gut. He can't let that happen. He has to stay awake. Stay alert. Wait. Be vigilante every second. Wait.

Řezník gestures toward the door (the supply closet?) behind the chair, in the corner of the room. Epley steps forward and unlocks it with his key-card, flips the light on, and holds it open. “This way, please,” Řezník smiles. Steve steps toward the door, while Řezník and Epley hang back. He faces the door, waiting, and two agents follow him in before Řezník and Epley will join him. Guns or no guns, he might be able to take them all down quietly once the door is shut. He looks up, checks the rooms corners and ceiling. Two cameras. In a room this small, there won't be any blind spots. These will be closely monitored. Even if he could manage to take down the armed guards without incident, reinforcements could arrive very quickly. He'll have to make his move in the main lab, where he has room to move and objects to use as weapons. And Bucky's help.

Once Řezník allows the door to close behind him, Steve takes a look around the room. One side is fitted with a counter, a shelf, a row of cabinets, and a rolling stool. The papers strewn across the counter and the scrawling Czech notes covering the pages suggest that Řezník has been using this room as an office. In the back corner, there's an exam chair — like what Steve would expect to find in an optometrist's office. He can't help but notice that there's no chart of letters to go along with it, though. He can only imagine that Řezník has found a more sinister use for it. Steve doesn't want to posit what that could be at the moment.

Along the opposite wall, to Steve's left, is an oblong…container. Blue, with a chipped coat of paint. Steve's not sure what it's for. It looks like a coffin or a sarcophagus. On the end facing the chair in the back corner, the container is slanted, with a small hatch on the tilted edge. Two handle-bars flank the hatch on either side. In the corner by the door, the box attaches to what looks like a motor or a filtration system. It gives off a hum that sounded faint when the door was open, but now the buzz is filling the whole room.

Řezník pushes through the crowded space and goes straight to the cabinets on the back wall. He takes out a few items — plastic box, packaged needle, syringe, and tosses all of it haphazardly onto his cluttered desk. He puts on a pair of gloves. Let's them snap. Stretches his hands. He looks like he's not used to wearing them. Steve watches him suspiciously as he prepares the syringe, giving
him ample time to explain whatever the hell he plans to do. Řezník isn’t as courteous as Montgomery.

“Step over here. Lift the gown off your hip.”

Steve tilts his head expectantly. “Not gonna tell me what that is?”

Řezník pauses for a moment, expression incredulous and brow creased, and then smiles. “Am I obligated to tell you that?”

“You’re the one who said I could ask questions,” Steve repeats, voice hard.

“Let me remind you that I am not required to answer all of them, Soldier,” Řezník assures him, tapping the air out of the syringe. “I was very used to Zima's good behavior. He was very docile in the years before he encountered you.”

You fucking bastard.

“I will be lenient with you today, since you are not yet programmed. This is Ketamine. It will help you relax.”

Steve scowls. “Thank you,” he replies with a sarcastic sneer. “I know what Ketamine is.”

Maybe he should just risk it. Take them all out right now – deal with the reinforcements as they arrive. This is his last chance – if he complies with one more order, he'll be pumped so full of horse tranquilizer that he won't be able to do much damage at all. But Bucky is back in his cell now, and from the look of him, badly shaken. He'll have no warning before the fighting starts – if Steve can even get to him through what he expects would be a swarm of agents. The agent behind him gives him an encouraging prod with the muzzle of his M4.

No. Damn it, no, he has to wait. He has to get through this, whatever Řezník has planned for today. If he makes one move out of line right now it will mean a bullet in his chest or his gut, and provided that the agent is proficient enough to not hit anything major, Steve would be down for weeks if he gets himself shot at this range, and Bucky would be stuck here with no support. Steve doubts that any well-trained agent would actually fire his gun in a space this small, surrounded by so many people, but it's admittedly hard to convince himself that the guard won't fire when the barrel is right against him and Bucky's freedom is resting on the agent's itchy trigger-finger.

Steve glances back at the agent as if to dismiss his threat, and steps forward. One agent beside the hatch on the blue box, one at his back. Epley by the door, hands clasped in front of him. Řezník settling in on his stool, raising the needle expectantly. He's surrounded, and every eye is on him. He knows he's got much bigger things to worry about than his dignity right now, but his face still burns something awful as he approaches Rézník and lifts the plastic gown up to expose his right hip. He keeps his eyes on the linoleum floor. Řezník swabs his skin and pushes the needle into the muscle. Steve almost winces at how bad it aches as Řezník depresses the plunger – it's a big gauge, and the syringe itself was large. The ache turns into a sting as the needle slides out, and then a second alcohol swab. Steve waits nervously, suddenly distrustful of every stray or tired thought that flits through his mind, wondering if the drug is already starting to take effect.

He hears the plastic latch of Řezník's box click behind him, and then shut and click again. “Here,” Řezník prompts. “Place this under your tongue.”

Steve turns around to see that Řezník is holding something up – Steve briefly thinks with surprise and confusion that it looks like a communion wafer, and the thought almost makes him laugh. He
takes a closer look. Paper. And then realizes the obvious.

“LSD, huh?” he says, forcing himself to sound bemused as plucks the paper square off of Řezník's open palm. “And Ketamine,” he laughs, popping it into his mouth and trying his damnedest to convince himself and Řezník that he's no more scared of it than a potato chip. “You know, if you advertised, I'm sure a lot of college kids would willingly volunteer for your little brainwashing program.”

Řezník's laughter is genuine this time. “They already did, my friend,” he says, packing his supplies back into the cabinet and discarding the used needle and his gloves. “MKUltra's research and findings allowed us to significantly improve HYDRA's control of its Assets.”

Steve smiles back at him, but he feels the expression stiffen as his teeth clench. The agents can enjoy quick deaths. This guy goes slowly.

Řezník turns back around and takes a quick look at Steve, appraising his condition. Steve's not feeling the effect of either drug just yet, but he makes a pointed effort to appear completely sober and hold Řezník's gaze steadily. “Take off the gown, please. The trash can is beside you there. Mr. Epley, prep him for the REST tank. We'll start with Level Two for duration, since our Soldier has been so chatty this morning.”

Steve's face flushes hot with anger, but he missed his chance to start a fight when he let Řezník inject him in the first place. He tears the gown off, deciding to hell with dignity – the sooner the gown's off, the sooner Řezník can finish his little pseudo-science experiment and Steve can move on to the next opportunity to rip this whole goddamn lab apart.

Epley picks his way carefully past the agent and Steve and dons his own pair of gloves. Řezník hands him a jar of petroleum jelly and a pair of bandage scissors from the cabinet. Steve doesn't afford him a second look. He watches Řezník instead, as Epley cuts away the dressing on his thigh and covers the wound in the petroleum jelly. Řezník returns Steve's stare coolly, only breaking it to look over Epley's work. Epley is checking every part of Steve's body for open cuts and scrapes – he spreads a liberal amount of the jelly on the insides of Steve's elbows, his skinned knees, a knick on his cheek, right down to the tiny, nearly-healed abrasions on Steve's ankles and shins from his long hike away from the crash. He's thorough. He checks everywhere. Steve doesn't respond. He refuses to.

Steve's head starts to swim just as Epley finishes. He watches the kid pull his gloves off. Knows that the sound shouldn't be echoing like that. He tries to shake it off.

This isn't going to be easy, but no matter what Řezník has planned, Steve has to stay present.

*Stay focused.*

Řezník's hand comes toward him slowly. Drops two things into his hand. Ear-plugs. He puts them in and Epley double-checks, then gives Řezník a thumbs-up.

The agent who's standing by the tank opens the hatch up, and Steve is pushed forward. He stands in front of it. Looks down. His eyes aren't working right. It can't be that dark in there.

No, there's a little glimmer. Water. And then a faint smell, too. Bitterness. Salt.

“Get in,” Řezník orders simply.

The agent and Epley steady him as he grips the bars on either side of the opening and puts one foot in, then the other. He slides inside. It's too shallow to sit up. He'll have to lie back.
“Just relax and allow yourself to float on the water, Soldier.”

Řezník's voice blends in with the hum of the filter. Steve lowers himself into the lukewarm water and lets it lift him up. He knows it's dark, but all he can see is color. He knows he's relatively still, but all he can feel is motion.


Stay focused.

He can't afford to lose himself, not even for a second. Zima's sitting out there in a cell. Answering to HYDRA. He didn't deserve that, God, no one deserves that, but him least of all. Steve had told himself he'd never allow that to happen again, and now he has. He has to stay focused. He's got to get—

Get Bucky out of here.

Bucky. Something else had crept into his brain.

—can't decide whether his body feels heavy or light—

No, that didn't happen. He didn't call him that, Řezník had. Earlier. That's what he was thinking of. He wouldn't think that.

—had said earlier—

Zi—

Bucky.

Said something earlier.

No. Said nothing?

Moved. Showed him something, not speaking. Steve's fist clenches. Hard as he can. Barely feels the pressure of his fingers on his palm. His stomach lurches. Falling again?

Roller-coaster. Pressed into the seat hips bruising against the metal already climbing climbing climbing up to the top of the hill and a gust of wind

tears in his eyes

just the wind

We're both smiling. But I'm terrified. God, I didn't want to do this I didn't wanna do this how'd I let you talk me into can't catch my breath swear I'll get you back for this

but an arm around me, weighing me down not gonna let me slip out fly away float off into the sky and crash back down

and then laughter, thrilled, smiling Hold on, Stevie!

To what?

“Hang on, Stevie!”

“Bucky, no, I don't wanna do this—”

“Steve, leggo of my arm and hold on to the bar, ya moron!”

“No, I can't, I can't, I wanna get offa this thing—”

“We can't get off now. Say a Hail Mary or something.”

“I can't remember how it goes, I'm too scared!”

“I've got you, pal, you're not going anywhere.”

“We stopped? Why'd we stop?”

“Haha! Hold on, buddy!”

“Oh, no, oh God—Bucky!”

And then he's weightless, lifting out of his seat as the cart is dragged over the hill and down toward the steel bars and bends and twists and hot pavement below, and his view of the beach and the water judders and shakes as they bump over the newly laid wooden tracks, and then the memory isn't right anymore. He knows this isn't what happened. He wants to believe it's not happening now. The world in front of his eyes keeps shaking, buzzing, and the coaster climbs the next hill, and his friend isn't beside him anymore.

He looks down. The bar and belt are gone, and he tries to sink lower in the cart as he speeds upward, toward the crest of a sharp turn. He looks up to the sky. White. Bleak. No longer a bright summer day at Coney Island. Cold. His foot bumps against something. Rudder pedal. Looks back up. The cart has changed now – no carts behind him or up ahead, and right in front of him – SID, nav control, PFD, throttle lever, control wheel, pin on the altitude indicator spinning like a roulette wheel and a red light flashing beside it, trying to tell him the horizon is approaching, he's nose down – and the cart whips around the bend, and out he goes. Floats away like a feather, blowing out toward the water, falling constantly and never hitting the ground. It takes long minutes of gentle decent before he hits the water, skipping like a stone thrown just so, like his friend was always so good at.

And now he's still, resting on the water, and the salt stings inside his ears and fills his nostrils. He should try to move. He should try to swim, to save himself, but the shore must be miles away now. Maybe he should just lie there. See where the waves carry him. Leave everything behind. Stop fighting. Accept it all and wait to see what happens.
Maybe nothing will ever happen again. It's an uneasy sort of peace, but at least it's quiet. At least he's not falling anymore. And it's warm.

The sun goes down. Night engulfs the ocean. The silence rings in his ears, manifests in vivid bursts of color and light, like the stars overhead are exploding into slow-blooming supernovae. He lets go. He watches the stars burst and expand toward the water's surface, apocalyptic and brilliant and lovely….and inevitable. Out of his hands.

He lets go of everything.

And then, very faintly, he hears a sound. Click. Creak. A splash, nearby. The water around him moves. There's light. And hands, fingers, pressing into his arms, his sides, pulling. For a moment, the light is so bright that it's blinding, even behind the lids of his closed eyes. And then it's dark again. Dark and stifling. Hard to breathe. Something on his face – no, over his head, around his throat.

He hears a voice – distant, low, distorted. He doesn't recognize it. “Lift him onto the gurney.”

He's cold. Shivering. Now there are two sets of hands, one underneath each of his arms. Something rough, abrasive, on his skin. A towel. More hands, lifting him up, laying him down onto dry sheets. Straps, tightening over his chest and ankles. The voice speaks again, interrupted at intervals by bursts of static and distortion.

“...want….before he….additional dose….Ketamine and….oxytocin.”

The needle doesn't sting this time. There's just a sense of light pressure. He's not even sure if he's been injected or not. They cover him with a blanket. Cold turns to hot, but he can't stop shivering.

The gurney moves forward. He hears doors open and shut. He can't be sure how far it moves, or where it takes him. Somewhere along the way, he loses himself again.

“Please, can I come back with him?”

“We'll call you back in a moment, Mrs. Rogers. We need to get his fever down.”

“He just had a sore throat, I don't know what—”

“Scarlet fever, look at the rash. Somebody grab a gurney, he's too delirious to walk.”

“Please, I just—”

“Ma'am, please, he's highly contagious. Wait out here.”

The blanket lifts away. The straps loosen. They move him again, turn him over, face down. Cold again – metal? His skin is so hot that it practically burns against his chest and thighs and his cheek, right through the dark fabric over his head.

“Get this poor kid into an ice bath, he's just under a hundred and four!”
More hands. Too many to count this time. Everywhere. Smooth, gloved. Groping, pinching like pecking crows. In his hair, gripping through the bag, pulling his head back.

“You gonna talk back to me again, kid, huh?”

“Shit—see the way he was looking at Arnie? Probably a fuckin' queer!”

“Everybody knows Arnie's fuckin' bent.”

“Kick the little queer in the jewels a couple a'times, see if that fixes him!”

He should be struggling, shouldn't he?

No, that happened a long time ago. It isn't real. Don't struggle. Maybe the nightmare will end. Maybe he'll wake up. The voice breaks through the static again.

“Let's...twenty minutes....then....another hour in....tank....Get the....recovery...”

“Oxytocin should....want....contact?”

“Fine.”

The hands increase their rhythm. Rougher, faster.

“How is he? Can I see him?”

“Ma'am, you shouldn't be exposed to—”

He hears his own voice, slow and weak and crackling with disuse. His lips press together, but he can't feel them. He hums out a sound, trying so hard to form a word, wanting her to hear him, to know that he's fine, needing to see her. “Mm--” but she's walking away. “Mmm--” and she still doesn't hear him. He can hear the heels of her shoes clicking on the tiles, leaving the room. “Mm-ma...no, ma, don't go. Don't. Don't go.”

The sound of her shoes gets softer, further away. She didn't hear him.

Again and again, he tries to count the pairs of hands. Every time he starts, a pair lifts away and moves on to another part of his body. He loses count. And there's a voice that keeps speaking, giving instructions, but he can't identify it. The tone is too deep and distorted, slow and phased and mechanical, like the whir of an old machine. The hands don't stop pinching and squeezing as minutes or hours slip away, and then one is pressing against him –pressing into him – and stretching and burning despite the fact that he knows he can feel the coolness of lubrication on his thighs. He has two momentary, clear thoughts. Please don't do this. And then, as tired acceptance overtakes him, This is happening to me.
It starts out slow. It stings, it makes his stomach twist and seize up, but all the sensations are too far away to provoke a real reaction in him – to get him to do what he wants to want to do, to make him kick and bite and punch his way out of this. But his mind and body are at an utter disconnect – he only realizes what's happening to him long after the fact, after it's been done and he's already laid there, lifeless, and accepted it.

There's a small, quiet, coherent voice lingering inside of his brain that tells him he's being raped. He surprised – no, appalled – at the indifference with which he accepts that as fact, but the drugs are dampening everything. He can barely hear his assailants speaking around him and they dull to a low drone, and he doesn't feel much pain at all, and his mind is too muddy to manage a sense of panic or outrage. All he's left with is a desperation to feel what he knows he's supposed to be feeling. The anger. The will to fight back. The shame. They're all just objects, meaningless, disorganized, cluttered inside his brain, and he can't seem to reach and find them. He doesn't even know where to look.

This hasn't happened to him before. He had knows soldiers who'd met with the so-called fate worse than death, but they hadn't discussed it with him, or with anyone, for that matter. He'd never even considered the possibility that he would one day find himself in this position. Even so, part of him expected it to be different. He would have liked to see a face. To know who to blame, who to hate, who to hunt down. He would rather be able to struggle. He wants to be able to spit in their faces and tell them they're pathetic. He can't do that. All of his awareness is trapped inside a haze of hallucinogens and the black bag over his head.

And God, it would even make it a little better if they were using him. If someone were taking some pleasure from this, if they were laughing at him, jeering, hurling insults and catcalls, getting off on him. That would make them rapists. That would make them pitiful. But this is only hands. No one is laughing. They're not getting anything out of this so why, why, why won't they stop? This is a fight without a quarrel, torture without interrogation, crime without motive, this has no purpose. It has to end sometime.

Just wait. Try not to feel anything until it's over.

The hand inside him pushes in deeper, puts pressure on his prostate – and God, no, he feels that. Not as intensely as he'd feel it without the influence of the drugs, but he knows what's happening, recognizes that he'll eventually have a physical response. Another hand presses down on the back of his neck, two more gripping his ankles and spreading them apart. The voice that had been giving orders has fallen silent, and he can't do much except consciously try to keep breathing. The room is quiet. The hand inside him moves faster, and his face feels hot against the fabric and his brain is buzzing and his ears are ringing. It's an uncanny, eerie hell.

The buzzing in his head intensifies and the ringing gets louder, higher, and he feels a wave of electricity run up is spine and through his legs and groin. That little coherent thought he's still hanging on to has the clarity to recognize this as an orgasm, and knows it should never have happened, knows it's already too late. He can't fix it now.

Fate worse than death.

He's died before.

At least there had been a reason to die.

The buzzing and the ringing and the inevitable shock-waves come again, harder this time – wracking his body with little involuntary convulsions and making fireworks burst behind his eyelids, so intense that he forgets to breath, so powerful that the pressure in his brain reaches some
kind of critical mass, and…

And then he feels a strange sense of quiet, numbness, nothingness. He doesn't get the relief of experiencing the moment their assault on him finally ends. He just...sinks, down, down into that dark ocean on which he'd floated earlier. There is no struggle, no time to think about whether this is death or unconsciousness or just a shift into a new hallucination. And soon he doesn't feel anything at all, and he doesn't know anything either. And if that's the best God can do for mercy today, then he'll take it.

_Warmth._

_A wooden floor._

_Wind outside, whistling though the narrow gaps between dark, brick and mortar buildings._

_Below him, tired, boozy voices singing half-remembered lyrics, clinking glasses, the laughter of the barkeep, a piano played clumsily. Nearby, a log pops and sparks in the hearth. He's in London, in a little room above a pub._

_No, they are in London, in a little room, above a pub. They had agreed to worry about the walk back to base in the morning, when the sun will be up and the wind will hopefully have died down._

Even as he watches the scene play out through the eyes of his former self, he knows this isn't real. He doesn't care. He needs this. Needs the warmth. Needs his friend. Needs his memories.

And just like that, he gives up. He can't help himself. He wants to rest, to escape. He allows himself to believe it's real. He doesn't care how bad it'll hurt later.
Coping Mechanism

Chapter Summary

Steve needs to rest, even if the only warm bed he can find is just a fever dream.

Bucky had paid the bar for a whole bottle of whiskey. Not good whiskey – just something to “get him through the night.” He’d asked the bartender to pour shots for all the boys and downed two glasses on his own, but at the end of the night he brought the remainder upstairs with him. He’s sitting in a plain wooden chair by the fire, tipping it back on two legs, letting it rock lazily in that precarious balance. His thumbs worry at the neck of the bottle resting in his lap and his eyes are fixed on the bright hearth, but they’re looking at something else. Something Steve can’t see.

“Nice to finally have some peace and quiet,” Steve smiles hopefully.

Bucky’s eyes don’t return to Steve or the room around him, but he replies emptily, “They’ll go on all night, if nobody stops ’em.”

He takes a step closer to Bucky, unbuttoning his cuffs and loosening his tie. He might as well just be out with it, so he takes a deep breath. When the words tumble out, though, “You look good, Buck,” is the best proposition he can manage.

Bucky blinks deliberately and finally brings his eyes up to meet Steve’s. He looks like he’s holding back that derisive little chuckle that Steve doesn’t like, but that he’s learning to appreciate. “Uh huh,” he says flatly, and raises the bottle of whiskey to his lips again, as if to make his point clear. “You don’t look half bad, yourself,” he smirks, voice rasping from the burn of the liquor. “You put on a few?”
Steve snorts. “When are you gonna run out of dumb jokes about that, huh?”

Bucky shakes his head dumbly. “I'm not making jokes, I mean it! You look nice. Not goofy at all. And your head certainly doesn't look too little, so don't even worry about it. And don't listen to what everybody else is saying about you,” he adds, lifting one finger from the neck of the bottle to
point it at Steve. “They're just jealous.”

Steve laughs and looks up toward the corner of the room, like he's asking the Lord for patience. He almost manages not to take Bucky too seriously, but then blurts out, “My head looks too small?”

Bucky smiles apologetically, studying the floorboards. “I'll get used to it.”

Steve finally closes the distance between them, resting his hands on Bucky's shoulders and squeezing the knotted muscles between thumbs and fingertips, slowly pressing all four legs of the chair back down to the floor. This is the first time he's really felt...different. Bigger. He'd caught a few little glimpses of the differences between them when they'd stood next to each other. Now, he was always looking down at Bucky rather than up to him. But they hadn't had a moment alone together yet, in all the uproar following their return from Azzano. Now, Steve has time to really look at his hands on Bucky's shoulders, to see himself relative to the body he knows as well as he used to know his own and feel the span of his grip, thumbs on either side of Bucky's spine and fingertips resting in the dips of his collarbone. And Bucky feels cool now against his palms instead of unfailingly warmer, and he doesn't comment on how chilly Steve's hands are. Steve remembers to go easy on him when he pushes his thumbs into Bucky's bowed back and rubs it in earnest.

Bucky hums softly under his breath, rolling his neck and clearly enjoying the attention. Steve takes it as a good sign. It's an even better, surer sign when he eventually brushes Steve's hands away and stands, stretches, turns, and leaves the bottle of whiskey on the chair.

Steve beats him to the kiss, but not my much. And this, this is what he's always wanted. This is what he's always dreamed of – Bucky not having to tip his head down, Steve not wobbling on the points of his toes for every clumsy kiss. It's as if they fit together better than ever. And Steve can finally give as much as he gets, and boy, does he plan to. He reaches up to cradle Bucky's jaw in his palms (and doesn't it just rest there perfectly now), feeling the prickle of Bucky's stubble against his face, letting Bucky draw his tongue into his mouth nice and slow, pulling back, catching one full lip between his teeth, and diving back in like he's found the only oasis in the desert.

Bucky pulls away for air first, and Steve is almost surprised to find himself not gasping for breath. Steve lets him get a few deep drags, then tries to draw him back in for more, but Bucky turns his head away, muscles tense and resistant.

“Baby doll, what's a matter?” Steve whispers.

Bucky's grimace is a lot more telling than his explanation. “POW, remember? Just, still a little bit...well, you know. Sorry,” he sighs dismissively.

He falls silent for a moment after that and doesn't try to say any more, and Steve isn't going to ask him to. Something about the way Bucky's body feels against him now has changed in the last few seconds. He's completely still, like he's trying to keep himself from shrinking away. All the warmth and the electricity that had been crackling between them a moment ago is replaced by a wall of unspoken words. Steve knows what happened – or at least, he can make painful guess at it, and he's not about to ask Bucky to say it out loud.

“Let's just get some rest,” Steve suggests gently, putting a few inches of distance between their bodies.

But Bucky pulls him back. “No, it's all right. I'm all right.” He puts his arms loosely around Steve's neck and settles his chin down on Steve's broad shoulder, so that he's close enough to whisper, “Please, baby, I need to...to fix this.”
Steve knows he would never have even come that close to actually admitting what those God-forsaken war-criminals must have done if it wasn't for all the whiskey in him. Whatever had happened, he'd take it to his grave, just like so many other soldiers. Steve chooses not to dwell on it. Bucky helps by going to work on his tie and his shirt buttons, and within the next minute Steve is stumbling toward the door and bolting it shut, and they tumble down into the little feather bed together.

And Steve worships Bucky. Like he's never done before. It's better now than it's ever been, sweeter, more precious to him, tempered by the horror of nearly losing his other half. Neither of them close their eyes, not even for a second. They strip out of every single bit of clothing so that their skin can touch at every possible point of contact, and Steve could damn near shout for joy when Bucky lays back against the quilt, eyes dark and half-lidded and unmistakeably inviting, and lets him kiss every inch of him. He starts on Bucky's mouth, picking up right where he left off, tongue flickering against tongue until Steve's so hard and heavy that he can hardly stand to keep playing the long game, but he's not going to rush this. He fought too hard. Missed Bucky for too many lonely months. He's not going to let himself rush this.

He leaves a wet trail of kisses down the column of Bucky's throat, enough to make him groan, and when he reaches Bucky's chest, he's arching up into Steve's mouth and panting, drawing heaving breaths as he tries to keep from making so much of a racket that he gets the boys wondering. Instead, he sighs under his breath, over and over again, “Steve, God, baby. Steve. Steve.” And he keens, fingers grasping blindly at the covers as Steve finally has the decency to drag the flat of his tongue over one dark, peaked nipple, and Steve has to hold his breath to keep himself from moaning.

There's a little tube of Vaseline in the pocket of Steve's discarded pants, purchased at a nearby drugstore in a rare moment of both hope and foresight. Steve sits up on his knees, bed-frame creaking underneath his weight, and Bucky rises with him, keeping their bodies close and aligned. He nearly loses his mind when Bucky takes it from him and coats his palm with it, then takes Steve's cock in his hand, spreading it over him from root to tip in two firm strokes. “Buck...God,” he grits out, head spinning as he gropes for the tube of Vaseline and squeezes half the container out onto his fingers. “Lie down, let me--”

“Baby, no,” Bucky croons, words slurring a little as the whiskey goes to his head. “Come on, I don’t wanna wait, come on,” he begs.

“Lie down, Buck.” Steve repeats, more insistent this time. It does the trick. Bucky falls back onto the quilt and takes a hold of his knees, drawing them up and spreading himself open, watching Steve's every move. Steve makes himself pause, just to be sure. “You still all right?”

“Better than that,” Bucky smiles back, and Steve is more than convinced.

His middle finger slides in like they haven't spent more than a day apart. Bucky takes it so easily, with one little breath in as Steve presses against his rim, and with a long, shuddering sigh as he pushes in as far as he can. Steve adds a second finger a few seconds later, and then Bucky really starts to come apart. He lets go of the blankets to reach for his own hard cock, desperate to be touched, and Steve lets him get away with a few quick pumps before he reminds him, “Just wait, sweetheart. Hold on for me.”

By the time Steve finally pulls his fingers out, he can see wetness gathering in the corners of Bucky's eyes. They're both just about delirious with want now. They're both done waiting. Steve slides his hands up Bucky's thighs to cup his calves and lets Bucky take hold of his cock, guide him in as he presses forward. Bucky takes every inch of Steve a hell of a lot faster than Steve would
have been willing to give it to him, but Bucky is the one deciding the pace. Once Steve is completely inside of him, Bucky arches his back, tries to take him a little deeper. Steve is finally ready to throw caution to the wind, though. Rolls his hips gently once, twice, and then pulls out and drives his cock in until he’s pressed tight against Bucky’s ass, and the feeling is like nothing he’s ever had in his life – Bucky is tight and deep and feverishly hot around him, and his own body is healthy and virile and – golly, he could do this all night if he wanted to. For the first time ever, he’s not going to be the first to wear out, which means they aren’t stopping until Bucky’s either exhausted or completely satisfied. Hopefully both.

Steve starts a fast, powerful rhythm, one that he knows he couldn’t have managed to sustain before, and if the feeling of being inside Bucky isn’t enough to drive him wild, then all he has to do is look at Bucky’s face when he feels the way Steve can fuck him now, mouth hanging open, eyes wide and irises reduced to thin rings of blue on black, chest and cheeks flushed with blood and both hands gripping the headboard, getting everything he needs even though he hasn’t even bothered to touch himself since Steve started thrusting.

Bucky comes first, biting out barely stifled pleas for more, more and Steve can only give him what he asks for, and then his breath catches in his chest and Steve feels the tightness and contractions of Bucky’s orgasm pull him in deeper and hold him there and then he’s tipping over the edge, too, lifting Bucky’s hips up off the mattress and leaving bruises on his thighs where he’s holding on, shaking, rhythm wild and rough as he slams into him, riding out the long waves until finally, he collapses into Bucky’s arms and lets his eyes fall shut.

Even within the dream, in a distant corner of his mind, Steve knows it’s just another hallucination. He doesn’t care. He lays there as long as he can, focuses on the sensations that he knows aren’t real, enriching every detail, trying to stay there, hold on to this memory. He can’t remember where he’ll be when he wakes up, but he knows it won’t compare to this. He savors his final few seconds in the little fire-lit room above the pub, feeling Bucky breathing underneath him.

He wakes up numb and confused. He dreamed, but he doesn’t remember what he dreamed. Thousands of images and fleeting emotions spark through his brain in his first seconds of consciousness, but he can’t put them together. He can’t feel anything. He’s not even sure that he is awake.

When he finally regains awareness of his body and his surroundings, feels his skin and his fingers and clenches his fists and draws in a breath and opens his eyes...it’s dark. The only sound is the soft rippling of bitter, salty water, filtering through ear-plugs.
Rebellion

Chapter Summary

Steve is getting out, by any means necessary.

The drugs aren't out of his system. He tries to piece his consciousness back together, to construct some kind of timeline, puzzle out the hallucinations and separate them from the realities. But he slips in and out. The puzzle is abandoned, left unfinished and messy, a collection of grooves and jagged edges that don't fit together, like a dream that leaves only the impression of emotions, without any singular moment of tangible memory.


Steve may be confused and drugged, but he knows the difference between hallucinated memory and reality. They removed him from the tank. He remembers. Řezník had him removed from the tank at some point, and he was taken to another room. They put a bag over his head. Put him on a table. Raped him.

*No abuse from the operatives or the technicians. No beatings, no unwarranted punishment, no sexual contact of any kind.*

That comes back to him, clear as day. Pierce had agreed to it. He feels like an idiot. What the hell had he expected? *Honesty?*

He feels his heart-rate increase sharply, anger burning so hot in his gut that he's surprised that the water around him isn't boiling. If they would do this to him, they'll do it to Bucky, too. And that won't stand. His mind is made up. They're getting out. Today.

So he starts to take an inventory of what he knows. Start simple. Name.

*Rogers, Steven Grant.*

Rank.

*Captain.*

Serial number.

*54985870.*

Current location.

*Montreal, Canada. Repurposed hospital. Basement level 3. Six above ground levels. Out the main doors of the lab, a right turn will lead to an elevator and stairwell.*

He has to get him out safely. That will mean that he has to do a great deal of fighting on his own. Bucky is shut inside his cell. He'll have to get him out. *The code to the cell is 3791, because Christopher Montgomery is a moron.*

And if he gets himself killed?

*Fine.*

But he's leaving HYDRA with one *hell* of a body count before he goes down.

There's no time to prepare himself for the imminent fight. The hatch clicks, creaks. Steve's fists clench. He can move. That will have to be good enough. Here goes nothing.

As soon as the guard leans in to get a look at him, Steve has his plan. His arms shoot up, he grabs the agent by the collar, braces his knees against the sides of the tank and drags him downward. *No, her,* judging by the tone of her gasp. He catches a brief glimpse of her silhouette, framed by the opening. Short, bulky. *Hartley.*

*Good. She's lighter. Easier to overpower,* Steve thinks grimly. He breaks her neck. The sound of her vertebrae separating echoes momentarily inside the tank, and then Steve rolls, grips the sides of the hatch as Hartley's body slides to the floor, and pulls himself out. He stumbled on weak legs, falls, but he grabs Hartley's sidearm and raises it.

Epley's right hand is on the door handle. There's a radio in his left hand. Only one other agent in the room, and his M4 is trained on Steve.

“Drop the radio. Put your fucking hands up,” Steve whispers harshly. Epley pales, but he doesn't otherwise acknowledge the order.

“Put the fucking gun down,” the agent advises. “I *will* shoot.”

“Epley, I've got eyes on his trigger finger. He shoots, I shoot first, you die. Drop the radio and *put your fucking hands in the air.*”

Epley complies.

“Get on your knees, put your hands on your head.”

Even as Epley follows the order, the agent takes a step forward. “Drop your weapon or I shoot!”

Steve stands up. He's done playing their fucking game. It's over. “You really want to test your reflexes against mine?” he asks calmly, walking forward to meet the guard in the center of the room. He shakes his head warningly. “Best case scenario, I move too slow and we shoot at the same time. Either way, you're dead, buddy.”

Steve has to give the agent some credit. He stares at the barrel of Hartley's Glock for a good while before his sense of self-preservation wins out. Sometimes, you can only win a fight if you're more willing to die than your enemy is. The agent nods, moves the M4 slowly to the right. Raises his hands. Steve takes the gun. The guard joins Epley on the floor, hands on his head, before Steve even has the chance to ask.

The sounds of the isolation tank's filter will muffle their voices enough – any reinforcements will have to be called for by whoever is watching the security feed. Adrenaline rushes through Steve, cutting through the drugged haze from the past few hours. He's back in his element now. He points the M4 at the agent and the Glock at Epley. He takes a good, long look at both of them, deciding
“Epley.” He smiles a little, raising his eyebrows expectantly. After what these shitheads have put Bucky through, what they’ve put him though, he's not going to deny himself a moment of self-satisfaction. “Can I please have your pants?”

With Epley and the agent now safely face-down on the other side of Řezník’s office, Steve takes a breath to clear his head. Looks around, testing his vision. Tucks the Glock into the back of his (Epley’s) khakis. This isn't the best escape he's ever planned – not by a long shot – but it's going to have to be good enough.

He opens the door quietly and casually. Of the two agents guarding the door directly across the lab, only one looks up. Steve shoots him first, never slowing his quick stride toward the counter by the padded exam table, which will have to serve as cover. The shot sets off a chain reaction. The agent beside him jumps back, fumbling to aim his rifle, but the two at the other end of the lab are quicker to react. Steve manages to duck behind the counter as the first few bullets blast through the air. He's a good marksman, especially at close range, and he's seen more firefights than any of these men. He takes down the closest agent first, and ducks back down as the two at the other end open fire again. One of them is frantically reporting the situation into the radio on his collar, voice shrill with surprise. Backup will be here pretty quickly, then. No time to play it safe. Steve raises himself back up and takes down the advancing agent, then sweeps right, hitting the last agent, as well. The lab is suddenly silent. It can't be clear yet. There should have been more guards.

But he can't spare another second to search the side rooms. If there are more agents in the lab, he'll just have to react quickly if they open fire on him. His only priority right now is getting Bucky out.

Bucky must have been given some kind of sedative earlier, when Montgomery had sent him back to the holding cell. As Steve jogs back toward the glass doors, Bucky has managed to pull himself up off the cot, but he looks groggy and unsteady on his feet. His eyes clear considerably when he sees Steve, though. In fact, he smiles.

“You son of a bitch!” Bucky yells, voice slurred from the drugs like when he used to drink, pressing his bandaged hand to the glass as Steve skids to a halt on the tile floor in front of his cell. Steve flashes him a quick, relieved smile as he opens the access panel to open the doors.

“No,” Bucky says hurriedly, banging on the glass. “Retina scanner first!”

“Shit,” Steve huffs, turning briefly to look toward Řezník's office, before he takes off. Epley and the guard flinch and cover their heads when Steve yanks the door open. “Epley, get out here.”

Epley stutters. “But, you – you've got my pants—”

Steve aims haphazardly and lets off a few rounds into the air. Epley shields his face as drywall rains down from the ceiling. “Now.”

That gets him moving. He follows Steve back out into the lab, hands dutifully raised. “Have you got clearance to open this?” Steve demands gesturing toward the access panel.

Epley goes pale, chin quivering. “I-I-I don't—I don't know, I just got transferred here yesterday--”

“Try,” Steve orders bluntly, hitting the green button.

Epley wastes another precious second nodding shakily before he leans down and presents a wide
eye for the scanner. The metal panel clicks and slides away into the recessed wall, revealing the keypad. Epley panics immediately. “I don't know the code! I swear to God, no one told me the fucking code yet—”

Steve shoves him out of the way without another word.

Bucky bangs once on the glass. “Steve, it's three, seven—”

“Three-seven-nine-one, I know, I know,” Steve finishes, punching it in carefully. Enter.

Nothing happens. The door doesn't open. The green light doesn't flash. The keypad doesn't close.


“Forget it, Steve. Get out now, get the others and come back for me—”

Steve interrupts Bucky's frantic advice by slamming his shoulder into the center of the glass door. He hits it twice before he collects himself enough to listen to Bucky.

“Stop! You're wasting your fucking time. The Hulk can't break this shit, so neither can you. Go, come back for me later.”

Steve hates that suggestion, but he doesn't see another option. If he can make it through the hallways and past the backup teams inevitably headed his way, he might be able to capture Řezník or Parsons or Montgomery and bring them back to open the doors.

“Okay,” he breathes raggedly, eyes flitting around the lab like a better alternative might suddenly present itself. “Okay. I’m coming right back.”

“Steve,” Bucky calls out as Steve turns for the door, catching his eye. “I love you,” he mouths. “You're gonna be alright. We’ll be alright.”

And damn it, Steve can’t help but smile. Apparently, he had looked pretty panicked, if Bucky had felt the need to calm him down and reassure him. “I know. I’m good,” he promises, nodding. That momentary pause has given him an extra breath to get his head in the game. He is going to be alright. Both of them are.

He doesn’t bother with another magazine for the M4 - just grabs a new one off of the first agent he’d gunned down - the one who hadn’t fired on him. He takes one last look at Bucky before he sets his shoulder against the door.

Locked.

He takes a few steps back and takes a run at it. Nothing.

He tries the other door. He tries the other set of doors. They don’t move. This time, he starts from halfway across the room and runs at the door again. Wood splinters and metal creaks and groans and pain blossoms in his shoulder, but the lock holds.

“They put us in lockdown,” Epley provides nervously. “Fuck. Fuck, they locked the lab down,” he pants, just as unhappy to be trapped inside with Steve as Steve is to be trapped. “The doors are magnetically sealed, you can’t--”

He’ll be damned if he can’t. Steve slams himself bodily against the thick wood again with roar of
frustration. The wood splinters under his shoulder and caves in, revealing a core of solid, undented metal.

“Stop! You’re gonna get your friend killed,” Epley warns him shrilly.

That gets Steve’s attention quickly. He rounds on Epley, dragging in harsh breaths. Bucky is still shut in his cell, on his feet, looking relatively far from harm. Bucky ignores the threat completely.

“Steve, wheel one of the carts over to that corner, see if you can pop the grate off that vent and--”

Vents.

Damn it. That’s what Epley’s talking about.

Steve’s mouth goes dry.

“Bucky, open up the slot on the door!” he orders, rushing over as he realizes it can’t be opened from the inside, but he finds it won’t open from the outside either. That’s been sealed up, along with everything else. Bucky finally turns and looks up to the vent inside his cell. It’s just above the toilet - too small to escape through, and some kind of vaporized gas is seeping out of it, pouring through the grate in thicker clouds by the second.

Steve doesn’t pause in his efforts to pry the slot open and give Bucky a channel of fresh air. Bucky is managing to keep himself a little calmer than Steve is, thankfully. With his teeth, he unwraps the bandage from his right hand and covers his mouth and nose with it. “Steve, I think it’s just sevoflurane. They’ve used it before. It’ll knock me out, but it’ll take a lot of it to kill me,” he says levelly. “Get out through one of the vents in the lab. They’ll turn it off - they don’t want to lose me.”

Steve slams the heel of his hand against the glass with a growl, but he listens. He grabs a cart from the wall and rolls it underneath the vent in the corner of the lab. He’s standing on top of it, trying to break the grate loose when a speaker crackles near his head.

“Soldier, you need to stand down immediately.”

Pierce.

“Collect every firearm in the room and lay them on the ground in front of the doors, then go to the back of the lab and put your hands against the door to your cell.”

“Fuck you,” Steve snarls, bloodying his fingertips as he works the second screw loose on the grate.

“Did your friend promise you that we wouldn’t kill him?” the speaker whittles softly. “You know that’s just his ego talking. As far as soldiers go, he’s second best. As long as I’ve got you, I have no problem losing him. Look over at your cell, Soldier.” Steve doesn’t do it. “Go ahead.”

Steve hates himself for it, but he glances over his shoulder. In the ceiling above his head, he hears a pipe shudder and a moment later, a blast of yellowish liquid issues from the fire sprinkler inside his cell, misting the interior. He turns back to the vent, and with one enraged punch, knocks the last two screws loose and gets the vent open.

“You know what that is, don’t you? Mustard gas. Did you ever get curious about what happened to your dad? Look up pictures? See any victims in the European theater? The blisters are pretty horrifying. You touch that goddamn vent one more time, we spray him. Do I make myself clear?”
Steve’s hand freeze above his head.

He’s been here before. They both know how this ends. He knows just as well as Pierce does that he can’t call a bluff where Bucky’s life is at stake. Inside Bucky’s cell, the air is so full of the anaesthetic gas that he can only see Bucky’s hand where it’s pressed to the glass, palm burned and raw and stitched together. As he watches, it presses harder, looking for purchase, and then Bucky’s forehead falls against the partition as he crumbles to the floor, unconscious in the haze of chemicals. And he can’t. He can’t do this. He can’t watch Bucky hurt like this anymore. It’s just too much.

Checkmate. Again.

It’s a loss.


This is just a setback. The war isn’t over. He’s not giving up.

Steve can barely feel his feet on the floor as he runs. He gathers up the guns. Lines them up on the floor in front of the doors, just like Pierce had ordered. He throws in the piece he’d tucked into his waistband last, and raises his hands high for the sake of the security cameras, and he backs up quickly toward the cells. Epley scrambles out of the way. All the sweat on his body suddenly feels cold. His fingertips are icy and the blood welling from his broken and split nails is eerily warm as it drips down to his knuckles.

He turns and places his hands against the glass door of his cell. The air inside Bucky’s is opaque with the white gas that’s still streaming in from the vent. He can’t see him anymore. Steve is glad that Bucy lost consciousness before he had to watch him surrender.

“I’m sending a team of agents in, Soldier. Don’t move.”

Steve tries to tell himself that it could have been worse. Bucky is alive. He’s alive. He can try again.

This is just a setback.

The doors to the lab open. He hears heavy boots on the tiles behind him. He looks at his hands, pale and dirty and bleeding slowly. An agent pats him down. His hands are swept from his view and cuffed behind him. When they push him to his knees, he doesn’t fight them.

This feels a hell of a lot like giving up.
Gaslight

Chapter Summary

It’s better not to think about how utterly fucking pitiful this is.

Steve doesn’t get the chance to see Bucky regain consciousness. The team of agents moves in, searches him, cuffs him, and walks him out of the labs at gunpoint. Throughout the whole process, he doesn’t allow himself to think. Nothing. His mind is completely blank, and if he doesn’t keep it that way, he’ll lose any semblance of control he’s hanging onto and he will fight. He’ll fight with the cuffs on, with Bucky vulnerable, with a dozen automatic weapons pointed at him, and he’ll fight until they’re forced to kill him. And his rational mind is still present enough to tell him that right now, fighting is no different than suicide. It’s better not to think.

It’s better not to think about how utterly fucking pitiful this is.

Fifteen minutes ago, he was coming down off of hallucinogens inside an isolation tank, and he let himself be enraged and worst of all surprised that HYDRA would dare use sexual violence to traumatize and condition him. He allowed himself to be offended that criminals and terrorists and mad scientists didn’t keep their word. His own naïveté is as striking to him as it is disappointing and disgusting. And now he’s made captivity infinitely worse for both himself and for Bucky. And for what? His own fragile dignity? The lives of five HYDRA agents? Or just to prove a point? All that anger and determination, and it amounted to fifteen minutes. He’d done his best, and his best was taking out five agents, getting Bucky gassed, getting himself into an as yet unknown amount of shit, and stealing a goddamn pair of pants. Some super hero. Fifteen fucking minutes.

Yeah, it’s better not to think.

The agents escort him out into the hallway and to the elevator. They take him down to the next sub-level. The elevator opens onto a hallway, almost identical to the hall on the floor above, where the labs are located, but this one is mostly empty. Rows of locked doors on either side, and dark rooms past small, narrow windows. They push him toward the end of the hallway, where one door has been left ajar. The dim light of computer screens issues from it, and low voices speaking in hushed, clipped tones - probably deciding what to do with him. How to contain him more effectively. Steve keeps his head low and his eyes forward. If they’re bringing him down here to execute him, they couldn’t have picked a more appropriate spot. The hallway has a dark, artificial smell of overheated wiring and basement mold and floor cleaner. If it’s not the place that he’s going to die, he has a feeling that it’s a place that will at least make him want to.

His escort stops outside the open door. Pierce, Řezník, and an officer he hasn’t seen before turn, falling silent, and see him. The officer quickly returns his attention to the computer screen - security feeds. Řezník and Pierce keep their eyes on him. Pierce, Steve thinks, looks exhausted, but his gaze is so accusatory and intense that Steve is tempted to look right back down at the floor, like a chastised child. Řezník’s lips are parted and his brow is heavy and creased, as if there’s something he’d like to say that he’s barely holding back - like he’s taking Steve’s violent attempt at escape personally, like he’s hurt by it. Steve has a fleeting fantasy about putting bullets in their heads.

Well, he had his chance. But he didn’t manage it. He fucking blew it. The consequence of that
failure is about to become clear, and he has no choice but to accept it.

The security office is small, but it’s large enough to hold a narrow counter and the bank of screens, as well as four chairs. One of them is empty. Pierce points to it, and an agent grips Steve’s shoulder and guides him toward it. That agent and one other follow him into the room and flank him as they push him down into the chair. The rest remain in the hallway. Pierce shifts in his own seat to look at Steve, turning his phone over in his hands absently as he watches him. Řezník crosses his arms over his chest, then moves to rub his thumb against his neatly trimmed gray beard. The room is silent, until finally, Pierce lets out a rough, weary sigh.

“Well,” he says curtly, inclining his head to the side, flipping his phone smoothly between his palms again. “I guess you felt that was justified.”

Steve doesn’t respond. There’s no reason to respond. Was it justified? Of course. Was it worth it? Hell, no. But Pierce is already well aware of that.

“Soldier, I don’t...I don’t delude myself into believing that you’re going to be cooperative. Honestly, given the way SHIELD and the SSR conditioned you, I don’t even think you’re capable of cooperating with my team, no matter what kind of case I make for the work we’re doing, so I haven’t tried talking to you. I don’t think that you care what we’re going to do with your blood, with the serum, with a map of your genome. I think that if we manage to utilize it to its full potential and cure cancer and save millions of lives, you will still cling to this notion that we’re all ‘evil’ because you don’t like our means. That’s fine. I’m going to do what I have to do.”

Steve feels something cold spreading through his gut and into his chest. Like guilt, but faint and creeping. He ignores it.

“And I guess...you’re going to do what you think you’ve got to do. And right now, that’s get yourself and your friend out of this facility and back on the run. I can certainly understand why you’d want to do that. This isn’t exactly a four-star hotel we’re running, and we’re telling you to sacrifice a lot. Like I said, if we thought we could have gotten you here with a phone call, that’s what we would have done. But we have a goal. And if we need to force two people to sacrifice for that goal, we’re going to do it, because the ends absolutely justify it. We are using you, Soldier. And you don’t have to like it, but it’s going to help a lot of people by the time we’ve got what we need.

“I can’t let you go back on the run. You know that. He’s fair game to shoot on sight in two dozen countries, and you’d inevitably go down with him, and those are resources I don’t want to lose. So we find ourselves at a stalemate, don’t we?”

Řezník has finally shut his mouth. He and the security officer are listening intently to Pierce. His tone demands it. Steve, on the other hand, is exceptionally careful when he blinks - if he’s not, he’ll let his eyes roll. He wants to spit at Pierce’s feet and just opt to take the bullet.

“Here...is what I don’t understand. I know you’re angry, and I know you don’t want to be here, but I thought - and I guess I thought wrong - that we had come to a temporary agreement. You two got to make some demands, and I agreed to your terms. I don’t really see what prompted that little killing spree.”

Steve bites his tongue. Maybe it would be better to remain silent. His resolve lasts all of four seconds before he grates out, “Řezník knows damn well.”

Řezník seems neither surprised nor intimidated by Steve’s indictment - he just looks down thoughtfully at his lap, then raises his eyebrows and turns back to Pierce, with an expression which
somehow manages to both portray his own innocence and patronize Steve. As if he regards Steve’s accusation as bewildering but ultimately inconsequential.

“Soldier,” Pierce begins again, louder and firmer this time. “I just got off the phone with Agent Hartley’s husband.”

Really? Pierce wants to play this card? Steve sets his jaw and holds his breath. Pierce’s sad little attempt at manipulation isn’t worth a reply, no matter how badly he wants to tell him that he’s full of shit.

“She served two tours - one in Iraq, one in Afghanistan. She also had a six-year-old son. And I’ve got four more of those phone calls to make tonight. Now, I know you feel like you did the right thing or that we forced your hand, but I know all of my agents personally. And they are people, Soldier - not just goons in uniforms - foes to be vanquished by a hero like yourself. And look, I don’t expect to change your mind about that, but I feel like I owe it to Agent Hartley and her family to find out why the hell you snapped her neck. I want to know what happened to our agreement.”

Steve takes a breath through his nose. He needs to respond now, but if there’s even the slightest chance that Pierce will be sympathetic to his case and make sure that doesn’t happen again, to him or to Bucky, Steve will have to be straightforward, level-headed, and diplomatic. “Řezník had me removed from the lab during a procedure. They took me out of the isolation tank and put me on a stretcher. I was taken into another room and raped by your agents. You said there would be no sexual assault. No sexual contact of any kind.”

Řezník sits up straighter in his chair, his full attention now on Steve. He leans forward a little, listening with disbelief in his eyes. Pierce’s jaw drops a little, forehead creasing with shock.

“Soldier, are you trying to tell me that Agent Hartley sexually assaulted you?” Pierce asks.

“I don’t know if Hartley was there. I didn’t see any of their faces.”

“Were they men or women?”

Steve feels like he’s shrinking back into the corner of the room. Pierce sounds genuinely concerned, and yet Steve can’t bring himself to buy it. Part of him wants to simplify the entire situation by assuming that Pierce is unconditionally, consistently evil. That he’s only asking these questions to humiliate Steve further - to torture him. But Steve is accusing Pierce’s employees of something very serious - it only stands to reason that he’d ask these questions.

“I...I don’t know.”

“They sexually assaulted you, and you don’t know if they were male or female?” Pierce cuts in softly, seeming confused.

“They used their hands,” he replies. His eyes feel hot. He hopes it’s too dark for Řezník and Pierce to see the flush of shame on his face.

“Can you tell me what they did?”

There’s something wrong about this. Steve is starting to wish he had stayed quiet. That he’d taken the blow to his dignity and moved on, rather than inviting Pierce to tear it down further.

“Do you want Dr. Řezník to leave while we have this conversation?” Pierce prompts.

Steve finds his voice again. “They...they put me on a table. Pinched me. Um, grabbed me. One of
them - one of them penetrated me.”

“With their fingers?”

“Yes.”

“And where were you when this happened?”

“I’m not sure. Another room. Smaller than the lab. There was a metal table. I don’t think there was anything else in it. I didn’t get a good look.”

“Do you know how many agents there were?”

“No,” Steve shakes his head, giving himself a moment to get control over the tightness in his throat. “No, I couldn’t see. They put something over my head.”

After a long, heavy silence, Pierce says. “Okay. Go on.”

Steve stares resolutely at the space just between Řezník and Pierce, meeting neither of their stares. “That’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think - I think I passed out after that. I was back in the isolation tank when I woke up.”

“Okay,” Pierce nods calmly.

“Soldier, I don’t know why you think I would order--” Řezník starts.

“No. No,” Pierce cuts him off immediately. “Look, Dr. Řezník, I have to follow up on this. I just want to check the footage. I’ll decide after I’ve seen it where this conversation needs to go. Anybody have a problem with that?” Pierce asks, looking between Řezník and Steve for signs of permission.

“No, of course not,” Řezník says quickly raising his hands and settling back into his chair.

Steve steels himself. “Go ahead.”

The security officer backs the tapes up to that morning. They find the moment Steve enters Řezník’s office, and they work from there. The officer enters a few commands on the keyboard, moving the feed on Řezník’s office to the main screen, then lets it cycle through the first hour at double speed, While that plays, Pierce calls Steve’s attention to the adjacent screens. “Okay - do you remember if they took you to the elevator after the removed you from the lab? Or did you stay on the same floor?”

“Same floor.”

“Any of these rooms look familiar?”

Steve studies them. One is a secondary lab, with larger equipment. Probably meant for processing samples. Another is set up with a dentist’s chair and tools. Then there’s an office, with two computers. In the far right corner, a feed shows a room with a few pieces of equipment - what looks like an obstetrical chair, a bare counter, and a metal table. It doesn’t seem to be in use. Maybe just storage. Steve points to it. “That one.”

“Are you sure?”
Steve hesitates momentarily, and hates himself for it. “Yes.” But he isn’t.

“Paul, keep your eyes on that one for me,” Pierce instructs, motioning to the screen Steve had indicated. “I may need you to pull up a section of tape.”

Once the feed on Řezník’s office reaches the point at which Steve is put into the tank, Pierce lets it play at regular speed. Both he and Řezník watch it silently.

Hours pass as they watch the tape play.

Steve’s heart hammers in his chest the entire time. He imagines that Pierce and Řezník can hear it in the silent room. Pierce doesn’t manipulate the play speed again. Just watches. Řezník waits patiently. After the first hour, Řezník turns away. Like he knows there’s nothing there to incriminate him. Steve feels like he’s going to be sick.

In the beginning, Řezník, Epley, and two agents occupy the room.

One of the agents leaves.

Řezník and Epley have a conversation.

Epley leaves. Now it’s just Řezník and one agent.

Epley comes back. Řezník leaves.

The agent checks his watch. Talks to Epley.


It’s probably protocol that an agent should be in the room with him, in case Steve were to regain consciousness, and right now he’s alone. Finally, Epley steps out, too. He returns in just over five minutes, and another agent is with him. Steve recognizes him as the one who’s M4 he’d taken.

Řezník returns for a little while. He and Epley talk again. After about twenty minutes, Řezník opens the door and lets Hartley in. Řezník checks his watch and gives Epley instructions, then leaves.

Another hour passes. The only ones left are Epley, Hartley, and the other agent. Steve tastes copper. He’s bitten into his cheek deep enough to draw blood.

When Epley stands up from Řezník’s chair and nods to Hartley, Steve’s hands get colder. His fingertips tingle, bloodless in the cuffs.

Hartley moves to open the tank. She’s dead a moment later.

Pierce motions for the security officer to stop the playback quickly, as if he doesn’t want to watch Hartley’s death a second time. The main screen returns to the lab in real time. Bucky isn’t in his cell - he’s strapped to the table where they’d kept him when they’d first brought him in. He’s not struggling. Steve’s cell has been cleaned. There are a few higher ranking officers walking the lab, and three men in white uniforms, cleaning up the last of the blood and damage from Steve’s attack.

Steve doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t know what to say. This isn’t right. This can’t be right.

“Soldier, are you sure this happened while you were in the REST tank? Maybe it happened last night?”
“No. They removed me from the tank, and took me to a room with a metal table.” Even in his own ears, Steve’s words sound weak and unsure.

Pierce studies him for a little while, then sighs deeply. Finally, he nods to Řezník.

“Soldier.”

Řezník waits until Steve meets his eyes to continue.

“Do you remember what I gave you this morning, before I put you in the tank?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what I gave you.”

“Ketamine. LSD.”

“Okay. You remember that. That’s good. Did you have any hallucinations while you were in the tank?”

Steve swallows. “Yes.” But he knows the difference. He knows the difference between a hallucination and reality. He knows the difference. They’re not going to do this to him. He knows the difference.

“Do you think perhaps--”

“No,” Steve bites out. “No. I know exactly what happened. I remember it. Don’t you dare tell me...don’t you dare fucking tell me that it wasn’t real--” Steve stops himself and holds his breath. He can hear his voice starting to break. If he cries right now, he might as well take the gun from the agent behind him and put the bullet in his head himself. He’s not going to let himself do that.

Řezník rubs the back of his neck. “I know that you do not want to hear what I have to say, Soldier, but this is what I would call a very bad trip. It does happen, especially if you are in distress at the time these drugs are administered. They are meant to help you relax, but sometimes they do have a very different effect.”

He pauses, giving Steve an opportunity to reply. He chooses not to. If Steve opens his mouth right now, he’ll be sick. He holds his body still and tense, taking in sharp breaths through his nose.

“What you described, Soldier...it sounds very frightening. Very disturbing. I know you must be extremely upset. But you must realize that it did not happen. I think, maybe, your mind is just trying to process...maybe that you feel you have lost control over--”

“Fuck you,” Steve bites out through gritted teeth. Blind rage is all he has left. He has no ground to stand on. He wants to go back to his cell. He wants all the drugs they can give him. He wants to sleep for days, if he can. He wants out. He stops thinking rationally - starts hoping that all of this, his whole life is just some fever-dream in his bed back in Brooklyn. He wants divine intervention. He wants God to pick him up and put him anywhere else but here. He wants this to be over.

Pierce shakes his head at Řezník, silencing him. “Okay,” he says, nodding again. “Soldier, you’re not stable right now. I think you know that. You’re a danger to my staff, and your a danger to yourself. I’m going to have them take you back upstairs. I’ve already called Dr. Montgomery in. We’re going to get you calmed down, and then you’re going to get some rest. I’ll have someone take you to the showers so you can get cleaned up. Dr. Montgomery can stay with you, or I can, if you don’t want to be alone around the agents. We’ll deal with this tomorrow morning.”
Steve takes a shower. He doesn’t ask Pierce or Montgomery to accompany him. The showers are on the level above the labs. The water is hot. They give him a bar of soap. Two armed agents stand at the door, but he doesn’t look at them.

He stays there until the water runs cold. The guards don’t tell him when to leave. When he finally shuts the water off, Montgomery is in the hall outside. He’s brought a towel, but no plastic hospital gown this time. He tosses the towel in, and lets Steve dry himself off. When Steve hands the towel back, Montgomery hands him a pair of soft pants.

Before he can stop himself, Steve thanks him.

When they return to the labs, Bucky is back in his cell. There’s an IV in his arm, but he’s not asleep. He’s sitting up on the side of his cot, looking hazy and drugged, but determined to stay conscious until he sees Steve come back.

In his periphery, Steve sees Bucky look up when the agents and Montgomery bring him in. But Steve keeps his gaze to the ground. He can’t look Bucky in the eye right now.

Montgomery sets up another IV stand in Steve’s cell, and slips the needle in without a word. Steve doesn’t ask what it is this time. Tonight, he doesn’t care. It helps him sleep.
Troubled Water

Chapter Summary

Sam and Clint finally find signs of Steve and Bucky's movements, but things are looking grim. Sam wants to keep looking, but he can only push himself so hard for so long. He's not Cap, after all.

Sam had left his car about a half mile from the warehouse, where it wouldn't be noticed. There were a few cars in the lot outside that were closer - one broken window and they could be on the road - but driving a stolen vehicle seems like a terrible plan when authorities are already on the lookout in the area, and Sam is admittedly a little wary of driving while black, anyway.

The team reconvenes at the exit where Clint and Sam had discovered signs of Steve and Bucky's apparent capture. They take the trip back to Sam's car at a jog, and Clint fills them in on their findings as they run.

Clint checks the street for traffic before he motions the rest of his team toward Sam's car. Sam, without a word to any of them, stows his flight-pack in the trunk and then carefully places the shield alongside it, taking one last look at its smooth surface, like he's promising it that it will be back home soon. Wanda and Lang watch him - and he gets the sense that even if only Wanda is enhanced, both of them feel what's going on in his head.

Sam drives, Wanda sits in the passenger seat, and Clint and Scott sit in the back, stowing whatever gear they can by their feet. He pulls off his goggles and powers them down to save a little battery life, and passes them to Wanda to put in the glovebox. It feels instantly weird to Sam - driving down the empty side-streets in the wee hours of the morning, the team suddenly silent and idle when less than an hour ago they were all in heavy combat under enemy fire. Any cars that pass them would probably figure they were just four friends making their way home from a bar after last call.

He barely restrains himself from ignoring the speed limit entirely as they make their exit onto the highway, following the black tire tracks left by one of the vans that had made the turn too sharply, but he knows that if they're stopped, late might become too late.

Dawn should be about two hours away, now, Sam thinks, realizing that he's not tired at all. His whole body is buzzing with energy and adrenaline. Every cell is on high-alert. He takes a quick look around the car.

Team of four. That ain't much manpower.

Scott is essentially a civilian with good tech. He needs guidance. Clint is as sharp as they come, but he prefers to support a team rather than lead one. Wanda is powerful - hell, she's right up there with the Vision - but she's still impulsive. Pretty green behind the ears, too, despite how fast she's been catching on to Cap's training. Sam feels the weight of Steve's absence bearing down on him, and he can't do anything but try to hold it all up and stay on his feet. Holy hell. Looks like he's calling the shots, now.

“Hey, Wanda,” he says firmly, breaking the nervous, silent tension that had settled in the cab.
“You found us without talking to any of us – think you can do the same for Cap and Barnes?” he asks, even though his tone clearly reads order, not request. Try.

“I found the warehouse by searching for you, Wilson – Rogers, I can’t find. He will not let me into his mind again—”

“Mmhm,” Clint interjects softly, clicking his tongue.

“And Barnes is… I cannot read Barnes. It is like reading many people at once. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Sam sighs, deliberately softening his tone. “We can do this the old fashioned way. Clint, you see where those drones came in from?”

“Yes, sir,” Clint replies sharply, with only a touch of sarcasm on the sir. “Definitely from the north, before they circled the building. We’re headed in the right direction.”

“Yeah, I figured they were probably headed for that base Barnes was talking about.”

“We can’t take on a fucking army base right now, man. No way,” Clint groans. Sam catches sight of Scott’s face in the rearview mirror as he huffs with relief, like he’d been hoping someone else would bring up how badly depleted their ammo was.

And this right here is the sort of tough call Cap would make in a heartbeat, Sam thinks insecurely. Maybe if he just tries to imagine Cap talking in his head – “They’re headed to an airbase, and they won’t want to keep them so close to a lab that’s going to be crawling with feds in an hour. If that is where they’re going, they won’t be there for long. We’ll have to send in Wanda and Lang to find them and then barrel in however we can. We let them off that base, we lose them.”

“Barrel in?” Clint snorts. “Okay, ‘Cap.’ Good point, though. Guess that’s the way it’s gotta be.”

Hey, at least it worked.

“Alright. Lang, same as before. You’re going in first. Take out whatever security you can, even if you only take out enough to let Wanda in undetected. Wanda, when you get in there, start asking questions. Move quiet, corner whoever you can, focus on officers. See if anyone has connections to HYDRA. Now, I’m pretty familiar with airbases, so I’ll check anywhere they could possibly be holding two super soldiers and I’ll see if I can’t get us some firepower to work with. Barton, you run silent. Your only job is finding Steve and Barnes. Don’t engage unless you have to. Likelihood is, you’re only going to run into young ‘uns and old men on desk duty, so just try to play it cool.”

Scott and Wanda nod. Clint breathes a weary, “Hallelujah.”

After that, the team falls into resolute silence as the minutes tick away. Sam feels his foot weighing heavier on the accelerator. There’s a pressure building inside his chest, and it’s getting more intense with every mile that passes without sign of the van. He wishes he could at least see tail-lights in the distance, but the highway is almost completely deserted. It’s eerie.

“Wait, wait, slow down a little,” Clint barks.

Startled from their tired, tense silence, everyone in the car jumps. Sam’s foot moves to the brake in a heartbeat. Lucky no one was tailing him, or they would be halfway up his ass. He slows the car to twenty-five miles an hour as Clint rolls down his window, craning his neck out into the dark, frigid air. The brakes creak a little as the car rolls to a stop. Clint doesn’t speak, and no one else dares to distract him. A full minute goes by, until finally, Clint heaves a sigh.
“Sorry, man. Sorry. Gun it - don’t lose them on account of me.”

“What’d you see?” Sam cuts in sharply.

Clint grunts. “I don’t know, man. Nothing, apparently. Thought I saw a light or something moving inside the treeline.”

“Creepy,” Scott whispers.

“Think we oughta go check it out?” asks Sam.

“I saw it for less than a second, if I saw it at all, dude,” Clint replies, shaking his head. “I’m probably just tired. Seeing shit. Keep following the van, Wilson. That’s our best lead.”

Sam holds his breath as he hits the accelerator. It doesn’t feel right, somehow, but Clint’s point is valid. If they waste time here, they’ll lose the van. And that can’t happen. So he drives on, ignoring that itch creeping along the back of his neck that tells him, *Maybe it was them. Go back. Risk it.*

He forces himself to think about other, more pressing problems. Like the airbase. Suddenly, it strikes him that he’s *been* to this base. The only base north of West Seneca is the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. He dredges up fifteen-year-old images in his mind, recalling everything he can about the layout, running through a list of buildings, ticking off the ones where HYDRA could potentially move prisoners, crossing off sections of the campus that are of no use to him, trying to narrow their search. He doesn’t like the conclusion he comes to: there’s *nowhere* on that base that HYDRA could be seen with Captain America and the Winter Soldier in cuffs and not draw attention. They almost certainly have a craft waiting for them, ready to take off as soon as they arrive. Sam knows he should say something right away and back-pedal on his earlier plan, but the chances of actually arriving, getting onto the airfield, and locating Steve before it’s too late are so incredibly slim that he can’t bring himself to open his mouth just yet. He needs more time to think.

He doesn’t want to give up. Cap wouldn’t give up on one of his friends - Sam has seen that determination first-hand. So he’s not giving up on Cap. Or Barnes for that matter. He hasn’t known him long, except through the few stories Steve had decided to share, but he can tell that Barnes is good people, even if he is a little spooky and a little bit of an asshole.

The first light Sam sees isn’t a red tail-light or a flickering phantom at all – it's a head-light. Just one. Stationary and dim, too high off the ground, somehow, and the beam pointing at a weird angle. The whole team shifts, sitting forward in their seats. As they get closer, the silence in the car becomes heavier.

Sam slows down and pulls onto the shoulder of the bridge. There's a creek below. It's the van from the warehouse, alright, or one just like it. And damn, did this scene ever have Cap and Barnes’ names all over it. And what’s more, it changes the team’s priorities drastically. A crashed van could mean a lot of different things, and most of them flash through Sam’s mind in a matter of seconds - they tried to escape, died in the crash. The van crashed on its own, they died in the crash. There were other vehicles headed to the base, and they were transferred to one of those, so keep heading north or lose them. The van crashed and they managed to escape - widen the search perimeter, spread out on foot, search the woods. *This is a decoy, keep moving.* That itch comes back something awful as Sam remembers the light in the woods. Half an hour since he put himself in charge back at the labs - did he make the wrong call and pass them by? God, God, he hopes not.

Doors are flung open before Sam has even brought the car to a full stop. No one speaks, but Sam is sure that they all share a singular priority: confirm that Steve and Bucky aren’t in the back of that
van. The possibility is remote, but it’s present enough to have the whole team jogging over to the flipped vehicle, heedless of what any passing cars might see. Clint gets there first.

“Empty,” he declares, peering inside. The whole team lets go of a collectively held breath. Clint climbs in to take a look around.

Sam walks the whole crash-site with a flashlight from his glove-box. Finally, he slows down, stops firing on all cylinders, and the January chill sets in. The sweat on his hands goes cold. He searches for anything about the crash that could lead him to his teammates, but all he finds is signs of a fight - not necessarily signs of an escape.

“Metric fuck-ton of blood in here. Somebody lost about two pints, but they didn’t exit the van - they’d have left a trail. Looks like they just laid here until somebody picked them up. I’m thinking HYDRA’s guys have already been here and scrubbed it. Smells like cat piss. They didn’t want anybody IDing the blood samples. Got bullet holes, too. Exiting, not entering,” Clint calls out, voice tinny from inside the van.

“Casings everywhere,” Sam adds. “Finding a little blood on the ground over here...maybe Barnes took some down.”

“So, we keep going, assume they were recaptured? Or we search from here? Do you think that Steve and James escaped, Sam?”

Damn it, Wanda just had to ask - and Sam doesn’t have an answer yet. If they assume Cap and Bucky escaped and search on foot, they might be letting HYDRA take them all the way to the air base and then God knows where. If they continue to the base, they might be leaving them stranded in the woods, probably injured after their capture, the wreck, and the ensuing firefight, and worst case scenario, they could easily be caught infiltrating the base and not get the opportunity to come back and search.

So, here goes nothing. “Okay. We’re splitting up.”

The team stops what they’re doing to stare at him. He can’t quite figure out if that means they’re onboard with the idea or if they think he’s an idiot. Well, if he’s fucking up, he can at least fuck up with conviction. “Wanda, Lang, you two get to that base. Check the airfield first - mostly likely scenario is that they’ve just got a pilot ready to make a quick getaway. Call me on the burner to report whatever you find. If you see them, I want Lang onboard the craft with them if you can manage it, then call again when they land. Shit goes south, Wanda’s your muscle. But only engage if they engage first. Last thing we need is to give the media another reason to put your face on the front page. If you don’t find them, do a little recon - find out if HYDRA’s got people there. If they’re setting up camp at Niagara Falls, I got a few good buddies in the Air Force who’d be happy to know about it. Clint, let’s you and me double back along the highway, see what we can find.”

Clint is the first to nod. “You got it, boss.” No sarcasm this time - Clint must feel that it’s the right call.

That sets the team in motion. Lang closes the mask on his suit and mumbles some promise about “lots of sugar cubes later,” and Wanda takes off her bright coat and stows it in the car, leaving only dark jeans and a black sweater. Lang vanishes a moment later and Wanda follows, twin flashes of red streaming in her wake like flare guns and then dimming to a warm glow before they vanish beyond the tree-line.

Clint heads toward the end of the bridge at a quick stride, calling back to Sam. “Emergency services are probably gonna get wind of the crash pretty soon. It’s getting early. Might see some
cars heading to work here within the hour. Get your car off the bridge and meet me down by the
creek."

“But that light you saw - shouldn’t we just turn around? Head back that way? We’d get to them a
lot quicker, if that was them.”

“Could have been them, could have been a hobo in his tent coming out for a piss. If I’m getting
shot at on a bridge over water, I ain’t taking off down the open highway. I’m taking a cold bath.
And they’ll leave good tracks by the water.”

“Be right there,” Sam confirms. Okay, so he was pretty exhausted - and as a long-time soldier, it
feels kind of good to just follow an order. He moves his car off of the bridge and pulls up next to a
set of mailboxes by a hidden drive - if a few people live down that road, hopefully they’ll each
assume that the car belongs to someone visiting one of their neighbors. He runs to catch up as Clint
reaches the end of the bridge and slips down the steep trench toward the creek bank.

The ground is muddy with patches of filthy, melted snow - slick as hell. And even though Sam
doesn’t know as much about tracking as Clint does, he knows it’s possible to establish a timeline
with tracks made near water. If they came down this way, Clint will find out, and he’ll know about
how long ago they were here. Sam stays back a few feet so that he doesn’t disturb any evidence
while Clint walks the water’s edge, squinting down into the mud.

“I’m not seeing much - just animal tracks and shit. You bring that flashlight?”

Sam lobs it over and Clint catches it, sweeping the bank a second time before he shines it
downstream. He watches Clint pass the beam over the bent, dark, trees and brown water like a
searchlight until it slows, doubles back, and stills. It takes Sam a little while to see what Clint is
seeing. Orange? Something orange.

“The hell is that?”

“A clue,” Clint states matter-of-factly, moving purposefully downstream and keeping the light
trained on the spot of color. “Which means we’d better skidoo.”

“We better what?”

“God, sorry, been hanging out with Lang. I forget you don’t have kids.”

Sam follows without any further questions. They close half the distance between the bridge and
their destination, and although no amount of squinting helps Sam in the darkness, Clint must
realize something that makes his gait quicken urgently.

“What?” Sam pants, fighting through the underbrush and mud to keep up.

“Looks like a stretcher,” Clint responds tightly, running ahead “Think it’s turned over--”

Sam sees it now. One of those basket evacuation stretchers, floating in the water, face down. If
Cap couldn’t walk when they took him out of the labs, that’s exactly where they would have put
him. There isn’t a thought in Sam’s head as he veers off to the left and takes the first few steps into
the creek at a clumsy run, letting the frigid water soak his boots. The water is unbelievably cold,
but it doesn’t matter - he whites out for a second as the clay and mud drop off beneath him and he
sinks into the freezing creek up to his chest. He ignores the paralyzing pain, because he has to
know right now if Cap is still strapped to that thing with water in his lungs. One more step and
there’s no foothold, so he pitches forward and swims. The light current carries him right toward the
little eddy on the far side where the stretcher is stuck.
Despite the absolutely mind-numbing cold, he’s never been more relieved. The stretcher flips without much resistance, and the straps have been snapped forcibly.

Bullet holes.

The fucking thing is _riddled_ with bullet holes.

“Whoever was in here broke out,” Sam gasps, teeth chattering.

Clint catches up. “Shit, Sam - that thing’s been blasted to hell.”

“No, see the straps are torn, so--”

“That doesn’t tell us--”

“There’s no blood anywhere, so he can’t have been _on_ it when they--”

“Blood would have washed away by now. Sam, look,” Clint stop mid-sentence to groan before continuing. “We’ve got to start preparing for the worst case scenario here.”

“The _hell_ we do!”

“Come on, man, get out of there before your balls fall off.”

Clint jogs downstream to a bend where the creek narrows and finds a muddy overhang on his side, where he can jump it. Sam uses the plastic stretcher like a float and paddles back to the bank with burning, aching legs. He tries to sound firm when Clint approaches him, but it’s hard when his teeth won’t stop chattering. “Okay. Okay,” he shudders. “You can prepare for the worst all you want, man, I don’t give a fuck. You wanna follow the creek, go looking for a body? Or you wanna head back to the bridge and check for a trail on _this_ side and find our goddamn teammates?”

“Oh, I’m all for Option B,” Clint replies flatly, already making his way back toward the highway. “If there _is_ a body downstream, it doesn’t need our help.”

“How the hell are you gonna joke about that?” Sam snaps.

Clint sighs heavily. “Sorry. It gets me through.”

Clint goes on ahead as they near the highway - even as high-strung as he’s feeling, Sam still has the good sense to stay out of Clint’s way while he tries to find a trail in the dark. Sam has to keep pacing, though, marching out into the woods twenty feet and then back to the creek over and over again, trying not to let his body temperature drop too low. He’s as run down as he’s ever been right now, and it came on pretty suddenly - it’s all really starting to get to him: the cold, the lack of sleep, the hunger, and most of all, the paralyzing, all-consuming anxiety that the sun is going to come up and two of his teammates are still going to be MIA or KIA. The lull in action while he waits for news from Barton isn’t doing much to occupy his mind, either, so he counts his steps as he paces, trying to steady his breathing and calm himself down.

“Wilson,” Barton calls out at two hundred and three steps.

And whatever sense of calm he achieves in those few minutes is gone when he hears Clint’s tone. He blames all the shaking on the ice forming on his soaked clothes, and makes himself walk toward Barton’s voice.

“You’re not gonna like it.”
Sam’s gut twists. “You find tracks or not?” he presses impatiently.

“Yep,” Barton rasps, still bending wearily over the print of shoe that slipped in the mud. “Found one set, heading south. There’s a real clear trail just past the tree-line, there.”

“Just one set.” No, dammit, no.

Clint nods once, stiffly and slowly. “Checked all around. Didn’t find anymore. He covered his prints on the bank, but not once he hit the woods. Tracks are fresh - twenty, thirty minutes old.”

“Can you tell whose it is?” Sam asks quietly.

“I got a good look at Cap’s soles earlier when I followed his blood-trail out of the labs.”

Sam feels the tiny space between Clint’s words stretch out over what seems like minutes.

“They’re not his.”

Sam shakes his head. “Well, you said it looked like Barnes was supporting him back at the warehouse. He probably took that bullet in the leg. Hundred dollars says Barnes is carrying him.”

“I’d be happy to lose that bet, for sure,” Clint sighs, looking out toward the woods, huffing out a breath that Sam can see freeze in the air. “Tracks are definitely deep, but I don’t know what Barnes weighs with all that metal he’s lugging around. Let’s get moving. See what we find.”

Barton leads the way with the flashlight, keeping an eye on the tracks. Sam drags himself along behind him, feet and hands numb, limbs tingling, body hurting. He just wants this night to be over. He wants to find Steve. He wants to find Barnes. He wants to call Lang and Wanda back to their rendezvous point in West Seneca and get the fuck out of town and drive to another motel room in another city, and he wants to go to sleep and deal with HYDRA and Stark and Ross and the rest of it another day. But with every hill he climbs with no sign of his teammates up ahead in the bare, dead woods, the more he feels like he’s not going to get that sort of closure.

Feels an awful lot like he’s chasing after that smoke hanging in the air, where his buddy should have been.

He strips his wet, heavy jacket off and lets the cold, January air sting his bare arms, sober him up. He keeps on marching. He just wants some closure.
Steve’s brain switches quickly from deep sleep to full consciousness the next morning. For the first time since his capture, his body feels truly well-rested. He flexes his fingers - the cuts around his nails where he’d pulled the screws loose on the vents are already healing. The aches and pains he’d taken to bed with him have nearly vanished overnight. Something deep inside him remains exhausted - there’s a weariness in his heart that he knows won’t abate until both he and Bucky are safe, but his senses are instantly wakeful. Hyper-alert. Like someone else is--

“Good morning, my friend.”

Řezník. Steve feels something seize in the pit of his stomach as yesterday’s events crash back into the forefront of his mind. Just for one day, they couldn’t have sent Montgomery instead? He’s not ready to look this man in the eye again. He doesn’t think he ever will be.

You can’t let him do that to you. You can’t let him have the control. Steve has to stand his ground. He has to keep resisting, even if his resistance is only in small gestures for now. Yesterday is over. It’s time to start over. Fight again. He has to show Řezník and the rest of them that he’s not just unbroken - he’s unbreakable. So he opens his eyes. He sits up, and he looks at Řezník. He holds Řezník’s gaze and he doesn’t look away, doesn’t cower. He faces him, just to remind the doctor (and maybe himself) that, yes, he still can.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Řezník asks smoothly. He and Steve are playing the same game today - like yesterday never happened at all. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, I slept just fine,” Steve answers with a dark undertone in his voice.

“And...how are you feeling?” Řezník presses chidingly, as if Steve must have simply not heard him the first time.

“Yeah, I slept just fine,” Steve answers with a dark undertone in his voice.

“And...how are you feeling?” Řezník presses chidingly, as if Steve must have simply not heard him the first time.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Řezník asks smoothly. He and Steve are playing the same game today - like yesterday never happened at all. “Did you sleep well?”

“I mean,” Steve laughs incredulously. “Frankly, I’d love it if you’d just cut the shit,” he snaps.

Řezník blinks slowly, taking in Steve’s response, but he seems otherwise unimpressed and unintimidated. Not much of a feat of prowess for a man flanked by two heavily armed agents, but it’s more than others have managed in the past when Steve has laughed in their face. “And what ‘shit’ is it I’m meant to cut, hm?” he asks curtly.

“Oh, give me a fuckin’ break,” Steve laughs acidly. “How are you feeling? Stop playing nice. Same thing I told Pierce. Just give up the fucking show - you guys are going to wear yourselves out. I know who you are, you know who I am. I know what you did to Bucky, and I’ve got a pretty good idea of what you’re going to do to me,” he answers, raising his voice and punctuating every word.

Řezník shrugs animatedly and pulls a bewildered expression - Steve is reminded of the comically
exaggerated expression one would use when speaking to a small child. “And what is it I’m meant
to do? How would you like me to act differently?” He pauses, waiting for an answer, but Steve
settles back against the wall and shakes his head, hoping Řezník can see that he’s lost interest in
the conversation. “What do you expect from me? Maybe, should I dress in all black? Carry a gun?
Bring my pet cat in to work with me?” he asks, chuckling at the ridiculousness of his own
suggestions. “Maybe you could be more comfortable with me if I were to act like - oh, you know
the ones - the old James Bond villains? Maybe, some kind of mad scientist?”

Steve echoes Řezník’s laughter, replacing the doctor’s humor with venom. “You know, that might
actually suit you. You should try it out.”

Řezník sighs heavily, turning his clipboard over in his hands a few times while he thinks. He leans
back into the cell wall, relaxing, watching Steve with the eyes of a discerning professional,
building a careful conclusion. “You would feel much better, I think, if all of us - we who follow
HYDRA’s ideologies or help their causes - you would like to see us all as evil men,” he muses.

“I promise, buddy, I don’t need a damn bit of help seeing that,” Steve smiles mirthlessly.

“You are being forced to reexamine this thinking though, and you don’t like that,” Řezník
continues. “I think this is how you wish for people to be, always. Good and evil, black and white.
God and the Devil. Your own righteousness, your goodness against my evil. This is a comforting
way to see the world, isn’t it? All your choices become very easy. I don’t know - maybe for a man
in your line of work, this is how you must think? Because if you do not always know who is the
good guy and who the bad guy, you are not certain that you have done the right thing. And that is
important to you. Always doing what is right. You believe what I am doing is wrong, so I must be
the ‘bad guy’ for you,” he smiles. “You know, many, many years ago, when I was much younger, I
worked on a project called MKUltra--”

“Yeah, I’ve read about it,” Steve interrupts blithely.

“You have read nothing good, I imagine. And yet, I left my country to come to America, work on
MKUltra, because I was afraid of what Russia might do if they were to gain the upperhand. When I
was a child, the horrors - the war crimes I saw Russia commit against their neighbors in Eastern
Europe - I was afraid. I knew that I must fight them somehow, and yet all I have is my mind, my
education. Of course, the Russians - if they had one great strength against the US, it was their
espionage. That was their favorite weapon. And they were fighting dirty,” he says emphatically.
“So this US must do the same. I must do the same if I wish to help. MKUltra was the only way I
knew to put my skills to use, to fight back. I am not so proud of all the things I did...no. Certainly
not. But would I make the same choice again? Yes, I think so. The same choices you are making
every day - whether or not to help your friend, which allies to trust, which wars to fight - you are
not the only one with this responsibility. I have my own struggles and I must make decisions I can
live with.”

“Maybe it is black and white,” Steve bites out. “Because the way I see it, those people - the ones
you guys used like lab-rats back in the 60s, they had no idea what they were signing up for. They
didn’t get a choice in the matter. That’s where you stepped over the line.”

“And what about Zima? Did he get a choice?” Řezník asks pointedly. “Not when Zola modified
and weaponized him, no, before that - when he was drafted into military service by the US
government. Made to suffer and fight for a war he did not start. Even to give his life, perhaps. He
had no choice. Did your country cross that line, do you think? Was this on your mind very much
when you were doing the little propaganda films and selling bonds?”

“The draft is totally different. It’s--”
“Necessary in times of war. Yes. I agree,” Řezník nods. “When so much is at stake, perhaps a few brave men must be made to suffer so that others may live in peace. This is true. This we have no argument over. But let me make this very clear, my friend - HYDRA is still at war. You may not understand the war we are fighting. You may not sympathize with our position, our goals. And we did not give you a choice, bringing you here. You will undoubtedly suffer for our work here, too - I’m not going to deny that. But we need a soldier. We believe that there is so much good we can do with you. And not only with you, but with your blood, your genetic code! Pretend you are me for a moment. A doctor. A researcher. You have an opportunity to access this blood and the serum within it - this serum, which cured a boy’s asthma, his scoliosis, his frailty, made his mind sharper and his body healthy and strong. We isolate that serum here and find a way to produce more? My God! We use it to make medicine, there are other little boys out there who will not have to live with their asthma. People who are in wheelchairs who might walk again. Because you did this.”

Steve has a thousand arguments on the tip of his tongue, but he knows Řezník won’t hear them. Steve knows that the risk of mass-producing the serum far outweighs the benefit. HYDRA’s focus isn’t on healing the sick. It might be a selling point when they try to pull in doctors to do their research, but they want weapons. They want more soldiers. They want control, and they control through fear, just like they always have. But Řezník knows all of that, and he’s made his choice in spite of it. That, to Steve, means he’s beyond hearing reason.

“I was not born evil, my friend. I am not here because I want to hurt you, I’m not here because I want to hurt Zima. I am here because there is a war to be fought. I believe that order must win out over chaos. Health over sickness. And you and Zima both have been drafted to fight alongside me. And I am sorry for the things you must lose. We give you new names, just as your army once gave you a serial number. We need to use you. To treat you as tools. I know that is not what any man would choose for himself. I don’t resent your anger or your fear, the disenfranchisement you must feel. Your position is unfortunate. But what I think it is you want from me - to ‘stop playing nice,’ I cannot do that. I am not ungrateful for your sacrifice, or his. I don’t want to be cruel to you, and I won’t go out of my way to do so. I don’t even want to be rude to you, if I can avoid it. I will say again - I don’t wish to be cruel. Yes, I’m less than perfect. Sometimes, I may lose my patience,” he laughs. “Maybe I don’t have such a good bedside manner. I am only human,” he concludes meaningfully. “And I think that very much upsets you.”

Steve lets out a slow, silent breath and ignores Řezník’s idea of a moving speech. “So,” he says after a tense beat. “What’s the evil plan for today?”

“Questions, first,” Řezník says airily, keeping pace with Steve’s quick change of subject. “And then a few procedures, and then, for you, some food. Then I will hand you over to Dr. Montgomery. There are some tests he would like to run, and he needs more blood, now that the paralytic is out of your system.”

“Just copy my answers from yesterday. They haven’t changed.”

“What is your full name?”

Steve maintains eye-contact, but he doesn’t otherwise respond. One of the agents grips their weapon a little tighter and looks to Řezník for a cue, but the doctor shakes his head firmly. “No, no, we’ll leave it. If he does not want to answer, a threat is not going to force him.”

Řezník makes a few notes on his clipboard and then puts away his pen, apparently having given up on preaching and polite conversation for the day. They lead Steve out of the cell after that, and as he tries to stay in step with the guards he takes a hurried survey of the lab. Bucky’s cell is empty. The OR and both exam tables, too. Steve’s heart skips a beat.
“Where is he?” he asks urgently.

Řezník lowers his brow and turns back to give Steve a glance over his shoulder. “You don’t answer my questions, and yet I should have to answer yours?”


Řezník stops in the corner of the room beside his office door. Steve tries not to think about the drugs and the isolation tank waiting for him just inside. The doctor searches Steve’s face for signs of sincere cooperation and apparently finds exactly the sort of desperation he’s looking for. “Zima has been taken to another lab - not permanently.”

“Why? What are they doing to him?” The words spill out of Steve before he can even consider the possibility of Řezník not answering.

“Dr. Montgomery is conducting some scans this morning. He is worried about potential damage from Wentzel’s implant, and we must be absolutely certain that there is no bleeding before he is wiped.”

“Wiped?” Steve repeats, face blank even as his stomach churns nervously. “Today?”

“Perhaps. I believe I told you yesterday morning that I planned to recommend the procedure. It will calm him down, keep him from hurting himself again.”

“Will he - will he lose everything?” Steve asks, voice thick. “All of his memories?”

Řezník studies Steve appraisingly, as if he’s deciding whether he should tell him the truth, lie, or simply refuse to answer. And there’s a third alternative, which Steve hadn’t yet considered. Steve hears two other technicians approaching from the central workstation - a woman and the doctor who had accompanied Montgomery on the helicopter. They come to stand behind him.

“Let’s not waste our time with questions about that,” suggests Řezník, laying his hand on the headrest of the black chair and making no further move toward his office door and the isolation tank. “You attempted an escape yesterday and killed several people - good agents, as Alex said,” he reminds Steve. “You are about to find out for yourself.”

The sudden panic that overcomes Steve feels like it does half of Řezník and the chair’s job for them. He knows that Bucky has been through this and recovered, but he doesn’t have much time. He has to get them out of here, and soon. He has to find a way. And this is going to slow him down. He can’t imagine that it will stop him entirely, but losing any of his cognizance at such a crucial time is a major setback.

And...and he’s scared. He’s scared to lose his memories. He can’t let it happen.

Rogers, Steven Grant, his mind screams urgently. Captain, US Army. The numbers. His serial number. When he tries to remember those, all that his memory offers up is the nightmare - the empty battlefield, the deep mud, the endless search. 549--

Think.

Relax.

5498--
“Have a seat.”

“Now, please.”

Steve sits down.
“Dr. Maclean, handle the telemetry, please. Maria, calibrate the monitors for the scans we did yesterday, will you?

54985--

Maclean begins to attach the electrodes to his skin. The other doctor - Maria - takes his right hand, swabs, and slips a needle in without a word of explanation and tapes it there. She’s young - no
older than Epley - but she approaches Steve without a hint of hesitation or fear. There’s something flat and blank about her dark eyes. She checks the IV line and moves on to calibrate the monitors. He’s running out of time. 5498--

“What is your full name?”

Řezník is standing in front of him now, looking past the younger doctors, gaze intent upon Steve.

Steve takes a deep, steadying breath so that Řezník won’t hear the tremor in his voice. “Steven Grant Rogers.”

“And how would you like to be addressed?”

And by God, there’s a little bit of dignity left in him. “Captain Rogers.”

“Age?”

“Ninety-six.”

“What were your parents’ names?”

“Sarah. Joseph.”

“And what is your opinion of HYDRA?”

“I’d like to put every last one of you in goddamn ground,” Steve tells him earnestly, voice low and intimate. He doesn’t say it derisively. It’s plain. Direct. Nothing but an honest answer. Steve doesn’t miss that Řezník then decides to skip the questions from yesterday about his feelings on Pierce, Montgomery, and himself. He must realize that the answers will be similarly violent.

“And what is your relationship with Zima?”

“Bucky,” Steve snaps darkly, eyes dark and aggressive.

“What is your relationship,” Řezník tries again, “with Zima?”

“His name is Bucky.” Steve’s voice wavers almost imperceptibly as he hears the low whir of fans and servos and feels the vibrations of the chair powering on beneath him.

“Answer the question.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Answer the question, Captain Rogers. The man you brought to us. The one you tried to break out yesterday. Where did you two meet?”

“Say his goddamned name.”

Řezník doesn’t look surprised by Steve’s resistance. He puts his pen in his pocket and steps back to watch. The cuffs close with a hiss of hydraulics around Steve’s arms, thighs, and wrists. “The Soldier does not have a name.”

“Go to hell.”

Steve knows how weak his voice sounds. He can hardly stand to listen to himself. Before he can push it down, a wave of hot, enraged tears stings at the corners of his eyes.
Řezník nods to the woman. Maclean presses a hand to Steve’s shoulder and holds something up. Steve keeps his eyes on Řezník and doesn’t look at it.

“All right,” Řezník remarks lightly, calling a halt to his interrogation. “Open your mouth, please.”

And now, Steve looks. Maclean is holding up a bite-guard. Steve’s lips press shut and his jaw clenches involuntarily.

“You are not doing yourself any favors,” Řezník reminds him calmly. “Without it, you might bite through your tongue.”

54985870.

Bucky, and the way he had looked at him back at that pub in London.

Sarah Rogers. The smell of chicken soup, her soft voice and bony shoulder where he used to lay his head, the rough fabric of her patched frock against his cheek.

Bucky Barnes looking at Steve with undeniable recognition, stretching seconds into hours back in Bucharest, lying with his mouth while his eyes told Steve how much he’d missed him, that maybe he remembered London, too.


Bucky, patching him up under a tree in the January woods and finally, finally leaning in for a kiss.

Steve tries to think of nothing but that, and opens his mouth.

When he bites down on the guard and lets his head fall back against the support, his world narrows. He can’t manage to call up an image of Bucky. He can’t think of his mother or Sam. He can’t recite his serial number. His consciousness closes in on the grid of white ceiling tiles above him and the bitterness of rubber, the hum of the machine all around him and the immovable tightness of the restraints.

“Let’s start slow. Thirty seconds, please.”

“Thirty,” the woman’s voice echoes.

Steve doesn’t know what to expect next. He doesn’t know what’s coming. If there’s going to be pain, he doesn’t know where it will be inflicted and he can’t brace himself. He can only be a passive observer to whatever Řezník is going to do to his body.

_Hold onto something._ Steve hears Bucky’s tired, cracked voice over the machinations of the chair. But the only image that comes to mind is hands - touching, pinching, grabbing, penetrating hands and a bird-eye-view of his own naked body sprawled face-down on a stainless steel table, struggling like an animal in a slaughterhouse, pitiful and disgusting and barely _human_ anymore. He thinks of the dark bag they’d put over his head (or maybe it was all a hallucination, he couldn’t be sure anymore) as two metal plates rotate forward and consume his field of vision, blocking out the pale fluorescent panels on the ceiling. The snap-hiss-click as they center themselves over him makes his muscles tense and his cold fingers curl into tight fists, and moments later they crackle and spark, emitting tiny little bolts and currents and then, they begin their descent.

In the second before they make contact, Steve’s mind bleeds out a million little truncated thoughts rapid-fire, panicked, desperate, hopeless, resigned, angry.
Fight back even if you die. Fight back. Should never have come near that base. Should have known better. Please be alive, Sam. The smell of laundry soap and clean hair, her hand holding mine as we walk to Sunday mass. Oh God, oh Jesus, how many times has Bucky sat right here and waited, knowing exactly what was coming? Will I remember who I am? How many times can they do this before I stop remembering? Break the cuffs, get out get out get out get away run before you you forget that you want to run and don’t let this happen - And Bucky ran. Bucky ran and you brought him back. How did I let this happen how--oh god bite down hard you’ll be alright it won’t kill you hail mary full of grace thelondiswiththeepray--

“His vitals look fine, really--”

“Alright, well, I’d still like to see that heart-rate back down around eighty before we move on.”

“Check that IV, will you Groff? Did he shake that loose?”

“No, it’s holding up.”

“My God, look at the right hemisphere here - he recovers much faster than the Soldier. Twice as fast.”

“Well, Zola’s serum wasn’t exactly name-brand--”

“Yeah, he’s going to take some pretty extensive work.”

“Well, let’s raise the voltage ten percent and see if that makes a better impression on his right hemisphere.”

“Adjusted.”

“Heart-rate’s at...seventy-eight. BP’s good, too.”

“Let’s try a minute.”

After the first standard four-minute wipe, Steve stops counting the rounds. He stops...everything. He becomes a body. A corpse. Just a puppet, held up by the solidness of the chair underneath him and the cuffs around his slack limbs. Every muscle is on fire and yet somehow bloodless and tingling. He feels an unsettling emptiness as someone removes the bite-guard - there’s a moment of shock and terror because it feels like they’re pulling out his teeth - and then the taste of copper overwhelms him.

But...he’s alive.

He’s alive, and it’s over.

And that revelation brings on a strange sensation deep in his gut - creeping tendrils of feeling and emotion that spread from his center and out into his extremities, ticklish and almost like the pleasant shiver of sinking into warm water.
Happiness.

Elation.

No rage, no panic, no fear - not the kind he’d been feeling. All of that is dampened. Buried somewhere. He can still hear them - the shrieking of terror and the bellowing of anger. The will to fight and die. But they’ve all become so, so quiet.

He feels good.

He feels eerily, emptily, chillingly fine.

“Soldier?”

Me? Are they talking to me?

“Soldier,” and this time, there’s concern in the voice. They want to know if he’s alright. If he can speak. He thinks he can. He manages a low, broken hum in response.

“Are you with us?”

Another not-word escapes, but he can do better. He gathers all of his energy, focuses, and says, “Yes.”

“Good,” and the voice sounds relieved. “It’s all over. You did very well. Can you tell me your full name, please?”

He can. “Steve Rogers.” His own voice sounds distant in his ringing ears.

“Age?”


“What was your mother’s name?”

“Sarah.”

“And your father’s?”

He hears the silence. Knows it’s important, that the question is important, that he should say something, but the silence is louder than the little voice in his head saying, “Jo--Joseph.”

“And what is your relationship with Zima?”

Zima. That’s what they call Bucky. He makes the connection. He didn’t forget. He smiles. “Friend.”

“Good,” the doctor says - he sounds like he’s smiling, but Steve’s vision is still too blurry to know for certain. “Do you think you can stand up and walk? You will be dizzy, but Dr. Groff and Dr. Maclean and I will help you.”

Steve thinks. Nods. The cuffs release. He stands, and when he almost loses his balance, they catch him.
“Let’s move to station four,” Řezník directs them. “Soldier, would you like some water?”

He swallows reflexively at the offer, tasting metal. “Yeah.”

“Do you think you could eat something?”

He’s nauseous, but he’s also very, very hungry. It took Řezník’s suggestion to remind him. “Yes, please.”

“Well, then lie down and get some rest,” Řezník says approvingly. They help him up onto the exam table, laying him on his side. Maclean covers him up with a thick, soft blanket. Groff, the woman, puts a pillow under his head. It’s covered in a paper case, but it’s soft. It’s a relief.

“Dr. Maclean will be right here if you need anything, soldier. I’ll go see if I can find you something hot to eat - would you like that?”

Steve realizes dimly that the is Řezník speaking to him right now. He despises Řezník, his brain reminds him flatly. But he’s so hungry. And exhausted. The voice of anger fades again. Buries itself. “Yes. Thank you.”
One More Heartache

Chapter Summary

Sam can't seem to catch a break.

Sam swings his arms and picks his knees up high as he walks, trying in vain to raise his body temperature. Ten minutes in to their watchful trek into the woods and he’s really starting to regret taking a deep in that damn creek. He can’t imagine having stopped himself from jumping in, though. Not when that stretcher was floating on the water’s surface. Not when there was a chance, however slim, that Steve Rogers was still strapped to it, face-down in the water, dead or dying. Still, he’s a little envious of Clint’s ability to remain so level-headed, because if he gets much colder, Cap’s going to hear his teeth chattering and come find him. Sam’s so goddamn cold he wouldn’t be surprised if he’s stopped aging.

His heart jumps into his throat when he hears Clint calling out from up ahead - a short, sharp, “Hello?” as if he’s seen or heard something nearby. Sam forces his stiff legs to carry him forward at a run, bleary gaze following the flashlight as Clint sweeps it from side to side, searching through the dense trees. He strains his eyes, praying for movement, hoping to God to see a flash of red, white, and blue standing out against the gray and brown.

“Got something?” he pants, nearly colliding with Clint’s back.

“Not really.” Clint admits, then groans thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Could be my imagination. You smell anything, Sam?”

He takes a deep breath, first through his nose, then through his mouth, tasting the air. He doesn’t discover much that he could imagine would be of interest to Clint. “Ah...trees,” he shrugs, frustrated with his own answer. “Wet asphalt. Leaf-mold. You. No offense.”

Clint cocks an eyebrow. “You don’t smell that barbecue?” he asks.

Sam can’t tell if he’s joking or not. “Barbecue?” he repeats lamely. But he’s desperate, so he tries again, imagining the smell, hoping he can zero in on it. He walks the area, turning every which way, waiting for the wind to change direction and trying yet again. Nothing. “Man,” he sighs, not bothering to hide his disappointment. “I think you’re just hungry.”

Clint snorts. “You got me there,” he grumbles distractedly. “Yeah, maybe I’m going nuts. Wouldn’t be the first time. Do me a favor, though. Step off that way for a minute, will you? You kind of smell like dirty creek water. Throwing off my radar.” He smacks Sam’s shoulder, suddenly struck by an idea. “Actually, run back up to the highway real quick. Get me the number on the mile-marker.”

“Whatever you need, Barton,” he agrees wearily.

Sam’s quads burn like hell as he makes his way through the undergrowth back to the road and he becomes acutely aware of a blister forming on the sole of his foot, but luckily, it’s not far. When he gets close enough, he can hear sirens approaching. He feels his heart speed up. He leans out into the roadway and squints. 295. Thank God his mother made him eat all those carrots. He can see
police lights in the distance as he ducks back into the treeline.

Shit. The flashlight.

“Clint,” he calls softly, then hisses, “Clint! Put the fucking light out, man. Police coming by.”

The light goes out. Good thing Barton has his hearing aids turned up.

Shit. The flashlight.

That’s why Barton had him check the mile-marker. He finds Clint’s shadow among the brighter shades of gray, finally feeling a little warmer. “You think one of them stopped here,” he states, beating Clint to the punch. “You think that was their flashlight you saw?”

“I fucking know so,” Clint replies. Even without being able to see him, Sam can hear his pleased smile. Sam doesn’t know how to feel. Clint has found a solid lead. Great. And if Sam hadn’t passed that lead up the first time Clint had caught it, they would have a lot more than a lukewarm trail right now.

They fall still and silent as they wait for the cop cars to pass, and then Clint flicks the light back on and shines it at the sprawling roots of a tree.

“Check it out,” Clint smiles breathlessly.

“What am I looking at?”

“Good fucking news, that’s what,” Clint assures him, squatting down. “So, this back here is an ass-print. Somebody stopped to rest for a second. Not that cool. Here’s where the heels of his boots dug in - ground’s real soft, and he pushed in hard, like maybe he was in pain That smell is stronger over here, too. And here we have,” he says, sweeping the flashlight back toward them a few feet, “One light, even print, one deep print, just the toe, and a little divot where somebody’s knee was. And leading off from here, we got ourselves two sets of tracks.”

Sam grins, clapping Barton on the back. “That’s my man!” he laughs. “I ever tell you how much I love you?”

“Aw, that’s sweet. Yeah, my guess is, they stopped to cauterize that gunshot wound Cap got at the lab, so that was Cap’s meat I smelled cooking. Let’s go get ‘em,” he smiles back, setting off at a quick pace with Sam right at his shoulder.

“They won’t be going too slow - not with how fast Cap heals up.”

“Do I seem like I’m going slow? You calling me old?”

The trail is easier to follow after that. They had stayed in line with the highway for the majority of their walk, and where one failed to leave good boot prints, the other could usually be discerned. The sun comes up and colors the woods a rich frozen blue - on a better day, Sam would think it was really beautiful, but right now speed-walking is the only factor between being wet and being frozen. Clint tosses him one of the burners to contact Wanda and Lang and update them on the situation, but he doesn’t get an answer. That means they’re probably both still in the air. He trusts them to have the presence of mind to check their missed calls when they land, but he still texts them both as a precaution, making sure they know to meet them at the motel and not at the bridge, which is probably crawling with emergency services by now.
Got a lead on S and B. Recon at NFARS if u can then pull out asap. RDV at room.

Be safe.

After another half-mile, they hit a long stretch of hidden drives paved with gravel. Clint sighs thoughtfully and Sam side-eyes him, knowing they’re on the same page, dealing with the same conundrum. Steve and Barnes have a bit of a lead on them. They might have risked tramping through everyone’s front-yards when it was still pre-dawn. With Cap’s leg messed up, they’d probably want to take the straightest path back to the city, and if Clint and Sam don’t want to potentially lose their trail, they’re need to follow their path directly. Judging by the city lights on the horizon, the woods can’t go on too much farther, but even with Sam’s limited experience with tracking, he knows that once you’ve got a lead, you keep on it, because if you miss one thing it could mean another hour lost. And he does not have another hour right now. They’re going to have to deal with the possibility of encountering some early morning commuters leaving home which, given the media’s hunt for Barnes and their newfound dislike of Cap and his friends, makes Sam hesitant to -

“Good morning!”

Sam’s stiff fingers twitch toward his sidearm and Clint’s gaze, which had been focused on the muddy ground, searches frantically for the source of the voice. Sam whips around, startled, and sees the speaker - older brother, Vietnam vet according to the patch on his jacket, coming down his driveway in long strides, with walking shoes, and a pedometer on his wrist. Probably not a threat, considering his worn out baseball cap featuring Steve’s shield front and center. Well, this is awkward.

Clint has the good sense to try to keep the interaction short. “Morning,” he answers, friendly and casual, and keeps walking. Sam nods cordially and turns to follow him.

“Aren’t you guys Avengers?”

Really? They get recognized now, but God forbid Sam ever gets clocked by that cute barista. No, she still writes Dan on all of his lattes. Well, here’s hoping he’s read this guy right. “Yes, sir,” he confirms. “And in a really big hurry,” he adds, trying to sound official.

The man waves them on and picks up the pace, making a beeline in their direction. “I see that. Keep walking, I’ll keep up.”

What in the name of. “Uh, sir, we’re kind of trying to keep a low profile,” he explains, chuckling so he won’t seem like he’s trying to be rude, although he and Clint do follow the guy’s advice and resume their march.

“I know you are,” the guy laughs. “That’s why I’m walking with you. In case any of my neighbors have questions. I’ll turn around once you guys are past these houses.”

Sam can’t help but smile. “Not sure how that’s going to help, but thank you.”

“Media’s been all over your story. Fox News is trashing Cap, except for Gutfield who’s trashing Iron Man, and that Rachel Maddow lady is losing her damn mind over the whole registration thing. Gutfield’s on there right now hollering about how the US government ought to be getting James Barnes his promotions and back-pay instead of trying to arrest him. He’s about to choke out some of his co-hosts.”

“And what’s your opinion on that?” Sam chuckles.
“If Captain America’s statement about him was true, you know,” the guy sighs, shaking his head. “It was. I’ve seen the receipts on how HYDRA did it, too. Nasty stuff.”

Clint glances over his shoulder. “Yeah. Brainwashing. No me gusta.”

“Well, then I’ll pin the medals on him myself. Now, tell me why you’re wet.”

This dude, though. Sam is always pretty shocked by what old people are ready to roll with. Avengers on the run from the law wandering across his lawn at the crack of dawn and he’s just power-walking right along. “Jumped into a creek.”

“Bet you wish you hadn’t done that.”

Real helpful there, old guy. “What’s your name?”

“Terry.” He jogs a few steps until he’s shoulder to shoulder with Sam and goes in for a handshake. “And you’re Sam Wilson, right? Falcon. My wife loves you. And Hawkman.”


Sam obliges with a bemused laugh. “Well, Terry, you sure do like to talk.”

Terry throws his head back and laughs loud enough to wake the dead, still shaking Sam’s hand before finally letting go with a firm squeeze. “I know, I know. That’s why all the neighbors are going to leave you alone. They know I’ll have ‘em out here talking for an hour if they say something, and I just got myself a new truck, too. They probably figure I want to tell them about it,” he smiles. “It’s a Dodge. One owner. And you can make phone calls in it too, and it’ll just come right out of the speakers. Got a really good deal on it, too.”

Clint throws a grin back in Sam’s direction as Terry tells them about the dealership, the salesman, what he’ll be paying on it every month, his credit score, and how he’s planning to take it with him on a camping trip and where he wants to go. Sam kind of tunes out for a while.

“My nephew’s an NCO. Michael Read. He might be your age, too. You know him?”

“I’m afraid not.”

They’re now about fifty feet past the residential area, and yet ... here’s Terry. Still with them.

“Sharp young guy, let me tell you. What are you two doing out here today? Chasing down some criminals? Being superheroes?” he chuckles.

Sam hums thoughtfully, not sure if he should answer or not. If this guy likes to talk so much, he might just go talk to the media. Clint decides to be a little more straightforward. “Uh, it’s a secret.”

“Flew Operation Menu in ’72, managed to keep my mouth shut for twenty-eight years until they declassified it. Just let me know if I can help with your secret.”

“It’s pretty dangerous,” Clint warns...or baits, Sam’s not sure.

“Yeah, yeah, I figured. Retirement, though...you know, after flying so many combat missions, I still get that itch.”

“HYDRA tried to kidnap Captain America and James Barnes. It looks like they broke containment, though, so now we’re tracking them. Cap’s injured, so we’re trying to be quick about it,” Barton
explains. “Still interested?”

Terry is actually quiet for a minute. Sam looks over and sees his jaw working - muscle flexing a few times underneath his gray stubble. Damn. Terry looks pissed.

“I think so,” he says with total surety.

“Well,” Sam cuts in. “We’re only going a little further, just to make sure they made it back into the city, and then we’ll head back to my car. Which is actually a couple miles back down the highway, and it’s going to be hard to sneak past emergency services without getting recognized.”

“Oh, I’m pretty good at sneaking,” Terry assures them emphatically. “Three years I’ve been hustling pool - my wife doesn’t know I’ve been anywhere but the bank, the library, and the grocery store. Okay, Falcon, Hawkman,” - and Sam overhears Clint’s soft, longing sigh - “Here’s the plan.”

Oh, so Terry makes the plans now?

“I’m going to head on on back to my place and make sure the old lady gets herself to work alright. She leaves about seven thirty, maybe seven forty-five every morning - even Sundays. But if something good is on the news, you know, she might be a little late getting on the road. Doesn’t really matter if she’s late, though, because she’s the boss. So whether you guys find Captain America or not, I want you to come on back to my house, alright? And I’ll turn on that back porch-light if it’s cool to come inside, you know, if Judy’s gotten her make-up on and she’s out the door and all that. Now, uh, let me see. About a mile, mile and half up that way, you’re going to hit an old smelting plant. Niemeier’s, I think. Or, well, it used to be called Brook’s Tool and Dye, but that was a while back. If you’re turned - let me see - south, take a left at their parking lot and just keep on walking. You’re going to hit a little side street that runs along the back of the plant. That road, which is Brook Street, it turns into a little gravel driveway. Just follow that when you’re headed back my way It’s take you behind all of these houses here and right into my driveway, right? It goes all the way through. You, and if they’re with you, Captain America and Barnes, too, just come on inside if that porch-light is turned on. I’m going to get you some dry clothes - some civvies. See if I can find some breakfast that you could take along with you. Then I can just give you a ride back to your car. You guys can check out my truck. It might be a little crowded in the back, but it’ll seat five. That sound like a plan?”

Sam really hopes that Clint caught all of that, because he kind of zoned out during the part where Judy was putting on make-up. The older a man gets, the more words it takes him to say one damn thing. He is pretty sure, though, that Terry is doing them one hell of a favor. “Sounds like a really good plan,” he smiles. “But you really don’t have to do all that, Terry. Might be better if you didn’t get involved.”

“Nobody’s got to do whatever it is they do,” he shrugs. “People still get up in the morning and go do it. And, you know…” he grins wheedlingly. “If I do you a favor, one of these days you just might find a spare set of those wings laying around somewhere.”

Sam glances over at Terry and finds that his expression is at least half-serious. Sam chuckles, shaking his head. “I just might. If I run across one, I’ll keep you in mind,” he promises.

Terry stops and throws Sam a smart salute. Sam pauses and turns toward him to return the gesture, and then Terry starts back toward his house, calling out, “See you two shortly.”

“Terry might be my grandpa,” Sam muses. “I mean, he’s not, but I kind of wish he was.”

Clint halts abruptly, squinting. To their left, the landscape dips down a sharp hill into a little bramble. A short walk in that direction, and there’s a huge fallen tree whose upturned root system has left a nice little hollow that would make good shelter. In the morning light, Sam can now see that the tracks lead down that way, and his first instinct is to assume that Steve and Barnes are probably down there right now. “Looks like they detoured right about here,” Sam notes. “You think they’re taking a nap?”

But Clint is already looking further ahead down the trail. “No, see, the tracks do go off that way, but then they come back up over here and keep on going in the same direction. But that’s good, though. If they’re taking breaks, we might just catch up to them. Wanna jog?”

“Sure.”

Five minutes later, Sam is convinced that his blister has busted open and reformed twice, and his lungs are burning from the cold air. Sam doesn’t hate running. He actually doesn’t mind it at all, when he’s not wet and cold and trying to function on zero sleep after a fire-fight. But he definitely likes flying better. He’s pretty relieved when they hit the treeline and Clint slows down. He tries to catch his breath quietly, because Barton doesn’t seem all that winded and he’s like, forty-five, or something.

“Aw, concrete. Shit,” Clint groans. “Well, no more tracks for me, I guess. Really wanted to intercept them before we hit the city.”

“They’ll be careful, man. Barnes is dressed real low-profile and Cap can turn his uniform inside out. They’ll rendezvous with us back at the motel if we don’t manage to pick them up on the street before that.”

“So, back to Grandpa’s house?”

“Yeah, just let me try Wanda and Scott one more time, make sure they know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, that’s about all we can do, man - oh, what the fuck? Ew.” Barton stops and lifts up his foot. He takes a few slow steps back, eyes sweeping the ground.

“What?” Sam finally prompts after a heavy silence, watching Barton’s face as he analyzes whatever he’s seeing.

“Well, it looks like puke and it smells like puke,” he answers, squatting down to get a closer look. “And...it’s definitely puke.” He whips around to study the parking lot behind him. “Cap got this far out...tracked mud with him. Definitely Cap, because the prints are heavier on his good leg. And then he turned back around,” he guesses, walking the perimeter of a small patch of dirt. “Somebody sat down right here. And right over here,” he says, pointing to another section of ground. “I don’t know. It looks like somebody was kicking dirt all over the place. Boot heels dug in real good.”

Sam comes to stand beside him. He sees exactly what Clint’s referring to - zig-zagging scars in the soft earth, just a few feet away from two shallow impressions where someone had knelt. Sam can actually hear Barton gnawing on the inside of his lip as he thinks.

“Aw, man,” Clint intones softly. “I think Barnes has a seizure.”

So, they might not have made it back to the hotel, after all.
Sam edges away from the clearing toward the treeline. Something’s got his guts tied up in a knot, and it’s not just the smell of vomit, either. Not even a super soldier can usually manage to just get up and walk off after a seizure. Something’s not right. In fact, something feels really, really wrong.

Steve’s got a GSW. Barnes can’t be too steady on his feet either, if he’s walking at all. They can’t have gotten far.

“Steve!” he shouts into the empty carpark.

The walls of the old smelting plant up ahead throw back a hollow, delayed echo, but apart from the quick beating of wing-flaps as startled birds flee the nearby branches, there’s no answer.

“Steve!” he tries again, not really knowing why.

Without really feeling the ground underneath them, his feet have carried him out into the overgrown, vacant lot. He turns in every direction, wanting more than anything to see Cap limping his way.

No Cap. No Barnes.

But his periphery does latch on to something just below his eyeline. Something just a little strange. A little off.

It’s the weeds.

No matter which way he turns, the weeds all bend the other way, laying flat against the concrete. And that’s out of place. Familiar, but out of place. Sam turns his face skyward, tired eyes stinging in the pale morning light. He feels phantom wind-gusts buffeting against his back, hears the memory-roar of a turboshaft engine, and he knows exactly what happened.

“Barton,” he calls out. Clint jogs out of the woods, looking curious. “I think...I think they're gone.”

“What?”

“I think HYDRA sent a chopper out as soon as they broke containment.” Clint follows Sam’s gaze down to the eerie crop-circle surrounding him, recognizing the same signs. “They got to them before we did.”

Sam feels a cold sort of nausea bloom in his stomach when the phone in his back pocket buzzes, breaking the somber quiet. He doesn’t want to say it out loud. He forces himself to take out the phone and answer it, but he’s suddenly so exhausted that he has to sit down, right there on the cold, dusty concrete. Lang’s voice sounds too loud in his ear.

“Hey, Falcon. We got your message and pulled out. Did you guys find Cap?”

Sam takes a deep breath.

“I made the wrong call.” The words hurt his throat on the way out. He scrubs his cold fingers over his scalp, warding off a headache that he doesn’t have time for. “I really fucked up, Tic-Tac.”
Chapter Summary

Sam begins to regroup.

Sam and Clint trudge across the parking lot, following Terry’s directions toward the hidden drive. The fight’s gone out of both of them. They know they need to get back to Sam’s car, get it off the road and out of sight, but they’re tired and defeated and footsore. For now, no amount of haste is going to bring them any closer to Cap, and neither of them are enhanced - they both need rest. Sam can hardly keep his eyes open. They’ve got that morphine-itch, like they’re full of sand. And yet the idea of heading back to some motel room and crawling into a soft bed, getting the amount of sleep his body needs to function makes him absolutely sick. It just doesn’t seem right. Not when Cap and Barnes are in trouble. But it’s that or run himself into the ground, and if he doesn’t take care of himself he’s not going to be of any use to them at all.

They reach Brook Street in just a few minutes and see a set of headlights flash from just inside the treeline. Sam is wary for a moment, but as he gets closer, he realizes it can’t be anyone but Terry. After the detailed description he’d been subjected to earlier, there’s really no mistaking that shiny new truck of his. He came out to meet them - and even though Sam is having trouble feeling much at all beyond guilt and frustration and physical and mental exhaustion, he is so, so grateful.

Terry hangs back and lets them get a little ways into the woods to get in, in case HYDRA’s still got eyes on the area. He waves to them from the driver’s seat, face already full of concern and sympathy, seeming to know just by the look of Sam and Clint that their search ended badly. Clint goes straight for the back door - and Sam’s not sure if that’s to give him some extra legroom or because Clint doesn’t feel like having Terry in his ear right now.

“Get on in, guys,” Terry smiles ruefully. “I don’t care if you got muddy feet, I’ll take it to get shampooed next week, anyhow.”

They climb in and shut their doors. Sam’s legs and feet tingle, finally at rest, and now he really starts to feel the ache in his knees and back set in. What a fucking day. A man should only have to suffer through a day this bad once in his life. Sam’s starting to lose count of them.

Terry turns them around in the parking lot and heads down the bumpy gravel drive that leads back to his house. He drives slowly, avoiding all the potholes he seems to have memorized. The mood in the car is so heavy that even Terry remains silent for a few minutes. When he finally speaks, it follows a heavy, wistful sigh that makes him sound every year of his age.

“You didn’t find ‘em, huh?”

Sam catches Clint watching his face from the rearview mirror, but he doesn’t find the right words to respond. He looks down at the dashboard.

“Sam...uh, Sam thinks a chopper might have picked them up.”

“You think they called EMS for that gunshot wound?”
“No, they didn’t have their burners on them. Couldn’t have.”

“I need to start calling around to the local police departments?”

“We’ve got a hunch it was HYDRA,” Clint says darkly. “My guess is, they’ve still got a way to track Barnes, if they get close enough. And looks like Barnes had some kind of seizure right before they picked them up.”

Terry shakes his head solemnly. “So it doesn’t look good.”

Sam doesn’t take his eyes away from the dashboard. “Nope,” he answers. His voice sounds as aged as Terry’s in his ears. “This is on me,” Sam admits, hoping it’ll take a little weight off his chest, but it just gets harder to breathe as he speaks. “I sent half our team to the wrong place, I split us up. I should have listened, back on the highway. Should have stopped. Clint’s gut made a better call than my dumb ass,” he trails off, laughing bitterly. He puts his hand over his mouth and scratches at the rough stubble on his lip, tired of listening to himself complain.

“You want my advice?” Terry offers.

Sam forces himself to stay silent for a few seconds, so that his stress doesn’t do the talking for him. He’s got no reason to snap at this nice old guy. “Yeah,” he finally concedes. “I could sure use all the advice I can get.”


Terry won’t go on until Sam has done exactly that. It makes him feel weird and self-conscious, but it makes Terry happy. But he also realizes he had been holding his breath for a while. His lungs ache as they expand. The pain in his temples calms down a little.

“Well, alright, old man, then just tell me , Sam thinks caustically. But he knows what Terry wants to hear. He knows what he’s supposed to say. “We’ve got to go after them. We’ve got to collect our resources and get all the intel we can on HYDRA. I don’t know how, but we can’t stop until we’ve got Cap back safe.” He’s trying to channel Steve again, but his heart’s just not in it.

“Wrong. First, you’ve got to get some sleep and some food. That’s what comes after breathing. You’ve got a hard job to do - all you’ve got to do is break it down into smaller steps, right? Take it a little bit at a time, Sam Wilson. Breathe, sleep, eat, and then you can start helping Captain America,” he says emphatically, reaching over to pat Sam on the arm as they pull into his back driveway. “I’m gonna get you guys some clothes together while you have some of this breakfast casserole. I hope you guys eat pork, because it does have sausage in it. If you don’t, though, they’re big chunks so you can eat around it. It’s reheated from yesterday because I always cook a lot at once, you know, but this is something that’s really better the second day, anyhow. Lets the spices mature...”
Terry’s house reminds Sam of his old place just outside DC. Pictures of his family on every surface. Terry’s portrait from his time in the service. One of Judy, too. Terry says she was Navy. The refrigerator has disappeared behind scribbled coloring book pages and pictures of nieces and nephews and grandchildren. Sam sits at the kitchen table, breakfast casserole still untouched. Terry is getting some stuff together. Clint is in the bathroom with a first-aid kit, patching up that hit his calf took back on the roof of the lab. He stares blankly at the fridge, not looking at any one picture in particular - just the mass of them. All the faces that this guy loves, all the things his grandchildren have colored and given to their grandpa. And Sam feels so goddamned lonely he could cry.

He wonders if he gave up this life when he let Nat and Steve into his house. He wonders if maybe he lost it the first time he shook hands with Steve Rogers, out by the reflecting pool. He thinks he might have stepped into a world where he can’t keep up. Where he’s never going to belong. And when he did that, he gave up a big piece of his life he didn’t even know he wanted. They’ve been on the run for a while now - ever since the debate over the Accords and registration and Barnes got hot between Tony and Steve. He hasn’t been able to call his mom or his sisters. He hasn’t talked to any of his old friends from the service. Steve is important to him. All of the Avengers are. They’re a second family to him.

But they’re still only second.

He doesn’t notice Terry until the old man pulls a chair up next to him and reaches out, picking up Sam’s spoon and a big bite of casserole. “Don’t make me do you like I do my little grandbabies,” Terry threatens, and mercifully puts the spoon back down and just scoots the bowl closer to Sam’s hand. “Come on,” he says, firmly this time. “If you don’t hurry up and eat something, Clint and I are going to leave here without you. He’s probably about done bandaging that scrape up. You warming up a little bit?”

Terry had given him some fresh clothes as soon as he walked in and Sam had changed into them gratefully. It had definitely helped, even if his skin still feels cold and clammy and filthy. That probably won’t change until he gets the chance to take a really hot shower. “Yeah. Thank you. Not often you run into a guy who’ll give you the clothes right off his back.”

“You didn’t have to--”

“I know I don’t have to,” Terry interrupts, shutting Sam down with a wave of his hand. “I’m doing exactly what I want to do being with my Sunday morning, Mr. Wilson. Sure beats that cold-ass walk I almost made myself take. Anyways, listen. I’ve got you some candy bars in there - well, you know. It’s that FiberOne crap. My grandkids think they’re candy bars, though. So, you’ll have something to snack on later, and they don’t expire until June or so, so they’ll be good if you don’t get to them for a while. I put a spare first aid kit in there, too. Those can come in real handy. There’s painkillers in there - all kinds, you know, Motrin and Bayer and Excedrin. The good stuff. Burn cream. All of that. And I threw in some water bottles, and a little bit of cash and don’t you argue with me about that one--”

“Terry--”

“Uh-uh.” Terry shakes his head and shuts his eyes, denoting that he won’t listen to Sam’s reproach. “Nope. You need to have some cash on you at all times. And it’s not going to hurt me to let it go, either. It’s just a little taste of my pool winnings,” he grins, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together and looking really pleased with himself. “Damn near forgot I even had it under the
mattress, to tell you the truth.”

Sam bows his head, humbled, and finally cracks a hint of a smile. Fucking Terry, man. When they find Steve, they’re all coming back here to bring this guy a dozen roses and a damn cake. He deserves a lot more than that.

“I don’t even know you, Terry,” he shrugs. “You really don’t have to do all this for us.”

“Hey,” Terry interjects loudly, pointing with both fingers at his Captain America hat. “You got people in your corner, man. I know, doing what you do, it’s probably easy to forget that, but there’s a lot of people in this country who are rooting for you guys. Especially in New York. I heard you were a Harlem boy.”

“What, you, too?”

“Nah, I moved up here from Indiana. My wife, though - that’s where her family’s got roots.”

Sam sighs, finally giving up on arguing. “I don’t know how I’m going to pay you back for this, man.”

“You don’t have to. You don’t pay back, you pay forward,” Terry insists. He slaps his palms against the table decisively and pushes himself up with a groan. He takes another bowl down from the cupboard and dishes out another generous helping of casserole just as Clint shuts the bathroom door down the hall. Sam can hear the limp in his footfalls as he makes his way toward the kitchen, but as he enters with a theatrically tired stretch, he makes his steps even, like he doesn’t want Sam to see.

“Aw, man, yes,” Clint remarks with a brash smile that hides his exhaustion and the inevitable discomfort in his leg. “Smells like some kick-ass breakfast in here.”

“Oh, you know it’s good,” Terry agrees, adding another heaping spoonful to Clint’s bowl in return for the compliment. “It’ll fill you up, too. Probably not so hot for your sodium or your cholesterol, though,” he adds with an animated cringe. “I mean, it’s probably better if you guys eat it, to tell you the truth. Probably saving me a couple of nitroglycerin pills.” He breaks down chuckling before he even finishes his joke.

Clint pulls up a chair directly across from Sam, which finally blocks the refrigerator and the collage of photos from Sam’s fixed stare, and then he tucks right into the food. He thanks Terry with a couple grossly inappropriate noises of pleasure, but Terry doesn’t seem offended - he just nods knowingly. “This is good shit man, really good,” Clint praises around a mouthful. “Hawkman approved.”

Terry barks out a triumphant laugh and claps Clint on the back. “See, there you go. There you go!”

Sam’s shoulders lose some of their tension as he watches their exchange and despite everything, his body relaxes into a real, honest smile. He doesn’t know what to do about Cap and Barnes just yet, so all he can really do is take Terry’s advice. Break it down, one step at a time. Right now, all he has to do is eat something - and the sausage in that casserole admittedly smells spicy and utterly mouth-watering. Sam manages to finish off his portion even before Clint finishes his, and Terry’s right there with an extra spoonful the moment his bowl is empty.

Once Sam and Clint are both well-fed and wearing dry civvies, Terry takes them by back to the highway via the side-streets, making sure they come at their destination from a good distance, just
in case the police are still on the scene looking for witnesses to question. Sam is surprised to learn that once Terry has some Led Zeppelin blasting from his CD player, he’s completely silent, save for a few enthusiastically mumbled choruses and the intermittent steering-wheel drum solos.

“We getting close?” Terry finally shouts over the last chorus of “Ramble On.”

“Yeah,” Sam confirms. “Right up here on the bridge. I’m parked in somebody’s driveway on the other side.”

The bridge comes into view as they crest the next hill, and Sam doesn’t like what he sees. Only one police car - state trooper. One van, eerily similar to the overturned vehicle still occupying the bridge. Two other cars stopped at the scene. Dark, non-descript sedans. “Great,” he says. “Looks like the Feds are here, too.” They’ve got most of the roadway obstructed. If they try to head through the roadblock too fast, that cop will be on their ass for sure. If they slow down, one of the suits might just clock Sam or Clint.

Clint leans forward in his seat, watching a few of the officers who are making rounds of the site with narrowed eyes. “Those aren’t the Feds,” he informs Sam, tone soft but urgent.

Sam slouches low in his seat as Terry leans on the brakes. “What, you think HYDRA sent a few of their own guys in to do the cleanup?”

Clint studies them for a second longer, then nods surely. “Yeah, and I think the police are buying their bullshit, too.”

One of the men up ahead finishes what looks like a terse conversation at the window of the police car, and to Sam’s dismay, the cop rolls up his window and begins to pull away, apparently having been convinced that whatever’s going down is above his paygrade. If Sam and Clint were alone, they might just risk it, but with Terry in the line of fire, too, he’d rather just head back up the highway and take his chances walking through the brush on the side of the road. “Turn it around, Terry.”

“They’re not going to do shit,” Terry promises confidently.

“They’ve got eyes out for me and Clint,” Sam argues, getting desperate. “We justtrashed one of their labs in the city, man, turn it around.”

“You lay your ass down,” Terry orders Clint as he drives closer. “Pretend you’re sleeping.”

To Sam’s horror, Clint doesn’t take his side. “Doubt I’ll have to pretend,” he comments coolly as he settles across the back seat, throwing an arm over his face.

“What about me?” Sam asks frantically.

Terry just laughs. “Look at them, Wilson. They’re all white. You know they can’t tell the difference between one brother and the next.”

“That does not comfort me, Terry,” Sam pleads through gritted teeth.

“They’re not going to bother us,” he reiterates. “Not if I bother them first.”

“Terry. Don’t.”

“I’ve got this.”
"I swear to God."

“If they’re up to some shit, they’re just as nervous as you are,” he says, braking to a halt beside one of the vans and rolling down his window like it’s nothing.

“We’re going to die,” Sam whispers to himself. One of the agents approaches the truck.

“You guys spooks?” Terry hollers before the guy can get the first word in.

“Just keep moving, sir,” the man advises as he waves Tery on, backing away presumably because he’s recognized that the driver isn’t one of his targets.

“Hey, I’m just taking my son and his buddy back to their car,” Terry explains needlessly as Sam’s stomach churns. “They got a little fucked up last night but they pulled over and called me for a ride. I ain’t been drinking, though,” he adds defensively.

“Keep driving,” the agent instruct firmly. He’s starting to sound a little nervous.

“Hey,” Terry interrupts, leaning out his window and indicating the crash site with a wave of his hand. “Was this aliens?”

“It’s an ongoing investigation. Get out of here.”

Terry shakes his head fervently as he begins to roll up his window, looking wholly unconvinced. “Oh, I know what that means. New York does not need any more goddamn aliens, let me tell you,” he gripes as he pulls away.

And Sam breathes for the first time in a full minute. It takes all of his remaining self-control to not scream in Terry’s ear. “Did you have to be that conspicuous, Terry?” he asks, wiping some cold sweat off his upper lip.

“Oh, Natasha? Yeah, Natasha Romanoff. The Black Widow. Yes, sir.” Terry grins. “She’d love me, huh? Well, you tell Natasha that I am happily married, but I shoot pool Thursday, Friday, Saturdays down at the F.O.E.”

Terry pulls his truck into the hidden drive at an angle, effectively blocking Sam’s car from view. Sam knows that time is of the essence, but he’s not about to leave without thanking Terry one last time. They meet each other by the driver’s side door, and when their hands clasp, Sam swears he can feel some kind of warmth just seeping out of the guy’s calloused fingers. Feels just like shaking his own grandfather’s hand, the day he finished the pipeline.

“Be safe, young man,” Terry grins. “Really nice to meet you guys. Sure wish I could tell my grandkids about it, but you know they wouldn’t believe me anyway.” Clint throws him a salute from the other side of the car. “And you keep that Hawkeye out of trouble, too.”

“Oh, now you remember,” Clint jibes before he shuts the door.

Terry looks a little bewildered as he turns back to Sam. “It is Hawkeye, right? Isn’t that what I’ve been saying?”
Sam smiles placatingly. “You, uh, *might* have called him Hawkman a couple of times.”

Terry only chuckles dryly in disbelief. “Oh, no I did not. Hey, listen, I’ve got a big basement that I’m thinking about turning into a rec-room, right? Maybe get a pool table of my own, later on this summer. Big, flat-screen TV or something so the kids can all come over, watch football. Anyway, I haven’t done anything with it yet, and Judy says I can do whatever down there. So if you guys ever need a place to crash - I’m serious - because she can’t really complain. It’s *my* mancave, you know?”

Sam gives Terry’s shoulder a parting squeeze. “We’ll keep that in mind,” he promises, then adds earnestly, “And thank you. Without you, we might not have made it back.”

“Hey, remember what I said, though.”

The wicked gleam in Terry’s eyes tells Sam exactly what he’s talking about. “Man, I swear, if I get my hands on a spare set of wings, they’re all yours. I’ll put a decal on them with your name on it.”

“Yeah,” Terry grins. “You be sure to do that.”
Sam has become the de facto leader of Cap's team, and he’s got to be ready to fight a war.

Sam and Clint take a long, winding path back to the motel, heading north up the highway and taking an exit to double back into West Seneca. Clint offers to take the wheel a few times, but Sam just blinks to clear his vision and shakes his head, gripping the wheel tighter. By the time they arrive, Wanda and Scott are there already. Wanda had sent them both a text, letting them know that she’d scouted the hotel’s perimeter and that Scott had entered under the doorway to check for signs of a break-in, and then a second message giving them the all-clear. Clint remarks that Natasha’s training had really stuck. Sam’s just thankful that his team has their heads on straight, even if he doesn’t. They’re safe for now, still undetected by HYDRA or the authorities. But they shouldn’t press their luck by lingering.

Inside the motel room, the mood is pretty dismal. Scott asks about their new clothes and the bag that Terry had packed for them, but Clint just mumbles something about explaining it all later. Sam guesses that the four of them are all suffering from the same sharp, sleepless headache, because no one has even bothered to turn on more than the bathroom light. The cold, fluorescent casts harsh shadows on their faces, highlighting the growing lines of exhaustion under every eyelid and each cut and bruise from the fight back at the lab.

Wanda stretches out along the edge of one of the two queen-sized beds, barefoot, with her socks and boots set out to dry in front of the heater by the window. Scott peels off his suit and packs it away, revealing a sweat-stained grey t-shirt, and collapses into the cheap, creaky office chair at the desk, head resting dejectedly on his forearms like a student in detention. Seconds after walking in, Clint had thrown himself down on the rough-upholstered couch, propped up his injured leg, and removed his hearing-aids. The circles under his eyes are two shades darker and more swollen than they were yesterday, making his usually bright irises a dull, watery blue.

Since no one else seems immediately interested, Sam hits the shower first. His wet clothes are packed into a plastic shopping bag, courtesy of Terry. He’ll have to throw them in the wash later tonight, once the motel’s little laundromat has cleared out. That is, if they even stay that long. Until then, the clothes Terry loaned him are still clean and dry and he’s thankful to have them, even if the jeans are kind of high-waisted and the sweatshirt is a few sizes too large. And God knows, Sam definitely prefers his own boxers to these weird, baggy grandpa briefs. He folds it all up neatly, hoping that he’ll get the chance to return it.

It is a feat of sheer willpower that Sam doesn’t use all of the hot water. Then again, even a lukewarm stream feels scalding hot against his numb, chapped face and his frostbitten feet. He wishes he could just stand there in the shower for hours, where it’s easier to think. He wants to stay there where the only sound is the water beating down on the back of his skull until he has a solid plan to take back out into the room with him - some little scrap of hope, some kind of revelation to lift everybody’s spirits. But he can’t do that. He cuts it short.

He lets his skin warm up, washes off the smell of the creek, and he turns off the faucet. Five
minutes in all, just like being back in Kandahar. As he redresses, he prepares himself to initiate the conversation that no one wants to have. Everybody needs to get some rest. At least six hours of it, if they’re going to function. Sam knows that. He’s right there with them. But before they can sleep, they’re all going to have to come to a consensus on how to move forward, because their present situation can only be described as undeniably and totally fucked.

He steps back out into the motel room and takes a deep breath of the cool, dry air. Wanda doesn’t move a muscle, Scott doesn’t raise his head, and Clint’s eyes don’t even break their thousand yard stare.

Okay. Morale is obviously at an all-time low on Team Cap. That’s a problem.

So Sam breaks it down, one step at a time.

He forces his stinging feet to carry him smartly from switch to switch as he turns on every single light in the room. And it helps. Wanda sits up, Scott lifts his head. Clint’s gaze comes back into focus and he puts one hearing aid back in.

Step two. Sam digs through the backpack Terry had loaded up for them and locates the stash of snack food – it’s mostly those FiberOne bars, but there are a few baggies full of homemade trail-mix, too, and he hands one of each to Scott and Wanda.

By step three, even Sam is enjoying the effects of his progress and feeling a little more energetic. He goes back to the bathroom to plug in the little coffee-maker on the counter and he gets a double-strength pot brewing. He leaves the door open and turns off the fan so that the smell will fill up the room. Maybe a shift in the gloomy atmosphere isn’t going to fix everything, but it sure is a start.

“Alright,” he says, making his voice clear and strong, ignoring the ever-worsening tickle of a sore throat. “Let’s get this shit sorted out.”

The team manages a full hour of discourse before stress and exhaustion catch back up with them, despite the bright room and the hot, bitter coffee. Wanda and Lang give a brief report on their findings at Niagara Falls, which amount only to seeing a group out on the airfield who, by Wanda’s account, didn’t seem to belong, although they were accompanied by a uniformed officer. Sam listens carefully, trying to discern any details that seem out of place, any irregularity or breach of conduct that could confirm HYDRA’s presence at the base. He uses the pad of paper on the phone table to take down a description of the officer, but he knows he’s grasping at straws. Clint fills Lang and Wanda in on their end of the search - they look a little shocked to hear about Terry’s sudden appearance on the scene, but even Clint’s pared-down retelling of that morning’s events make the corner of Sam’s mouth quirk upward fondly. Getting the whole team up to speed is relatively easy and doesn’t take too long. The sticking point is, of course, what to do next.

After a collective sigh, the team seems to agree to a quick break in the discussion so that everyone can gather their thoughts. Sam finally allows himself to take a seat on the edge of one of the beds and immediately regrets it - it’ll be hard to convince himself to stand back up when the time comes and he tries not to let the thought of crawling under a blanket and taking twenty cross his mind.

Clint eventually hauls himself up off the couch with a deep groan and takes his cellphone out of his bag, then limps away into the bathroom and shuts the door. Sam is sitting closest to the shared wall and as firmly as he tells himself not to strain his ears, he can’t help but catch Clint’s half of the conversation.
“Hey there, sexy. How much per minute? You take Visa?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Little scrape on my leg, that’s about it.”

“No, I swear, I’m fine.”

“...Not...yet. No. I know.”

“Whole thing went south on us. Real bad.”

“Steve. Barnes.”

“We think so.”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re hoping.”

“How’re my boys?”

“You kidding me? Shit, if he’s that good at math he can do my fucking taxes next year.”

“How’s Lila? She talk you out of that no-phone rule yet?”

“Damn...remind me not to piss you off.”

“Soon, I promise. You know I can’t let this one ride, Laura.”

“I know. I will.”

“Cross my heart.”

“Yeah, I’ll check in.”

“Love you, too.”

“I--I hear you. Yes, ma’am. I know, yes, it’s a hole right now, but it’s going to be a swimming pool by summer, okay? The kids are going to love it.”

“No, I’m going to finish it.”

“Yup. Love you, too. Sorry about this.”

“Bye, baby. Give ‘em kisses for me.”

Sam takes a deep, steadying breath. If he’s going to keep Clint out on the road, away from his wife and kids, he sure as shit better make effective use of their time. More than once, Sam has entertained the thought of one day stepping out from behind Steve and leading his own team, but not under these circumstances, not when he’s this unprepared. And he didn’t realize just how terrifying it would be - every step forward is a step onto muddier, slicker ground, and there’s no sure footing in sight.

Clint’s phone-call drags at his heart, but he’s also reminded to check his own phone, now that it’s charged. He digs it out of his bag, and immediately feels that tightness in his jaw that always comes with seeing five missed calls and a voicemail. Same number each time, and he doesn’t recognize it. He braces himself - for what, he’s not sure - and accesses his mailbox.

Hey, Wilson, this is Agent Sharon Carter. If you’re in contact with Steve, have him call me on this
line when you get this. It’s important. Thanks.

Ignoring the fact that it feels like a huge breach of trust, he searches Steve’s bag for his phone and checks that, too. Seven missed calls, three voicemails. Same number. He listens.

The first message is brusque, but not terribly urgent. *Steve, it’s Sharon. Call me when you get this.*

The second, her voice wavers a little with a note of worry. *Steve, you need to keep a lower profile. Just got called in on my vacation because someone blew up a lab in New York. HYDRA scientists? Chemical and biomechanical weapons? Sound familiar?* A tired sigh cuts the message in half. *Listen, five of the scientists are German nationals so they’re flying me out to help extradite them. No word yet on any hard evidence, but everybody figures you’ve got something to do with it. Get in touch with me. I’ll be in New York by tomorrow evening. Be safe. And call me.*

The third is quieter. Gentler. *Steve, I’m on my way. I called Sam. Didn’t get an answer from him either. Please don’t make me break you guys out of a max security prison. If you’re dead, I’m going to be really pissed. Call me when you can.*

A mechanical voice. *End of messages.*

He reaches for his own phone to call her back, not wanting to give her any false hope in seeing Steve’s number come up on the ID. There’s no answer. Probably no service on the plane.

“Agent Carter, this is Wilson,” he says, hoping his tone is even enough to not imply the worst case scenario. “Give me a call back. We’ve...we got a situation.”

He ends the call to find Scott and Wanda’s eyes fixed tiredly on him and purses his lips, not having much to say. Clint finally emerges from the bathroom a moment later, drying his hands and his freshly washed face with one of the hand-towels.

Scott asks the obvious question, as usual. “So...how are we going to get Captain America back?”

Sam swallows a retort, quietly tamping down the urge to throw the phone he’s still clutching at Lang’s big forehead.

“Barnes told us that he knew the location of many HYDRA bases which had remained in operation,” Wanda thinks aloud. “He said there were not many in the United States. More in Canada, more still in Central and South America. If they were taken to one of the bases he knew of, it is probably up north.”

“Yeah,” Sam sighs. “But it’s not like Barnes is here to tell us where we ought to start looking. *Up north...* I mean, that covers a shitload of territory. For all we know they’re shipping them up to some underground bunker north of Ivujivik.”

“They’re not gonna get that far in a chopper,” Clint cuts in.

Wanda nods. “So then perhaps someone should have eyes on other air bases? They may try to transfer them at some point.”

“And if we don’t catch the transfer,” Scott confirms, catching himself up. “We lose them.”

“Agent Carter’s on her way here to help with the clean-up after that lab bust,” suggests Sam. “She’s about the only person I know with the resources to track that kind of shit and see the red flags.”
“I don’t know about that,” Clint shrugs. “I’m betting Nat could do it.”

Sam is quick to reply. “I don’t trust Romanoff right now. I’m still not sure where she stands.”

Clint throws him a stinging glance. “Oh, but you’ll trust a Fed, no problem.”

Sam crosses his arms and turns his upper body toward Barton, shoulders squared. “Yeah, because that Fed went out of her way to help us out while Romanoff was busy trying to arrest us.”

“She got Cap and Barnes out of there safe—”

“Yeah, and then she stood there with her mouth shut while our asses got hauled off to the Raft, Barton!”

“She would never, for a second, let HYDRA hold Steve Rogers captive.”

“Sure, she wouldn’t, and neither would Ross! It’s where he goes after we get him back I’m worried about.”

“Wilson, this is Nat we’re talking about—”

“Lower your voices,” Wanda snaps as every light in the motel room buzzes and dims. Scott jumps and looks around, confused. “Someone will hear you.”

Clint and Sam take a step back from one another, embarrassed. Their eyes meet briefly and Sam spares him an apologetic frown. They’re both just run down. Clint lets out a puff of air, releasing the tension between them. Sam knows it’s not personal.

“I think that we should ask them both for help,” Wanda continues calmly. “Agent Romanoff is very hard to read, but not impossible, not when she feels strongly. Her allegiance is not with Ross or the Accords. I think even Stark was beginning to waver. We need her. She will understand that. And if Sam trusts Carter, we should trust her as well.”

A moment of silence follows as Sam and Clint consider Wanda’s advice. Lang breaks it with an awkwardly raised hand and an expectant, “Aye.”

“Wanda’s right,” Sam finally agrees. “We need everybody on this we can get. Sorry I was a shithead, Barton. Call her up.”

“Yes, sir,” Clint nods.

With that much decided, Lang sees another opportunity to chime in. “So...I mean, obviously, HYDRA. Yeah. Super bad dudes. Had some bad experiences with them myself, in fact. But do we have any clue what they’re going to do? Like, I somehow doubt they just want Captain America dead.”

“My best guess is that they’re after the serum,” Sam sighs. “They’re weaker than they’ve ever been. If they could make themselves some original flavor super soldiers, they’d be back in business real quick.”

“What about Barnes?” asks Lang. “I mean, do you think they’ve still got a way to make him go all...Winter Soldier-y again? Because that would fucking suck. Not just for us, because we’d probably have to fight him, but...you know. It would suck really bad for him, too.”

Sam and Bucky have had their disagreements, that’s for damn sure. Their personalities aren’t
exactly the most compatible, and it took Sam a long time to trust him a fraction of how much Steve does. That fight in DC has been kind of hard to forget, not to mention the shit that went down in Berlin, but Sam’s starting to see in him a little of what Steve sees - the guy just won’t give up. Sam has only read a handful of the files Natasha has recovered on the actual procedures HYDRA did, so he’s not sure just what they put Barnes through, but he knows it must have been pretty nasty, and yet Barnes is still keen to take them on. And he tries to keep a handle on himself. He’s been getting better every time Sam has talked to him and it makes Sam sick to his stomach to think that Bucky might be back in his own personal hell right now. As for whether or not HYDRA will try to make him into their Soldier again, Sam knows that they’ll try, but he’s also got some first-hand experience with Barnes’ stubborn ass.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” he says earnestly. “Nobody hates HYDRA like he does. No way he’ll work for them ever again. And whatever they could do to him...I doubt it’ll be anything new.”

Wanda studies the brown carpet with a furrowed brow, then corrects Sam, “No. They could not threaten to hurt Steve, before.”

“It’s not that simple, anyway,” Barton adds. “I know you guys are sick of hearing about it, but look, if somebody fucks with your mind, you don’t have much of a defense. I mean, it’s your brain, man. It’s all you got. You have nothing, no defense to fall back on - not your knowledge, not experience, not the people you love, nothing, and these guys...what they did to him and their other Assets...it’s like you’re a clean slate. There’s nothing left of you, so they can just put in whatever they want.”

“But Barnes got better,” Sam counters.

Clint’s eyes brighten and his mouth drops open. Sam thinks he can just about see an actual lightbulb over his head. “You’re never really better,” Clint says with a lopsided smile. “You just learn to take precautions. Everything you know, everything you remember, you take care of it.”

Wanda moves first. She rolls across the bed and reaches down into the nook where it meets the wall to dig Barnes’ bag out from underneath Steve’s. She dumps it out on the bed and a few spare side-pieces and ammo boxes fall out (Sam can only pray that the safeties are on) and then reaches up into a smaller pocket and comes back victorious, clutching a beat up steno pad. She thumbs through it, scanning each page until she finds exactly what she’s looking for and holds the notepad up for Sam and Clint to see.

It looks like Barnes has come back to the page a hundred times. Words are crossed out, notes are scribbled in the margins, there are three different colors of pen, but it’s exactly what they need. He kept a list. Every base he remembered, he wrote it down. Wanda hands the notepad off to Sam with a smile. Three pages total - twenty-nine locations in Canada.

“Huh,” Clint chuckles, reading over Sam’s shoulder. “What do you know? There actually is one north of Ivujivik.”

Sam snorts. “Yeah, let’s just hope we don’t have to figure out a way to get up there. Alright, Barton. Call up Romanoff, see how fast she can get to us.”

“Sort of…” Clint mumbles, “already texted her while I was in the bathroom.”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Great.” He gives Lang and Wanda a quick once over. Wanda’s sitting up straight and her jaw is set. Lang’s eyes look a little wider. “You guys good to head out? I think we’ve been in town a little too long,” he says, already anticipating the drive and pretending that his
“own eyes don’t sting like hell right now.”

“Where will we go, another hotel?” Wanda asks. “This rescue mission will get very expensive.”

“Yes, we need, like, a…” Scott scans the room, waiting for one of his more experienced teammates to fill in the blank, but Sam waits on him. “Like, a rebel base,” he finishes resolutely.

“Safehouse is taken care of,” Clint announces, gathering up everyone’s bags and gear and piling all of it on the unoccupied bed.

Sam shakes his head. “Man, what else did you do in the bathroom?”

Clint cocks an eyebrow in his direction. “I mean, do you really want to know?” he asks, taking his phone out of his pocket while searching through the front pocket the bag that Terry had loaded up for them.

“What the hell are you planning on getting us a safehouse to work from? Clint, who are you calling?”

“You fuckin’ know who I’m calling,” Clint smirks cheekily.

“Barton, don’t. Listen to me, Barton, I don’t want him involved in this, he could get—”

“He offered.”

“Barton!” Too late.

“Terrence, dude, long time no talk. It’s your boy, Hawkman.”

“You are not his boy,” Sam grumbles, sounding a touch possessive before he can check himself.

Sam had protested every mile of the drive back to Terry’s house. This was too dangerous. This old guy didn’t need to be anywhere near the crossfire, but Sam has to admit that he doesn’t see another option at present.

Terry had jogged out to greet them. Made Scott’s day by knowing his name, shook Wanda’s hand ever-so-delicately with both of his, and offered the two of them the remainder of his casserole. Despite his misgivings, Sam had taken it upon himself to debrief Terry on the whole situation, his explanation punctuated with assurances that Terry should not feel pressured to allow them to stay, inquiries about his wife’s opinion on the whole mess, and apologies various and sundry. Terry had brushed off the apologies with an adamant shake of his head, but had otherwise listened to Sam with an understanding and intensity that revealed that, underneath that talkative, grinning exterior, he was still the same decorated pilot who’d flown those covert ops and never spoken a word of it. Each time Sam had mentioned HYDRA, a little spark of something hotter and angrier had seemed to spark in the old man’s eyes. And Sam knows that feeling - opening his door to some near-strangers on the run from the law, because not doing so would only be helping out the bad guys, wouldn’t it?

By two o’clock, Terry had made a few trips up to his attic and dragged down a plethora of camping supplies, which he had directed them to move down into the basement - canvas folding chairs, sleeping bags, two card tables. The basement is empty except for a step ladder and few cans of paint, sitting at the juncture where dirty white walls meet a deep cherry red, and it doesn’t take them long to get it set up and move their bags inside. They’re in the middle of unpacking when
Sam and Terry overhear the front door open and shut. Terry checks his watch. “That’s my girl, always leaving early on Sundays,” he chuckles.

“You want me to--” Sam starts, pointing toward the stairs in an offer to accompany Terry up to the kitchen to explain the intrusion.

“Nah, nah, I’ve got this. Just watch me go. I’ll charm her socks off,” he laughs, hurrying back up the steps. Sam hears him call out, “Hey there, sweetheart! Hey, you remember how you said I could do whatever I wanted with the basement?”

At that point, all Sam can really do is pray that she doesn’t call the police. A few minutes later, he holds his breath as two sets of footstep make their way back down toward the basement. Wanda, Clint, and Scott stop what they’re doing and stand respectfully to attention as Judy lets her momentum carry her right into the center of the room.

Judy is Latina, sharply dressed, without a speck of grey in her hair despite her aged face, and she probably stands no higher than Sam’s breastbone. She turns in a circle, hand over her heart in shock, and Sam resigns himself to begging for her forgiveness, packing everything back up, and leaving.

“Oh my God,” she says emphatically, as her turn brings her back around to face her husband at the bottom of the stairs. “Terrence, you actually met the Avengers?”

“I invited the Avengers to stay in the basement, baby.”

“I thought you were lying!” she practically hisses.

“Nope.”

“Oh my God,” she repeats, turning again to look at all of them. “I’ve got to call Maria. She’ll shit her pants. Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry. I’m Judith Torres-Clay, I’m Terry’s wife.” She reaches out to shake the nearest hand, which happens to be Wanda’s, and once they realize they’re welcome, the rest of them line up to shake her hand, too. Sam sighs with relief. Terry gives him that, I told you so, look. “I love you guys. I love what you do. My grandkids love you. My sister, Maria, loves you. And I mean, in a creepy way,” she grins. “And she’s single.” She gets to Clint last. “And I love you. Oh! You’re my favorite. A little shorter than I thought you were going to be,” she remarks, craning her neck to look up at him, “but still good-looking.”

Sam begins to wonder if this house has ever known silence.

By four o’clock, the entire team has resigned themselves to exhaustion. Judy had made it abundantly clear that she was off work on Mondays and would therefore be happy to make a late dinner for them once they’d had some rest, but looking at his teammates and knowing the way he feels, Sam wouldn’t be surprised if the four of them slept straight through until morning. He’s seconds away from dozing off when the buzz of his cell jolts him awake. Sharon.

And he has to explain the whole thing all over again. She takes it pretty well. Sam gives her Terry’s address, in case she finds time to meet up with them. After that, his heart is pounding again, thinking about Steve and feeling like he should be anywhere right now besides tucked into a plush sleeping bag, drifting off. But his body needs this. He compromises and reaches into Barnes’ bag to review the locations of the bases up north - at least that’s a little productive.
Monty knew a place in London - Grannery Tavern?

Got some time off after we’d all given our reports to the Col. Got checked over in medical by some grouchy old dame who didn’t know what to think of what I had to tell her.

Monty and Jones picked me up outside, then the rest of the boys, and then we all went to track down Steve. Found him stuck in a crowd outside the Col.’s tent and couldn’t walk ten feet without a clap on the back, so we rescued him, took him with us into town.

Couldn’t keep my eyes off him in the truck and he couldn’t keep his hands off me. Had to look right into his eyes to tell he was still my Steve, so much had changed. Touched me just the same though, just with bigger hands. Kept one planted on my leg the whole ride, with his other arm around my shoulders. The guys all saw no doubt, but nobody said a word.

Drank a lot at the bar, but never felt a drop of it. Didn’t know why, yet. Hadn’t yet spoke to Steve about the serum, didn’t know we’d had the same shit done to us.

Booked a room at the tavern together, just me and him. He looked so different, felt different. Kissed just like always. Tall and strong as could be, too, but when he took me to bed he was just slow and gentle and sweet. Didn’t get out of breath like he used to, just stared down at me and smiled. Don’t ever want to forget how he smiled at me.

He’s likely moved on now, found somebody. Haven’t had the nerve to ask. Wouldn’t kill me to do it, though, and I haven’t heard him mention a girl. I’ll see where we stand if we ever get a moment alone. I’m still his guy if he wants me.

Sam shuts the notepad, eyes too tired to continue. A handful of missing puzzle pieces fall into place. He wastes a few minutes wondering why Steve hadn’t told him, but he knows. This is just something Steve was raised to keep quiet about. And they’ve done a damn good job of hiding it, too - Sam knows it’s none of his business, but he’s a little shocked. He really hadn’t seen this coming.

Aside from that, he doesn’t know what to think in light of recent events, so his mind settles for thinking everything at once. I hope they talked. I hope they talked before this happened. I hope I can bring them home safe. They deserve to have a break. At least, wherever they are, they’re together. What if they’ve been split up? What if they never talked about it? What if I can’t bring them home?

The stairs creak softly as Terry comes down to check in on them. He surveys the room silently. Sam has his eyes shut, but he doesn’t seem to fool Terry for a second. He must have heard the notebook papers rustling. “Get on to sleep, Wilson,” he orders quietly. “Swear to God, I could hear you thinking from all the way upstairs.”

“I will,” Sam promises.

“It’s going to be a brand new day tomorrow,” Terry reminds him, voice fading as he climbs the stairs. “It may not be any easier,” he chuckles, “but it’ll be brand new.”
Winter

Chapter Summary

Bucky Barnes will never be their Soldier again.

All of his dreams are in black and white.

They’re bright. Like a headache. Every movement within the dream jumps and stutters and quakes. Somewhere inside his head, there’s a bad connection. Synapses fire, but the picture never comes through clearly and he sees the world around in him only in flashbulb bursts and overexposed photographs. The sky is always pale. There is no difference between green grass and muddy snow.

Voices are dampened.

Time can’t find a steady rhythm.

The touch of friendly hands fights to reach his skin through a morphine-tingle numbness. Landscapes and continents bleed together and can shift within the space of a backward step. The sun never feels warm on his face, but the wind doesn’t sting, either.

But this isn’t a nightmare. There’s nothing to see in a nightmare. Those are dark. Loud. There, he can feel everything. Hands, bullets, scalpels, clamps, the rush of air as he falls, burning heat-lamps, the buzz of a bonesaw radiating through him, making his teeth chatter. Every nerve sparks brilliantly behind his eyelids, and each sensation explodes in firework-colors and rings in his ears like a tripped landmine.

He’ll gladly take a dream, when he can get one.

Bucky wakes up before Steve, unsure if he ever really fell asleep. The morning sun is still dim outside the little green half-shelter they’re sharing. It can’t be much later than seven. Doesn’t feel too cold, but the clouds he’d seen overhead last night suggest more snow today. The team has decided not to move further into the mountains until the storm has run its course. The Commandos have been tasked with weeding out any Hydra or Axis bunkers on the French-Italian border, so their time-table is looser than usual. Still, the delay has Steve worried.

But Bucky doesn’t worry. He doesn’t care if they make their destination in time or not. He’ll follow Steve anywhere he goes, but his heart’s just not in the war, anymore. Never really was. Once, he had cheered for the fellas who were shipping out and shaken hands with his buddies who had enlisted. Then, ever since his own number had come up in the draft, every mention of the war felt like swallowing bitter medicine. Especially when Steve would get on his soapbox over it.

Bucky won’t say any of that out loud, though. He would break Steve’s heart. Steve would be ashamed of him, if he knew. So he gripes and complains with the boys about the weather and squeezes Steve’s shoulder when he frets, while silently, secretly wishing for more snow, and another day of rest.

The wind is gentle and quiet. The heavy canvas walls of the tent rise and fall in the drifting breeze
outside like they’re breathing. They’ve got their pallets stacked together and it feels like luxury - makes the rocky ground a little softer underneath him - and they’ve combined their blankets, too, so between the four layers of wool and the warmth of Steve’s strange new body, Bucky doesn’t really feel like getting up to check on the camp outside.

He shuts his eyes when he feels the covers shift beside him. Steve stretches once, reaches up, rubs the sleep from his lashes, and sits up without so much as a yawn, immediately leaning forward to pull on his boots. Bucky remembers when it used to take a lot more poking and prodding to get him out of bed for work - with asthma that bad, Steve had never slept so well. Coughed all through the night, sometimes. Now, here it was, dead of winter in the mountains, and he sleeps like a baby for all of four hours and wakes up ready to take on the whole Axis. Bucky drags himself up, feigning a slow return from slumber that hadn’t really come.

“How’s the weather?” he slurs.

“That wind died down, at least,” Steve replies softly. Doesn’t sound like the others are up and moving yet. If the storm hasn’t moved on, Steve probably won’t see much reason to wake them. The pass through the mountains won’t be navigable. “I’m gonna go take a piss. I’ll check it out.”

He slips out, and Bucky grudgingly throws off the covers and dons his jacket, wincing as his cold feet slide into colder boots, fingers aching as he laces them. He crawls out of their shelter and stumbles over to the cooking fire to stoke it and boil a pot of coffee.

They’ve made their camp on a shelf of slate rock under a broad overhang - Bucky guesses they’re about fifteen miles south of Mont Blanc. The open gray cavern is deep enough to shield them from the worst of the snowfall and keep their tents and supplies from being buried, although the ground is hard for sleeping and slick and wet with cold pools of water, into which the ice-coated stalactites had dripped like broken faucets all through the night. Now, their campsite has shrunk - snow has drifted all the way up to the shelf edge, piling against the rock and enclosing them. Anyone passing this way would never see any sign of the team.

Bucky turns the logs and blows on the coals, hoping he won’t have to haul any more fuel over, and gets the flames rekindled well enough for coffee. They’ll have to add a few logs if they want a hot breakfast. He nestles the pot into the embers and flips up his jacket collar, shivering, and takes a look around to see if the other boys are stirring.

But there are no other tents. No Commandos, as if they’ve packed up and moved on in the time it took him to put the coffee on.

Steve. Where did he say he was going? Just out for a piss, so he can’t have gone far. But he’s not in the alcove, and there are no tracks leading away from the camp. Had he gotten back into their shelter while Bucky had his back turned? But their shelter is gone, too.

He wanders to the edge of the campsite, where the gray stone makes a gradient with the white snow and looks out across the empty foothills.

“Steve?” he calls out. His voice is quiet, no matter how much breath he puts behind it. His tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth. Dry. Gritty. He can taste the tang of sweat on his lip. A gust of wind whips toward him, skimming the first layer off the snowdrifts and pelting his face with sand.

Sand.

Sand. Acrid, dirty, stinging in the corners of his eyes like opium-drowsiness. He kneels down and picks up a handful of it and watches it fall from the gaps in between his metal fingers. Particles
catch in the joints and grind when he flexes his fingers. He doesn’t turn around again. He knows there’s no camp behind him. He thinks he might have called out for someone, or imagined doing so. He can’t remember who, or why. The heat’s probably getting to him.

He lays down flat on his belly on the edge of the cliff overlooking the KSM motorway, keeping his eyes on the winding road three hundred and fifty meters below. The butt of his rifle rests against his shoulder at the ready, waiting for a white van with a female driver, heading toward the Armenian border.

She’s two hours behind the ETA he was given.

He watches the van approach, silently counting milliseconds, feeling the wind, watching her speed, watching the curve of the highway, keeping his sights trained on the space just in front of the driver’s side tire.

She reduces her speed and he adjusts his aim, finger steady on the trigger. She stops. Either he’s been made or he’s about to get a much clearer shot on his target.

She exits the van. Wisps of red hair flutter out of her brown ِهِلْب and the sun glares of the surface of her dark glasses. He pulls his rifle back and remains still and flat against the ground as she scans the area for threats. She’s chewing a piece of gum.

She pats the side of van, signalling the all-clear. His target exits, but the open back door doesn’t allow him a clear shot yet. The target helps a woman in a niqab out of the back of the van and keeps an arm around her. A boy follows close behind her.

He loses visual on both the driver and the target when they go to stand on the passenger side. The target’s wife and son are still visible. The woman glances around, then hurries off the road and hides behind a rock to relieve herself. The boy - he’s no older than ten - squats down beside the van and rests a notebook on his bare knees. He looks up toward the mountains and cliff-faces, right toward the rifle trained on him, and then begins to draw long, jagged lines on the paper. He’s drawing the mountains. Every so often, he looks up again to study them.

Every time the boy glances up, he feels like they make eye contact.

His finger rests against the forgotten trigger, relaxed.

He never does get a clear shot on the target, but he gets a clear shot on the driver. He has a six minute window and could shoot out two of the tires. But he doesn’t. He stares down at pebbles on the ground, absently counting grains of sand, mind blank because it’s reliving something forgotten, remembering something that never happened, missing someone he’s never known.

Thirty minutes later, someone radios in.

“You got visual on the target yet?”

“Negative.”

“Fuck, they must have been early. Probably already on a plane halfway to Ukraine. Immediate extraction. You’re gonna have to take a chopper to Odessa.”

“Immediate extraction. Understood.”

At least, that’s how he’s been conditioned to answer. But he’s so tired. He doesn’t respond to his conditioning. Instead, he just keeps walking, feeling like the whole world is dim and his senses are
dampened. He can hear the brown water splashing at the bank to his right, agitated by the helicarrier sinking in the middle of the river, and beyond that, the crackle of flames and the groan of failing support beams, screaming sirens and the beating of helicopter blades. Dark smoke from the Triskelion reaches out like a grasping hand over the Potomac, stretching out toward him just as the distress call comes over his earpiece again.

“Any available agents in the west building, we need immediate extraction--the secretary needs medevac--please respond--”

He doesn’t acknowledge. No other agents respond. Just an hour ago, there had been constant radio chatter on the comm. Now, he gets the feeling that he’s alone.

“Rumlow--do you copy? We’re on level seventy-one, we need immediate extraction.”

“Rumlow doesn’t copy--I’m pulling him out--”

“Rollins, leave his ass and get to the Secretary--”

He keeps walking.

But he’s so, so tired.

He feels his step quickening as his head droops, steps becoming stumbles as his feet drag through the grass. The beating helicopter blades are getting closer all the time and he wants to run, but he’s exhausted and his eyelids are heavy, and hunger is spreading from his belly up into his chest and down into his legs, making his fingers tingle and his feet numb, and his mouth is filling with thin saliva and that conductive copper tang. There’s an empty lot up ahead. He can’t remember where he’s going, but he knows that if he can make it to that lot, he’ll be Closer. The ground slips away under his feet, like a treadmill. He can’t hold his head up anymore. Finally, he falls.

But never hits the ground. He’s being held. Carried. He’s safe. He knows the man cradling his body by everything but sight - the salty smell of sweat and the darkness of smoke. He knows the way those lungs breathe - he knows from long nights in the field, listening to the open, easy sighs, where before there had been shallow inhales and constant coughing fits. He knows the shape of the hands holding him steady and he can feel that very particular gentleness - careful and tender and skittish, the kind a strong person doesn’t know by instinct, but painstakingly learns so he can touch the things he loves. Steve has him. He’s safe.

And then Steve lets go.

Steve’s familiar hands are replaced by other hands. By tools. By monitors and machines. His clothing is cut away and he can feel the blunt end of the careless scissors driving a red line into his skin. They dismantle his body. They fill it with needles. He is not safe.

He can hear their voices, all just on the edge of familiarity. He hates them. He’s heard them since he escaped, too - snatches of quiet words that become amplified and blast through his ears as he wakes up in the morning. He doesn’t know who they are or what they’re doing to him, though. The world is dark, and only full of bitter, sharp physical sensations.

So it has to be a nightmare. That’s what this is.

Because there’s nothing to see in a nightmare.

Because those are dark and loud. Because he can feel everything. Hands, scalpels, clamps. Nerve sparks. Landmine blasts.
Bucky wakes up before Steve, unsure if he ever really fell asleep.

The lab is still quiet and mostly empty. One guard in view, but there’s probably another by the doors that he can’t see. Neither of them have eyes on him.

He puts his bandaged right hand to his mouth and tears away some gauze and tape with his teeth, then flattens the dressing back down. He sits up and sticks the wad of torn dressing under the metal cot, along with all the rest he’s managed to hide. He has done this every time they’ve changed the bandages. He almost has enough, now.

Might be a little late for an escape plan, though. He’s been defiant. Caused a lot of trouble. They’ll want to wipe him today. They might wipe Steve, too. Especially considering yesterday’s events. He wants to know what they’d done to Steve last night, when they took him away. Why he hadn’t been able to look him in the eye when he’d returned to the lab.

No. He doesn’t want to know.

He doesn’t have time to think about it; it’s morning, and the IV bags that the techs had set up last night should be empty. At night, he pulls the tree close to the cot to keep the line slack and holds the plastic tube between his arm and body as he sleeps, kinked to stop the flow of the drugs. Before anyone comes in to check on him, he takes down one bag as he grabs the IV stand for support, feigning dizziness. The guards usually look away if he’s taking a piss - men are almost universally conditioned to do so, even in a situation like this. He hides the bag just under the edge of the hospital gown, uncaps it, and pours it out into the toilet. He’ll do the other one in an hour or so. The guards don’t seem to have noticed.

An hour later, he barely manages to empty and rehang the second bag before the doors out in the lab open. Montgomery, with a security team of four. Their hands are on their guns as they approach the cells, which means that they’re coming for him, not Steve. His cell door slides open. The guards enter first, surround him. Montgomery takes out the IV. Doesn’t even look at the bags. Bucky stares up at him with sleepy, drugged eyes, hoping the impression is passable. His mind is entirely alert.

“Come on.”

And he recognizes that tone. Montgomery doesn’t like ECT. He hates putting Bucky in the chair - for a doctor in the service of HYDRA, he’s always been uncomfortable with causing the Asset pain. Maybe he’s just uncomfortable with the sight of it. Squeamish. It doesn’t matter. Bucky knows it will be today. What he’s collected will have to be enough.

He grips the edge of the cot as he stands, peeling away the wad of gauze and tape and concealing it between his thumb and palm, making sure that the tape faces outward. He takes a few, dragging steps toward the cell door, letting himself sway unsteadily, so the guards don’t question it when he pauses to support himself against the doorframe. His palm lingers over the strike plate, where the latch bolts will enter when the door slides shut. One quick press inward as he lets his left knee buckle, guiding the agents’ eyes downward, and the tangle of dressings is out of sight.

They march him down the hallway, away from the elevator and deeper into the facility, and they
lead him to a small room. There’s another doctor there already - a woman he’s never seen. He knows it’s against the rules to speak or ask questions, but the rules no longer apply to him. He’s not theirs. As long as he keeps breaking their rules, he never will be again. “What are you going to do?”

“Contrast MRI,” Montgomery remarks shortly.

The woman motions to the security agents, and they drive him toward the exam table. He goes at his own pace and sits down. “Why?”

Montgomery releases a breath through his nose. Aggravated. “To see if that implant is damaged, or if it caused a bleed.”

“To make sure you don’t kill me later when you wipe me.”

“Yep.”

The woman inserts the line for the contrast and Bucky feels the familiar warmth and nausea begin to spread through him. He doesn’t want to speak. He has nothing to say to any of these people, but the silence is making this feel too much like before. Too much like compliance. And he is not the Asset. He is not the Soldier. He’s Bucky Barnes. He knows something about who that man was - he’s gleaned enough from seeing Steve’s expectations. He knows he can do a fair impression. Good enough to fool Steve every now and then, to make him smile that hopeful smile. He knows what Bucky - what he - would have done, faced with this same situation. He’d have given these bastards hell. So he’ll give them hell.

“So, Chris.”

Montgomery instantly looks up from what he’s doing, face twisting with surprise. He hadn’t been around for the early years of defiance - all the major malfunctions he’d witnessed were bursts of animal rage. Montgomery knows the Asset, and he knows Montgomery, but Montgomery doesn’t know a damn thing about Barnes. Has no idea who he’s dealing with. That might give Bucky the upper hand. Clearly, he’s already touched a nerve, so he keeps pushing. “How’re the wife and kids?”

“How do you know I’ve got kids?” Montgomery replies shakily, trying to laugh it off, belittle him.

“You got three. Probably - what - ten, eight, and seven, aren’t they? Three times, you gained some weight, and then you took a few weeks off work. Looked real tired for a couple months after, every time. Slept at your lab some nights.”

“I don’t have any children,” Montgomery insists, returning his eyes to his computer screen, but not his attention. He looks pale.

“You know, I’m not stupid. You guys always seem to forget that.”

Montgomery turns in his chair, his expression stern. “If you’re trying to threaten me, Soldier--”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky interrupts, momentarily enjoying the little thrill of adrenaline it gives him to interrupt a technician and relishing the confusion and shock on Montgomery’s face. “I’m not going to hurt your kids. Or your wife. I wouldn’t do that. Turns out, given the opportunity, I’m a pretty nice guy.”

Montgomery laughs at that outright. “Right. Say one more word, Soldier. There will be consequences.”
And Bucky laughs right back at him. “What the fuck are you going to do to me?” he chuckles, then glances briefly toward the female doctor, who has taken a few steps back. “Sorry, miss,” he says with a sarcastic grimace before continuing. “You’re not going to shoot me. I’m worth money to Pierce. He’d have your ass for it. So what’s left? More torture? More conditioning? You guys have tried it all, at this point. You can’t throw anything at me that I can’t catch, pal, believe me.”

“God, I hope you don’t need brain surgery. I can’t wait to wipe you so you shut up,” Montgomery remarks, clearly thrown off balance and grasping at straws for comebacks.

“Yeah, I’ll bet you’d like that. If I was quiet again. Obedient. Compliant, like some kind of robot. Makes it easier to believe that you’re not doing all of this to a human, doesn’t it? I’ll bet this is more words than we’ve ever said to each other, huh? I’m a person, Chris. Just like you. And what you’re doing to me and Steve? It’s fucked up.” He spares the lady another apologetic wince.

Montgomery’s hands are moving furiously on the keyboard now, but he doesn’t respond. Apparently, he’s done engaging. That’s an easy fix. “So, how’d you lose your medical license?”

Montgomery’s shoulders tense visibly. “Agent Hammond, if the Asset speaks again, hit him with the stun baton.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bucky.”

Montgomery finally raises his voice as the baton crackles at the ready. “Last warning, Soldier--”

“Bu-cky,” he enunciates slowly as the agent raises the baton.

“Meirei - ōgonshoku.”

Bucky recognizes Pierce’s voice instantly. He sees him standing in the doorway, eyes narrowed expectantly. *Fuck you, you prick,* Bucky shouts, but the words stay in his mind. Something keeps them from passing his lips.

“Oh,” Pierce groans mockingly. “Looks like the Wakandans forgot to clear out the Japanese trigger phrases. Washio didn’t have you for long, but he had some great ideas about your programming: focused on individual directives, rather than general compliance, which is all the Russians ever cared about.”

He pulls the empty chair over from Montgomery’s work station and sits down an arm’s length away from Bucky. Breath quickening with rage, he begins to raise his right arm to tear the line in his arm out with his teeth.

“Meirei - ishi.”

His arm drops to his side again. It hangs there like lead. His legs suddenly feel too heavy to move.

“He never could get them to last long, though. Half an hour, you snap out of it, all on your own. Not very useful in the long-term.” He turns to the woman. “Christie, go ahead and give him a sedative. Something to keep him still for the MRI. Go on, he won’t hurt you.”

The woman grabs a readied injection from a nearby tray. Her hands tremble nervously as she slips the needle into his neck. As soon as the plunger is completely depressed, she steps away again.

Pierce briefly reprimands Montgomery for allowing himself to get so worked up. Bucky doesn’t
really listen. The sense of warmth from the contrast material has been replaced by a boiling anger. He wants to kill Pierce. He hates him. He hates - he hates this.

*This*. Their power over him. It’s always something. Something he’s overlooked. The trigger words Zemo used. Wentzel’s implant. Insulin, stored somewhere in his body, remotely released. Gas lines in the cells. More triggers. Fuck. Fucking, *fuck*, he hates this. And that’s all he can do right now. Hate it. He’s stuck.

The sedative begins to work on his body, although it doesn’t do much to dampen the rage. They transfer him to a gurney and take him to yet another room. The MRI makes him claustrophobic and the sedative depresses his breathing. He bites his tongue. Reminds himself that the drugs will wear off, the effects of the trigger words will go away soon, the MRI will be over. None if it really helps.

When they remove him from the machine, he finds he can speak again. But he doesn’t have much to say, now. Nothing but petty threats he can’t make good on. Not right now.

They bring back the gurney, but he stands on his own, trying not to fight for his balance. He overhears Montgomery, speaking into a radio.

“MRI’s free. You can bring him on in for scans.”

Steve. They must mean Steve.

Bucky knows he’s being taken back to the lab to be wiped. If his brain had shown any signs of fresh trauma, they’d be contacting a surgical team. Everything must have been fine.

Almost feels like a death sentence.

He’s halfway back to the main lab when the doors open and Steve and Řezník exit, flanked by security agents.

He knew it would happen. He had tried to prepare himself for the inevitability, but it’s done him no good.

He sees the redness on Steve’s forehead and cheekbones. The mottled bruises on his temples. Blank face, slack shoulders, shaking fingers, unsteady legs, empty eyes--

He stops.

Steve glances back toward him for just a second, then keeps walking. Lets the agents drive him on. Follows Řezník silently. Passively.

Bucky remains still despite the prod of a baton at his back. He watches the set of double doors close behind Steve and Řezník.

Montgomery and two of the agents are on the ground before Bucky is even aware he’s swinging his arm. He fights them blindly, senselessly. It doesn’t take long for more agents to rush out of the lab. There are batons held to his back, abdomen, sides, and thighs before he goes down.

“No, no, *no!*” he shouts, struggling dazedly as the drag him back into the lab, where Pierce is already waiting. “No! Not him! Not him, God, no,” he cries.

They put him in the chair. It takes them ten minutes to get him to hold still enough that the cuffs can lock into place. Pierce looks on with nothing but a frown.
Montgomery, sweating and breathing hard from the struggle, opens the gown to expose his chest. He sticks the pads on haphazardly, just well enough to get Bucky’s vitals to display on the screens. Bucky jerks in the restraints, baring his teeth.

“Sit still, Soldier,” Montgomery all but begs. “If you keep acting like this, you will be decommissioned. Do you understand?”

Pierce stares Bucky down, lips a tight, thin line. He makes no argument.

“Do it,” is Bucky’s only request.

Montgomery shakes his head somberly and steps back to calibrate the machine.

“As much as you think he can handle,” Pierce orders. “I want this fixed.”

“Decommission me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Decommission me.”

The hydraulics whir as the chair leans back into position. Montgomery tries to put the bite guard in his mouth. He spits on his hand. Montgomery recoils.

“Fuck it,” Pierce sighs. “He wants to hurt himself, let him.”

The plates hover over him, sparking blue and white. He’s not nearly as terrified as he’d thought he’d be.

“Barnes, James Buchanan, Sergeant--”

throat raw
metal. copper taste. sick
teeth clatter, faster, skull shaking shattering into pieces
muscles burning, on fire, fluttering
eyes bursting from sockets tongue bleeding ringing ears heart stopped lungs empty
has it ever gone on this long
steve i can do this
I can make it
I’ll make it.
I won’t ever hurt you again.

Ten cycles in quick succession. The most they’ve administered previously was seven. Finally, the machine powers down. His body is limp. Useless. He’s nearly blind. Sitting in his own piss.
Then, he manages to move his fingers. He breathes again. Fills his lungs with air. Spits out bile and thin, coppery saliva. His voice is weak, nothing but a rasping whisper from his torn throat, but it’s there.

“...US Army. 32...557038.”
Through the Grapevine

Chapter Summary

The cavalry arrives, and they bring just the bad news Sam needs to hear.

Maybe it’s the fact that Mondays are the proverbial start of the workweek. Maybe it’s just Terry’s hell-or-high-water smile. Maybe it’s the six long hours of dreamless sleep that Sam enjoys on that rock-hard basement floor. Whatever it is that does the trick, Sam is thankful. He wakes up ready to take on all of HYDRA, hand to hand, if has to.

Clint seems a little less enthusiastic about greeting the day, but he drags himself out of the borrowed sleeping bag as soon as he hears Sam padding around nearby. They silently elect to let Scott and Wanda go on sleeping. It’s still early - the basement is still cold and dark. The night-like stillness is still winning out over the January sunlight, which creeps in through the high, dusty windows over blades of frozen grass, sharp and cerulean, but still too weak to call dawn.

The ceiling above is already creaking with footsteps, and Terry and Judy’s voices are drifting down the stairs. They sound like they’ve already started their day. Sam and Clint tidy up their respective sleeping areas efficiently (Sam leaves Barnes’ notebook out on his bedroll, reminding himself to continue reading later, and he remembers what he’d read the night before and goddamn, it stings like splinter in his brain), and they head upstairs together.

The smell of breakfast food and really good coffee hits Sam before he even reaches the landing. Clint walks on ahead and greets their hosts with a crackling but cheerful Good morning, but Sam stalls, caught up in a sense of nostalgia so thick that he can hardly wade through it. It smells like his mother’s home. He can almost hear his sisters fighting in the bathroom. The phone on the kitchen wall, ringing, with one of his aunties on the other end of the line. His mother’s voice, asking to see his homework from the night before. He pushes himself forward and tucks the flood of memories away - he’s bound and damn determined to show Terry he’s capable of doing a lot more than sulking today.

“Oh my, smells like pancakes up here.”

Terry is laboring over an electric griddle on the kitchen counter, but he neither turns nor responds to Sam’s observation nor to Clint’s greeting - he just ducks his head low and flips one of his pancakes. Judy laughs aloud, shrill and cutting. “Yeah, smells like burnt pancakes, I’ll betcha,” she scoffs, dragging two more chairs from the dining room into the kitchen, slippers scuffing against the tiles. “He got them started and then got to watching the news - I’m guessing that crazy raid on that old warehouse was you guys? Forgot all about them. Oh my God, did the smoke alarm wake you up?”

Clint chuckles, taking one of the heavy wooden chairs from her and bringing it to the table. “No, ma’am, we slept like big babies.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she smiles. “It scared the piss out of me, I’ll tell you--”

“Well, I thought there might be some information on there they might need--” Terry dares to say, although he doesn’t take his eyes off the griddle again.
“Oh, you burn them every time you make them because you always--”

“They’re not that burnt, baby. I’ll eat those if you don’t--”

“Just throw them out, they’re not edible! Stuff that burnt can give you cancer.”

“I don’t know about cancer, and don’t you talk to me about cancer when you smoke those damn cigarettes--”

“You’re always cranking that old griddle up to four hundred damn degrees because you think it gets hot faster or something--”

Terry and Judy continue on at an impressive pace, considering that it’s six thirty in the morning and the coffee’s only just finished brewing, each never letting the other reach the end of a thought. But as far as bickering goes, it’s pretty tame. There’s no venom in their voices and it sounds to Sam more like an idle habit than a real argument. Clint follows it like a tennis match, smiling. Probably missing Laura and his kids like hell.

Despite Judy’s apparent beef over the burnt pancakes and the smoke detector, she makes Terry’s coffee first, with artificial sweetener and lots of skim milk, her measurements specific and precise while the motions are easy and second nature to her, and she sets the cup down beside his free hand. He doesn’t so much as glance at it before taking a deep drink of it, and pauses in his rebuttal to thank her. Clint watches the exchange with a smirk of recognition, then turns to catch Sam’s eye, looking like he expects to find some kind of puzzled longing there. Sam knows he doesn’t disappoint him. Maybe it’s just natural for a single man of his age to envy the familiarity of old couples.

Judy slides two more mugs across the table for them (she passes Sam one with chipped depictions of Looney Tunes characters, and Clint purses his lips into an envious Oo and swaps their mugs). She pours a cup for herself, black with lots of sugar, passes them the gallon of milk and a bottle of creamer, and then fills their cups and puts the carafe back on for a second pot. She stands by the kitchen table in her flannel pajamas and bathrobe and slippers, silent for the first time all morning, and watches them fix their coffee. Sam feels the need to hurry the process, trapped under her scrutinizing gaze, so he splashes in some cream and a single packet of Splenda. The moment they have their coffee fixed, she smiles coaxingly. “Anybody want to come outside with me for a smoke? That alarm got me on edge this morning. I’m dying over here.”

“I’m a quitter, but I could probably use some cold air on my face, yeah,” Clint sighs, rising. Sam nods. “Terry, you need any help, man?”

“Oh, no, no - don’t let her trash talk fool you. I’m competent.”

Judy leads them out to the back deck, where Terry’s truck is still parked. She brushes some leaves out of the plastic lawn furniture to make seats for them, dumps the glass ashtray over the side of the deck, and takes her seat at the table. She lights two cigarettes at once, and insistently passes the second to Sam. She must have seen his eyes lingering on the package. Same brand he’d smoked when he was deployed. Menthols. And he’d had a rough couple of days. He accepted it, said, “Thank you,” and took his first drag in years before he could talk himself out of it.

“You guys know something about the bright red UFO that shot across the sky over the Air Reserve Station last night?” she asks, cutting right to the chase after one misty exhale.

Sam and Clint throw each other questioning stares. Clint makes the decision for them. “Uh, yup.
Sure do. She’s downstairs. Still asleep.”

“What was she doing there?” Judy asks, leaning back in her seat. Even though she’s wearing a bathrobe and slippers, her long years of service are suddenly apparent to Sam. “Looking for Rogers, I guess?”

“Yeah,” Sam confirms.

“And James Barnes,” she guesses.

“Yes,” Sam admits, “But look, Barnes isn’t--”

Judy waves her hand dismissively. “Oh, God, save it, please. Whatever you’ve got to say about HYDRA and the Russians and mad scientists, believe me, Terry’s already talked my damn ear off about it a dozen times. He actually read the files that got leaked a while back. Every one he could get his hands on. He’s a sucker for that shit, I’ll tell you. I take it you boys know something about the magical disappearing chopper, too?”

“Do you know something about it?” Clint presses, leaning forward.

“Yeah, I was there when it went missing. It was kind of a big deal,” she laughs.

Sam tilts his head. “I thought Terry said you were Navy,” he comments. “Retired Navy, at that.”

“Multi-agency communication exercises,” she says with a pleased grin, then shrugs airily. “They still need my expertise, I guess. You boys’ll figure it out yourselves one of these days - retirement ain’t working any less, it’s working unexpectedly and usually for free.”

Clint closes his eyes tightly, nodding like he’s listening to a profound sermon.

Sam decides to fill in the blanks of their story for her. “We followed a couple of vans from the warehouse. Thought they might be headed to Niagara. One of them crashed on the highway - looks like Cap and Barnes might have gotten away. I think they were picked up in a chopper just outside of West Seneca, in the industrial district.”

“Alright,” Judy exhales excitedly, flicking the ash off her cigarette with a flourish. “So, these HYDRA bastards stole one of our birds. Now the Air Force is going to be looking for it, and they’re pretty handy at locating their own missing choppers. They find it first, they might well find your friends, which is bad news for Rogers and worse news for Barnes, until the US catches up with the rest of the world and figures out that the Winter Soldier never willingly acted on behalf of Hydra. But if you guys can just stay hot on their heels, you can get there first.”

Clint snaps his fingers and points skyward as if her explanation has come as an epiphany, though he only replies, “Yup.”

“And it’s just the four of you?” Judy asks, careful and sympathetic. “No other Avengers in your corner, huh?”

“Aw, I think I know of one that’ll have my back,” Clint smiles. Sam sincerely hopes that Natasha will hear them out and be willing to come out of hiding. After what she’d done for Steve and Barnes, he’s almost convinced that she’s on their side, but whether or not she’s willing to put herself in more danger remains to be seen.

“And I’ve got a friend flying in today,” Sam adds. “Federal agent. She’s willing to help.”
“Well, if they’d like to save money on hotel rooms, you know where they can camp out,” Judy laughs. “It’s not much, but my grandkids think it’s a blast, sleeping down there.”

“We should really get out of your hair,” Sam says, shaking his head. “As long as we’re here, we’re putting you and Terry in danger. Hell, maybe even your grandkids, too. And I’m sure they’re going to want that basement back,” he reasons, smoke tickling his lungs.

“Terry and I are soldiers,” she corrects him. “We may be retired, but you know. You’re never really out, are you,” she states. “And undermining the government to help Captain America, I mean,” she snorts. “That is the most patriotic thing you can do, isn’t it?” she laughs, extinguishing her cigarette. Sam’s is only half gone.

Sam is forced to agree.

She rises and rubs her palms together against the sharp January air. “Terry about talked my head off last night about those damn wings of yours,” she mutters.

Sam ducks his head apologetically. “Yeah, I might have told him I’d keep my eye out for a spare set,” he admits.

“Oh, don’t you dare,” Judy reprimands him, opening the sliding glass door and ushering them back inside. “Válgame Dios...he’s on nitrates, for Jesus’ sake.”

Breakfast is as pleasant of an affair as it can be. Scott and Clint eat more pancakes than they’re worth, and Sam quickly learns that arguing with Terry doesn’t do him much good, and has a second helping of everything. And as good as Terry’s pancakes are, Judy’s mixture of syrup, butter, and cinnamon makes them far better. Wanda initially declines to join them, and although she doesn’t say so outright, Sam is almost positive that she’s worried that Terry and Judy might be nervous about her. Terry takes a heaping plate of food downstairs and returns a few minutes later with a smiling Wanda in tow. Sam and Terry wash the dishes together like they’d been doing it for years. Once everyone has packed away as much breakfast food as they can manage and the kitchen is clean, Terry seems as anxious to get to work as Sam is.

“Alright, Samuel,” he says soberly, drying his hands. “We slept, we ate. Now what’s next?”

Sam knows that Terry and Judy are both now very much committed to helping them, and that leaves him with only two relatively simple choices: accept their help, or keep wasting his precious time arguing about it. “You got a little space and some tools? I’ve got to get airborne again.”

“Judy! Hey, baby - did Joaquín ever finish up in the garage?”

“Got done yesterday!” she calls back from the second floor landing.

“Alright,” Terry exclaims triumphantly. Sam nods and heeds out toward the car, Terry close behind him. “I’ve got a nice work table you can use, then, and there’s a good heater out there, too. And that’s, uh, that is Judy’s sister’s youngest boy I was talking about. He lives with his his mom and my mother-in-law out in Arizona.” Terry rattles on as Sam opens up the trunk and shoulders his flight pack, then starts loading Terry’s open arms up with the rest of their gear. “He just got done with high school this past spring, so he’s been going to school up here and doing yard work for us for some spending money. Really good kid. Really good--” Terry falls silent as he looks down at the duffel bag in his arms, just as Sam balances the shield on top. He gives a low whistle to show that he’s impressed, although Sam can also see a familiar frown in his eyes. “Let’s go get you set
up, my friend.”

By eight thirty, Sam has a work space set up and has his flight pack opened up, spread out across the table. He had done enough maintenance and field repairs on his original set of wings that he was confident in his abilities - he could fix these. No problem.

At nine o’clock, Barton brings him a cup of coffee and tells him that Sharon called again, and he’s been in contact with Natasha. He’s going to take Sam’s car to the airport at noon to collect Sharon. Romanoff didn’t say how she was getting there - only that she was.

At a quarter ‘til eleven, Sam throws a screwdriver on the ground and growls, “Oh, no. Nope. Fuck you, Tony Stark. You piece of shit. Goddammit.” Stark’s newest rebuild of these wings are more than mechanics and simple combustion engines. There are circuit boards. In fact, there are about a dozen miniscule scorched parts that Sam needs, and he’s got no clue where he could get them. He doesn’t even know what most of them are.

By twelve thirty, Sam has catalogued and sketched the basic design of the wings and all their separate parts. He feels more organized, but not necessarily any closer to a solution. He decides to try another cup of coffee. He takes one last, lingering glance at his blueprint, looking for any sort of bypass or workaround he’s missed.

“Sam.”

“Shit.”

Sam clutches his chest like he’s trying to hold his pounding heart in and whips around. He hadn’t heard the creak of the garage’s side-door opening. He finds Sharon Carter framed in the narrow entryway, eyes swollen and sleepless, cheeks pale and nose pink from the freezing air, hands buried in the pockets of her coat.

They stand there for a long moment, like synchronizing drives - Sharon’s eyes worried and sympathetic and Sam’s scared and sorry, both determined and boiling with anger just beneath the surface. Without ever speaking, they get a sense of what the other has endured in the months they’ve been apart - Sam’s heartbreak over Rhodes, his captivity at the raft, Sharon’s battle with internal affairs over their flight from Berlin and the disappearance of Cap and Sam’s gear, and her tireless work to build an airtight case against Zemo to lighten the charges levelled against Barnes. And Sam and Sharon both know that somehow, they are going to find their friends and neutralize yet another cell of HYDRA, all without Stark or the US government getting tangled up in it, and neither of them are going to rest until it’s done. Sam feels the silent agreement between them like a handshake, and offers a conciliatory smile, nodding his thanks.

“I could really use some coffee,” Sharon laughs.

Sam picks up his cup and upturns it to show that he’s in need as well, thinking that Sharon does look more than a little jetlagged. “Probably still some in the kitchen. Judy keeps it going all day.”

“Judy?” Sharon asks suspiciously. Sam recognizes her tone of voice as the same his mom always used on him when he had to slink into the kitchen to tell her about a bad grade - that familiar little, Oh? that still makes him stammer nervously. “And...who is Judy?”

“A friend,” Sam assures her, wishing he could muster more confidence.

“And you’ve known her...how long?”
Could he lie? Is lying an option? No - she’s a goddamn CIA agent. That’s every bit as useless as lying to his own mother. She would find out. “Uh, last night.”

“Great,” Sharon grins wryly, stepping aside to let Sam lead the way back to the house. “I’ve got a little more info on the lab you raided. You’re not going to like it.”

“For how long?” Sam asks numbly.

Sharon sighs and sets down her cup, watching the steam rise. “As far as I can gather, they’ve been tracking him since the day the Triskelion went down. And not only that, but according to intel from one of the old labs we raided in Austria, the arm is outfitted with some kind of kill-switch, too. Enough insulin to kill him within minutes. It can be remotely triggered by anyone within range who has the code. Looks like only a few people had clearance to know it, though. Nice little--” and she hides a grimace behind her cup “upgrade they gave him in the mid-nineties.”

“That’s...they couldn’t have used that. Most of his arm was blown off in that fight with Stark. Whole thing was replaced in Wakanda.”

“It attaches directly to his skeleton. According to their schematics that we recovered, both the tracker and the kill-switch are located where the arm’s connections attached to his spinal cord. They’ve got him rigged up like you wouldn’t believe - and there wouldn’t be a safe way to get it out - maybe not even a safe way to disable it. It’s a miracle they didn’t kill him getting it in.”

“So, I don’t get it. Why didn’t they go after him sooner?” Sam presses. “He was alone in Romania when we found him. Steve said his apartment windows didn’t even lock. They could have had him back whenever they wanted.”

“See, I spent a whole month asking that same question over and over again. Then I started thinking about how Aunt Peggy used to talk about Steve and Barnes. She always said they were joined at the hip.”

Sam smiles. “Yeah, she wasn’t wrong.” He thinks back to Barnes’ notebook - still down in the basement, on his bedroll. The memories that Bucky had written there in scrawling shorthand, like he was grasping at tendrils of smoke that he couldn’t bear to lose. But this isn’t the time or place to tell Sharon about that, and it’s neither of their business, anyway, so he stays quiet and continues to listen.

“So...I don’t think HYDRA was interested in finding Barnes,” Sharon says grimly. “They got ambitious. I think they wanted Steve to find him. I think they knew that once Steve had him, they were going to stick close together. Maybe even regroup with the rest of the Avengers,” she concludes meaningfully.

“So they were waiting until they could use him to track Captain America,” Sam groans, rubbing his palm over his eyes. “And...if they’d gotten their way, the movements of the whole damn team.”

“And that’s not all - we’re in the process of extraditing the staff of that lab you raided. They were big fish, Sam. People who had been working with HYDRA for years, who had a part in some of the biggest projects they’d undertaken. Did Barnes know who was there?”

“Yeah, we had good intel. Wentzel and Montgomery, right?”

“Exactly. And about a dozen others. Not only were they the best names to draw Barnes there - it was the team best qualified to subdue him. And of the old guard, only Eric Wentzel was actually
there. Traffic cams and security footage put a few of the others within the area that same day, but they weren’t at the lab. And it turns out that Wentzel tried to jump ship after the Triskelion went down...looks like HYDRA thought he’d make a good sacrifice for this op.”

They fall silent for a few minutes, each rehashing the facts and their conjectures as they sip their coffee. Sam can hear the dishwasher cycling on the other side of the kitchen and voices filtering in from the living room, where Judy, Terry, and Clint are trying to work out how to track a stolen chopper without tipping off the Air Force. The abrupt chime of the doorbell, followed by a sharp knocking on the door, cuts through the hum of white noise and Sam startles so bad that he splashes a little coffee on himself. Sharon’s hand twitches against the breast of her jacket, touching her side holster. They both stand and back into the hallway between the kitchen and the living room as Terry jogs toward the door. Clint follows at a cautious distance and hangs back with his teammates.

“How is it?” Terry calls cheerily.

“It’s me!” a female voice shouts back from outside. “I brought Pride and Prejudice, if you want to watch it!”

“Which one?” Clint hollers with a half smile.

“Colin Firth!” the voice answers.

Terry turns back to raise an inquisitive eyebrow at Clint, who snorts. “Go ahead, open it up. She’s harmless.”

Terry unlocks the door and peeks out, only to be pushed back as Natasha opens it the rest of the way, laughing, “Hey, you!” and then throws her arms around Terry’s neck. “Hug me like you know me, buddy,” she orders through a clenched grin.

Terry squeezes her tight and pats her on the back. “No problem,” he replies dazedly.

She lets herself in and allows him to shut the door behind her, then drops the fake smile and her duffel bag instantly. “Ooh, awkward. Sorry. Sketchy looking cop was following me for about three miles back there.”

If Natasha’s voice was any less recognizable, Sam wouldn’t know her in a million years. She’s wearing a tailored coat that shows off a figure that’s at least thirty pounds fuller than before. She looks like she’s been tanning at laundromat, too, and a nauseating pastel pink lip gloss offsets her bronze skin. Her brilliantly red hair is dyed matte black, her soft curls now a rail-straight bob, and her functional, form-fitting clothes replaced by a tacky floral blouse, tight jeans, and a pair of beige Uggs. Sam can’t say he prefers this look for her, but damn, does she ever know how to make Natasha Romanoff disappear when she needs to.

“If anyone says anything,” she sighs. “I’m really sorry. Accords. Yeah. Terrible idea. We’re all in agreement.”

Sam nods slowly.

“Yeah, forget that shit,” Clint shrugs. “You’ve been busy. I mean, it can’t be easy, keeping up with all those Kardashians.”

She removes her over-sized sunglasses to reveal an unremarkable pair of brown eyes. “I look worse on purpose. What’s your excuse?”

“Prison,” Clint smiles acidically.
“Aw, did you lose that soap-on-a-rope I bought you?” she croons, crouching down to open up her bag. “I dug up what I could, but my resources were pretty limited—” she mumbles, tossing a thick manila folder onto the kitchen table, then glances from Terry, who is still standing awestruck in the entryway, to Judy and Scott who are peering into the kitchen from the hall. She points to each of them with a single, vague gesture, looking at Clint and Sam with skeptically narrowed eyes.

“These...are people we trust, I’m assuming.”

Sam watches Sharon’s gaze float up toward the corner of the ceiling as she gives a tight-lipped smile and a stiff nod, as if to say, _Apparently so._

“Yes,” he responds confidently. “We trust them. That’s Terry, and this is Judy. They’re friends.”

Natasha takes a seat at the table, and the rest of them pull up chairs. “So,” she sighs tiredly. “They got Steve and Bucky.”

Sharon clears her throat. “Sam and I were just going over what we’ve managed to find out so far...Barnes had an internal tracking device planted on him, and a kill-switch that may have been used to immobilize him.”

Natasha shakes her head. “That kill-switch is necessary for them - they don’t handle the Winter Soldier unless they have someone on-hand who’s authorized to euthanize him.”

“And from what I’ve gathered,” Sharon interjects, “That information was privileged - limited almost exclusively to HYDRA’s top brass. The frequency and the codes were never recorded or documented - HYDRA leaders communicated them verbally, in person.”

Natasha raises her eyebrows, clearly impressed. “You really did your homework.”

“I don’t think anything I dug up is going to do us much good,” Sharon amends. “Every leader who would have made the list is dead.”

“And that,” Natasha frowns, flips the file folder open and pages through it, “Is where I can help. Before I mysteriously disappeared from the Facility, I...might have procured some of Tony’s facial recognition software. I figured I’d need it to keep tabs on myself,” she admits. “So...since we all know how gray a concept _death_ is among HYDRA elite, I ran searches on all of the recently deceased higher-ups,” she finishes slowly, sliding a packet of captured CCTV photos toward Sam, Sharon, and Clint.

Sharon’s stillness beside him is enough to jar Sam. “Is that…”

“Oh, my God,” Sharon hisses through her teeth. “Where were those taken?”

“Just outside a small biotech firm based in Ottawa - Keeler International. Last week.”

Sharon sits back heavily in her seat, shaking her head with disgust. “Alexander Pierce. That bastard.”

“Oh,” Terry suddenly utters in surprised recognition of the name. “He is a bastard.”

“No, no, no,” Clint cuts in, waving his hand. “No, this is good. They’re going to be keeping Cap and Bucky under lock and key, but Pierce is evidently moving about freely. Lot easier to conduct a manhunt than just busting down all of HYDRA’s doors looking for the one Cap’s behind.”

Sharon taps a finger against the corner of one of the photographs, like she’d rather not touch the image itself, and slides it back toward Natasha. “And if Barnes is alive, Pierce will have to be
nearby. Even if Barnes is dead, they have Steve, and Pierce will have his hands in that, too.”

Sam reaches for the folder, then pauses, finding Natasha’s gaze. “You care if I read through these?”

“Help yourself.”

He pulls them over to his side of the table and dives right in, tuning out everything around him. Sharon leans over his shoulder to study them with him. Scott, slumped against the wall, takes a look around at Natasha, whom he has only known as an enemy combatant; Sharon and Sam, who are absorbed with the new intel; Clint, who seems to be lost in thought; Terry and Judy, who are having some kind of wordless conversation which involves a lot of discreet shrugging; and Wanda, who is standing beside him, trying to keep pace with the conversation. He leans over a little and whispers to her, “So, they found a...dead bad guy.”

Wanda nods.

“And dead bad guy might know where Cap is. And is also alive bad guy.”

“I think.”

“I’m lost.”

Terry grimaces in concurrence. “You guys can help me make lunch.”


“That’s right,” Terry chuckles. “There are no small jobs.”

“Oh, damn--” Scott winces thoughtfully. “Give me, like, two minutes and I can make a really good joke about that.”
Non-Compliance

Chapter Summary

Bucky undertakes a suicide mission.

“For Decommission me.”

And that hails the start of a second round of ten.

It is the sixth day since they started the process of wiping his memory clean again. Thirty sixty-second rounds of electroconvulsive therapy were administered on the first day. Twenty on the second. Thirty on the third. Twenty on the fourth. Forty on the fifth. He expects ten more will be administered today, after this round.

Two hours and fifty minutes in the chair in less than a week, although it has felt like much longer. That’s not so bad. He’ll make it. He has to make it.

It’s not as painful, today - not when he’s in the chair, at least. Today, when the plates crackle against his face and temples, he only feels drugged and heavy, except that there’s a sense of lightness in his chest, tickling somewhere just beneath his collarbone, which he knows will linger on for the rest of the day. Between sessions, his muscles are tired and sluggish, so he doesn’t move if he doesn’t have to. He rests.

He has become entirely passive to the convulsions. He allows them to crash through him like an earthquake and subside when they will. The pain has become standard, and the first moments without it are like euphoria, and when it returns, it’s a return to normalcy. Before the euphoria is gone, they have usually returned him to his cell, so he sleeps and waits for the door to open again. Another minute of electricity passes.

“De...decommiss--” he tries automatically, knowing full well that it means, _Put a bullet in my head._

The world is back to normal before he can finish.

When it’s over, they ask him, “Soldier? Are you ready to comply?”

“No,” he answers dully, even though there’s something else he’s meant to say. _Name, rank, serial,_ he recalls as two of the technicians haul him up. He can’t remember it right now.

That’s alright. It’ll come back to him later. It always comes back to him, if he can keep a clear head and stay calm.

His arm is wrapped around the shoulders of a tech for support as they take him back to his cell, and he feels the fingers of his right hand twitch like a tremor. He raises his head a little to look at them - shaking fingertips pressing to the pad of his thumb - ring finger, middle finger, ring finger, and back to middle finger. A tick in his muscle memory, something he’s repeated over and over again.
A message he’s encoded in himself. He thinks he knows what it means. Three, two. Three, two. His thumb touches the outside of his pointer finger. Five? Three, two, five. He knows there’s more. It’s already coming back.

He wakes up before they return to collect him again. There are voices outside his cell - one specific voice, which he thought he had dreamed. But he never would have imagined it like this. It’s almost unrecognizable.

“...water?” Pierce’s voice filters in first, muffled by the thick glass partition.

“Yes, sir.” Steve. Softer, but closer.

No hatred. No venom. No fight.

As much as he hates the words, he replays that quiet, docile utterance of, Yes, sir, over and over again in his head, listening to Steve’s voice. He’s not sure how long it’s been since he heard it last, but even a small piece of Steve is enough to keep…

...to keep Bucky anchored. Bucky. James Barnes. 32557038.

He remembers very little else. He can’t remember now how he came to the labs. Why Steve is there with him. He knows who Pierce is, and Montgomery, Parsons, Řezník. He sees them every day. The guards’ faces blur together. He knows that Hydra used him before, and that he escaped. For what seems like a long time, he lived on his own. Freely. No wipes, no experiments, no missions. Pierce was dead. He had felt (sometimes) that he was safe. Maybe that had been a dream. But Steve wasn’t with him before. Steve was never their soldier. They’re trying to make him compliant, and Steve has never been wiped or programmed. He doesn’t have Bucky’s long-studied strategies for retaining his memories, and what’s more, there’s a room in the lab that they take him to sometimes, one that they never take Bucky to. He assumes there’s an isolation tank inside. They wouldn’t risk putting him in that. Remembering isolation tank brings back the knowledge that he had eventually tried to drown himself years ago, when they had tried to make that part of his programming routine. Steve probably isn’t faring well - the tank and the chair were a vicious combination.

Gauze, he realizes suddenly, the memory breathing life back into his limbs. He looks at his hand. There’s not enough there - he must have already taken a piece off since they changed the bandage last. He sits up and runs his fingers along the underside of the metal cot. Empty. And his hand is almost healed. Reopening the wound would probably mean punishment and suspicion, as well as tighter surveillance, neither of which can be risked. He will have to try to steal something from the lab. When they put him in the chair next, he will have to act subdued. Steve can’t hold on much longer. He has to get them out soon. Tonight. They must not think he is a threat.

They come to take him back to the chair. Once again, he endures the electricity without panicking. Without letting fear drive away his focus. Whatever remains of his mind when it is over is tasked only with escaping. Nothing else matters. It will all come back, if he can get out. All he needs to remember is, Appear compliant, steal what you can.

When it’s over, they ask him, “Soldier? Are you ready to comply?”

He does not answer. He stays still.

They check his pupils and determine that their machine has done no permanent damage. “Soldier?”
they repeat. He remains silent and unresponsive. They talk amongst themselves, then haul him up. He could support himself with a little effort, but he makes no effort. He allows his knees to buckle and he’s dead weight in their arms. They are unprepared to support him, and he pitches forward and lets his body fall to the linoleum floor tiles, holding his breath, willing himself not to raise his arm to protect his face. When his nose connects with the ground, he hears the pop of cartilage and feels the impact reverberate in his already aching skull. They hurry to drag him up off the ground, and he triumphantly marks that first bright red spatters have already dripped from his nostrils. Moments later, it’s dripping over his lips and off his chin.

He hears the screech of rubber soles against the floor as someone runs over. He opens his eyes. Řezník is standing over him already, still holding the penlight he’d used to check his pupils. So Řezník must have overseen the wipe. Montgomery has joined him now, and he feels exactly what he’d been hoping for - gauze, pressing against his face as Montgomery tips his head down. He raised his singular hand to hold it in place himself, mumbling some semblance of an apology while the two men argue over him as if they assume he can’t understand.

“Řezník, look, this is way too much. You can’t--”

“The other subject is coping--”

“The other subject’s enhancements affect his ability to recuperate to a far greater degree than--”

“Christopher, he’s quite alright. Spells of dizziness are very normal for--”

“I took care of the ECT on the Asset for years, and never, not once, did I drive him to the point of fainting! This is totally excessive.”

“You never had to deal with him in a state of total non-compliance, Christopher. If we’re going to stay on schedule with this project, then--”

“Okay, fuck the schedule. There will be no project if you reduce him to a vegetative state.”

“Alexander and I agree that he is optional to the project at this stage. Once Project Leto is in its second stage, we hardly need him. Obsolete technology.”

“A super soldier. One that HYDRA has millions of dollars, seventy years of research, and thousands of my man-hours invested in.”

He has managed to open his eyes now, and although he lets them wander, unfocused and dazed, he reads the lab carefully, noting that they’ve been reducing their security staff over the past week. He sees when the door opens quietly and Pierce steps in, as if he had been listening from just outside the lab. Řezník and Montgomery notice a moment later, and abort their argument. Pierce, however, does not acknowledge them. He approaches his prisoner directly and leans down in front of him, eyes narrowing appraisingly. After long seconds, he asks, “Ready to comply?”

He nods once - a small, shameful gesture.

“Can you stand?”

He knows he can, but he nods again and this time, forces himself to look unsure. They techs help him up.

“Let him get some sleep,” Pierce orders, speaking to the room at large. “I’ll come talk to him myself in the morning. See where we’re at.”
Bucky continues to press the gauze to his face, but separates out a section of it between his fingers and grips it tightly, compressing it.

“For now,” he overhears as Pierce continues, “Dr. Řezník, I’m impressed. On the other hand, I really hope you weren’t too aggressive. Just because I don’t need something doesn’t mean I want to lose it. Kind of like a green card,” he adds lightly.

One tech steps away to open the cell door. He nods to the other and slurs, “I got it.”

Usually, he wouldn’t speak to them, but they’re not going to be strict about protocol so soon after such a long barrage of ECT, and he knows he’s heavy - the agent seems more than happy to be rid of his weight. He stands on his own, and as the glass door slides open to admit him to his cell, he grips the frame on his right. Half the gauze disappears into the lock-cache. The other half, he immediately replaces over his bleeding nose. He does not look back over his shoulder to see if the guards noticed his sleight of hand, although it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and his skin crawl. Turning back would only invite suspicion.

Bucky has listened to the sound of the door sealing him into his cell so many times that he hears the rhythm of the locking mechanism in his sleep. The scrape of metal against metal as the door slides along its runner, followed by three clicks as each bolt snaps into place, one loud and low and two quiet and sharp.

He collapses onto the cot as the door closes behind him, forcing himself to breathe evenly, relax, and not watch the door or the guards outside of it. His determination pays off and he gets very, very lucky. The agents outside walk away the moment it slides into its cache. They must assume that Bucky is too weak and addled to make any kind of escape attempt, so they don’t stay nearby to make sure that the locks engage. And why would they? Technically, it’s not even part of their procedure, and the lock has never failed before.

Bucky struggles not to flinch when he hears the first click - it’s softer than usual, as if the bolt has struck against the padding he’d jammed in. The second and third click…

Never come. Small, motorized gears grind faintly from within the wall and the the secondary bolts thunk dully against the interior of the cache as they fail to lock into their separate grooves. No alarms sound within the lab, and Bucky knows that doesn’t mean that one hasn’t alerted security to the lock’s failure, but it does give him a little hope, which he allows himself because he needs it so badly.

The planning and preparation stage of his breakout is over. While the waiting game has been hard, he doesn’t really care for his chances of making it off the facility’s grounds alive. He knows they’re not good, but even trying makes him feel like he hasn’t lost yet. Now comes the last step before the escape - necessary, but nearly impossible. Sleep.


For a moment, Bucky had thought he heard the deep rumble of the building’s foundation and the clattering of glass in the kitchen cabinets, but there’s no earthquake. Steve’s just shaking the hell out of him. He manages to get one eye open. He thinks the other is stuck shut. “What?” he mumbles unintelligibly. It’s still dark. Man’s not meant to be awake at such an hour.

“You got work,” Steve reminds him.
“I got a hangover is what I got,” Bucky whines into the pillow.

Steve laughs, and the sound is so pleasant that it starts to lull Bucky back to sleep, like him mama’s windchimes used to do back in Shelbyville, when he’d sleep with his bedroom window open just to hear them singing on the front porch. “Not my fault you’re so popular,” Steve scolds him. “Word gets out it’s your birthday, everybody on the block wants to buy you a drink. I got coffee on the stove.”

Bucky starts to sit up, but only manages to roll halfway over before his motivation fails. What a goddamn headache. He feels like his brain’s been scrambled. He squints up at Steve, who is still hovering over the bed, wearing a pair of thick trousers and one of Bucky’s own sweaters (the poor guy makes it look like a knitted circus tent), and he’s so bright-faced that Bucky just about wants to slap him. “How come you look so good?”

“Probably because I don’t care for whiskey,” Steve snorts.

“Aw,” Bucky groans, reminding Steve that he really doesn’t need to hear a reprimand beyond that which his own body has provided. “You drank enough beer to float a horse, so don’t give me that.”

“Well, I guess I just hold my booze better,” Steve grins, smug as can be.

Bucky feigns a tired stretch, but hooks his arm around Steve’s waist and topples him into the bed instead, wrestling him into his arms and trapping him against his chest like a child with a favorite stuffed animal.

Steve struggles and laughs, and Bucky does his best to make it feel like a joke. He really hopes that Steve can’t tell that his intentions aren’t as pure as they ought to be. He’d never show his face in New York again if Steve could hear what he was thinking - if he knew how being this close to him in that little bed felt, or how it pleased him to see Steve wearing his clothes, making coffee for the two of them. All the little domestic tasks they shared for the sake of thrift. Bucky rather felt like he was twenty-three years old and still playing house with a friend - he can remember feeling a similar sort of guilty weight in his chest as a kid, when there were no girls around to play the part of the wife.

Steve finally stops struggling and sighs affectedly, like he’s resigned himself to captivity. It only takes a few seconds of that stillness for Bucky to doze off again, not caring about work or impropriety or the coffee on the stove one bit, because he’s sleepy-eyed and in a warm bed with a cool pillow, and he’s lovesick with the sweetest guy in the world right beside him. There’s no reason at all that he should ever want to leave.

“Bucky.”

Steve says his name softly, intimately, and for a moment, the illusion remains intact.

“You better wake up.”

Bucky opens his eyes and keeps his body still. The lab is dark. Two guards on duty. He stops thinking about anything - he puts away everything but the mission at hand. HYDRA trained him to be the perfect soldier, and now they’d have to reap it.

The agents usually get bored around the end of their shift. He hears them laughing, sometimes, right around 5AM, just before their relief arrives. He waits until they make their usual mistake. One takes out his cellphone and browses through some website, then inevitably finds something
interesting. He laughs to himself, letting the video play for just under two minutes, and then motions the other guard over. They lean against the workstation, watching the small screen, and Bucky gets to his feet silently, he gives himself one minute and thirty seconds, to be safe. From this moment on, he’s going to have to move quickly. It will only take forty-five seconds for the guards in the hall to receive a message from the security room and arrive to apprehend him.

The only place to grip the door is by the frame of the slot they send the food through. It’s shallow, with sharp screws protruding from its metal plates. He wedges his fingers into it, sets his body against the glass for extra purchase, and pulls. It’s nearly impossible to budge without the added strength of his prosthetic, but failure is no longer an option. He holds his breath and braces his foot against the wall, and drags it open just wide enough. Metal scrapes briefly against metal, but the guards are laughing. They don’t hear it.

He’s glad his feet are bare - they’re silent on the tiles. He walks at an even pace to the nearest workstation and reaches directly for the drawer from which Parsons had taken a scalpel four days ago, to drain the wound on his hand, and from there, with the little scalpel now painstakingly freed from its leather case and in his possession, he approaches the guards without hesitation. The man on the right is still laughing when Bucky cuts his throat open. Before the first guard can even collapse, the second gasps and turns to fight, and Bucky’s knee connects with his gut, winding him into temporary silence before the scalpel slices through his vocal chords, too.

He has a very small window now before the lab is put in lockdown. He doesn’t bother to drag the senior agent’s body over to the cells. His eye is easy enough to cut out to satisfy the retinal scanner. The new code to the doors is 1113. Steve doesn’t even wake up until Bucky has the door open. Steve sits up, looking like he might speak, but Bucky doesn’t give him the chance. “Come on,” he says, knowing that Steve will recognize that there’s no time for questions, and tosses the agent’s eye away. He’ll get another one if he needs it for the elevator access.

Lockdown is now only a matter of seconds away. He runs to the smaller agent’s body and drags it directly to the main doors, which are thankfully still unlocked. He shoulders it open and drops the dead man into it to act as a wedge, and then takes a moment to look back. Steve is still lingering in the door of his cell, confused and spooked, like a captive animal who’s never seen the wild. “Now,” Bucky reiterates. “Get that one’s gun and key-card. Take his other clip, too,” he orders as he does the same to the guard in the door.

Steve’s agent - the one missing his eye, lets out one wet cough before he stops fighting. Bucky feels Steve freeze from across the lab. So, they’ve broken him down badly. He’s not functioning right anymore. Not ignoring what he should be able to ignore. He doesn’t seem to recognize the difference between an enemy and a human. The other doors bolt shut. The lab is now locked down, which means he doesn’t have time to help Steve. “Move,” he demands.

Bucky steps into the hall just as the boots of two more guards begin to screech against the linoleum. One is coming from the end of the hall to his left, the other from the stairwell access on his right. The left agent’s gun is already drawn, so Bucky shoots him first. The second guard manages to shout, “Get the fuck down--” before the next bullet blasts though his cheek, the force of it throwing him into the wall. Steve finally follows Bucky out of the lab, but while Bucky is thinking about the elevator, Steve’s empty blue eyes never leave what’s left of that agent’s face.

“Focus, Steve,” Bucky says, softer than before. He needs Steve to be collected enough to cooperate from here on out. “Are you okay?”

Steve swallows like he’s fighting against waves of nausea, but manages to give Bucky an unsteady nod. It will have to be good enough. Bucky flashes the door-stop’s keycard at the panel over the
elevator button, then presses it. It’s already on their floor. Steve follows him in, and the doors take an eternity to shut, but when they do, Bucky realizes that this is not the inside of his cell, the lab, the hallway, or the room where he was taken for testing. It feels good to see someplace different - to not have their eyes on him for a few seconds. They’re almost out. They’ve made good time so far. It’s possible.

“Go,” says Bucky, gesturing to the top of the elevator car. Steve looks at it for a long moment, then seems to understand. Bucky kneels so that Steve can climb up on his knee, and Steve gets the service exit open and hauls himself out. Bucky holds out his right arm, and Steve pulls him up. The elevator is still shooting upward at the moment, pulleys and gears spinning by their bare feet as the dark shaft rushes by, but Bucky knows it won’t be long before security cuts the power to the elevator. The goal is just to get as close to the roof as possible. “How many floors are there?” he asks urgently. Steve says nothing - either he doesn’t know, or he doesn’t remember.

The drone of the motor sighs into silence as they pass the fourth set of doors. Bucky can hear a team assembling just below their current position, waiting to corner them in the car, so they’ll have to climb quickly. It should only take the agents about a minute to assemble on the floor where the elevator has stopped, if they haven’t already - Bucky can’t be sure how many Pierce kept on site. He shoves Steve toward the service ladder. “Next floor up. Hurry,” he whispers. Steve does as he’s told, without looking back toward Bucky once. Bucky knows exactly what state Steve is in - a blank sheet of paper. It was always like some kind of fugue - he was malleable, impressionable. Able to understand verbal commands and following them without knowing why, except that not doing so could result in punishment. With the way Steve healed, his brain would probably start functioning normally again within a week, but Bucky knew he’d never be the same again.

He follows Steve up the ladder, sliding his right hand up the rail as he climbs, wishing fervently that he had his arm back, no matter how much he’d always hated it.

When they reach the next level, Steve stops and looks down over his shoulder, waiting for the next instruction. “Get the door open. See if they’ve already got men out there. Get out if it’s clear.”

Steve leans out and wrenches the doors open a little, and he must see that the hallway they open onto is empty, because he swings himself over to the ledge and pulls himself out of the shaft. He doesn’t reach back down to help Bucky out. In the moment, it’s annoying. In the back of Bucky’s mind, the only part of him not solely focused on the task at hand, it’s terrifying. Steve is gone.

With the key-card hanging around his neck and the gun held precariously between his teeth, Bucky has to make a jump for the ledge and use his still-injured right hand to catch the door, then brace his bare feet against the rough-hewn brick walls of the elevator shaft to scramble out. Steve isn’t particularly alert when Bucky checks on him - he’s just standing in the center of the dark hallway, waiting for the next instruction.

“Steve, look at me.”

He does.

“Do you know who you are?”

He hesitates, but he nods.

“Do you know who I am?”

Steve’s eyes skitter over him, but Bucky can see that his pupils are blown and his eyelids are heavy. Even after pulling himself out of the elevator shaft, his breathing is low and shallow.
They’ve got him drugged out of his mind. Steve doesn’t reply.

Bucky startles - in their immediate vicinity, a dog is barking. For a moment, he thinks it may mean that a security team has arrived, but a glance over to the doorway on their right tells him otherwise. The white door has only a single glass window and a red plaque that reads LAB 310. CAUTION - LIVE ANIMALS.

The dog’s growls and whines seem to wake up the rest of the lab’s occupants, and soon there’s a clamor coming from just beyond the door. Bucky glances once at the access to the stairwell, where he knows he should be going now, as fast as he can, but he wonders if he can’t slow down their pursuers a little more. He takes out the key-card and tries it on the sensor by the handle. The light flashes green and the lock clicks.

The lab is dark except for the red glow of heat lamps in one corner and a few computer screens. Once his eyes adjust, he looks around. Cages and kennels, wall to wall. Dogs. Rabbits. Monkeys. Mice and rats.

There’s a row of larger kennels along the back wall. When he approaches them, the dog stops barking, ducks his head low, and shifts toward the back of his cage, coveting in the deep shadows. He’s a pitbull - big-boned, but his ribs protrude and his muscles seem atrophied. He’s not neutered, his ears are clipped short, and his face is mapped with white scars and malformations, doubtlessly earned from fights and beatings. He sits and tries to wag his tail in a clumsy, unpracticed way as their eyes meet, like he can read true, knowing sympathy in Bucky. “Hey, good boy,” he whispers absently, putting his hand up to the chain-link, and the dog shuffles forward, licking his dry nose, tail beating a nervous rhythm against the dirty concrete floor.

Bucky looks back up to Steve. “Unlock all the doors, but don’t open them,” he commands, then turns towards the exit and listens intently. There are boots on the stairs already, coming from above and below their position, meaning that at least two squads are closing in to hem them in there. They’ll be moving cautiously, though, so Bucky guesses they have about one minute before there are guns on them again.

Once Bucky stands up and starts unbolting the cage doors, Steve finally follows suit and helps him. The rest of the animals behave much the same way the dog had - flinching away, trying to disappear into the backs of their cages, but Steve and Bucky don’t threaten any of them into aggression. They open up as many as they can before Bucky decides that the boots have become too loud on the stairs, and heads back to the first cage, directly across from the lab entrance.

“Get inside,” he orders softly, giving Steve a little push forward. He edges in without hesitation or fear - exactly as a soldier should do when he’s been given a command - and Bucky is grateful. The dog doesn’t get territorial. In fact, his tail wags harder. Glad to have some company in hell, Bucky guesses. The poor guy must recognize another pair of lab rats when he sees them.

They crouch low at the back of the pen. Bucky releases the safety on his stolen gun and grips it between his knees to cock it, and Steve imitates his movements, and then they wait. Pierce has to be tracking him - the way he’d chased them down in that helicopter was evidence of that - though whether he can see what room Bucky is in or just that he hasn’t left the building, Bucky can’t be sure. A jolt of fear lances through his chest when he feels something warm and sharp against his forearm, but it’s just the dog, huffing and nipping at him - not attacking. Just curious.

Just beyond the lab’s entrance, agents begin to pour out of the stairwell into the hallway, where they immediately move into position at the door. They know exactly what room he’s in, then. He can only hope that Pierce’s technology can’t track him any more specifically than that. He sinks lower into the shadows, lungs full of air that reeks of animal waste, feeling the slickness of filth
beneath his bare feet, and takes aim.

The agents move in and fan out, and almost instantly a cacophony of noise explodes around them. Low growls and anxious whining, sharp barks, the screech of primates and the metallic rattle of a dozen cages. After that, all it takes is one of the smaller monkeys beating against its door and realizing that he’s free to leave his prison, and there’s only time for one guard to say, “What the fuck?” before cage doors are swinging open all over the lab. One dog at the end of the row of kennels takes down two before the rest of the agents can even respond, but after just a few seconds, it’s clear that the primates are doing the most damage.

And as much as Bucky hates having to put the animals in harm’s way, his plan works. The agents let out a chorus of panicked shouts and start shooting wildly, and amid the cover of the gunfire from eight other sidearms, Bucky shoots three. Steve, with shaking hands, takes down one. Good Boy must see an opening, because he springs out of his kennel and latches onto the meat of the closest agent’s thigh and shakes for all he’s worth. Steve and Bucky follow him out. The two agents still standing realize what’s happening, but their aim is off. Bucky feels the heat and percussive blast of a bullet passing near his right ear, but he’s able to shoot them before they land a hit. He finishes off the ones that the German shepherd at the end attacked, then mercifully ends the suffering of the one screaming underneath Good Boy’s hefty frame. Luckily, the German shepherd has already taken off down the hall - Bucky doesn’t doubt that he’d have bitten into anything that got near him.

“Well, most of the animals don’t pursue them. When Bucky stops, so does Good Boy. He sits for a split second when Bucky sees him, and then rises again, shuffling back and forth, excited to leave. “What the hell,” Bucky sighs, and waves him through the door, too. He’s no more likely to die with them as would be in that lab. He might as well get the chance to make a break for it, too.

Bucky starts to worry after the third flight. He had been hoping that the stairs would allow them to bottleneck any incoming agents, but there are no agents. Good Boy leads the way like he knows where they’re going and Bucky drives Steve on ahead of him, all the way down to the ground floor. Still no agents. Aside from the dog’s excited panting and the sounds of their feet on the smooth concrete, the entire stairwell seems eerily silent. This is a trap. Pierce is very, very smart. It has to be a trap. Bucky wants to stop where he stands and beat his fucking head against the wall rather than walk into it, but he doesn’t have that option. They have to try. He tells himself that if all this accomplishes is twelve dead HYDRA agents, then it’s been worth it. He wants so much more, but he has to give himself a reason to move forward.

The lobby is visible down the hall to Bucky’s left, with neutral colors and freshly waxed floors, updated to provide the facade of a research facility to anyone who might peer into the thick, tinted windows. The silence that had followed them through down the stairs doesn’t abate.
The dog takes the first cautious steps down the hall and then back to Steve and Bucky, claws tapping and skittering on the linoleum, looking so comically out of place that he almost manages to dispel the foreboding atmosphere. There seems to be no way to go but forward - into the lobby and out the doors. Bucky decides that speed is now a better ally than stealth, because if they can just get outside and get some civilian’s attention, they might get away. Bucky would much rather be arrested and thrown back in a maximum security prison than be HYDRA’s research subject again. So if the doors are locked from the inside, he’ll shoot out a window. If they pursue, he’ll run like hell.

The lobby is empty and still dim. Outside, morning is approaching, bathing the echoing hall in dusty blue light. He stays close to the wall for a moment, stopping Steve with his arm and the dog with his foot, and takes one last look around. No agents. In the cavernous room, he’s sure he could hear another man’s breathing from a hundred yards away. There is most certainly a trap, but he hasn’t encountered it yet.

Then again, there is the slightest possibility that Pierce had exaggerated the number of agents at his disposal. And as many of them as Bucky and Steve had killed so far, he wouldn’t be surprised if a few of them had quit. The response to their escape so far has been not only minimal, but clumsy - the work of badly trained agents who haven’t been functioning as a team for long. HYDRA is crippled on a global scale. That must have affected Pierce’s faction. Maybe they have already won. Maybe they’re going to get out.

“Let’s go,” Bucky says decisively. “Out the doors on the east end there, then run. If you see anyone who looks like a civilian, shout for help. You still alright?” he asks when Steve doesn’t look up from the floor.

Steve only nods again.

“We’re getting out of here. I love you,” Bucky says quickly, stepping out into the open lobby. He doesn’t look over his shoulder to see if Steve responds - he’s too afraid that he won’t find even a glimmer of recognition.

The run. They move cautiously at first, up to the glass doors. The doors are locked. Bucky shoots twice, and the glass panel shatters. The second set of doors leading out of the foyer only take one bullet. He gasps when the broken glass meets the bare soles of his dirty feet, stinging like ice, but he focuses all of his attention on what’s right in front of him. Outside. Wind. Freedom. Escape.

There’s a footpath leading toward the car lot and a grassy park, beyond which Bucky can see a main road. He runs toward it. Steve is at his shoulder, feet beating against the ground right beside them, and Good Boy is trying for all he’s worth to keep up, bounding beside them and looking happier than Bucky thought the poor thing could have managed. Their feet hit the wet grass, crunching in frozen dew, the cold soothing the bleeding cuts around the embedded chips of glass, and Bucky can see the road up ahead and an electric thrill lances through his whole body, so powerful that he can feel tears spattering at the corners of his eyes, damp and chilly in the biting wind.

Goddamnit, they made it.

He doesn’t hear the first gunshot, but he catches the echo of the second one, reverberating through the complex behind them. He doesn’t process it. He doesn’t care. He takes another long stride, and when his right foot meets the ground, it’s almost like there’s nothing underneath him. He falls hard - the empty metal socket of his shoulder hits the grass first.

The faint, distant reverberations of the gunshots are instantly drowned out by an explosive burst of
ringing in his ears, as loud and dizzying as the the transmitter that Wentzel had used back in New York had been, but lower, making his whole skeleton buzz with it. His body suddenly feels bloodless and oddly light and ticklish, like he’s in continuous free-fall. It’s a starkly familiar sensation. Some still-present, lucid voice in his head recognizes it and tells him mechanically, *Gun shot wound. Right knee. Extreme pain. You just can’t feel it yet. Do not faint. Keep breathing. Breathe slowly.* A secondary, less rational voice, screams and cries, begging, *Get up. Get up. Keep running. Please, keep running. Please.* Another gunshot rings out. He feels an impact and a burst of heat in his thigh. He can’t hear or see.

He’s sprawled on his back when the blackness of shock recedes to the edges of his vision. He must have twisted as he fell - he’s facing the facility. The burning chill of frozen dew draws his brain back into his body and anchors him there long enough for his eyes to focus and to allow the blurry, doubled figures on the roof to resolidify. Pierce put snipers on the roof. Of *course* he did. Bucky would laugh, if there was a breath of air in his lungs to let him.

Of course Pierce had known that however Steve and Bucky made it out of the building, the only way off the grounds was by the lot or the park. After a single, failed gamble on apprehending them inside the building, all he had needed to do was let them go, put his best-trained shooters on the roof, and wait. Even with the incredible weight of failure sitting heavily on his chest and the shock from the bullet exiting his kneecap, he says to himself in a removed, calm voice, *What did you expect?*

From the first shot fired to the moment Bucky asks himself that question, no more than a second actually passes. Time stutters back into its normal rhythm like a record flipped from thirty-three to forty-five. Steve slides to a panicked halt just ahead of him as Good Boy crashes through the grass beside him. The dog stops and turns, barks once, trying to rouse him, but he’s sent running instantly, terrified but seemingly unhurt by the bullet that thuds into the soft ground between his front paws.

Bucky tips his head up, hoping to see that Steve has followed the dog out toward the highway. Goddamnit, he wishes Steve hadn’t even looked back. “Go!” he shouts, hoping the desperation in his voice will be enough to cut through Steve’s drug-haze. “Go, get help!” he instructs, dragging himself up onto his elbow. An armed security detail jogs out of the facility’s main doors and makes a bee-line for them. Pierce brings up the rear of the squad, a bullet-proof vest over his white shirt. Bucky’s sole consolation is that the old man’s head remains unprotected.

“Steve, *run!*” he tries again as the approaching agents draw their weapons. But Steve only sways where he stands, then bends down and hauls Bucky up by the arm, drawing him close to his side to support him. Bucky growls out a curse when his weight shifts onto his shattered kneecap.

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” Steve rasps dryly.

“Steve, listen to me,” Bucky says softly and slowly with one eye on the approaching squads, trying to get through to him. “You’re not going to do either of us any good if you stay here. Run. They want you alive. They won’t kill you. Get to the road. Steve, *get to the road.*”

But Pierce is already closing in. “Stay right there, soldier,” he calls out from across the lawn, although he keeps his voice gentle and wheedling. He keeps his gaze and attention on Steve as he speaks, but his gun stays trained on Bucky, making his priorities very clear. “Let’s bring him back inside. He’s injured.”

Steve’s silence is enough proof that he’s actually *listening* to Pierce. How could he not? He’s been wiped countless times every day for a week, and given LSD and ketamine and Bucky can only guess what else, and through all of that, Pierce has been whispering into his ear. Bucky had been
programmed by other handlers, but no one had demanded his obedience like Pierce had. He knows just how quickly Pierce could make someone - even Steve - forget the truth.

“Steve,” Bucky pleads before Pierce can open his mouth again. “Drop me on the ground and run,” he says, trying to sound reassuring. He knows very well that Steve’s the only one they care to take alive, and he hasn’t got a fighting chance alone. They’re using the same paralytic rounds from the lab in West Seneca. His one good leg is already giving out.

“Listen to him. Listen to what he’s saying,” Pierce implores. “Remember what I told you? He gave up, Soldier. He knows he can’t get out of here - he knows it’s more dangerous out there than it is with us,” he says, flicking a nod over his shoulder. “He doesn’t care whether he lives or dies anymore. He wants to die. You don’t want that for him, do you? We don’t want that for him. Drop the gun...and help us take him in,” he offers calmly, keeping his eyes locked with Steve’s, unblinking, as he nods his encouragement. “You know you don’t have another option.”

Bucky raises his arm with an enraged shout and proves him wrong with the last bullet in his gun. His joints move like worn-out gears, though, and his aim is too low to kill - it glances off Pierce’s right bicep, tearing through his dress shirt and spraying a little blood on the frozen ground. It knocks Pierce back, and the recoil knocks Bucky back just as far. He’s out of choices now. They only want one thing, and he has it, and so that’s what he’ll have to wager with. As Bucky stumbles, he hooks his arm around Steve to catch himself and pulls him down, pressing the empty Glock (still loaded, for all Pierce knows) just underneath Steve’s chin. The barrel of the gun tips Steve’s head back and to the side, pressing their faces together cheek to cheek, and keeps him pinned against Bucky, shielding him. Bucky prays that Steve knows he wouldn’t hurt him, but Pierce isn’t in a position to gamble with his non-viable asset’s sanity when his viable asset is at stake.

Pierce clutches his arm, and when he straightens, his eyes narrow viciously, assessing Bucky’s ploy. For a fleeting moment, his expression makes it clear that he’s afraid that there’s a grain of truth to his own lie - maybe Bucky has lost his mind. Maybe they pushed him too far.

“You want him?” Bucky roars, trying to ignore the way the paralytic is making his trigger finger weak and his arm heavy. “You can have a fucking cadaver,” he spits.

“Soldier,” Pierce pants, almost pleading with Steve. “Look at him. He was safer with us. You know what the Feds will do if they get a hold of him. He’s on a suicide mission and he’s ready to take you down with him--”

“Shut the fuck up!” Bucky shouts, driving the muzzle in a little harder for effect. “If you want him alive, you’re going to have to hunt him down again. Steve,” he says, suddenly softening his voice. He doesn’t have more than a minute before he won’t be able to stand up. They’ve got to move. “Come on. Back away. We’re leaving.”

“He’s not thinking clearly--” Pierce interrupts.

“Steve, walk,” Bucky begs, praying that his numb fingers can keep a grip on the gun a little longer.

“You think my men couldn’t put a bullet in your head right now if I ordered them to?” he asks Bucky. “I would rather this hadn’t gotten violent, but you have forced my hand,” Pierce scolds him.

“Do it,” Bucky laughs. “If you were going to do it, you already would have. Steve, come on. Please.”

Pierce takes a step forward, as if his victory is assured and he’s eager to claim his winnings. “Anderson, when you get a clear shot, put the Asset down.” Anderson is standing closest to them
and he’s got a steady hand. Bucky doesn’t doubt that he could make the shot.

“Please, Steve. Let’s go,” Bucky tries again, but Steve is watching Pierce, his body tense and unsure. “Please, Stevie.”

“Anderson,” Pierce prompts grimly.

Steve’s eyes stay on Pierce. Bucky’s gun trembles against Steve’s jaw. Anderson lowers his head and adjusts his aim ever so slightly. Bucky wishes they had just decommissioned him the first time he’d asked. Pierce takes another step forward and gives Steve a nod.

It’s not much of a consolation, but Bucky barely feels the bullet make impact with his face.

It takes him a long moment to realize that Anderson never fired. There was no bullet. What hit him, what knocked him to the ground, reduced his vision to white bursts and firework-colored, worsening the damage to his already broken nose, was the back of Steve’s skull. Steve tears the gun out of his boneless fingers as the agents close in and encircle the two of them. Bucky coughs once, lungs and chest weak from the paralytic, and feels the tickle of blood in his throat from his bleeding nose.

He stares up at Steve, whose white hospital clothes stand out against the encroaching mass of black-clad agents. Pierce comes to stand at his side. Bucky is barely hanging on to consciousness - his awareness is reduced to himself and the ground beneath him, and the two men looking down at his body. Steve doesn’t seem to completely comprehend what he’s done.

“He would have killed you rather than surrender. And himself. You did well,” Pierce praises him.

Steve frowns, but nods slowly. Like it was exactly the reassurance he had needed.

If Steve ever realizes that the gun he took from Bucky is empty, Bucky doesn’t see it. He blacks out, and hopes he won’t have to wake up. Maybe Pierce is right about him. Maybe he has given up.
Chapter Summary

HYDRA has lost faith in their old asset.

Even through the disjointed dreams that seem to stretch on for days, Bucky remains lucid enough to dread waking. He knows what he’ll open his eyes to - the lab, scrubbed clean, and the cell and every memorized blemish and stain on its floor grey floor. And as he dreams, he thinks of Steve, whose face hovers at the perimeter of his vision no matter where he looks. Every time it flashes into his awareness, an anxious, cold nausea washes over him. Steve’s face is frozen into that same shape it had taken on the lawn outside facility, when he had stared down at Bucky like a beaten opponent to pity, like something now inconsequential, someone he had to let go. Put down. Someone mad, who was a danger to himself, who needed to be restrained to be kept safe, for his own good. No matter what Bucky tried to imagine or recall from the better years of their lives, Steve’s eyes never seemed to change. Always, they stayed as empty and flat as an ocean, endless in all directions and unmoved by the breeze. If there was still life beneath the glass surface, it made no sign of breaking through. He had become a Soldier - Leto, to overthrow Žima. Summer, full of rage and cuttingly, cancerously bright, to replace Winter.

Bucky expects to wake up to the hum of machinery and a glaring work-light whiting out his vision, with the bite of needles and bone-deep pressure of Parsons’ instruments digging at his nerves. (If he wakes up at all - he drowns in his nightmares so many times that he’s sure the blood from his nose is blocking his airway.)

It’s the sound of his own weak coughs that finally pulls him back to consciousness. He opens his swollen eyes and coughs in earnest, the thick straps on the table squeezing tighter and tighter as he tries to draw a breath. This isn’t the lab - the air is too still, and his rattling breaths are thrown back at him by close walls. The effects of the paralytic have mostly subsided. He has no clothes, and no bandages on his wounds, and when he struggles to move, testing his mobility against the straps crossing his body, each six inches apart, all the way up to his forehead, he feels the pull and crack of dried blood gluing his skin to everything it touches. There are no machines in this room, and no lights, and no one else, but he can hear raised voices just beyond the wall to his right. He swallows, wetting his throat with the stale taste of copper, and ignores the itch in his lungs so that he can listen.

“This is exactly what you should have expected!”

The voice belongs to Montgomery.

“Look, I understand that you’ve been focused on the Leto Project,” he continues, “but you have been - honestly - sloppy with his reconditioning--”

“Sloppy,” Řezníčk scoffs. “Your programming was laughable. It broke down in a day, it’s failure nearly destroyed HYDRA--”

“You have no clue what went on that week, you weren’t there. We pushed him way too goddamn hard, we wiped him over and over again, when we should have put him back into cryo, exactly like you’re doing right now. Pierce wanted to recondition him mid-operation.”
“He knows that can’t be--”

“That was the situation. It was a fucking mess. You don’t have the experience with enhanced people to make these calls, Řezník. Yes, the programming is temporary. Because he heals. If you go for permanence, you essentially lobotomize him. You make him unusable--!”

“So you want to put him back into cryo? Where is your cryogenics facility? Did the FBI leave that for you to keep?” he asks sarcastically. “I am going to ask that Alex let me supervise surgery. If we removed the--”

“It’s a moot point,” says a third voice, distant, but drawing slowly closer. Pierce’s.

Montgomery sighs, “Sir, you shouldn’t be--”

“I’m alright. Couple of stitches. It wasn’t deep. I think it’s time to decommission him, Chris. I’d rather have your focus on the Leto Project. He’s at stage two already, we could have him on ops in a matter of months. And look, I won’t beat around the bush with you two - we’ve taken every kind of sample imaginable from him, and the updates on reverse-engineering the serum are bleak. We need him in the field to make this worth the funding.”

“I--” Montgomery seems to pause to consider his words. “I think that’s risky, sir,” he offers, so quietly that Bucky barely catches it. “Decommissioning him this early in Leto’s CP.”

“And why is that? You don’t think it’s riskier to keep him around?” Pierce asks brusquely, as if he’s calling attention to his injury to make his point.

“Listen, there is a human element here, sir.”

Řezník interrupts with a derisive, “Oh, this.”

“Yes, this. They were obviously close friends - close enough that Leto was able to talk the Asset out of compliance. You put him down, this early in Leto’s CP, you’re going to throw away any progress you’ve made. Guarantee it.”

“Řezník?” Pierce prompts for an opinion.

“You know where I stand on the issue, Alex.”

There’s a long silence as Pierce considers his options. Bucky suddenly realizes that he’s waiting on a verdict. He’s waiting to hear whether or not he’s going to die today. Before that knowledge can fully settle in his mind, Pierce has made a decision. “We’ve...got a very good system established for compliance programming. From what Řezník tells me, putting the Asset down at this stage could actually be beneficial to trauma bonding Leto to a handler. Is that right?”

Řezník answers for himself, a little smugly, “Certainly.”

“Chris, I’m sorry.”

And as Pierce continues, Bucky has to strain to hear him over the buzz of blood in his ears. He knows how Pierce’s explanation is going to end, just as well as Montgomery must know it.

“Look, you fixed a lot of old issues with the Asset - I recognize that. But you know you weren’t working with a clean slate - Zola made a good start with him, but he was skittish, and Lukin undid a lot of that work trying to use him for jobs outside of his skillset, and Karpov made him too aggressive. But we’ve got the chance to work with undamaged equipment for once, Chris. It’s
going to make your job a lot easier in the long run,” he says, as if he’s trying to soften the blow.

Bucky wishes he’s just say it outright, so he could stop hoping and make peace with it.

“We have a rare opportunity before us, gentlemen. We’ve got the original super soldier, and we’ve got seventy years of applicable research on how to control him. I think it’s time to throw out the prototype and concentrate our efforts on bigger things.”

*Just fucking say it.*

“So,” Montgomery bites out tersely. “How do you want it done? You want me to shoot him in the head? Lethal injection? Suffocate him with a pillow?” he laughs. Bucky can’t quite process the death sentence yet - he finds himself a little amused by Montgomery’s reaction, in fact. He’s never heard him throw that kind of vitriol at Pierce. “We could just let Řezník electrocute him. That would be nice and ironic.”

*Bullet,* Bucky thinks numbly, the suggestive voice in his head so casual that, in that moment, it almost seems comical.

“I think that should be your call, Chris,” Pierce answers evenly.

“If that’s your final word on it,” Montgomery says with an audible tightness to his jaw.

“I suggest that we don’t inform Leto until we’ve selected a permanent handler for him,” Řezník adds.

“Noted,” Pierce calls out from down the hall. He must be walking away. The conversation is apparently over. “Six hours, Chris. However you like.”

Thinking about them telling Steve - about what they’re going to tell Steve, and how, and why - that drives it all home.

Bucky suddenly realizes that he’s been emptying his lungs for the space of several breaths, his tense abdomen forcing the air from his chest in a long, unsteady stream. When he finally makes himself inhale, he sobs. He cries. The most awesome, unfathomable pain he’s ever felt settles right in between his lungs, and the crushing heaviness bears down on him like a million atmospheres, beyond hatred for Pierce and HYDRA or regret for the choices he’d made that had led him here, to this table, in these restraints, in this dark room. He crumbles under how *unfair* this is and he *cries hard,* and the grief is still too much. He can’t let it all out quickly enough. It builds up like a bleed in his brain, no matter how much he cries.

Maybe this is really what he deserves for all his kills, but it still hurts, it hurts so much it’s *unbearable.*

He got drafted. He was captured. He got out. He fell. He lost his arm and broke every bone he had. They captured him again. They made him kill, and kill, and *kill.* He got out. He got better. Steve found him. He remembered. He kissed Steve. Steve kissed him. They had laughed. Steve handed him over to save his life. They wiped Steve. Steve was their Asset. They almost got away. Steve was gone. Leto brought him down.

He’s going to die. They’re going to kill him. That was it that was the end of the story the end of his life and he had gotten up every day and tried so fucking hard because he’d thought that *maybe* there would be *more to it* and God would give him *something* some reason or reward and he could be happy again for a little while and he’d have Steve they’d get old together and they would finally be happy but this this *this* restraints and suffocation naked in the dark *animal* was how his life was
going to end then fuck god and every other false hope he’d ever held and fuck dignity and pride he
doesn’t have a goddamn reason not to cry

He feels the world swaying underneath him like a ship at sea, and sees every color blooming bright
in the black room. His teeth chatter. He hyperventilated.

He clenches his teeth and breathes slowly.

The only thing left, the only thing he has now is his most basic freedom of will. He had wanted to
cry. And now, if he’s going to die, he wants his dignity. It’s his to exercise. He breathes slower.
Deeper. He stops crying. He thinks of acceptance rather than loss.

The door opens, and light streams in from the hallway, silhouetting Montgomery. Bucky doesn’t
try to parse out whether it will be now or later. He tries to accept that simple fact that it will
happen. Montgomery turns on the light and shuts the door.

The room is as bare as it had felt in the dark. Painted cinderblock walls and a scuffed, dirty floor,
and the padded slab they’ve got him strapped to, tilted upright so that he wouldn’t suffocate before
the jury was in on him. There’s nothing else to look at, so he watches Montgomery. The doctor
looks at him like a thirsty man looks at a spilled drink.

“Guess you heard all of that,” Montgomery assumes.

Bucky doesn’t answer, and doesn’t allow his face to betray anything either.

Montgomery huffs with frustration. “God damn it. You just can’t let me have a good day at work,
can you?”

Bucky lets himself laugh. “Find a better job.”

“Why can you not just follow simple instructions? We don’t even have you on ops - all you had to
do was stay in your fucking cell. Do you seriously want to die? Řezník says that you’ve been
asking him to decommission you. Is that really what you want? I don’t know, because sometimes
you just say that shit to be an asshole. You need us, we need you, this is where you belong. With
us. And you’re throwing a fit because we’re asking you to do what we made you to do.”

“HYDRA didn’t make me.”

“HYDRA is the only reason you are alive,” Montgomery enunciates slowly. “Zola put you back
together piece by piece, and I have busted my ass keeping you functional for over a decade, and
now you’re treating us like we’re the bad guys. You realize the US government wants you shot on
sight, don’t you? And this is the only place you can be safe?”

Bucky gives him a minute, then asks, “You finished?”

Montgomery explodes. “You really don’t give a shit, do you? You still haven’t grasped the
concept that if you would just do what Pierce says, your life would get better really fast. Come on.
Stop. If you tell me that you’re willing to cooperate and do what you’re supposed to, I swear to
God, I will go back upstairs and I will make Pierce listen, but you’ve got to give me something.”

The basest part of his brain which is interested only in self-preservation tells him to accept the
offer. But he knows it’s not an option. He won’t work for them willingly. He’s not going to kill for
Pierce or anyone else, ever again. “No.”

Montgomery turns away and takes a step, but in the tiny room, he has nowhere to go. He must have
just been sick of looking at Bucky. He drags his nails over his scalp. “Fine. How do you want me
to do it?” he challenges.

“Bullet seems quick and cheap,” Bucky bites out.

Montgomery laughs acidically and looks toward the ceiling. “You’re not even considering Leto
here - in fact, fuck it, we’re alone - you are not thinking about what this is going to do to Rogers. I
understand trauma bonding. I have studied it. Half of the research that Řezník works off of is
bullshit from his MKUltra days. It’s going to fuck Rogers up. It’s going to make him volatile, and
then I’m going to be putting him down.”

The tears reappeared right around the moment Montgomery used Steve’s name. Bucky wishes he
had somewhere to bury his face, some way to hide, but he can’t stop himself and he can’t
disappear.

“No you really want to die?” Montgomery presses.

And Bucky opens his mouth to say yes, but he can’t.

He had only had his dignity, and now he doesn’t even have that. His throat aches and his ears ring
and his bones shake, holding in the wrenching sob that all his words are trapped behind.

Montgomery watches him like a hawk, dissecting his reaction, and then begins to nod slowly,
gaining surety by the second. “Okay,” he says simply, making a choice - though whether the
decision he’s come to going to mean death or a longer wait for death, Bucky can’t guess.
Montgomery doesn’t bother to tell him which it is. He leaves, shutting the door softly behind him.

In the bright, empty room, Bucky can’t sleep. He can only be still and wait. He spends the next
five hours of the six he has left listening to the sound of his own breaths, counting them down.

Bucky has made peace with dying, until the moment the door the opens and guards file in.

He takes in everything, wishing that he could shut it all out and lose himself in a warm memory,
but his damaged neural pathways haven’t reconnected yet - they won’t have time. He knows the
memories are there, but the images, the words, it’s all still just out of reach. He wants one more
hour. He wants one good memory to dwell on, to be the last thing he sees.

Instead, he sees the agents. Two of them bend to release the wheel-locks on the tilted table he’s
strapped to. He hears each creak and click as they disengage one by one. He listens to the way they
breathe - three fairly quiet, one heavier, labored. Another clears his throat once, twice. None of
them speak. They push him out into the hall. One of them turns off the light and shuts the door.
They won’t be taking him back to that room - his long wait in purgatory is over.

He gets the sense that he’s in a lower sublevel of the building now. The air is damp and stale,
heavy with the electromagnetic hum of servers and decaying pipes, and he can hear the quiet,
persistent clack, clack, clack of a kettling boiler echoing in the walls. They take him to the
elevator, and he listens to its long descent. Just before they push him inside, he notices that the
grate he and Steve broke open earlier has only been partially repaired. He tries not to think about
the events of that morning.

The elevator only goes to the next floor. In the space of seconds, the doors shudder open and then
the wheels of the gurney are jarring over the little gap again, and he’s back in the long hall with the
main labs to his left. They pass them. Bucky briefly wishes for someone to leave the lab or enter, just so he can catch a glimpse inside. Steve is probably there. None of the doors open.

One of the agents walking alongside the gurney breaks rank to knock on the next door down.

“Yeah,” Montgomery calls out from inside. The agent flashes his keycard at the panel by the doorknob, the sustained *beep* as the lock opens suddenly reminiscent of a heart-monitor.

Bucky flinches reflexively when he hears it, and shuts his eyes as they maneuver him through the door. He doesn’t want to see the room. In the absence of older, better memories, he searches for any fleeting picture that’s *somewhere, anywhere* but here and now. He pictures the grounds outside the hospital and the low-hanging sea of white fog as it caught the first rays of pale winter sun, imagines the way the frozen blades of grass had crackled under his bare feet like breaking china as he ran, tries to hear the dog’s joyful panting and the distant sound of cars speeding down the highway like sighs and whispers, replaces the smell of acrid, nervous sweat and old blood with the smell of mud and bare trees and morning air cold enough to make his lungs ache.

The gurney stops moving and the agents’ footsteps recede. On his right, the door shuts. Just in front of him, an office chair whines, shrill and sporadic, as its occupant shifts. Papers rasp. Fingers beat a steady rhythm against computer keys like iron wheels on train tracks. Bucky turns his attention back to the memory of anywhere else, trying to imagine what the ice-laden branches would have looked like once the sun was a little higher in the sky, glittering.

“I think I’ve found an alternative.”

Montgomery’s voice strikes like lightning from Bucky’s imagined sky.

“Want to hear about it?”

The question is so strange, so out of place, coming from someone who has never really treated him as a human capable of conversation, that Bucky’s eyes open with reflexive interest. He doesn’t want to listen. No offer coming from a HYDRA scientist can possibly bode well for him. He shouldn’t allow himself to hope right now. He should try to focus on accepting death with some measure of grace. This isn’t the time to make a bargain with the devil.

But Montgomery sees him open his eyes, and he must read a little glimmer of something in them that says, *Yes.*

“Remember Operation Paperclip?” Montgomery asks lightly. Now that Bucky looks around, he realizes that this must be his office. There’s a desk and a small workstation, and Montgomery’s laptop sits next to another, older computer, which is probably connected to a private server. Every surface is covered in papers in English, Russian, German, and French, many of them old and water-damaged. Two large filing boxes are stacked beside his chair, almost completely emptied of their contents. “You served under Karpov for a few years, and then Zola came to work for SHIELD, and gained access to you again. Early seventies. You’d been really hard to control, so they handed you over to him to reprogram. He conducted a lot of research. Kept you in the lab for about five years.”

He remembers, but not well. That period of time is written in smudged ink in his brain - he had been kept heavily sedated most days, but looking down at the stack of papers spread out between Montgomery’s fidgeting hands, he recalls staring up at a dripping ceiling and a naked, humming lightbulb, and he can hear the intermittent taps and chimes of Zola’s typewriter echoing through the bunker. Briefly, the scents of iodine and chloroform and mildew surround him. “Yeah,” he admits, disgusted with himself for being so easily baited.
“I’m going to propose reopening one of Zola’s projects.”

Bucky immediately decides that death is the preferable option. Montgomery must see the disgust in his expression.

“I know. You don’t like it. But it keeps you alive. In fact, it does more than that. Hopefully, I’d be the one leading the research, and I’m not Zola. There’d be no reason to deprive you of your identity - no wipes, no conditioning, no programming. You get to keep your memories. I’ll call you whatever you want to be called. No field operations, no kill missions. I mean...how much else can you really ask for?” Montgomery asks stupidly.

“No,” Bucky answers. The research would benefit HYDRA. To Bucky, that’s just as violent as actually pulling triggers for them.

Montgomery sighs, exasperated. “I’m not really giving you a choice - I’m doing this for your own good. And you know what? Pierce still may veto it - but considering that they haven’t been able to replicate Erskine’s formula, I really doubt it. I’m telling you all of this to be nice, alright? I’m trying to save your fucking life, so you should probably help me out.” He pauses, presumably to give Bucky the opportunity to thank him or promise to cooperate. Bucky does neither. Montgomery gives up, apparently deeming Bucky’s response or lack thereof inconsequential. “I’ve already called him and he’s on his way. Like I said, he may turn me down. You could still get your death wish,” he adds cuttingly, straightening up the piles of papers, putting away what he doesn’t need.

Bucky watches him tidy the room and pour over the documents one last time as he thumbs through them. A chill sweeps over him, and he wishes desperately that Montgomery would drape a blanket over him.

Pierce doesn’t bother to knock on Montgomery’s door before he enters minutes later. Bucky is a little pleased to see that his arm is in a sling and he looks completely exhausted. Maybe his day hadn’t been a complete waste of effort. Whatever satisfaction he feels dissolves as Pierce’s eyes sweep over Montgomery’s desk, sceptical, but clearly intrigued. Suddenly, he’s afraid.

“Alright. So, you’ve solved the problem with replicating the serum. Congratulations, Chris. You have my undivided attention.”

Montgomery stands up and wrings his hands like a schoolboy preparing to give a presentation. “Yes, sir,” he answers smartly, though it doesn’t take him long to lose whatever courage he’d dredged up and start babbling at Pierce, stammering occasionally. Bucky almost feels embarrassed for him. “Look, the Asset can’t be reprogrammed at this point, but...killing him is a waste of raw material. And I think I can use him. I can make new Soldiers. You’d have multiple genomes to study, you’d have stem-cells, cord blood, everything we’d need to isolate the--”

“Slow down,” Pierce demands, raising his hand to silence the doctor, sparing him any further effort or humiliation. “It’s been done, Chris. And it didn’t work. I don’t need another debacle like Karpov created. I’ve got no use for a crew of partially enhanced psychopaths,” he chuckles, with a distasteful glance at Bucky.

But Montgomery only looks more eager now. “With all due respect, sir, that’s not what I’m proposing. If you’re taking him off ops anyway, if it really wouldn’t be a problem if we terminated him...then I want a surgical team,” he says with a tremor of nervousness in his voice, thumping his palm against the papers in front of him. He doesn’t seem like a man who’s accustomed to confidence or making demands of his superiors. “I know I can do it, sir. The advancements in microsurgery, in transplants - we know how to work with decellularized organs, now! The strides
we’ve made in endocrinology alone since the seventies are reason enough to take a second look at-

Pierce tilts his head, squinting to read the heading of the document beneath Montgomery’s hand. “You want to reopen Project Vesna.”

Montgomery takes a deep breath and nods sincerely. “Sir, I know it’s a long shot, but Zola’s hypothesis is solid. And the only piece of the puzzle he was missing,” he smiles, pointing to the wall behind Bucky, toward the main lab and Steve, “we have it.” Montgomery stands straight and tense, awaiting an answer, hoping that his last statement has sold his argument.

Pierce takes his glasses out of his pocket and slides one of the papers across Montgomery’s desk. Bucky watches him read it. He feels completely numb and passive, like he’s watching the scene play out in a film.

Finally, Pierce sets the paper down and looks up. He gives Montgomery a little smirk of resignation. “Okay,” he says decisively. “Let me make a few phonecalls. For a project like this, I think I can find you a few benefactors. You update the proposal. I’ll worry about the money.”

Montgomery contains himself until Pierce has left, then collapses into his chair grinning. “I think you may have just gotten me a raise,” he laughs. Bucky’s stomach churns violently, his brain a battleground between relief and terror. He’s not going to die today, but what will happen to him tomorrow remains a horrifying unknown.

“Congratulations, James Barnes,” Montgomery smiles, glancing at him like he’s expecting gratitude. “You’ve just been decommissioned.”
Sam and Sharon make a new friend.

On the morning of Sunday, January 31st, Sam wakes up earlier than usual. It’s been one hell of a week since they set up their base at the Torres-Clay residence.

Sharon has set herself up a little office in the basement so that she can maintain contact with her superiors back in Europe. She’s working her end of the case marvelously, obtaining dossiers on everyone in Pierce’s cell who hadn’t been confirmed dead in the wreckage of the Triskelion, tracking all of their aliases and their accounts, trying to link them together toward a central location. She and Judy get along famously, too - Judy is intensely interested in her work, and Sharon shares more of it with her than Sam guesses is technically legal, but it’s a fair trade for Judy’s sharp insights.

Wanda had taken a little while to settle in to their new surroundings. She’d spent a few days struggling with feelings that she couldn’t be much help to the team outside of combat, but Sam assures her repeatedly that she’s needed and appreciated - sometimes, he tells her, you’ve got to sit down and strategize before you roll out the cannons, so you know where to fire them. Still, she’s young, and she doesn’t love the fact that as one of America’s currently most wanted enhanced individuals, she can’t leave the house.

Natasha comes and goes and Sam doesn’t ask too many questions - he knows he doesn’t need to supervise her. Whatever leads she’s hunting down on her own time, she’ll talk to him about it when she’s got something solid. On Thursday, she had returned to the house in the early morning and sat down with Judy and Wanda for coffee. Wanda must have expressed that she’d been itching to do more for the team, because a little spark of excitement had flashed in Natasha’s eye when she came back inside and coyly asked Sam if he trusted her. Sam had, of course, said yes. But not without a hint of trepidation.

Natasha had left again for a few hours and returned with some interesting clothing and a few bags from a beauty supply store. She and Judy had dragged Wanda into the upstairs bathroom for most of the day after that, and had apparently had a great time. The next time Sam saw Wanda that night, he had hardly recognized her - she was blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and her hair was in tight, bouncy curls and about ten inches shorter. She had accompanied Natasha that night, when she left to hunt.

Scott has been accompanying Judy to work every day in her handbag, and has enjoyed free run of the air base while he’s there. He had managed to come home with some good information on their search for the chopper. On the third day he went with her, he had found his way into a nice office, where some higher-up had taken a phone call which revealed that the missing helicopter had been spotted heading north out of West Seneca. And it’s not the only thing that’s missing, either. Some personnel apparently disappeared along with it.

On Tuesday, Clint had sat for an hour, staring at his phone. Sam could see that he was talking himself into - or out of - asking for something. Sam had already been entertaining an idea of what it might be. Before Clint had even approached him, Sam had already made up his mind. That afternoon, Clint had rented a car and headed out to see his wife and children. He had only seen
them once since he got out of the Raft, and Sam knows that they’ve been moving around a lot. Without their dad around and a toddler to take care of, he figures that’s been especially rough on the kids and Laura. If Clint was willing to risk it, so was Sam. He had left with a promise to return immediately if they made any headway tracking down Steve, and to return by Monday morning, regardless. Sam hadn’t missed that there was something really sad about Scott’s voice when he had smiled at Clint and said simply, “Give ‘em hugs, buddy.”

Sam has drifted from one task to the next, helping his teammates however and whenever he can, struggling to make himself a jack of all trades, and when he’s not doing that, he works on his wings. He knows how they work now, but it was slow going on getting them repaired and flight-worthy. Sam is admittedly more than a little proud that in less than a week, he’s taught himself to take apart Stark-tech and diagnose exactly how it functions, but he’s still frustrated by the fact that a basic understanding of the computer systems and mechanics isn’t enough to get him off the ground just yet. Before he goes to sleep every night, he works his way through a few more pages of Barnes’ notes. He knows that Bucky might see it as an invasion of privacy, but it drives him. Understanding what Steve and Bucky had been to each other, what they deserved to have with each other after all they’d been through, in a world where they didn’t have to hide, it just makes him work harder.

What jars Sam from his deep, exhausted sleep at four forty-five that morning is a brief, flashing dream. The dream itself is nothing he would consider particularly strange or special - he’s had hundreds just like it. They’re frequent occurrences, particularly when he’s been under a lot of stress.

He sees faded images of the grass in Bamyan and the crumbling mountains beyond and feels the dry, baking heat radiating from Kandahar rooftops, and his feet sink into fine sand out in the dunes, where he walks and walks and gets nowhere.

And somewhere out in that boundless desert, he hears a dog barking. He tries to walk faster and he tries to run, but the ground slips away under his boots and the dust coats his tongue and sticks in his teeth. The dog’s barks get closer and closer. They start to feel threatening.

He turns and turns, hemmed in by brown wasteland on every side, but the low, rumbling barks are always at his back. It makes him nervous - makes him want to run as hard as he can, and yet even with a thousand empty miles ahead of him, there’s nowhere to go. He runs anyway, on nothing but instinct, feeling the pounding of his own heart shuddering like tremors through the ground, beating the air like machine gun rounds. He needs to escape, needs to sprint as fast and far as possible from wherever he is.

He runs and runs and runs, losing his sense of direction every times he dares to turn and look over his shoulder, expecting to find the animal snapping at his heels.

Soon, he gets tired, and the dog’s barks get quieter. Fainter. They’re far away, now. He hears them coming from somewhere up ahead, in the watery distance, and suddenly he’s stumbling, shocked and horrified as he realizes that the dog wasn’t chasing him. He was supposed to be chasing the dog. But now it’s getting away from him - it’s too far ahead, and his legs are too weak to carry him any further.

He’s sweat through his shirt when he wakes, and his chest is filled with the same hot sense of panic and hopelessness that he had felt back in the parking lot on the edge of the city, with the ghost of that chopper still passing like a wave through the trees.

Sam doesn’t give the dream a second thought. After two tours, nightmares were an unfortunate but acceptable inconvenience, and frequent enough that he was used to living with them and moving on.
with his day. Even when they leave him feeling like shit, it’s nothing a little cold water on his face can’t help. He just files them away with the rest, always to be unpacked later, when he has time.

But today, regardless of the nightmares, Sam finds that he has a good, old-fashioned, unshakeable bad feeling. As he drags himself up off the floor where he had slept, washes his face, dresses, brews the first of many pots of coffee, that uneasiness stays with him.

He sits down at the table in the dark kitchen, rubbing a thumb back and forth over the lighter skin of one palm, idly studying the way the aqua glow of the microwave clock illuminates his hands in cold, artificial color. He thinks about Steve and Bucky, probably stuck in some lab like the one they’d raided the week before. Of course, he thinks about them nearly every waking minute, but now, he tries to imagine them. To be right there with them, like he can somehow find them through some of that remote viewing bullshit that he’s never believed in.

Today is the thirty-first, and they were taken on the twenty-fourth. Wherever Hydra took them, they’ve been there for seven days now. That’s a long goddamn time behind enemy lines, and Sam knows it. A lot could happen - a lot could be done to them in seven days, depending on what Pierce wants out of them. God knows, they’re valuable to him. They have information he could use against HYDRA’s enemies. They’re both enhanced - and Steve was enhanced using tech and drugs that Pierce would love to get his hands on. Not to mention, he’s probably been harboring a nasty vendetta against both of them, but especially against Cap, Sam thinks, remembering how Steve had exposed Pierce personally, over the Triskelion’s intercom, at that.

But really, it gives Sam a small shred of comfort, knowing that they’re valuable, knowing that Pierce will have uses for both of them. If it had been him taken captive, they probably would have shot him within a day or so. It means that, even as the search stretches on into its second week, there’s still a chance that Steve and Barnes are alive.

Despite that scrap of reassurance he gives himself, Sam still can’t escape the feeling that something is somehow off. He walks the whole house while the coffee brews, first floor, second floor, and basement, glancing through every doorway and peering out into the dark morning past every window pane, but it does him no good.

Finally, he returns to the kitchen, half-convinced that he’s just losing his mind, and he drinks his coffee and waits for the next early riser to come and join him. It will either be Judy, preparing to leave for work, or Natasha, creeping in like a cat after a drive to one of the neighboring cities, where she asks questions only to return to their makeshift base with still more questions and rarely any answers.

That’s what he’s expecting, anyway, as he scoots his chair out carefully and quietly to pour himself a second cup. He damn near jumps out of his skin when he hears an unexpected voice behind him.

“Hey.”

“Oh, shit,” Sam breathes as he splashes a few ounces of scalding coffee onto his fingers.

Sharon laughs at him, her eyes, still heavy-lidded with sleep, narrowing to little crescent slivers as she steps into the room. “That smells much better than the crap I get at McDonalds.”

Sam ends up chuckling at himself, too. He picks up the plastic tub of pre-ground coffee and gives it a shake. “Maxwell House. What, you couldn’t get that kind of quality in Europe?”

She snorts, coming to lean on the counter beside him.
“I’d be happy to pour you a cup if you promise to quit sneaking up on me,” Sam offers.

They enjoy their coffee together in the dark, speaking in hushed tones as the light outside begins to change. Sam is more than a little ashamed when he catches himself staring at her from across the table - this isn’t the time, it sure as hell isn’t the place, and she’s...well, she’s Sharon Carter. Sure, he’s an Avenger and he’s friends with Captain America, but she still seems kind of out of his league. She’s got a career and a full life that he’s not a part of, and she’s probably still carrying a torch for Steve, anyway. He can’t help but think about how Bucky complicates that situation, though. As they sift through information on the search, there’s another process running in his brain, wondering if she and Steve had ever been serious, and guiltily curious about why Steve hadn’t kept his eye out for a young man if he was so persuaded. Then again, Steve might just be bisexual - hell, Sam figures he’s not exactly a Kinsey “one,” himself. On the other hand, Steve could be one-hundred percent gold-star and Sam could still see Sharon catching his eye - there is something really sexy about the way she carries herself. She’s just so competent, and that’s admittedly a deep-seated turn-on - a quality that years in the service had lead Sam to appreciate in a potential partner.

He reminds himself firmly that Sharon Carter is not a potential partner.

“...at least a dozen shell companies, mostly pharmaceutical and biotech. But I’m starting to think he’s got a larger network, too. Individuals. We didn’t catch them when SHIELD collapsed because they weren’t directly...Sam? You okay?”

“Yeah,” he responds, too quickly, too automatically. The sun is a little brighter outside than the last time his eyes were focused. “Sorry. I spaced out. It’s just...I was just thinking--” he gestures lamely, tilting his nearly empty mug from side to side, like he might see a response at the bottom. “I’m really digging those pajamas.” He has a sudden fantasy about shooting himself in the foot.


“It’s Terry’s,” Sam practically wheezes. He sits there for a few more seconds, suffering acutely, before he stands up, pushes in his chair, puts his mug in the sink, and decides that his week has been way too stressful and he should quit trying to communicate. “I should go see about those wings.”

Sharon nods slowly, accepting Sam’s desire to escape the conversation. He’s completely sure that she knows why he’s high-tailing it out of there. She gets paid to be good at reading people. “Yeah. Hey, thanks for the coffee,” she smiles, clearing her throat. “Did you get any sleep?”

Oh, please, please, just let me go be embarrassed somewhere else, Sam begs silently. “Yeah, about five hours,” he says off-handedly.

“Looks like you’ve already been putting in some work on those things this morning, so...I was just wondering.” she shrugs.

Sam tips his head, the blush on his cheeks draining anxiously. “What? No, I haven’t been--”

Sharon stands up just as Sam turns toward the window that faces the garage and parts the blinds. From the house, only the side of the garage is visible, but they can both see yellow light spilling onto the driveway from the open carport door. Sam had already checked every room in the house - everyone of their people is in bed. Natasha’s car is still gone. This is somebody else.

When Sam looks back towards Sharon, she’s already around the corner and down the stairs, heading for the basement. He knows exactly what she’s doing, but that doesn’t make the thirty
second wait for her to return seem any shorter as he watches the driveway, and sees a shadow passing back and forth over the column of light from the work lamp inside. Well, for whatever it’s worth...there’s his bad feeling. At least he’s not crazy.

Sharon returns with both of their guns. She hands Sam’s off to him and slips her own into the pocket of her flannel pajamas. Sam notices that she didn’t even take the time to put on shoes. “Follow me out, but stay back. Your face has been all over the news,” she whispers, and slips silently out the door, hand placed casually in her pocket, ready to draw if necessary.

Sam gives her a few seconds to get ahead, worry writhing in his chest, then follows her, padding over the grass rather than the gravel. Sharon doesn’t know what she’s walking into - hell, there could be a dozen HYDRA agents in that garage, or there could be a single home invader just trying to lift anything of value. Lucky for Sam, his wings aren’t necessarily recognizable at the moment, but if they’ve got a thief who’s after scrap metal, he’s hit the jackpot and Sam is f*cked if he gets away.

Sharon hugs the shadows of the garage wall, ignoring the side-door to approach from the front, blocking the easiest escape route. Sam takes the other entrance. He’s lost sight of Sharon now - all he can do is listen.

He’s high-strung and expecting the worst - an instant eruption of gunfire, or at least threatening words from Sharon, responding to an obvious threat. He sets his shoulder against the door and holds his gun low and ready. What he ends up hearing really throws him.

“Um, excuse me,” Sharon calls out, doing her best impression of a pissed off suburban homeowner. That’s definitely not how one armed agent talks to another. Sam sighs, a little relieved that there’s not going to be a firefight.

Inside the garage, something clatters against the concrete. Sam flinches, recognizing the sound - one of the pinion blades from his wings. He’s dropped it enough in the past week to know what it sounds like when it hits the floor. What he hears next is the real kicker - their home invader sounds offended.

“What the f*ck are you?”

The speaker is obviously young, and also pretty damn surprised to see Sharon, who doesn’t seem to be in the mood to answer his questions. She stays cool as a cucumber, though, and Sam can’t help but admire her.

“How did you get in here?”

“I got a key! Who are you? Do you know my aunt and uncle or something?”

Oh, shit. This could be bad. No, this is bad.

Sharon lies without the slightest moment of hesitation. “Terry and Judy are your aunt and uncle? I’m a friend of Judy’s from work.”

“Why are you here?”

“Got in a fight with my boyfriend, she’s putting me up for the night.”

Whoever’s behind the door seems to briefly accept the falsehood, or Sam assumes he does--

“Why are the Falcon wings out here taken apart?”
Alright, what the fuck. The wings are in about a hundred scrambled pieces at the moment, and most of the wiring is melted to the interior plates. They are *not recognizable*. Did this guy just *look* at them and see how it was all supposed to fit together?

Sam realizes that the silence has dragged on a little too long, now. Sharon doesn’t seem to have a good lie to answer that question with - not that there is one. So Sam makes a decision that he’s ninety-nine percent positive he’s going to regret in a *big* way. He takes the side-door key out of his pocket, turns it in the lock, and walks in. The circle of people who know their team’s whereabouts, whose lives are already entangled with HYDRA by mere association with them, is already far too large for Sam’s peace of mind. On the other hand, whoever this nephew kid is, it’s his own damn fault for skulking around his aunt’s garage at five in the morning. He steps into the glow of the work lamp and clears his throat pointedly.

The kid spins around so fast that Sam’s pretty sure his little locs make a whistling sounds as they whip through the air. He can’t be much older than eighteen or or nineteen years old, but he’s already taller than Sam and thin as a wispy switch. He stumbles backward when it dawns on him that - yep, that’s Falcon - and Sam allows him a few seconds to get up to speed. He spends it looking from Sam, to Sharon, to the dismantled wings, and then back to Sam. Looks like he’s having some trouble absorbing all the new information. When he finally find his voice, the best the young man has got is, “Ohh, my God. Oh, my God. You’re real.”

Sam nods, just barely avoiding making a smart response. His face has been all over the news for three months. There was an international manhunt for his ass. He’s not *Sasquatch*.

“And…,” he points slowly over his shoulder toward Sharon. “And...your boyfriend...ya’ll didn’t get in a fight.”

“No,” Sharon helps him.

“Okay, okay. That’s good,” he adds. Sam thinks back to the awkward moment he’d just shared with her back in the kitchen. Really, he ought to thank this guy for making him look so slick. “Do--uh, so, like, did...does my auntie know you’re here?”

“Yeah, she does,” Sam challenges. “Does your...auntie know that you’re here?”

“Yeah! Oh, yeah, no, she--” he stammers nervously. “No, I mean, yeah, she did know last week. Because I was here - she asked me to come clean up the garage. Which I did do, but then - now, I had to come back.”

“At five in the morning,” Sharon smiles expectantly.

“I left my bag here,” he explains, holding a backpack up as evidence, voice cracking. Sam nearly dies of second-hand embarrassment.

“What’s your name?” Sharon asks, tipping her head inquisitively as she takes her hand out of her pocket.

“Joaquín.”

“You know, Joaquín,” Sam cuts in. “I have been all over this garage this past week, and I didn’t see no damn bag,” he smirks, cocking an eyebrow.

Joaquín looks absolutely petrified. Sam can’t lie to himself. He feels a little bit like Batman right now.
“Okay! I--” Joaquín’s lip trembles a bit, forcing Sam to bite back a chuckle. Joaquín’s explanation tumbles out of him so quickly and with so many unnecessary words, it’s not hard to believe that he comes from the same ilk as Terry and Judy. “I - I borrow power tools all the time. And...I suck at returning them? I mean, I don’t lose them, but sometimes I break them. Or sometime I just hang onto them because I’m going to need them again. And I’m not supposed to borrow any more of uncle Terry’s tools until I return the ones I’ve got, but I really need them right now and I wouldn’t have come at, like, five in the morning, you know, but I had a Red Bull earlier and I’m really close to done with this thing I’m working on, except I really need a soldering iron.”

Sam shakes his head, impressed. “And what are you trying to build, Joaquín?”

“A solar-powered UAV with intuitive AI.”

Sam’s jaw drops a fraction. “Like my old…?”

Joaquín gives a breathless laugh. “Like Redwing, yeah,” he grins. “Except mine’ll be able to learn and store environments and use the data to analyze strategic advantages and predict future environments. Like, after a while--”

“You wouldn’t even need to tell it where to go,” Sam finishes, stunned.

“Yeah,” Joaquín confirms, starry-eyed. “I mean, if I can borrow that soldering iron. I’d work on it here so I wouldn’t have to come over to borrow stuff, but my auntie got mad at me one time.”

“For what?” Sharon dares to ask.

“I had to call the fire department.”

“And why’d you have to do that?” Sam smiles

“I crashed my UAV through uncle Terry’s windshield and the lithium ion cells vented and set his truck on fire. His insurance didn’t cover it. He had to get a new one,” he admits guiltily.

“Well,” Sam sighs. “At least he’s happy with his new truck.” He glances over to Sharon, knowing they’re both going to feel like hardasses for threatening the poor kid, but there’s too much at stake here. They can’t risk this kid telling his friends about his accidental discovery. Word travels fast. “Joaquín, look. I don’t mean to be an asshole or anything, but you cannot tell a soul that we’re here, alright? You say one word to anybody, it could cost some people I care about their lives. And if anyone knows that you know about us, you could wind up dead yourself. You feel me?”

“Yeah, no, I know. I know, I won’t tell anybody. I won’t even tell my grandma.”

“Nobody,” Sam reiterates.

“No, no, I promise.”

“Not even your grandma.”

“Yeah!” he repeats, nodding vigorously to show he’s sincere. His eyes shift back toward the parts to Sam’s wings a few times as he shuffles, wondering if he’s allowed to ask any more questions. “So...you guys are in trouble?”

Sam smiles wryly at the understatement. “A little bit.”

“And..you need these.”
Sam pitches forward slightly, like he’s buckling under the weight of how obvious that is. “That would be nice, yeah.”

Joaquín does a little nervous dance with a half-smile like he’s about to ask a cute girl to prom. “Can I...uh, if it’s okay with you...can I see that soldering iron, please?”
Bucky learns exactly what will happen to him.

The irony of the name itself occurs to Bucky, even as he desperately tries to relax in the restraints. He can feel himself trembling right down to his bones and metal in the wake of his near-execution. Little by little, his mind spirals down from hysterical red-alert and he starts to notice the exponential spike in the pain from his right leg, his nakedness, his lingering fear. He pictures himself as nothing but a body, a small and insignificant figure in the vastness of a tempestuous ocean, fighting for air as the weight of dark waves push him down, miles away from a breath. If he wins one precious inhale, there will always be another white-capped mountain to fall on him. The cycle is unabating.

Spring - he thinks faintly. The end of winter - the end of his usefulness to HYDRA as the Winter Soldier, and the beginning of a new directive. Montgomery is trying to frame it as some kind of freedom, a favor, a concession they’re making on his behalf. It’s nothing but an evolution of the same game they’ve always played. A new mission, with new orders.

Bucky has no memory of Zola working on anything under the codename Vesna. He knows nothing about the project, except what can be assumed from the name itself - Russian, meaning that it was probably funded by Lukin or one of the Karpovs, as Montgomery had implied.

The younger one, who had used him in the early nineties, had showed little interest in advancing Project Zima, focusing rather on taming his newer soldiers - he’d sent Bucky out for kill after kill, with a dozen stimulants skittering through his veins, with only baseline programming between missions.

Whatever Vesna was, it made sense that it had first been conceived in the late sixties or early seventies, when HYDRA had plentiful resources and an iron grip on every major government. Bucky knows he’s still missing a great deal of time from that era, although now that Montgomery has mentioned it, he remembers being handed back over to Zola - he remembers exactly the moment he saw that man’s face again. Beyond that, there are only those fleeting images and sounds - the naked bulb of the work light, the table, the dripping water, the typewriter keys tapping incessantly and the scratch of Zola’s pen like a rat trapped in the walls.

His next solid, real memory is years later, when he’d been taken somewhere arid and swelteringly hot. His days had been a storm of orders and raucous shouts and shrieking cries in Uzbek and Russian and endless snare-drum gunfire, and his nights were brief, filled with fever dreams and fantasies of cool water.

He comes back to the word again and again. It sticks in his brain like a deep splinter. His fear only
mounts as he watches Montgomery frantically composing one email after another. He seems excited, Bucky realizes, cold tendrils of anxiety creeping through his chest. Men who would turn their medical knowledge over to the service of HYDRA are inherently sick - nothing that warrants such drive from one of them bodes well for Bucky. Routine compliance programming and the constant cycle of cryofreezes had always been drudgery to Montgomery. He had been enthusiastic and eager to please in his first years under Pierce, streamlining Bucky’s programming and redesigning the cryostasis chamber and freezing process - and he’d been cruel. Later, once his responsibilities narrowed to maintaining the integrity of his long-finished work, he’d started to feel that he, too, was merely a slave to the process.

But right now...Bucky can see that he’s eager once again. It looks like that same tunnel-vision which had made him blind to all ethics has returned full-force. He types so quickly that his fingers make a near-constant rattle on the plastic keys. His back is straight. There’s a sharpness to his eyes that looks as if it could slice flesh. He seems to have forgotten that Bucky is even there. He neither speaks nor glances up from his screen. Zola used to be the same way.

Finally, Montgomery takes his first deep breath since Pierce’s departure and sinks into his seat. He shuts his laptop and swivels his chair back to face his desk and his immobilized subject.

Bucky has now been waiting in stricken silence for thirty-two minutes. The adrenaline that had accompanied the expectation of death has tapered and his metabolism is burning through the last of the paralytic drugs in his bloodstream. It’s becoming harder every second to ignore the damage to his right leg. The strap across his forehead prevents him from looking down, but he is viscerally aware of his knee bulging against the rough nylon straps as it swells, and he knows by the electric sting of nerve pain that the wound is wide open and gory. Even considering his capacity to heal, it will be a while before he walks again. He’s shaking so intensely now that his teeth chatter and the inclined table at his back shudders faintly.

Montgomery looks him over, eyes harder than usual. “Well--Mr. Barnes--I think we’d better get you fixed up,” he suggests with a disquieting smile that’s genuine, though not at all kind. He rises and opens the door, and the guards file back in.

They never return to the main lab. They take him up one more level, where the elevator opens onto a wide corridor that looks like it might have once been part of the hospital’s main structure. The walls are painted and there are dozens of doors adorned with faded blue number plates. They wheel him past an old waiting room, which has been rearranged and reclaimed as some kind of break area for the security agents. It’s currently dark, except for the glow emanating from the vending machines - all the guards must be posted in the wake of Bucky’s escape attempt. There’s also a reception desk and nurses station, but where a receptionist and nurse would normally stand, there are more hired guns, standing at ease, since the potential threat is currently immobilized and injured. They back him through a set of double doors marked NOTICE: NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY and AVIS: ENTRÉE INTERDITE SANS AUTORISATION just below.

Beyond the thick doors is a separate ward - the hallway is dim, but light from a few open rooms illuminates a mural on the wall as they push him past it. Chipped, peeling, uncanny depictions of children, running along greying, dirty grass painted over the baseboards, reaching for pastel colored balloons as they float away. Another waiting area - this one outfitted with small furniture, stained, ragged stuffed animals lying face down on the ratty carpet, and stacks of simple wooden puzzles in disarray. Skirting over the surface of his deeper fears like a stone skipping over still water, a chill creeps down Bucky’s spine.
Their destination in this ward is a small operating room, which looks as if it was stripped bare years ago, only to be refilled with outdated machinery out of storage. The lingering scent of sharp, chemical antiseptic mingles with the smells of mildew and damp drywall in the stale air. The pristine sheet tucked around the padded table and the glimmering tray of surgical tools stand in sharp relief to the rest of the filthy room.

In the corner, there's a gurney, and on the gurney, there is a haphazardly refolded body bag. Bucky bites the tip of his tongue to keep himself from vomiting in horror - this was the room where they would have killed him. Looking at the body bag - actually seeing it - it's enough to make him less resistant to Montgomery's alternative, no matter what it turns out to be. This morning, he had been so prepared for death - now he realizes that he had merely forgotten what death looked like. He wasn't ready.

They tilt the table back to a horizontal position and lock it into place, then, one by one, they loosen the straps that have held him there for long hours. As they lift them out of the red and white textured indentations they've made in his skin, blood rushes back into his limbs. When they reach his legs, he loses control of his careful, measured breaths and he’s forced to listen to himself as a humiliating, high-pitched whine escapes with each exhale. By the time Montgomery and the guards lift him off the gurney to transfer him to the operating table, Bucky has reached the end of both his endurance and his shame.

When they jostle and reposition his right leg as they transfer him, his cries are frantic and pitiful and he doesn't have the dignity left to quiet them.

Montgomery spreads a few thick blankets across his chest, leaving his legs and his right arm exposed and then presses an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Bucky is faintly aware that Montgomery is speaking to the security agents, and he thinks that he sees Parsons arrive, as well, but he's become too absorbed with the rippling, liquid state of the ceiling overhead by then. He tries idly to recall if he's ever been shot in the knee before - he doesn't think he has. He's certain that any injury he's sustained before has been less painful that this one.

The oxygen has his whole body buzzing and weightless by the time Parsons has scrubbed his hands and donned gloves - he's only vaguely aware of burning and pressure as they catheterize him, and the needle in the crook of his arm is unnoticeable. He lets his head fall to the side, watching the morphine drip into the IV line, and it keeps him from feeling the pinch of local anesthetics being administered around his thigh and whatever is left of his knee.

He relaxes completely. He tries to count the drops of morphine and allows himself to lose track. He lets his vision blur over. Usually, he hates this - feeling utterly helpless and drugged, forced into stillness as men blind him with surgical lights and explore his body like medical students with a cadaver. Today, it's a welcome escape. Eventually, he closes his eyes. Whatever local anesthetic they had used on his injured knee has done its job spectacularly - the pain is dull and nauseating, but given his state of complete exhaustion, it's nothing he can't sleep through.

When Bucky wakes, it's like waking up from a freeze. Training and paranoia have made him a light sleeper over the course of many decades - he’s almost always able to keep track of the passing hours and minutes and wake himself when he needs to with no alarm. Even when he lets himself sleep as long as his body needs, which is rare, he can at least guess at how long it’s been. Right now, he has no sense of anything - he doesn’t know if it’s day or night, whether he’s been asleep for an hour or comatose for a week. He doesn’t even know where he is. He hears no familiar sounds, smells nothing distinctive, and the air around him is too cool to be his cell in the lab, too
warm to be another operating room.

His eyes open just a sliver, revealing blurry crescents of a hospital room that he’s never seen before. A real hospital room. He can hardly believe he’s still in the same facility - in fact, he wonders for a moment if Steve or the team somehow got them out while he was under. He tries to sit up a little to see if there’s anyone else nearby and finds his situation growing stranger and stranger.

He notices first that he’s no longer restrained. Not even a cuff on his singular wrist. Granted, his leg is suspended above him in traction - the pair of steel pins through his tibia and femur wouldn’t allow him to leave the bed. And this is a bed. The mattress underneath him is soft, and there are pillows stacked beneath his head and one under the small of his back. The plastic hospital gowns he’d lived in the lab have been replaced by a longer cotton tunic, which is not only soft, but also allows him a modicum of dignity. Someone has taken steps to make him comfortable. He’s still attached to a catheter and an IV, and the IV must be delivering an ungodly dose of opioids, because apart from the irritating itchiness of his scalp, back, and chest and some tightness between his shoulder blades, he’s not in much pain at all. He touches his thigh, walking his fingers along the skin toward the site where the traction pin is positioned, and he finds it still completely numb. It must not have been long since they finished the surgery.

Beyond the bed, the room itself is fairly spacious and clean - there’s even a private bathroom with a door. Inside, there’s a toilet, sink, and a tub with a removable showerhead. There is no drywall dust on the countertops, like he’d seen in so many other rooms, although a few of the drawers are in disrepair and one of the walls sports a long, jagged crack. The structural damage convinces Bucky that this is certainly the same hospital, which means that this relocation is Montgomery’s doing. Doubtlessly, they intend to keep him separated from Steve now, but they could have done that in less accommodating quarters. That could mean several things: Montgomery actually wants him treated like a human being, rather than an animal meant for dissection; Montgomery is testing him - seeing what he’ll do if he’s given a little more freedom and if, perhaps, it will take a little of the fight out of him; Montgomery has something truly awful in mind for him as he moves forward with whatever Vesna is and the room is conciliatory, just a manifestation of what little guilt he can conjure; or Montgomery is gloating. Bucky tends to think it must be the latter - that this is simply the doctor’s way of saying, you’ll be here for a while, you might as well feel at home.

Stranger still - a knock at the door. Bucky has only a split second to think that no one within HYDRA’s ranks has ever shown that kind of courtesy before it cracks open and a guard he’s never seen leans in. No tac gear, no riot helmet. Just a dark baseball cap. He must have heard him shifting in the bed.

“You doing okay?”

Bucky is too shocked by the question to answer it.

“Need anything?” the guard tries again, almost gently. Bucky only manages to shake his head dumbly. He shuts the door. Through the wood, Bucky hears him call out, “Hey, tell Dr. M. he’s up.”

But Montgomery doesn’t show up within the next ten minutes - not even in the next twenty. Bucky feels every second passing tediously as the questions pile up. Between the tedium and the morphine and the comfort of the mattress and the pillows beneath him, he’s asleep again by the time Montgomery finally arrives. He startles awake when he hears voices and feels an odd pressure in his leg.

“...yeah, Parsons was telling me. I think it’s been years since he did traction. I almost called you
“No, you guys did fine. Looks good. What’d you say it was?”

“Type III avulsion to his tibia and a longitudinal fracture to the femur - almost no vascular damage though.” Montgomery laughs, “Glad it wasn’t comminuted and there was no damage to the femoral artery - really would have sucked to have to amputate it.”

“And his patella was okay? No damage to the tendon?”

“Little tear.”

“Aw, he’ll heal up fine. I’ll do some PT with him once the pins come out.”

Montgomery finally glances up from the chart he’s been scribbling on and notices that Bucky is awake again. Bucky notices that he’s in substantially more pain than before.

“Mr. Barnes,” he says in greeting. “You remember Dr. Maclean?”

He does, but only vaguely - he recalls seeing him once or twice during his last year with HYDRA, specifically after being caught in a bomb-blast in Syria. That might have been where HYDRA had first contracted his employment if his brown skin, tight black curls, delicate features and light eyes are any indicator. His accent is vaguely suggestive of the Aleppo region, but a there’s also a nasal quality to his vowels that would indicate French and a likely mixed parentage, so Syria is the most probable explanation. He guesses that the man is some kind of trauma specialist. Bucky can certainly understand why a doctor in that line of work would leave his country, even if it was to work for HYDRA. It also occurs to him that Brent Maclean is probably not his real name. But he sees no reason to explain any of that to Montgomery, and ignores the question entirely. “Why am I in here?”

“You mean, why aren’t you locked up in a cell and restrained?” Montgomery smirks. “Well, first of all, because while you were out, we replaced that insulin delivery system where the Weapon’s connects to your spine. You make another run for it - which you’re obviously not going to be doing any time soon - we can knock you on your ass again just like we did back in West Seneca. Secondly, because you’ve made your point - if we give you a puzzle, you solve it. We figured it was useless to give you another lock to pick. Also, Epley still hasn’t finished digging all the tape out of the door to your cell.”

Bucky wonders if that was meant to make him feel guilty or scolded. He’s very tempted to laugh.

“And third, you’re no longer a Soldier. The cells and the utility, that’s all part of your programming, and you’re no longer being programmed. You caused a lot of trouble, but you did a lot of good, too. So we thought we’d try to make your retirement from active duty a little cushier,” he chuckles. “Why, you like it?”

Bucky turns his face back toward the ceiling, staunchly disregarding Maclean’s hands as he checks the catheter. He’s not interested in answering any of Montgomery’s questions - especially not until he gets through his own long list of them. “What is Project Vesna?” he asks evenly.

Maclean sighs, pulling Bucky’s hospital gown back over him and replacing the blanket. “Guess it’s story time,” he jokes. “Mr. Barnes, whatever Chris tells you, try to remember that he gave you a PCA pump and you can use it whenever you like,” he smiles, shucking his gloves on the way out the door.

“Speaking of which,” Montgomery interjects, shaking his head at Maclean’s quipping, “how’s the
“pain?” He holds up a little pad with a red button and inclines his head toward the IV stand. “This is what he was talking about, by the way. I’m still not sure how quickly you metabolize opioids, so I thought this might work better. Obviously, it won’t allow you to OD, but it should be enough to keep the pain-levels manageable.”

Bucky reaches out and takes the remote out of Montgomery’s hand, but doesn’t press the button for a dose. His leg is throbbing intensely now, but he’d rather have lucidity than relief, for now. “What is Project Vesna?” he asks again, even though part of him would rather not know.

Montgomery clears his throat and pulls a stool over. Before he takes his seat, he passes Bucky a styrofoam cup. “Drink some water while we talk.”

Bucky accepts it as slowly as his parched mouth will let him and allows himself one mouthful before he returns his expectant gaze to Montgomery, making deliberate eye-contact, since he was forbidden from doing so for so long.

Finally, Montgomery settles in and crosses his arms, fingers fiddling with the pass-key clipped to the breast-pocket of his buttondown. “Just...stop me if you have questions. You’re allowed.”

Bucky doesn’t like the way he’s stalling, so he does interrupt. “Talk,” he orders.

“Vesna was Zola’s continuation of one of Abraham Erskine’s old projects...um, Heritage was the original. When Rogers signed on to Project Rebirth, he would have had to sign some paperwork saying that he...well, essentially, no unprotected sex with women. No children. Dr. Erskine knew early on that because of his serum’s ability to bind with a subject’s DNA, the enhancements would be hereditary. Obviously, the US government didn’t really want to risk having a bunch of half-enhanced kids running around that they couldn’t legally control or influence. Now, if that was their only concern, you’d think they would have just given him a vasectomy.” He laughs suddenly, “Useless, by the way - somebody gave you one back in the eighties. Healed up in two weeks. But here’s the thing - the US government didn’t even want to risk a vasectomy, especially after Erskine died and the serum’s formula was lost. He was all they had, so he’d have to be their means of making more.”

Bucky has ceased to be surprised when he learns that another of HYDRA’s worst ideas was inspired by American warmongers. However bitter and hateful he is toward HYDRA and the Russians for using him like they had, he assigns near-equal blame to the government who drafted him to kill first. The war had been necessary, of course, and the cause was a noble one on the surface, but that has never staunched his anger.

“The goal on both sides - HYDRA and the S.S.R. - was always an army. Once one of his POW lab-rats survived the enhancement process - you, by the way - Zola was tasked with making that happen. Granted, Rogers sprang you, and then by the time Hydra got you back from the Russians, Zola was in prison. His name didn’t make it onto the Osenberg List, so he wasn’t interviewed during Operation Overcast. The Cold War was in full swing by the time the US started turning to HYDRA scientists for help, so he didn’t get his pardon until ‘68. Lucky for him, he found the CIA pretty saturated by HYDRA’s American factions - he had a lot of admirers in high places. They got him a few research facilities off the books, and more importantly, they handed you over.”

Bucky realizes just in time that he’s gripping the flimsy cup too hard. He takes another sip, hoping that Montgomery hasn’t noticed how much the mere mention of Arnim Zola still terrifies him.

“He had a few female volunteers at the time and bred you with them - and he got fairly good results. The children were born enhanced, but they weren’t anything like you - they weren’t good enough and they sure as hell weren’t usable Soldiers. They got the physical strength and the
intelligence, but not your longevity, not your capacity to heal, not your immune system. So they were strong, but they were also a little more fragile than HYDRA was hoping for. In the long run, not very cost-effective. Karpov the younger - you worked for him back in the nineties - had the idea to stack another version of the serum on top of what was already bonded with their DNA. Almost killed them, in fact. After that, they were impossible to control. They were too violent. Even you couldn’t keep them in line,” he scoffs. “No real loss when Zemo killed them.”

Bucky thinks back to the bodies in the cryotanks in Siberia. Tanks hemorrhaging liquid nitrogen, crystals of red ice gathering around the bullet holes in their heads. Those had been his children. He wonders what it means for him, for his own immortal soul, that he’s still glad they’re dead.

“What he needed,” Montgomery continues, “was an enhanced female to breed you with. Which was a major problem, because there were no enhanced females, except for your own daughter, and aside from the huge risk of genetic defects due to inbreeding, HYDRA wasn’t willing to wait fifteen or sixteen years for her to reach sexual maturity.”

Bucky feels his heart hammering in his chest with rage and disgust. Montgomery doesn’t seem to notice.

“So, therein lay his problem. About three-quarters of the females he attempted to enhance died in the process, and all of them were rendered barren by the radiation in the second stage. The solution he proposed was definitely creative - he thought that if we could get a hold of some of Rogers’ genetic material, we could potentially alter you to carry the subjects. It would have required time and money and technology we didn’t have back then, and we had to put you back in the field when the Soviet-Afghan war broke out anyway, but Zola must have figured the research could be used at a later date. So, he tested what he could and carried his work to its logical conclusion on paper, but never in practice.”

Bucky knows he should hit that button soon, but he’s still too desperate to be alert. The pain in his leg is getting close to unbearable. He can feel the incision on his back, too - the stitches between his left shoulder blade and spine bite and sting with every breath he takes. He’s only been half-listening for the last minute because of it, picking out key-words as Montgomery rambles through his explanation. He must have misheard something. He’s sure that Montgomery can’t be implying that Zola had tried to - no, he misunderstood.

“He--” Bucky repeats weakly.

Montgomery sees him struggling, and deigns to explain himself more concisely. “He wanted to modify your reproductive system so that you could carry enhanced children.”

Bucky doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t close his mouth, either.

“He wanted to make it possible to impregnate you,” Montgomery simplifies further. “Preferably, he would have recovered some of Rogers’ samples from the S.S.R. Alternatively, he would have enhanced another male and bred you with him. That’s Project Vesna - Rogers’ genetic material and yours. Fully enhanced children, Super Soldiers from birth, picking up your antibodies and your immune-system during gestation. Rogers providing twenty-three chromosomes full of the perfected version of Erskine’s formula, your body doing the work of his Vita-Rays.” Montgomery is grinning now, speaking faster and faster, clearly impassioned by the project’s potential outcome. “I mean - objectively - even you have to admit, it would be an incredible accomplishment,” he laughs breathlessly.

Bucky finds himself reduced to horrified silence for several long moments. He doesn’t know what to say, short of begging for mercy, which he’s still determined not to do. Beyond his natural disgust
at the moral injustice of creating children to serve as weapons - children made from his body, from Steve’s body - his baser instincts scream frantically that he doesn’t want his body to be altered. He’s so, so scared to be sliced apart again and puzzled back together into a vessel for HYDRA’s parasites, to be stripped of what was left of his bodily autonomy, to have his masculinity cut out of him and to be filled with the organs of a dead woman, to be used as some kind of breeding mare. He doesn’t know how they’ll do it, but he knows that it will be done without regard to any life he could have had beyond their designs for him. He has to force his lungs to respond to the pressure in his skull as his brain pleads for oxygen. He’s not going to give Montgomery his fear. He won’t. He clenches his teeth and swallows hard. “Congratulations,” he finally replies.

Montgomery rolls his eyes. “I don’t know why you’re so bitter. Look, this is better for both of us - I get to make the most incredible breakthrough in human enhancement since Erskine created Captain America, you get to stay alive, keep your memories, keep your identity - you get to sleep in a nice room,” he chuckles, gesturing broadly, “And listen, I’m at the helm of this project, and you know me - I’m not part of the old guard, I don’t subscribe to that order through pain bullshit. If there’s anything you want or need and it’s within reason and budget, I’ll work on it, alright? You’ll get better food, I’ll bring you some clothes and some books to read - shit, I’m pretty sure that TV still works,” he shrugs, pointing over his shoulder at the old set affixed to the wall.

“I’d like to have my prosthetic back,” Bucky states plainly, knowing the answer he should expect.

“Well, one subject isn’t really going to do us much good,” Montgomery corrects, tightening his arms across his chest like he’s offended. "If we get it to work once, we’ll repeat the process a few times. And...if I’m understanding your question correctly - no, you wouldn’t be expected to deliver
naturally.” He scoffs as he thinks about it. “Hell, no. We’d do a c-section. You’d be out cold. Now, if you’re asking about whether or not you’d have external female genitalia, the answer is partially no. There’s no need for you to appear outwardly female, but you will have female internal organs, and the first step to fertility is menstruation, so those organs will need an external outlet—essentially a vagina. I’m almost certain we could construct one that would self-lubricate if we used a graft of skin cells from your cheek—”

“Stop,” Bucky finally snaps. He can’t listen to any more of this. It’s becoming too real too quickly. He just needs more time. He thinks back to the body bag in the OR and finds himself increasingly apathetic toward it rather than sick with fear. “Stop it,” he says again, quieter now. “Can I... I want-” He slows his breathing down, trying to stave off hyperventilation. “Leave. Now. Please.”

Montgomery pats the side of the bed by Bucky’s foot. “Remember - you are alive. And you’re you. Just keep that in mind... going forward.” He picks up the PCA pump’s remote and presses it into Bucky’s palm. “Somebody will be by with some food later. Try to eat.”

The moment the door closes behind Montgomery, Bucky sucks in one shuddering breath, then another, and another, until his head feels like it’s bulging at the temples, ready to burst. He stops himself, too exhausted to continue expressing the fear that’s wreaking havoc on his nervous system. He stares past his surroundings, eyes unfocused, desperately trying to have no thoughts. His hand clenches of its own volition, thumb trembling as it bears down on the little red button, once, twice, a dozen times despite the fact that the mechanism prevents the delivery of more doses. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. He doesn’t care what he’s doing. He manages not to think until the morphine drip floods him with sleep. He doesn’t count the passage of the hours. He doesn’t think about Zola or Montgomery and Pierce or Vesna, or about escape. Or Steve. He doesn’t even dream.
Today is Tuesday, February 9th. Bucky knows this, because he had asked Montgomery to tell him what day it was, and Montgomery had brought him a calendar and hung it on the wall. The first few days after he’d been brought to this new room have passed by in a blur. He had slept. When he woke, he reached for the PCA pump and let the morphine lull him back to sleep, dripping from the bag like sand through an hourglass as time passed in singular glimpses of day and night, distinguishable only by the programs on the muted television which Montgomery had turned on. He had tried to eat, but found that he couldn’t taste anything, and that the opiates could dull a hunger pang just as well as they could numb a broken bone.

At some point, he had woken to find himself alone. He hadn’t felt as if he could sleep any more and although his stomach hadn’t hurt, he had felt utterly empty. The hallway beyond the closed door was quiet, but there was food on the tray by the bed. He had eaten it, not caring that it was bland, nothing but texture on his tongue - all of it. He had sat there, filling his mind with idle thoughts, until he’d grown so restless that he’d pressed the red button again, more out of habit than need. Moments later, he had found that he could move his foot again. He had curled his toes once, twice, without pain, then tried to rotate his ankle. His fingers had seized in the sheets as he gasped, nearly whiting out. Then, the morphine couldn’t move through the line quickly enough.

The next time he woke up, his leg was free of the traction pins. He could move his foot with a little more ease. When he had reached out to touch his thigh, to gauge how painful the wound still was, he reached out with his left hand and discovered that it was more than a reflexive mistake - they had reattached his prosthetic. It was oddly weak and difficult to move, but the sensors still functioned perfectly. He had eaten again that day, and had asked to know the date.

Now, he is not only awake, but also lucid. He stares at the calendar on the wall - specifically at the white spaces between Saturday, January 23rd, and Tuesday, February 9th, trying to recollect the events of those eighteen days, put them back in order, and place them.

January 23rd. Late morning. They had arrived in West Seneca. In someone else’s car, but he couldn’t remember whose. Steve’s friend - Wilson. Sam. Bucky had known that Wentzel had fled to this city when the Triskelion fell. He knew there was a lab there, too. They had passed it and Bucky had found it unchanged and apparently undiscovered. They had rented a motel room. They had all agreed - who? Who had agreed? Steve, Sam...Clint Barton, Wanda Maximoff, Scott Lang. They had agreed that they couldn’t safely tip off the authorities without exposing themselves as well, and until Ross released his death-grip on Congress, there was no hope of a pardon for Steve, or for Bucky. They would take the base down themselves. They had left late that night. Steve was shot during the raid. One of Wentzel’s inventions - paralytic bullets.

January 24th. Early morning. Pierce. Steve couldn’t move or speak. His chest had barely moved, barely breathing. They smashed his face into the concrete of the warehouse floor. Bucky hadn’t - wouldn’t - forget that. More agents - some from the old guard, some new recruits. They’d herded them into the back of a van, apparently bound for a drop-off. Rollins had been there, made him suck him off just to spite Steve, just to show him what they did to any asset who dared to step out of line. Bucky had bitten him. Taken the car. He’d exchanged fire with another van. Crash. River. Woods. The sun had started to come up. He remembers how Steve’s profile had looked in the growing light, beautiful, even with a swollen, crooked nose and damp, icy hair and red cheeks. Then nausea and weakness, hearing only echoes of words, the ground shifting underneath him and the sky rocking above him like an ocean, and then electricity - no, seizure. And then nothing. It must have been later that same day that he woke up in the lab, attacked Parsons. Nearly got his
January 25th. They had taken Steve away. Shut him in another room. Left him there. Hours later, Steve had emerged, armed, and tried to get them out, but he didn’t make it far.

January 26th. They had taken him out of the lab for brain scans. They had wiped Steve while he was gone. He had known what was in store for him - he knew the chair was coming. He made his escape plan as he watched the shock plates come down. If he was only going to remember one thing, he would remember how to get out. Then they had wiped him, too. He had fought. He remembered.

January 27th. Wipes, sleep. Wipes. The chair had cradled him like an old friend, inviting him to let go of everything, to rest. To stay quiet, to go back to sleep and dream away the span of yet another natural lifetime.

January 28th. Chair.

January 29th. Chair.

January 30th. Chair.

January 31st. Chair. That day, he’d thought every single wave of electricity would be the last before his spirit gave up, left his body. But that night, when they led him back into his glass cage, the door hadn’t caught. He allowed himself a few hours of sleep. He recovered.

February 1st. Just before five in the morning, he had pushed the door to his cell open. They had made it out to the grounds beyond the hospital where they were being held. He had spent the rest of the day preparing for death, only to learn that HYDRA still had other uses for the enhanced body that should have been his.

February 2nd. Late. Project Vesna. He had learned that day what the project is, what it will do to him, what he’ll become, but all he can bring himself to place within the date’s square are those two words and none of the words they invoke, because he sees no gain to be had in ruminating on the nature of his suffering. Two words fill the box in red letters in his mind’s eye, but if he stares long enough, he sees all the others - surgery, pain, change, child, children, fetus, serum, stirrups, clamps, scalpels, lights, tables, restraints, exposure, bleeding, violation, wrong, please, please don’t do this to me. Each word becomes a little percussive blast in his ears, like the rapid stutter of typewriter keys.

From February 3rd through February 8th, he had slept. He draws a line through each day. Somewhere within that brief span, the traction pins had come out and his arm had been reconnected, recalibrated, made weaker and heavier, weighed down by the steel plates which had replaced the feather-light vibranium. He doesn’t attempt to place those events on the timeline. He has been relentlessly high. Whatever the doctors have discussed as they’ve come and gone from the room has escaped him, and it’s all inconsequential now anyway. They’ll do what they like with his body. Knowing what’s coming, day to day, wouldn’t that just prolong it? It won’t stop them. It won’t matter once they wheel him into the OR. Maybe he doesn’t need to know.

In his short moments of wakefulness throughout the week, Bucky has noticed that the furniture and machinery have been shifting. Old equipment has been exchanged for newer, compact models. Countertops have been cleared of debris and sanitized, then slowly filled with neat stacks of files and papers - binders brimming with Montgomery’s newly amassed research. The removal of a dusty privacy curtain this morning revealed a clock on the far wall, which still seems to be in working order. It is now ten after seven, and for the first time in a week, Bucky allows himself to
think of Steve.

He wants to know what they’ve done to him. What they’ve said to him. If they’ve hurt him and goddamnit he knows they have, but he wants to know if Steve will recover when - if - they get out. Bucky has faith in Steve’s extraordinary capacity to heal, and to an even greater extent, in his will to heal, but he can also see that HYDRA’s methods have improved vastly since they first started programming him. No, because they had programmed him. He had been nothing but a prototype - seven decades of research and practice before they got their hands on the real Soldier. They are more aggressive now. Every procedure is viciously concise and the scientists approach the destruction of a healthy mind with experience and surety. When Zola had first undertaken the process on Bucky, he had done so with some degree of trepidation - he was cautious, careful not to destroy the brain’s basic functionality. In Steve’s case, they act with full knowledge of the limits of his enhanced endurance and it’s a boundary they’re no longer afraid to push it outward, testing deeper waters.

Bucky shuts his eyes reflexively, not consciously praying for Steve, but he feels some undefinable part of him reach out for his friend nonetheless. He has to recover. They both have to recover. They have to get out. Sam will find them. Someone will find them.

He passes a few idle minutes flexing his ankle and toes, and even though the tightly bound splint keeps him from testing his knee’s mobility, he can tell that the swelling is already going down. Even for him, this injury has been remarkably quick to heal. At least all that sleep hadn’t been wasted. Seems to have done him a lot of good.

A knock at the door startles him - over the years, he had learned to be passive to others coming and going with no regard to his presence. The new sound has a way of setting him off, filling him with foreboding, as if their hospitality and consideration is more sinister than their previous disdain. He looks at the clock, then at the calendar once more, with a deep, aching sense of dread telling him that today will somehow be significant.

Montgomery enters first, eyebrows raised and mouth agape in a strangely friendly mock of surprise. “Oh, my gosh. Look at that. You’re up,” he laughs, so pleasant and sincere that Bucky has to fight a strange reflex to laugh along with him. “How’s that leg?” he asks, then, without giving Bucky the time to answer, he notes, “Looks like the swelling is down, And you haven’t touched that PCA pump in a whole day, either - great job.”

Parsons follows close behind, paying no attention to Bucky - his eyes are flickering over a set of x-rays as he holds them up to the light. Bucky is more nervous to see Parsons than Montgomery, though - unless he’s just there to take a look at Bucky’s leg, then his presence indicates that Montgomery may be ready to move forward with Vesna. Epley comes in last, carrying a bag over one shoulder and already looking uncomfortable.

Montgomery does the talking for all three of them as he washes his hands and dons gloves. “Okay, Mr. Barnes - don’t look so worried. Nothing painful today. Promise. Dr. Parsons is just here to do a consultation for me, then we’ll leave you alone and let you eat your breakfast.” Bucky doesn’t miss that, as Montgomery approaches the bed, he presses the PCA pump to release a single dose. He meets Montgomery’s eye as the man pulls his hand away from the button, letting him know that he was caught. Montgomery smiles apologetically. “This will be over with faster if you’re calm,” he reasons.

Bucky doesn’t argue, because it’s too late to argue. He doesn’t know if Parsons, Montgomery, and Epley are there for minutes or hours. He can’t make peace with the choices before him - he could continue to fight, continue to make HYDRA’s job as difficult as he can but always at his own
expense, or he could be still. He could lay still. Move when they tell him to move. They’ll do what
they want, whether he fights back or not - but it will be faster and easier if he doesn’t fight. That’s
exactly what they want him to do. That’s all they’ve ever wanted from him. Complacency. He
might finally be tired enough to give it to them. In the meantime, the result of his indecision is the
very inaction that Montgomery had hoped for.

He doesn’t shut his eyes, but he doesn’t see, either. He doesn’t watch what the doctors do, but that
doesn’t save him the agonizing nausea that comes with hearing and feeling them. They recline the
bed and lower it, then sweep the blankets off of his body. One of them unties the cotton tunic and
spreads it open, exposing everything but his arms to the air, which had seemed so inoffensive
before, but now feels cold, prickling against the dampness of fearful sweat.

They talk, and he does his damnedest not to listen. Montgomery and Parsons stand at his right,
discussing him like butchers looking for a prime cut, as Epley unpacks that bag. He holds his
breath when he overhears Parsons’ request that the catheter be removed, holds it still as he feels
gloved fingers grip him, bends all his will toward holding it and bites his tongue as Montgomery
slides the tube out inch by burning, stinging inch. Since another few hours of feeling heavy and
high are now inevitable anyway, he’s starting to wish the morphine would hurry through his veins.

They start with his abdomen. He hears the click of something being opened, a cap being removed,
then feels Parsons hand come to rest low on his belly, neither comforting nor threatening - not even
acknowledging - like an artist rests his hand on the corner of an empty page. The wet, cool tip of a
fine marker comes next, just above his left hip, and traces a fractured line across the width of his
torso. His teeth chatter briefly as he tries to keep his body still for the sake of his broken leg,
feeling the tickle of Parsons’ quick scrawling label of the mark. He wishes they would have
sedated him. He’s sure he’s imagining the cuts just as vividly as the surgeon is.

He tilts his head to the right to watch the clock as Parsons’ pen travels up toward his sternum,
watching the seconds tick by and trying to convince himself that they don’t last any longer than
usual. The pen reaches his chest.

“So, did Dr. Martin explain how she wants to--?” Parsons begins.

“Goddamnit,” Montgomery sighs, pulling out his phone. “She just explained it to me this morning-
-” he mumbles as he waits for her to answer. “She has this all figured out - Janet? Hey, can you
talk? Okay, just a quick question about the incisions for the chest surgery. Keyhole and then...how
do you want the rest….alright. Okay, that makes sense. Thanks. Yeah. Love you, too. See you at
home.”

Well, at least that’s one great mystery solved, Bucky thinks caustically. He had always wondered
what kind of woman would actually marry Montgomery - the only option, of course, was someone
exactly like him.

Montgomery stows his phone in his back pocket and holds his hand out for Parsons’ pen. “Here -
I’ll try to show you what she’s wanting--”

“I didn’t know Dr. Martin was your wife,” Parsons remarks casually. “I thought she was part of
Malick’s crew, anyway,”

“She was when we met,” Montgomery explains. “Worked with Whitehall, too, but she’s still got a
solid practice in New York.” As he speaks, he makes an incision line from Bucky’s ribs and inward
toward his nipple, around which he draws a circle. Bucky almost laughs - apparently, whatever
surgery Montgomery’s girl has planned involves removing them entirely. He’s not sure why that
should bother him more than the loss of a limb, but it does, and part of him finds that a little funny.
Maybe a little gallows humor is to be expected - maybe he’s finally starting to snap. He wouldn’t be surprised.

Montgomery also makes three longer lines, one beneath his pectoral, then up along his sternum, then at an angle along his collarbone. He repeats everything on the other side. Bucky imagines how it will look when they do it with a scalpel rather than a pen, skin peeled back and pinned open like red butterfly wings, muscle and nerve exposed.

“So, she’ll have to talk you through her ideas about this…” Montgomery hums absently. “From what I can gather, it’ll be microsurgery, which I know is a specialty of yours, but this hasn’t really been attempted before. We’re going to open and extend the blind ducts and attach them to transplanted glands. We’ll supplement the prolactin until his pituitary gland catches up. Hopefully the glands will respond.”

Bucky finds himself sorely tempted to ask why once he realizes that they’re discussing - hell, he doesn’t even know the right word for it. Breastfeeding. Even back when he was a kid with little sisters around, he knew there were other options - wet nurses, evaporated milk, he could even recall his mother lending one of their neighbors some cod liver oil to add to some regular old milk, telling her to mix it up with a little orange juice so her baby wouldn’t get scurvy or rickets.

Montgomery must see him struggling to think past the morphine. He chuckles. “Oh, you look freaked out.”

Bucky doesn’t feel that deserves a response.

“Remember how I was telling you that you’re going to negate the need for Vita-Rays? Yep. Breastfeeding,” Montgomery nods, looking pleased with himself. “Zola didn’t think of this, but I’m married to an endocrinologist who specializes in lactation, so I had a few ideas. This is how we’re going to deliver those antibodies. Finally get some Soldiers with enhanced immune systems,” he remarks proudly.

Parsons has moved to the end of the bed to affix a frame to either side - two metal bars with hanging straps at the top, where Bucky recognizes his heels and ankles are meant to rest. “High lithotomy alright?” Parsons asks. “I’ll just swing this one out a little so we can keep his knee straight.”

“That’s fine,” Montgomery confirms offhandedly, writing a few notes above the lines he’s drawn on Bucky’s chest. Bucky tries to sink deeper into the comforting high from the morphine and slow his breathing. He wonders if Montgomery can feel his heart pounding beneath his wrist as he writes. “Don’t reposition him yet, though - let Epley get some pictures.”

The bag that Epley had been unpacking - that was a camera bag, Bucky realizes. He almost lets himself think about it - almost lets himself feel the disgust and shame and hurt - but as Epley approaches the bed, Bucky turns his attention back to the clock. Twelve minutes. They’ve only been in the room for twelve minutes. After seven decades, twelve minutes is inconsequential. He tells himself that he’s fine. This is nothing. It shouldn’t be this hard. Don’t think. Don’t listen. Don’t watch.

And yet, he’s still aware of Epley leaning over him. The whir of the camera’s focus still pesters his ear like a buzzing mosquito. He still counts nineteen flashes as they light up his periphery.

After constant cycle of whirl-click-flash finally ends, he feels as if he’s slipped into some kind of waking coma. Knowing that his paralysis is psychosomatic doesn’t make it any easier to move.
“So, Mr. Pierce is fine with her…?”

“Oh, no, of course - actually, he asked me to see if she’d consult.”

They lift his right leg into the stirrup.

“How about you?”

“What?”

And then his left.

“I don’t know if I could work with my wife.”

“Well, Janet and I have so much in common.”

Montgomery or Parsons - Bucky doesn’t turn his head to find out which one - rummages through a drawer.

“Well, that’s nice - not having to keep any secrets.”

Someone’s hand, just above his pelvic bone, and then something cool and wet and the rasp of aerosol escaping a can. They spread the cold gel over the insides of his thighs, around the base of his penis, down to his perineum, and the hands of the clock move slower all the while. His face and eyes feel feverishly hot and his mouth is dry, tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Goddamnit, he should be used to this by now. He shouldn’t still feel this disgusted with himself, with them, he should be past petty embarrassment over this, but he isn’t. He’d had a few years of freedom. Privacy. Autonomy. He had enjoyed it, coveted it, treasured it, and now he’s lost it again. He feels strange. Ugly. Not human. A razor begins to whisper in quick strokes against his skin. He presses the button on the PCA pump, but the machine beeps angrily at him - it’s still to soon after the dose Montgomery had delivered.

Montgomery edges up to side of the bed to turn the alarm off, and he has the audacity to look concerned. “Hey, you’re doing great, Barnes. Parsons has a really steady hand. He won’t cut you.”

Bucky doesn’t reply. If he opens his mouth, he doesn’t know what will happen next. He might vomit. He might sob. He might spit in Montgomery’s wooden face. He just wants this to be over, so he does nothing. Montgomery sighs and takes a thick, soft blanket from the bottom of the bed and covers his chest with it, pulling it down just past his navel. “You know, we used to have to get every single bit of body hair off of you before putting you in cryo,” he laughs. “Otherwise, you might have ended up with frostbite. You’re okay. You’ve done this before. And it’s nothing we haven’t seen,” he shrugs.

Bucky gives him no acknowledgement, which seems to frustrate him.

“Hey,” he says, patting Bucky’s shoulder tentatively in a strange impression of comfort and concern. “Look, I’m trying to make this easier, alright? You’ve had a rough week. And I know you don’t like me, but you’ve been my responsibility for a long time, now, and I don’t want this to be harder for you than it has to. Understand?”

Bucky says nothing.

Montgomery rolls his eyes. “I know - my bedside manner sucks. I was just a cryogenics specialist before they put me on your case. Only worked with dead people,” he chuckles. “If there’s something you need, just ask, Barnes. I know we don’t necessarily get along, but I’ll do my best.”
“Chris - he’s not all there. I don’t think he understands what you’re saying.”

Montgomery looks taken aback. “He’s very smart. And he understands perfectly. I mean, I know he’s been unstable in the past—” and here, Parsons interjects a caustic laugh, probably recalling the way Bucky had attacked him upon waking up in the labs, eighteen days ago, “—but he’s got some fundamental disagreements with HYDRA’s mission. A lot of people do. We believe in what we’re doing, and he believes in what he’s doing. Right, Barnes?” Montgomery smiles, looking down at him.

A response tumbles out, but Bucky hears it, rather than being conscious of saying it. “I don’t know.”

Montgomery frowns deeply. “You’re pretty down today, huh?” He returns to the end of the bed, checking on Parsons’ progress, and gently repositioning Bucky’s injured leg in the high stirrup. “I’m going to bring you a few books in the morning. Something to get your mind off things while your leg heals. Then, if you keep getting better at this rate, Dr. Maclean can come back in a few days, help you get walking again...you can take a shower, stretch, get some exercise...sound good?”

Bucky stays silent again, keeping his lips closed, because a shower is all he wants in the world right now, and he doesn’t want to let himself say yes.

All that God-awful conversation, and only five more minutes have passed. Finally, the morphine is beginning to take effect, but all it serves to do is isolate him with thoughts. He tries to blink away the itch in his eyes that comes with opiates - the feeling of hot, fine desert sand - and then he turns his face up toward the ceiling - doesn’t want to look at the clock anymore, now that he feels like he’s the one spinning, rather than the hands.

The drag and flick of the razor blade seems to go on and on, until at last he hears the doctors talking again, their voices now deep and wavering like the sound is traveling through water and he feels the rough scratch of a dry towel between his legs.

“...Barnes? Mr. Barnes?”

“Bucky,” he sighs tiredly, thinking of Zola.

“All right - Bucky.” And even though Bucky didn’t hear his footsteps coming closer, he recognizes Montgomery’s penlight in his eyes, blinding first on the left, then the right. “You still with me? Breathing seems a little shallow—” And he knows that Montgomery says more, but he doesn’t listen, or else he can’t. The bed rises a little underneath him, and soon something presses over his nose and mouth and he tastes the bitter, cool dampness of oxygen. His lungs and brain burst with relief, and yet he resents both the clarity he regains and the position Montgomery has forced him into - looking down at himself, just coherent enough to process and comprehend Parsons’ actions and to understand their implications.

He watches as the two doctors stare impartially between his legs, discussing plans for how they should change him. Parsons’ hands are on him without warning, grasping his penis, pressing it upward so that it lays flat against his stomach, and Montgomery applies two lengths of tape across it to keep it there. They do the same to his testicles, lifting them and securing them out of the way. Montgomery’s fingers rest on each of his thighs, pulling them further apart, stretching his skin taut so that Parsons has a flat canvas draw another pattern on his flesh and label every cutting line. More camera flashes follow. He tries, tries not to imagine the photographs. Bright, clinical, disgusting - frame after frame exposing his body for the scrutiny of strangers, to be pointed at, reviewed, edited.
Bucky feels like he sees it all happen from the bedside - from the corner of the room, from the ceiling, as if his mind would rather watch the proceedings from anywhere but through his own eyes.

At five after eight, it’s over. Montgomery peels the tape off quickly and without much pain, and then together he and Parsons takes his legs down from the stirrups and stow the metal frame under the bed. Montgomery doesn’t uncover him and retie the hospital gown - just pulls the blanket down over his feet, and then raises the bed a little higher. Tries to make him comfortable. Warm. It makes Bucky miss the days when they used to leave him to bleed in the corner of a concrete cell like an animal. Now, they’re treating him like he’s a human, and it’s worse. Maybe he was an animal all along.

“I know you’re not talking to me right now,” Montgomery smiles, shucking his gloves, “but I’m going to send Leana up here with breakfast. I don’t know if you remember her - Dr. Boenig? She was the behavioral specialist on your case. She’s on my team, and I’ve been very clear with her about how I want you treated now. You can talk to her if you need to. Get something on your stomach, alright? It’s going to be a long day.”

He listens to what Montgomery says. He remembers the woman and pictures himself talking to her, pouring his heart out to her in ways he hasn't even done with Steve, even crying, sobbing in the face of her synthetic compassion and devouring all the comfort she can offer even though he'd know it wasn't real, because he's starving for it. He thinks of food and finds he can't quite imagine it - just the colors, warped and formless, with no smell or taste, like inedible blocks of wax. He envisions himself nodding, smiling, moving on from this instantly, but it's as futile an exercise as imagining that he can fly or walk through walls.

He's been through worse - God, so much worse. This wasn't so bad. It wasn't. He must just have finally run out of space to tuck things away and forget them.

Finally, the doctors file out of the room, one by one, each satisfied that he has taken what he needs. Pieces of him leave with them, escaping through the open door stowed inside the memory of Epley's camera, while his body remains on the bed, stained from the marker, mapped for surgeries that will devour the next months of his life, skin divided up like real-estate. In a way, it's hauntingly similar to rape, he thinks, then abandons the thought guiltily, because they did nothing to him. Nothing that a million patients don't endure daily - children, even - with brave, smiling faces, accepting it all without complaint.

It's not so bad. There's nothing wrong with him. He isn't injured. He's not bleeding. His life isn't in danger. Why does he feel so wrong, so sick, so mortally hurt?

He could still take his own life. He doesn't want to die, but he wants to take something from them, and his own body is the only thing of value he can destroy. He could do it, now - he's once again strong enough to drag himself out of the bed. All of the drawers and cabinets are unlocked, and inside there will be a thousand tools, any of which could be made lethal in his hands, and hell, failing all else he can beat his goddamned head into their counter-tops until there's no brain left for them to alter - nothing but a mess to clean up. He thinks about the dark blue bag, unzipped and re-folded, crumpled at the foot of a naked gurney, waiting for a body to fill it. It doesn't frighten him like it did - he doesn't mind the thought of sinking into it, letting it cover him, cocoon him, hide him from their eyes.

But then there’s Steve.

*Steve.*
Steve, who had saved him when HYDRA had used him as their Soldier, who deserved to know that Bucky would do the same for him now, at any cost, or at least that he wouldn’t just give up and stop trying. Steve who had gone to the ends of the earth for him again and again. Steve needs him. This is the opportunity he had hoped he’d never be given - their places are traded, and now Bucky has to prove that he’d do no less for Steve than Steve had done for him. Steve, who underneath his uniform and all his bravado, was still young - still the same sweet kid, taking on boys twice his size in every Brooklyn alleyway and walking away battered and bruised and yet still knowing that he’d won, because he’d stayed and fought, because he had refused to run away, and because to Steve, that was what it meant to win.

That was all Steve would ask of him. Don’t run. Hang on. Take the beating, and come out on the other side with a smile on your face and your shoulders squared and your chin held high, and you win.

At that moment, Bucky resigns himself to whatever pain HYDRA can inflict. He can’t move right now, but a time will come when he’s stronger, when they’re less diligent, and he can hang on until it comes. And when it does, he’ll remember the way Steve had always swaggered away from a scuffle, wiping the blood from his face, triumphant even in the wake of defeat.
He - who is that? - wakes up in his cell with only two thoughts in his mind.

The tank. And the chair.

The tank means numbness and horror - those gruesome, recurring hallucinations that ghost over him.

The chair lights up his nerve endings like a billion fuses and there’s always pain, but it drives the hallucinations away.

The question of who seems less important, at least for now. Whoever he is, his concerns are more basic. He knows only that he is afraid, and instinct tells him that he is not someone who is afforded the luxury of self-examination.

He weighs the two thoughts, tank and chair, one against the other, and finds that he has no preference. Where one option causes agony and improves him, the other soothes it and undoes him. As he shakes off the haziness of his chemical sleep, he remembers a little more about his days in this lab - not much, only that other things happen besides the constant oscillation between water and electrodes. He doesn’t quite piece together the visceral images and sensations that confront him: he thinks he feels the bite of a biopsy needle; he looks down at his own naked body, laying on padded tables or sitting upright in exam chairs; a headache so bad that the memory of it makes him shiver, and with it an image of the hospital gown covering his chest and the sight and smell of his own watery, acidic vomit covering it; numbness in his face and neck, the pressure of a vice, reading word after word from cards held up before him, not knowing their meaning, not knowing why he had to read them, reading them until he no longer cared why he was reading them. He’s not worried about what will be next.

Steve.

Suddenly he remembers, sitting bolt upright on the metal slab where he sleeps, knocking his thin mattress askew. Steve. That name belongs to him. He keeps losing it. In fact, only a moment ago, he had decided that it wasn’t necessary at all. He’s glad to have it.

He leans back against the cinderblock wall - the only cool surface in the still-aired cell - trying to let it draw some of the nightmare-fever from his skin. He’s not sure, only suspicious, that this is how he spends every morning. Living with what he knows - chair and tank. Exercising his freedom to choose - welcoming and dreading both options in equal measure. Remembering his name - Steve. And then he sits, waiting for his handlers, idly dressing his name in different histories, trying to find pieces that want to stick.

His last name is Rogers or Barnes or Wilson or Pierce.
He is very young, or perhaps very old.

Once he was small and weak and sickly, but something had changed him. That’s impossible. He has always been just as he is now.

He was a soldier, or an artist, or a celebrity, or maybe he fought aliens and robots. Or maybe he’s crazy. Aliens and robots feel strangely right, so he must be crazy.

He remembers a man he loves - or loved. Sometimes he thinks the other man might be dead. Sometimes he is certain that the other man came back to life and they found each other, but he’s afraid to let that fantasy take hold of him because it might not be true.

He is here, in this cell within a laboratory, surrounded by doctors and guards, because he was in an accident. He doesn’t know what kind of accident - sometimes, he remembers a plane crash, but he can’t sort out the details. He’s on the plane when it crashes, or he falls from it. Into an ocean covered in jagged islands of ice, into a river that’s muddy and sun-warmed, smelling of algae.

Outside his cell, the lights come up and two men enter. He knows them - Pierce and Řezník - but he doesn’t know why those names belong to them and he doesn’t remember learning them. They’re speaking quietly as they walk toward him, Pierce nodding as Řezník makes precise gestures, as if he’s instructing him.

The guards on either side of the cell’s door stand aside to let the two of them in. Only Řezník enters - Pierce, holding a leather-bound folder which is brimming with papers, reclines against the frame of the door, waiting for something he expects to see.

“Good morning, Soldier,” Řezník smiles.

Steve gets the sense that he doesn’t like him, but he can’t quite place why. He seems friendly, if only for the moment. “Good morning,” he replies. The sound of his own voice is uncanny - it’s familiar, and yet...not the voice he’d been expecting. Lower, softer. Tired. He wonders if he’ll get used to it, if he uses it more.

“How are you feeling, today?”

Řezník says it like he’s doing more than just going through the motions, making small talk. He sounds like he wants to hear the answer. He seems kind. “Alright,” he says, trying to make that his honest answer. “Nightmares,” creeps out, just before he can stop himself.

“Yes,” Řezník nods sympathetically. “You have a lot of those. Did they keep you from sleeping?”

“No.”

“That’s good. That is a little progress, at least,” the old man smiles, and writes it down on his clipboard. “May I ask you some questions? They will be the same that I have asked every day - I’m just tracking your progress.”

Steve desperately wants to ask about what progress Řezník is looking for - what is meant to be improving. Is he recovering from something? Is he supposed to remember or forget? Does he want to remember or forget? His only option is honesty, so he gives Řezník a nod of consent, signalling that he should proceed.

A beat, then, with as much certainty as he can manage, “Steve.”

Řezník inclines his head. “Is that all?”
He looks concerned, so Steve tries harder. “Steve Rogers.”

“And how would you like to be addressed?”

It’s a strange question - and he’s not sure if there are right and wrong answers. Maybe Dr. Řezník just wants his opinion. He’s too tired to form one, so he responds, “It doesn’t matter.”

Řezník nods. “Is it alright if I call you Soldier?”

And there’s a question answered - Steve looks up, hopeful for more information. “Is that what I am?”

Řezník smiles, pleased. That must have been progress. Not an artist or a celebrity - a soldier. It fits like a puzzle-piece, and Steve treasures it. Řezník writes it down before moving on. “What is your relationship with Zima?”

“Who?”

Řezník points to the wall behind Steve. “The man from the other cell. Your friend. He was a Soldier, like you.”

That’s his friend - it must be. He’s alive. Steve allows himself a slight smile, but just beneath it, he’s overjoyed. He hadn’t imagined him. “Is he alright?”

“He’s doing quite well. So you are fond of him?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. And what is your opinion of me?”

Steve doesn’t reply - he’s not sure what to say. He recalls Řezník’s name, but very little else about him. Řezník must see that he’s at a loss.

“And Dr. Montgomery?”

“With the bowtie?”

Řezník laughs. “Yes, he does wear those a lot.”

Again, Steve has no answer.

“And Mr. Pierce?”

Steve looks up to the man leaning at the entrance to his cell - Pierce just gives him a wry smile and shakes his head discreetly, implying that Steve doesn’t have to answer the question. Steve smiles back, thanking him.

“And what is your opinion of HYDRA?”

That final question sends a little chill through Steve’s limbs. HYDRA is...something terrible. He can’t quite name the emotion the name evokes, but he knows it’s bad, so, “Bad,” is his quiet response.

“Bad?” Řezník repeats looking shocked. “Mr. Pierce, Dr. Montgomery and I, we are all part of HYDRA - as are you. Can you think of any reason why you would dislike us?”
Steve tries, but he’s not sure of anything. He searches the concrete floor for an answer, but he doesn’t know why the name makes him angry—just that it does.

“Do you remember the Avengers?” Řezník asks suddenly. “Specifically, do you remember Tony Stark? You were telling me a few days ago about him.”

Steve can picture the man in question, but he doesn’t remember saying anything to Řezník about him. “What did I say?”

Řezník clears his throat, suddenly looking sympathetic. “That he had hurt your friend.”

“Zima?”

“Yes.”

Steve thinks about this and pieces together his memories, trying to make a cohesive timeline. He decides that it must be true. He remembers nearly killing the man. He remembers being angry. “I remember him—what...what happened to me? Was I...did I get hurt?”

Řezník only smiles and tucks his clipboard under his arm. “Let’s not worry about that just yet. One thing at a time, Soldier. You’re doing much better today. You’ll need rest and cognitive therapy for a little while longer, and then we’ll get you back on your feet.”

Steve nods, still itching to know more, but trusting that if the doctor doesn’t think it’s time to tell him what happened, he must have a good reason. Pierce looks pleased, too. He stands up, inclining his head toward Steve as he addresses Řezník. “How’d you manage this?”

“Prefrontal leucotomy and bilateral cingulotomy,” Řezník answers. Steve doesn’t understand what the words mean precisely, but he knows that they relate to the brain. “I should have done it all sooner, frankly. It seems to be helping with the chronic pain and PTSD, as well.”

Pierce chuckles, studying Steve, looking a little proud. “Hell, I might get one.”

“I had brain surgery?” Steve asks.

“A week ago,” Řezník smiles. “You are healing at an incredible rate. Your memory is getting better and better, and you have not been violent or tried to hurt yourself. You are doing very well.”

He had been violent? Something about that seems right, unfortunately. He knows he hurt someone. A woman. He thinks she had a family. Suddenly, he understand why Řezník doesn’t want to give him any more details. But the doctor doesn’t seem to mind answering his questions, so he dares to ask, “Tank or chair?”

Řezník reaches out to pat his shoulder. “Neither. You need a day off, don’t you think? You’ve been working very hard. You have an appointment with a new doctor today—nothing painful. She’s just here to run some tests. Her name is Dr. Martin.” He turns back to Pierce, looking expectant. “I have a few medications I need to get for him, Alex—would you two like to have a word?”

Pierce sits down on the mattress, just a few feet away from Steve, in reply. Řezník seems satisfied with his answer and leaves.

CHILDREN’S WARD.
When Dr. Boenig lets herself in, Bucky’s eyelashes and hair are cool and damp and tears have left tracks down his temples, but he feels as if the pressure has lessened a little. He can breathe again.

“Hi,” she smiles. “I hear we’re calling you by name now,” she continues excitedly. Her accent is faintly German, but it sounds like she’s been in the US since childhood. Her eyes are oddly bright and friendly. “I’m really glad you’re working with us on this - Chris was telling me about the project. It’s got really incredible potential. Do you remember me?”

“Boenig. Behavioral specialist,” he responds, testing his voice.

“You can call me Leana. And you’re James, but I hear you like to go by Bucky?” she asks, placing the covered food on the bedside tray and leaning against the plastic guard rail. Bucky nods. “Well, it’s nice to finally meet you. It’s so weird - I’ve been working on your case for years, but we’ve never really had a conversation. Conversations are usually a big part of my job,” she laughs.

“What the hell are you doing working for HYDRA?” Bucky suddenly can’t help but ask. This lady is a goddamn ray of sunshine, and yet here she is, throwing her lot in with a bunch of mad scientists and fascists.

Dr. Boenig gives an unladylike snort. “Have you been watching the news? I mean, if you haven’t been, I don’t suggest that you start, especially if you’re already feeling down. It won’t help. I think a lot of governments are failing their people right now, and I think that American voters are really happy being ignorant. Democracy just doesn’t seem to be working lately,” she shrugs. “So...I don’t mind working for an organization that cuts right to the heart of the issue and fixes it. Try the food,” she adds suddenly, noticing that he’s listening skeptically rather than eating. “I promise, it’s not terrible,” she assures him, uncovering the tray.

Bucky finds himself grudgingly impressed - someone had put together a plate of French toast and sausage, with a bowl of oatmeal. It’s more food than he’s seen since they left Wakanda. And even the fruit in the oatmeal looks fresh. What the hell are they trying to prove?

“I thought you could use some comfort food,” Boenig smiles. “There’s, uh - there’s butter and syrup.”

Bucky pushes himself upright in the bed, suddenly painfully aware that his gown is still open under the single blanket covering him. He studies her face as he accepts the plastic utensils she offers up.

“And what exactly do you think that HYDRA’s fixing?” he asks tiredly, still trying to decide whether or not he actually cares. This poor lady’s misinformed opinion probably isn’t going to be the last straw that makes him a HYDRA agent, but every one of these bastards seems to have a different reason. They’re usually entertaining, even if they’re all horseshit, as far as Bucky’s concerned.

She leans back against the bedrail a little deeper, tipping her head up and humming, like she doesn’t know where to start. “They could have fixed a lot with INSIGHT.”

“Could have killed a lot of innocent people.”
“Could have saved a lot more innocent people,” she counters instantly. “If the only person we’d taken out was Tony Stark, we could have saved an entire country from being destroyed. The algorithm worked.”

“You don’t mind working with a bunch of Nazis?” Bucky scoffs.

Boenig laughs, looking a little surprised. “HYDRA’s mission in Germany was to destroy the Third Reich. Hitler contracted our scientists to manufacture weapons, and then Schmidt and Zola strung him along for years, spending all of his money and never delivering a single weapon. If the S.S.R. hadn’t gotten involved and dismantled Schmidt’s faction, they would have assassinated Hitler and bombed Berlin - not that I blame you or your friend. But look, I hate Nazis more than you can possibly imagine, and I blame the S.S.R. for the last months that people spent in concentration camps. I don’t think the Allies cared so much for the prisoners - they merely wanted the credit for defeating Hitler.”

Bucky purses his lips. “Did Pierce let you sit on his knee while he told you that story?”

“I have a degree in history. I drew my own conclusions,” she replies airily.

“And you’re a doctor. How many degrees you got?” Bucky smirks.

“A masters in European History and a doctorate in Psychology, Humboldt-Universität,” she says flatly, cocking an eyebrow. Looks like she’s just about fed up with him. Good. “HYDRA has a very interesting history, but they have never been Nazis - they just infiltrated them.”

“Pretty dark history,” Bucky reminds her, but he finally tries a bite of the French toast anyway. There’s no real protest to be made by starving himself.

“No darker than the CIA’s - or America’s. I mean - look at the country you fought for. They killed ten million of their own natives, the way they treat people of color, the interment of the Japanese, the lives they snuffed out with nuclear weapons, Guantanamo--”

“I was drafted,” Bucky interjects. “I don’t like the US government a whole lot more than I like you guys. That doesn’t make me hate HYDRA any less.

“Well. Maybe you’ll feel differently when you see what they do with Vesna,” she suggests hopefully. “The drugs they’re planning to--”

“Really don’t care to hear any more about Vesna today. Thanks,” Bucky says, sharp and quiet. He feels fleetingly guilty for snapping at the girl - the breakfast is all actually pretty good and he’s enjoying it in earnest now, but he’s not blind as to why they’re giving it to him. And when HYDRA says behavioral specialist, what they mean is much closer to behavioral agent. Boenig is here to represent all things good and pleasant - she’s pretty, she’s young, she’s well-spoken, she brought him his first real meal in over two weeks. And she’d done it all while prattling on about all the things she loves about HYDRA. Hilarious. Bucky catches her eye, trying to gauge whether or not he’s pissed her off. She seems to be waiting patiently for him to continue. “Look, lady, whatever script you’re working off of, you can forget it. If Pierce sent you up to make sure I don’t kill anybody, don’t worry about it. Couldn’t pick a fight with you guys if I tried,” he points out rather sadly, nodding toward his leg. “And if you’re here to get me on board with HYDRA, then you can get fucked.”

She chuckles a little at his frankness. “There’s no script, Bucky...some days, I wish there was. I’m very invested in what Mr. Pierce is trying to accomplish. I want to be part of the initiative that’s going to cure cancer and Alzheimer’s and fix a broken global infrastructure. If that makes me a
fascist, then I guess I’m a fascist. How’s your fascist breakfast?” she asks tritely, picking up his chart and thumbing through it.

“Edible,” he replies. Actually, it tastes incredible, and his hunger only makes it taste better. It’s taking every bit of his will to eat slowly. “You guys sure weren’t chinky with the butter.”

“Well, they want your body fat a little higher,” she informs him lightly, then glances up from the chart. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t menstruate.”

And Bucky tries not to flinch, but he can’t keep himself from turning white. Psychologists seem to always know just what to say to cut deep.

Boenig smiles winnily, hanging the clipboard back up. “Even if you don’t like the project, at least the food will be better.

Bucky doesn’t throw the tray in her smug face, but he imagines it in detail. Instead, he laughs acidically. “You know, I met a lot of Krauts like you during the war. You’d have fit right in.”

“I’m Jewish,” she remarks coolly.

“Yeah, so was my grandma,” Bucky smiles, matching her brusque tone. “And I’m sure if she were here, she’d tell you, az oif dem hartsen iz bitter, helft nit in moil kain tsuker. She’d probably pronounce it better, though.”

She sighs deeply. “You’ve had...an invasive exam today. Obviously, that’s bothering you. Why don’t we talk about that?”

“You guys want to cut me up and use me for something stupid. That’s nothing new. Nothing to talk about.”

Dr. Boenig doesn't seem particularly deterred by any of his comments - after all, he hadn't expected her to give up the game the first time he calls a spade a spade. She's here to make him complacent and she seems to like her job, so she'll keep being sweet until Pierce tells her to abandon her current directive. He'll just have to make do with testing her patience in the meantime.

"So, Dr. Parsons came to do a surgical consultation?"she grimaces sympathetically. "I'll bet that was rough. It’s alright to be in a bad mood. All things considered, you seem like you're holding up alright."

Bucky thinks back to the image he had conjured only minutes ago, of the speckled grey counters and white floor tiles smeared with slick blood from his shattered skull. He laughs, knowing that he sounds manic, but he doesn't qualify his laugh with any excuse. Fuck it - he is manic. Let her wonder how far off the deep end he's gone.

“If you don’t want to talk about Dr. Parsons’ visit, you are allowed to ask questions,” she offers as recompense.

“What are they going to do to me today?” he asks flatly, ignoring Boenig’s concerned gaze.

“Well, Dr. Martin might be in a little later on tonight to do some endo work.”

Bucky waits expectantly. She’d only be that vague if the answer is something he wouldn’t like.

“Endocrinology.”
Bucky sighs and makes sure it’s audible – it doesn’t bear explaining, but he’s supremely frustrated by the fact that a member of HYDRA should be surprised by any knowledge he lacks - after all, they were the ones who, for seven decades, had withheld it from him.

“She specializes in balancing hormones, essentially....testosterone, estrogen, androgen, prolactin. She’ll probably draw some blood, check your sperm count--”

Bucky doesn’t want to hear any more, so he cuts her off. “And is she the one they’re worried I’ll kill?”

“What do you mean?”

“A long time ago, when they brought new people in - when they were worried I’d act up, tarnish their reputation for making their Soldiers obedient, they’d just beat me. Wear me out. After that stopped working, they starting finding some Trojan Horse to send in. Try to tie my conscience in a knot.”

“Ah, so I’m the ‘Trojan Horse?’” she smirks.

“Yeah. So, who do they need me to behave for?”

And he must have dug right to the heart of the issue, because she suddenly looks a little choked up, like maybe she’s not sure how much she’s allowed to say.

“Come on,” he presses, continuing to eat his breakfast as casually as he can. “You’re so goddamn excited about this project - you’ve got to know what’s going on. Only reason to stay mum about it is because they’ve got something disgusting on the itinerary and you’ve got just enough sense to be ashamed about it.”

“I’m not - it’s just...well, look,” she stammers, obviously giving herself the time to construct a lie. “I’m not really used to you talking so much - or at all. Some of us used to think you couldn’t.”

“I’m glad I’ve impressed you, doc. What are they going to do to me?” he enunciates again.

Boenig clears her throat. “Mr. Pierce has been conducting some preliminary interviews with specialists - he and Dr. Montgomery think they might have their team put together now. Really great doctors--”

“And they want to get a look at the guy they’re going to be cutting into?” Bucky laughs, though he only half-smiles because his stomach is churning with anxiety now. “They just….diving right in?”

“There are still a few things to work out before they’re ready to greenlight the project - and even after that, they won’t start surgeries until your hormone levels are where they need to be.”

“Greenlight,” Bucky repeats with understanding. “Alright. So it’s a money thing. What are these guys, your backers?”

“No,” Boenig answers. “Our backers are mostly corporate.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. So, it’s not about how much money they’re putting in,” Bucky thinks aloud, food now forgotten. “It’s about how much Pierce is willing to put in,” he realizes. “They haven’t worked out payment yet. That’s why you guys are so worried I’ll misbehave - because these people might ask for more if their science experiment turns out to be a biter.”

“They’ve made offers already, actually,” Boenig corrects him. “And most of them made really fair
offers, I hear - which means that they’re excited about this project, too.”

“There it is,” Bucky nods. “They’re finalizing bids. Bidding.” He lets out a breath like a laugh, which conveys only disgust. “God, when I think you bastards can’t sink any lower, you somehow manage it. Well, in that case, I’ll spit on every last one of them. Alright, next question - you keep talking about hormones. What are they going to do, give me a sex-change or something? Is that how this works?”

Boenig tips her head, weighing her answer. “I guess that’s one way to put it. I’m way outside of my field with what they’re talking about, but as I understand it, it would be similar to sex reassignment surgery, except that it would be purely functional. Not cosmetic.” When Bucky makes no comment, she continues, “I realize how scary that sounds, but you’ll still be a man. I mean, unless you tell me you’d rather not be,” she shrugs. “It won’t change who you are.”

“Yeah, you guys have always been all about letting me be myself,” he snorts. “When will these guys be here?”

“They already are,” she says gently, like she knows she’s breaking bad news to him. “They’re probably downstairs, having a look at Leto. After Dr. Montgomery and Dr. Parsons brief them on their proposal, they’ll probably come up here to have a look at you,” she explains, nodding as she speaks, probably hoping that it will influence him toward acceptance.

“Great,” he smiles sharply - more a narrowing of his eyes than a curve of his lips.

“Bucky, I know this must be tough for you--”

“Oh, burn in hell,” he pleads tiredly. “Thanks for breakfast. Now, one of us needs to leave, and unless you’re willing to let it be me, then get the fuck out.” Even as he says it, he pictures Steve as he had been before - five and a quarter feet of piss and vinegar - and hopes to God that he’s doing right by him.

Boenig swallows whatever reproach or comfort she’d been contemplating and gives a single nod of understanding. “We’re going to keep talking,” she says instead, taking back the tray and backing up toward the door. “I know you don’t want to right now, but you might, later. I’m here to make this as easy as possible for you.”

“You are here to make it easy for them,” Bucky says quietly. “And cheap for Pierce,” he adds, glancing up at her and catching her eye. “And to earn your dirty fucking paycheck.” It must be a hard look he gives her, because the door shuts quickly behind her.

The next hour is spent in silence, hardly breathing. And the next. Eventually, he stops watching the clock. He holds the control to the PCA pump in his hand, clutching it for comfort.

He should try to sleep. They’ll be here soon.

He should stay awake. Plan. Prepare himself.

He should kill himself. It’s what he wants.

He should keep fighting. It’s what Steve would want.

His mind is paralyzed and slow. He can’t choose from his list of impossible, inconsequential solutions, and those are all the thoughts he can manage to articulate before the door opens again.
“You still doing alright?” Pierce asks.

“Yes,” Steve says, a question mark trailing in the the sibilance. “How...how do I know you? I knew you before this - before I got hurt.” He doesn’t know what happened him - traumatic injury is his best guess.

“You worked for me,” Pierce prompts. “At the Triskelion, before it was destroyed.”

Steve looks down at the man’s hand. He remembers shaking it. A fleeting sensation of tense discomfort follows - the conversation on the edge of his memory wasn’t a pleasant one.

“It was a difficult time,” Pierce supplies, seeing the memory pass over Steve’s eyes like a shadow. “But we’re not supposed to talk about that too much. Dr. Řezník still thinks it’s too soon. All you need to know is that you’re safe from Ross and Stark, and you’re safe from Interpol - now I’m sure that piques your interest,” he chuckles, “but you’ve got nothing to worry about except getting better. Do you remember anything about the project we’re working on?”

Steve shakes his head, embarrassed. He hates that this man has to put up with his vacant stupidity, especially considering that what remain of his memories of Pierce place him in a figure of extreme authority.

“You...have an incredible capacity to heal,” Pierce explains, seeming to choose his words carefully. “Most of the diseases that kill people these days - cardiac, degenerative, neurological, hell, even cancer - you’re immune to all of it. Did you remember that?”

“Uh, yeah,” Steve breathes, trying not to sound stunned. “I thought I was...well, I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure if it was true.”

Pierce smiles, almost fondly. “Soldier, there are quite a few things you’ve done that defy reason. Nobody in their right mind would believe half of it. Look, you needed brain surgery, but you’re not crazy. Don’t worry about that. Trust me when I tell you that you’ve accomplished some incredible feats. And you’ll be back at it in no time...but...well, that brings me right to the point. It’s about Zima,” he says, watching Steve with narrow, unblinking eyes, gauging the effect of each word as he speaks. “He can’t be in the field anymore.”

Steve’s brow knits. Pierce had said it like it was going to mean something to him - perhaps even be devastating to him. Had he wanted Zima back in the field? Is it what Zima had wanted? And what had happened to him?

Pierce settles with his back against the same cool wall, relaxing as Steve leans forward. “We’ve replaced his prosthetic and recalibrated it, but his knee is a mess. He’s going to need physical therapy or he’ll limp for the rest of his life. And...he’s seen a lot of combat. Even more than you, probably. I think we can all agree that it’s high time that he retire from combat missions, but we still need him. And he’s agreed to help us.”

“What happened to us?” Steve can’t help but interrupt. “And...help - how?” He realizes a moment later that his questions are perhaps too broad to answer and regrets asking at all, but he still wants to know.
Pierce takes a deep breath. “Dr. Řezník and Dr. Boenig will be handling the first question - one step at a time. They want to see how much you can remember on your own, first. But cheating a little can’t hurt,” he smirks teasingly. “You said you remember a man named Tony Stark?”

Steve can’t picture the man’s face, but he hears something - percussive blasts, buzzes of energy, the groan and clatter of crumbling steel echoing off concrete walls, enraged shouts of unclear words and wordless roars of pain, and he knows the sounds must be associated with that name. “Did he...hurt us?” he asks lamely.

“You guys had a pretty serious scuffle. And we have even more to discuss about General Ross, but I’ll leave that to Boenig and Řezník’s professional discretion.” Pierce chuckles dryly. “But for now, you’ll have to be happy knowing that I think you hurt Stark just a little worse than he hurt the two of you - he walked away from it, but you dealt his ego a blow. That’s hitting Stark where it hurts,” he says, his tone unmistakably congratulatory.

“As for your other question--” Pierce shifts, suddenly seeming uncomfortable and hesitant. He clears his throat again. “Chris - Dr. Montgomery - dug up an old project. Long story short, we’ve been trying for decades to replicate the serum we used to make the two of you - that made you immune to everything and gave you the ability to heal so quickly. It was put to use by the military during the war, but that’s never what it was meant for. It goes without saying - and I’m sure even you can guess - why we want to reproduce it on a mass scale. I mean,” he laughs incredulously, as if he’s feeling the enormous weight of the idea’s potential. “You’ve got the cure for cancer in your DNA, and everything else, too, from muscular dystrophy right down to the common goddamned cold.

“Problem is, your DNA isn’t enough. A test group of one doesn’t do us much good if we’re going to isolate what makes you Superman,” he smiles, but the expression grows tight after a moment, like he’s struggling to ask what he knows is a great favor. “We need you to reproduce with another enhanced individual. Now, we wouldn’t hurt your kids,” he scoffs, “but if we could map their genomes, we just might be able to save a lot of lives.”

For a moment, Steve feels himself flushing dark red. This guy was definitely his boss at some point - in fact, all evidence says that he still is - and here they are talking about reproduction. Any embarrassment he might feel though is soon overtaken by a single question, which Pierce seems to have not only anticipated, but goaded him towards. “Are there--”

“Are there other enhanced people?” Pierce finishes.

Steve nods.

“Only Zima,” he replies meaningfully.

Steve lowers his eyes apologetically. “I’m-I’m sorry. Sir. I don’t understand.”

Pierce is quick to lay a calming hand on Steve’s shoulder, quieting his hastily stammered apology. “It’s alright to be confused. What I’m telling you is hard to believe - but that’s the project Dr. Montgomery proposed. We’re going to combine your DNA with Zima’s. If we’re successful, the two of you will have a child that biologically belongs to both of you. Sounds like some mad scientist’s horse-shit to me,” he chuckles. “But some of the greatest scientists alive today have assured me it’s possible, so I’m not arguing. Does the idea...bother you? I understand that the concept is more than a little awkward, but it’ll all be done in a laboratory setting,” he assures him knowingly. “I’m not asking the two of you to hold hands and sign a joint lease or anything.”

“No, no--” Steve breathes, tongue and jaw working faster than his mind. “I - we…” He doesn’t
know how to finish the sentence, though, because he’s not sure what’s true. He thinks of Zima - one of the few faces he can picture clearly - and knows exactly what to call the feeling that fills him up, like an empty cup begging for water. Even if he was sure that Zima loved him, too, it’s not something he should tell Pierce, or maybe anyone.

“You two are partners?” Pierce asks evenly.

Steve’s face remains blank, awaiting clarification.

“You’re romantically involved?”

Steve reaches desperately for the definitive answer, but he’s panicked, and can’t decide what is real and what scraps of memory are nothing but vivid wishes. “I don’t know - I’m trying to remember. I just...I’m sorry, sir, I couldn’t even remember my own name when I woke up this morning,” he laughs, hoping he doesn’t tear up in sheer frustration.

“Well, it doesn’t matter how hard you get knocked on the head,” Pierce says, “love doesn’t come out of nowhere. If you feel like the two of you were partners, you probably are. And listen, if we’re successful, Soldier, then as long as you’re still recovering, I’ll make sure you have a hand in raising your own children. If everything goes as it should, they’ll be enhanced, just like you and Zima, and they’ll need to be trained. HYDRA will make sure they’re safe for as long as we can, but you know very well that there will always be people like Stark and Ross out there. I’m going to need you to be at the top of your game,” he smiles, sounding certain that Steve will be.

Steve listens, absorbing more and more information as Pierce speaks, feeling that the window on his past is widening, revealing justifications for feelings he hadn’t been able to describe before. He can’t fully comprehend the thought of having a child to care for at the moment, but in a way, it’s like a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. A reason to work harder, to recover faster. “Thank you, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Double update! Read on!
The Auction Block

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHILDREN’S WARD.

1:00PM.

Montgomery opens the door and holds it. Two armed guards enter after him, followed by seven others - Parsons, and six who are unfamiliar: three men, and three women. One of the women, round-faced and sweet-looking even though God knows she can’t possibly be, stays close at his side as the other file in.

“This is Mr. Barnes,” Montgomery says almost off-handedly. “He’s not quite as stable as our other Soldier - if you need to examine him, make sure a guard is close.”

“Stable?” Bucky interrupts, the word aching like freezing water in his throat. “What did you do to him?”

“We explained the project to him,” Montgomery deigns to provide. “And he listened. Because he’s got more sense than you do,” he says, only half joking. “He’s been really cooperative this morning. I would love it if you’d do the same.”

And while Bucky tells himself that hell, no, he will not cooperate, they don’t immediately give him much opportunity to act out. Most of them keep their distance, conversing amongst themselves, asking Montgomery questions, every sentence laden with words he’s sure he’s never heard before, surrounded by others which are ominously familiar.

Montgomery and the woman - their body language would suggest that she’s his wife, Martin - stay by the door. An older man stands by the counter, facing the hospital bed, staring down its length at Bucky’s face. He doesn’t speak to the others. A fat man with pink cheeks is rattling on about cord blood to a tall woman, but Bucky can see from a certain way she smiles and nods that English isn’t her first language. From the coloration of her vowels as she expresses understanding or surprise or interest, he thinks she might be Japanese.

One of the men, whose accent and syntax Bucky would place somewhere in southeast Asia, is holding open a leather-bound portfolio, leaning over so that a thin woman with straight, thin brown hair can see its contents. They keep glancing from the portfolio to him. The way they point to the pages he holds out gives Bucky the feeling that they’re looking at the photographs Epley had taken that morning, and his teeth clench, jaw trembling, feeling like the obtuse angle of the folder’s pages might as well be his own spread legs. He listens to their conversation just long enough to realize that they’re discussing breaking his pelvis in four places, then shuts his eyes, letting every soft voice in the room blend together, willing his brain not to pick out any singular word.

A minute passes, and finally, the man who had initially kept his distance from the bedside steps forward. His grey hair is wiry and wild, face dusted with unkempt stubble, and he’s shorter than all the others except Montgomery’s petite wife. There’s a spark of interest in his watery blue eyes as he takes three decisive, fearless strides forward and perches on the edge of the bed, close enough that Bucky could strike him if he wanted to, and one of the guards has to shuffle forward in a hurry
to cover him.

The conversations around the bed stall momentarily before they hesitantly resume, as if everyone had been waiting to see if the unstable Soldier would pitch forward and grip to old man by the throat. For a second, Bucky thinks he might - but the man isn’t analyzing his body like the rest of them. He’s not looking at him like a conqueror gazing at a plot of land to level, and he’s not like Boenig, trying to mold his brain like clay in her hands. The room seems to grow smaller as each studies the other in silence.

MAIN LAB.

7:40AM.

Steve takes the pills that Řezník brings back. The next hour is starkly different than anything he half-remembers having happened in the last week, but he says and does things which he thinks are normal, trying to respond formulaically to every stimulus in the hope that feigning recovery will somehow lead to actual recovery, eventually. If he’s honest with himself, he’s dazed. Constantly looping thoughts, none of them productive or critical of his surroundings, dance over his neurons - birds scattering after a rifle blast. He knows his short term memory isn’t performing as it should, just as he knows his long term memory is all but destroyed, but if he’s very careful, he can manage to follow basic social cues.

First, Řezník walks him to one of the exam tables and gives him fresh clothes. They’re nicer than the threadbare pajama pants and scrub-top he’d woken up in, but just as plain - a white shirt and a pair of grey sweatpants, and rubber sandals. Řezník watches him carefully as he undresses and redresses, and when their eyes meet uncomfortably, Řezník waves his hand, dismissing Steve’s wary gaze. “Sorry,” the old doctor says distractedly. “I am watching how you balance. You’ve been unsteady on your feet for a few days. You’re much better today.”

Once he’s dressed, Řezník pulls a low stool over and gestures to it, indicating that Steve should sit. He makes a brief examination of Steve’s head, first one temple, then the other, and then the very top. He seems pleased with whatever he sees there, but it makes Steve curious, so the moment Řezník turns his back for a moment Steve runs his fingers along his scalp.

His hair must have been longer recently, because the bristle of its now close crop feels strange to touch. At his right temple and again at the crown of his head, he encounters something even stranger - patches of something roughly textured, rubbery, at the center of tender, swollen areas. Řezník looks up from the chart he’s filling in and catches him.

“Don’t touch,” he scolds, and Steve’s hand shoots back to his lap as his stomach churns. “It’s just glue, Soldier,” he assures him, gentler.

Řezník takes him through a battery of rudimentary exercises, making him extend his forearms and pressing on them, trying to force his hands apart, then together, repeating the process with his legs, asking him to stand with his eyes closed, to touch his nose with the tip of his finger. Steve has no trouble with any of it, and Řezník seems genuinely impressed.

“You must have slept well last night,” he comments as he write down a note with particular flourish. “Huge improvement, since yesterday morning.
Immediately afterward, Řezník motions for him to follow him out of the lab. As they pass through the doors, two of the guards fall into step with them, and in that moment, Steve realizes that this is part of daily routine. He can’t remember where he’s going, but he feels a sense of déjà vu so intense that it practically has a taste and smell. This must be something he does every day. Each door they walk past, every footfall around him, only serves to make the scene more eerily familiar. The sense of anticipation and anxiety builds in the pit of his stomach until it makes his face hot with a blush he can’t explain.

The door where their short walk ends opens before Steve can remember what this door means, what the number above it on the plastic plaque indicates. Inside, a man and a woman are waiting, and a padded table has been prepared with a white-cased pillow and a long sheet of protective tissue paper. He steps inside, words and questions still frustrating trapped deep inside his throat, no part of him escaping the disorienting fog. When he turns back to look to Řezník for instruction, the doctor is gone and the door has shut behind him. Only the two guards remain.

One of the doctors seems familiar. Steve studies his face for a moment until the name Maclean finally forms. The other, a short, white woman with round cheeks, doesn’t carry the same sense of familiarity. She is the first to speak.

“I’m Dr. Martin,” she says, with cursory politeness, her tone soft and airy and yet strangely robotic. “I’m an endocrinologist. Do you remember Dr. Maclean?”

Steve nods. He had the man’s name right, at least.

Where Martin leaves the conversation awkwardly halted, Maclean picks it up. He talks to Steve like any doctor would talk to a child, even though Steve’s sure that the man could be as much as a decade younger than him. “Do you remember doing this yesterday? It’s okay if you don’t - we usually do this right before you go back for ECT.”

Steve shakes his head dumbly, distracted as he watches Martin working at a counter, filling a tray with plastic containers and other instruments whose purposes he can only guess at.

Maclean’s expression is one of understanding. “Okay, that’s alright - you’re just here to give a semen sample. It’s not going to hurt, and we’re going to use a little machine that vibrates, so it’s not going to take very long. Dr. Martin isn’t usually here, but she’s going to be helping me out from now on. She’s going to do a quick exam first, alright?” he says, nodding as he speaks. The man’s bedside manner is textbook, but he’s not rude or threatening. Steve finds himself numbly mimicking the nod. “You can put your pants and shoes on that chair right there,” Maclean informs him. “And then just have a seat at the end of the table for us.”

Part of him - some squeamish, childish part - wants to escape the room, to run away and hide. But his earlier conversation with Pierce provides some context for the procedure. Pierce and these doctors know what they’re doing, and there’s a lot at stake that Steve knows he can’t even begin to understand - cures for every sickness known to humankind. And, he thinks selfishly, children that he will one day raise. He knows he couldn’t be a parent in his current state, not so soon after whatever had happened to him, but perhaps it’s the absence of his past that makes him want a future so badly. Brief indignity is a small price to pay for that.

Those thoughts manifest only as indescribable feelings rather than words in his mind, but he follows Maclean’s instructions nonetheless. Another fugue passes, like the one in which Řezník had disappeared from the room - the hands on the clock mysteriously shifting from 7:59 to 8:04. One moment, he’s nodding his reluctant consent, and the next, he’s seated on the edge of the exam table, naked from the waist down, trying to ignore the weak, infantile voice protesting in the back of his mind, insisting that he should have run.
CHILDREN’S WARD.

1:10PM.

After a while, Bucky starts to wonder if the old doctor is just trying to intimidate him. He sits, they watch one another, Bucky’s eyes cautious and unsteady, while the doctor’s remain fixed in contemplation.

“Hello,” is the man’s quiet first word. The way he says it invites a reply, and yet doesn’t demand one. He follows it with an almost apologetic expression, grimace on one side, smile on the other. “My God, this reminds me of when I had colitis,” he chuckles softly, moving his lips as little as possible, like he’s trying to keep their conversation private. He’s undoubtedly a Russian speaker, but he’s been in America for a long time. “Got it from taking the goddamned antibiotics my own doctor prescribed. American healthcare,” he sighs, as if that alone should imply enough to Bucky. “My name is Reshanov. Or Anatoly. Whichever you like. Or Doctor, I suppose, since we’re apparently just calling Captain Rogers Soldier,” he says, a mocking undertone creeping into his words. “Dr. Tangsrisuk - did I say that right?” he calls over his shoulder. The man with the photos and the woman beside him both look up. “You wanted a closer look at the surgical site markers? Come on, he won’t kill you.”

“Don’t make any promises,” Bucky advises.

Reshanov grins disarmingly at the others. “Alright, I think he won’t kill you. He hasn’t killed me yet, anyway.” He turns back toward Bucky as he says this and, with no pretense of asking permission, he peels down the blanket covering him. “Open your gown, please. Let’s make this a quick exam so we can all go to lunch.”

Bucky had known this was coming. He hadn’t expected himself to be fully prepared for the discomfort of it, and he’s not. The man and woman close the folder and tentatively edge forward as Reshanov rises and takes a step back to stand near the head of the hospital bed. Bucky touches the fabric of the cotton tunic, pulled shut, though still unfastened, like he’s handling needles and razors, and he opens it, laying himself bare. The two doctors don’t look him in the eye - not like Reshanov does. They study the lines and notes on his abdomen for a moment before resuming their conversation in earnest, communicating only in an indecipherable barrage of surgical and anatomical terms that Bucky knows he’ll soon be forced to understand implicitly.

Reshanov smiles down at him, but gives a discreet cringe of sympathy. “Must feel rather like standing on the auction block,” he says. “I’m sorry.” When Bucky doesn’t respond, he continues, “Maybe if you’re cooperative, they’ll bid low - certainly, that would be better than HYDRA being forced to seek out less skilled doctors,” he chuckles. “Am I consoling you at all?”

Bucky looks up at him, meeting his eyes once again. “No.”

“Oh,” Reshanov sighs, seeming disappointed. “I’m a fertility specialist,” he announcing, changing the subject.

“You’re HYDRA,” Bucky replies succinctly.

Reshanov frowns, but his eyes keep smiling. “I suppose I am, now. I went to school with Alexander Pierce. We used to drink together. My father - he was HYDRA. A fanatical supporter, in
fact. I would not have involved myself were it not for the nature of Project Vesna, though. I told Alex I won’t accept payment - just in case he feels I owe him something,” he says softly. “Now, you and I both know that HYDRA will use this research for military advantage and monetary gain. And neither you nor the Captain are here of your own free will. Two good men’s lives, stolen to save the lives of millions. I think that the good that will come of this project might just outweigh the bad. Do you think I’ve chosen wrong?” he asks. It sounds to Bucky like he actually wants an answer - like he’s genuinely unsure.

And for just a fleeting second, Bucky isn’t sure either. He might even listen to Reshanov, talk to him, if not for the fact that he was echoing the same shit Bucky had now heard from Reznik, Montgomery, and Boenig, who were all merely repeating Pierce’s weak justifications. “I’m getting real tired of you bastards trying to make friends with me.” He tries to focus on hating Reshanov, trying to ignore the man at the side of the bed - Tangsrisuk, pushing his uninjured leg up and snapping on a single glove, touching him, asking questions about the surgical markings on his perineum. The woman he’s been talking to - a German - makes her own horrendous comments regarding the transplant of reproductive organs. When Bucky flinches at the vivid explanation she gives Tangsrisuk, he knows that Reshanov sees.

Reshanov watches the way he pales and freezes under Tangsrisuk’s ungentle hand and the woman’s blunt description, but he makes no further comment to Bucky, turning instead back to Martin and Montgomery. “He seems perfectly well-behaved to me - I don’t see why all the guns are necessary. May I come back after lunch and examine him? I’d like to start his blood-work immediately.”

“Dr. Martin will handle the blood-work,” Montgomery dismisses. “She’s an endocrinologist - you won’t have to worry about that.”

“And I am a reproductive endocrinologist,” Reshanov counters. “And also old and inflexible. I like to have a hand in the lab work, whenever I can. Mr. Barnes isn’t going to complain about giving a few more vials of blood, are you, Barnes?” he smiles.

Bucky could be wrong, but he’s almost sure that he can hear a note of conspiratory mischief in Reshanov’s voice, directed at him. His situation can’t really get much worse, so he decides to gamble. For whatever it will be worth to Montgomery, he shakes his head, implying that no, he won’t complain.

And Montgomery must be happy - overjoyed, in fact - to see a little bit of the cooperation he’d been hoping for. A few of the other doctors seem to notice their subject’s docile behavior, as well. Montgomery is probably delighted on behalf of Vesna’s budget - maybe the doctors will be less likely to ask for hazard pay, now. Bucky endures the favor he’s done Montgomery out of sheer determination to satisfy some morbid curiosity - for some reason, Reshanov is pulling strings to see him alone, as soon as possible, and he wants to know why.

EXAM ROOM 2.

8:05AM.

The examination is tolerable. Steve has only the wherewithal to follow instructions and none to spare for self-pity at the moment, and sometimes even those basic instructions must be repeated before he can execute them. He finds himself in that frustrating, horrible limbo of functioning very
poorly, but functioning well enough to know how stupid he must seem.

A stethoscope presses to one side of his chest and then the other. He breaths in and out. The process repeats against his back.

Maclean shines a light in his eyes. He looks where he is told.

They test his reflexes.

Dr. Martin looks at his throat, nose, and ears, and then asks him to stand while she sits down on a stool. She makes a thorough examination of his penis and testicles, and he finds that ignoring her is really very easy, since he’s already so disoriented. Even when she pushes back his foreskin, pinches at the head, pulls with one gloved thumb just near the slit, presumably examining his urethra, only his jaw clenches in embarrassment and disgust. It’s just an involuntary reflex - his brain offers up no argument. He stares at the blank wall just above the top of Martin’s head, lets it fill his empty mind with white noise. At some point, he bends over the table so she can perform an internal exam, but even through that invasive procedure, he’s spared any single moment of clarity or self-awareness.

When she finishes and removes her gloves, she tells him to lie down on the table, on his back. He stands up straight and stumbles backward, suddenly dizzy, and Maclean has to put an arm out to support him. Maclean says something cautionary that Steve can’t make out over the ringing in his ears and helps him to lie back on the table. That makes him ashamed. Not the examination, but his own feeble incompetence. For a moment, he wants to die - he wants it badly. His face must twist with the pain of wanting it - Maclean seems to notice.

“It only been a few days since you had surgery. You’re recovering fast. I’m going to start physical therapy with you tomorrow.”

Steve nods, truly thankful, however simple that means he is. He’s disgusted with himself - needing to lean on these people, not remembering their names and faces, needing to be comforted, helped, taught, and all the while, he’s completely isolated within his own wrecked brain, smothered by a tangled net of damaged neurons. Maclean’s idea of a fast recovery isn’t nearly fast enough.

Maclean keeps a supportive hand behind Steve’s back as he lowers himself down onto the table. “Don’t worry - PVS usually only takes about forty-five minutes. We’ll have you out of here pretty soon.”

Steve can’t recall exactly what PVS is, but he knows very well what’s next. It must be how they intend to do the only thing left to do, which is obtain a semen sample. A brief period of silent waiting follows Maclean’s assurance, and Steve is half-aware that they must be changing their gloves and gathering up supplies. Not twenty minutes ago, he had justified this to himself as somehow necessary. It was hardly a sacrifice. Certainly it was nothing that should seem difficult or brave to endure. It’s a medical procedure just like any other, handled by doctors in a clinical setting. So Steve tells himself that over again and keeps his eyes on the ceiling, distancing himself, and blames his own malfunctioning frontal lobe for the cold feeling of disgust creeping over his exposed skin.

But after a few minutes of quiet clatters and jostling of instruments against Dr. Martin’s tray, the hiss and rustle of crepe papers draws his eyes downward again as Dr. Maclean drapes one sheet over his stomach and a second across his bare thighs.

Steve can’t stop himself from looking at the body. He wishes it wasn’t his own. He wants to look away. He is naked from the waist down; skin sickly pale and blotchy pink under the harsh,
jaundiced lights; genitals humiliatingly displayed, left comically disembodied between the thin sheets of powder-blue paper. It’s a raw, intolerably explicit image, and it jars his senses into a sudden state of hyper-lucidity. The fog lifts away at last, receding in the destructive path of a crashing wave of self-awareness which seeps over him like a tide. It isn’t an awareness of his identity, but a suffocating, paralyzing vision of the body on the table which can only be his own, positioned with such disregard to his human dignity that he might as well be a child’s doll, stripped nude to satisfy the infantile curiosity of clumsy, merciless giants. He has no voice to protest. He’s a toy - if he speaks, it will be out of the side of their mouths.

He averts his eyes. Trying to reason with his shame, trying to justify his own lewd ugliness only makes it worse. So he bends all his attention toward the plaster ceiling, desperate to sink deeper into the maelstrom of his blindly firing synapses, and tries to count the passing seconds.

Someone is speaking to him. Low, lilting. Maclean. The doctor steps up toward the place where his head rests against the paper-cased pillow, holding up a hand-held instrument. Steve watches the doctor’s mouth move, uncomprehending, watching the tool in Maclean’s hand with eyes intentionally unfocused, discerning only the shape - like a pair of tongs, with broad, flat paddles and a hinge at its apex which a light grip could squeeze shut. When clamped shut, anything inside it would be trapped between two silicone discs. Maclean demonstrates its function on his own left hand, pinching it between the paddles, one disc on his palm and the other on the back of his hand, and then he flicks a switch on the instrument’s handle with his right thumb. The tool powers on and there’s a brief buzz as it vibrates that hits Steve’s nervous ears like the roar and sputter of a chainsaw’s motor. He turns it off, and steps back down to the other end of the table, out of sight.

Steve wonders for a moment why they’re using that thing - why he’s not allowed to give a sample any other way. He’s almost sure that people are usually allowed to do this themselves, in private. And then he remembers that he’s been under constant surveillance, that someone would have been watching him, and that revelation brings back the dim memory which confirms that, yes, that strategy had been tested initially, and abandoned when it had yielded no results. The memory itself is fragmented and sparse, but the burning embarrassment of his emasculating failure lingers like a ghost in its place.

His whole body tenses skittishly when the first pair of hands touches him. He doesn’t know if they belong to Dr. Maclean or Dr. Martin and he won’t let himself look down again. The fingers that gingerly grip and maneuver him are bloodlessly cool behind the synthetic smoothness of the tight nitrile gloves.

Steve hears Maclean’s voice again, and he knows that a question has been asked, though the words are indistinguishable. Immediately, a second voice - the voice of a little boy - answers meekly, “Okay,” and Steve can only surmise that it must have been his own voice.

He holds every muscle in his body rigidly still so that he won’t flinch again. When the cold silicone pads of the device clamp around the base of penis, he manages to keep his body still and his face expressionless, but then Maclean flicks the switch not a moment later with no verbal warning, and Steve’s nerves light up all at once like a flashbulb burst. His legs give a reflexive jerk. His abdomen tenses. He tries to take a long, slow breath in through his nose to calm himself down, but fear morphs the first buzzing pulsations of Maclean’s instrument from what would have been a bloom of intense pleasure into the heart-stopping jolt of touching an open socket.

Steve takes another deep breath, self-consciously trying to keep the rise and fall of his chest level as he begins to acclimate to the vibrations, but the stimulation is intense and relentless. The pleasure crests again and again in rapid swells, but there’s no slowing down and no escape, short of squirming away from Maclean’s hands like a petulant child. He has to tolerate the overwhelming
sensation - in fact, he has to enjoy it, at least physically, if he wants this to be over. He understands that, but some part of him still wants to fight, to deny, to resist, to hide. The next inhale catches audibly in his throat and so, mortified, he tries to hold his breath.

He knows there’s a wash of blood painted across his cheeks now, making his face and ears and neck burn hotter by the second, and whatever blood remains is rushing to his groin and pooling in his pelvic floor. Thirty seconds tick by on the clock beside the exam table, and he can feel himself getting hard, even under the disinterested gazes of Maclean and Martin. His pulse is pounding out a reveille in the crests of his hips and something inside him is starting to tremble, right at the base of his spine, in tandem with the low hum of the vibrator. When he starts to swell inside the clamp, Maclean’s grip remains firm and unyielding, and the more he swells, the greater the pressure and intensity of the pulsations.

“You’re doing just fine. Just let us know if you start to feel any numbness,” Maclean says offhandedly.

A moment later, Dr. Martin speaks. “How long has he been off those antidepressants Řezník had him on?”

“Couple of days now. You think it’s been long enough?”

“With his metabolism, it should be out of his system. We’ll see how the overall count and morphology looks today, but it might take a little more time.”

“It’ll be a while before we’re ready to worry about insemination anyway.”

“His results were alright before, but given how much money is going into this project—”

“Yeah, no reason not to try to improve his numbers a little. Man, those SSRI’s can really wipe out your testosterone levels quick.”

“Oh, I see it all the time in my practice.”

“Wow.”

Steve can’t decide whether it’s disgusting or relieving that they hardly acknowledge that there’s another person in the room. Listening to their conversation is almost enough of a distraction to cool his blood for a few seconds and give him a little respite, but then Maclean slides the pads down the length of his penis and takes a slightly firmer grip near the center of the shaft. Steve realizes that his toes and fingers are curling reflexively, and by the time he notices, he can’t make them stop. One of the pads is pressed directly against the vein on the underside of his penis and suddenly he can feel the vibrations everywhere, in every limb. He can’t hold his breath anymore - he can feel every cool inhale scratching over his dry throat and each hot exhale shuddering out of his lungs.

Someone’s fingers draw his foreskin back a little further and press his penis up toward his belly until he feels the hypersensitive head cradled against the plastic lip of a sample container. The clamp repositions quickly, sliding up his shaft another inch and rotating to squeeze him from either side, electrifying the bare nerves that his foreskin had been protecting. And it’s just too much. His back arches up off the table and his thighs shake uncontrollably, biting the tip of his tongue to stay silent. His nails scratch against the long sheet of protective paper on the table.

He thinks through the thick haze of unstoppable, unwanted arousal, that Dr. Maclean and Dr. Martin must still be hovering over him, watching him with dispassionate eyes, waiting for the inevitable reaction.
They don’t have much longer to wait - Steve feels the orgasm blooming low in his belly in spite of his shame and disgust, with all the potential energy of a recoil spring, and Maclean presses the pads together a little tighter every second, pushing them upward until they press at the edge of his glans. At the last possible moment, shame wins out and Steve begs his body not to respond, but it’s long seconds too late - it’s like he’s trying to stop a train by clutching at smooth steel cars and digging his heels into the mud. His efforts are wasted, and he’s dragged along with the sheer force of it. His vision whites out, his whole body shudders, he clenches his teeth to keep quiet, cool sweat beads on his forehead, trying futilely to put out the fire. He feels himself jerking, spasming in the grip of those silicone pads, swelling against Martin’s pinching fingers, throbbing against the sharp edge of the sample container. The tool in Maclean’s hand doesn’t move, droning on long past the crest of Steve’s orgasm, squeezing him in slow pulses until they’re sure he’s got no more to give.

When Maclean finally flicks the switch and the buzzing that had filled the room falls silent, Steve can hear his own ragged breathing and the rush of blood in his ears. The only other sound is the scrape of plastic against plastic as Dr. Martin seals the container.

“Do you need some water?” Maclean asks.

Steve nods. The water is likely to be his sole reprieve from the procedure. He tries to drink it slowly, to give himself some respite, but he’s so parched that the little cup Maclean gives him is drained in just a few seconds.

Maclean puts a hand on his shoulder, indicating that he should lie back down. Steve collapses back onto the table, utterly resigned, his eyes drifting over to the clock as he repeats to himself, Don’t worry - PVS usually only takes about forty-five minutes. We’ll have you out of here pretty soon.

There are three more empty containers on the tray. Thirty-nine minutes to go.

MAIN LAB.

10:00AM.

Another fugue. Steve feels as if he blinked in the exam room and opened his eyes to find himself in the main lab, standing before a group of people he doesn’t recognize. He’s shaking hands with one of them - a fat man, balding with a reddish beard.

“Soldier?” says a voice just beside Steve’s left shoulder - Pierce.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes in a desperate panic. He’s standing in the middle of the room. Unfamiliar people before him, expectant faces all around. He clears his throat, embarrassed, and gestures vaguely to his ear, as if he’d simply not heard.

“This is Dr. Stephen Tripp,” Pierce repeats. “He’s an OBGYN. He’ll be working on Project Vesna.”

“I’m a maternal-fetal medicine specialist. It’s an honor to meet you, Soldier,” Dr. Tripp smiles.

Steve shakes hands with four others. Anatoly Reshanov, an older man, Russian - reproductive endocrinologist, fertility specialist, and OBGYN. Anke Hammond, dark-haired, thin and severe, German - a transplant surgeon. Prin Tangsrisuk, young, face prematurely lined - a sex reassignment surgeon. Takako Inoue, who gives a brief wave rather than a handshake, and takes a step away
from him - a pediatrician and neonatologist. Dr. Montgomery’s wife, Dr. Martin, is also in attendance. She watches him warily.

Only the one named Reshanov seems different from the others - Steve is struck by the gentleness of his handshake and way he says, How are you? There’s true concern in his voice, echoed in his eyes.

The names and specializations escape Steve’s foggy mind in only minutes. What stays with him is the sense that they’re not here so that he can meet them - not for his benefit at all, in fact.

He blinks, and once again, minutes or hours slip away. He’s back in his cell, exhausted. The trail of his thought continues as if no time had passed at all, when in fact, it’s a realization that comes all too late to be addressed: he was merely on display. They shook his hand only so Pierce could prove he would shake it back. Pierce was only trying to show his new associates that their subject had been tamed.

Bucky. Not Zima.

Captain. Not Soldier.

And not HYDRA. Never HYDRA.

He blinks again, and the bite-guard is already in his mouth, and the memories are gone - drops of water clutched in his hands as he sinks into an ocean.

CHILDREN’S WARD.

2:39PM.

At some point while Bucky was asleep or distracted, Montgomery seems to have actually made good on his promise to drop off a few books. There are three on the little table beside the bed, all fairly innocuous, though they’re undoubtedly from Montgomery’s own collection. Bucky picks up one titled “100 Most Important Science Ideas: Key Concepts in Genetics, Physics, and Mathematics.”

After being studied and picked at by Pierce’s team, every inch of his body scrutinized and touched, he has no desire to read, but he knows he’ll lose his mind if he doesn’t find some way to occupy himself. He has no plan for escape as of yet, although he keeps the thought in the back of his mind, waiting until his head is clearer to look for an avenue, so for now, escapism will have to do. While he’s certain that there are cameras trained on him somewhere in the room, he feels mercifully alone for the moment, and it’s been a long time since he was last awake to utilize a brief span of silence and solitude.

His tired, itching eyes drag over the same couple of paragraphs several times within the space of his hour alone. The PCA pump lingers tauntingly in his periphery all the while, forever drawing his attention away from the words. It’s not as tempting now as it was when the doctors were there, finalizing their plans to slice him apart. The only thought that keeps his finger off the button is the faint memory of his last true escape from HYDRA. Along with the injuries he’d sustained fighting Steve on the helicarrier, the detox had taken over a week and had been nearly unbearable. Even before the serum, he’d never been so sick in his life. He’s not going to let himself get addicted again.
He doesn’t bother to close the book when the doors open again. He had guessed that the doctors would be back soon. Hell, maybe they’ll even wheel him right out for surgery, then and there. Part of Bucky even hopes that’s what they do. Fuck it - get it over with.

But when Anatoly Reshanov closes the door behind him, he’s alone. There’s not even an agent with him. That’s enough to make Bucky look up.

“I have just enjoyed a grand tour of the facility, courtesy of my old schoolmate, Alexander,” he says hastily. “Including the security room. The cameras in here are not as good as the ones in the main lab. No audio, only visual,” he explains. His face is expressionless as he rummages through drawers and cabinets for supplies and sets them out on a tray. He settles down on a stool and rolls it up to the bed, dragging the tray on its mobile stand along behind him.

With no further explanation, he snaps on a pair of gloves and leans over the side of the bed to tie an elastic band around Bucky’s bicep. Bucky doesn’t fight him. Reshanov is rough and efficient as he swabs the crook of his elbow and slides the needle in so speedily that Bucky barely registers it. The doctor keeps his head bowed, watching the vial fill as he speaks.

“I have done a lot of thinking. I could not halt this project. I cannot even hinder it. Reverse engineering this serum, mass-producing medications from its formula - that is too important. I will be complicit in your mistreatment - and Captain Rogers’ - for as long as I must be. I offer no apology.”

Bucky laughs softly, laying back against the pillow. “Thanks for being honest.”

“Once this team has what they need, I will facilitate your escape. By any means necessary.”

Bucky stares him down, dumbfounded, until Reshanov finally meets his eyes and shrugs, “Better late than never.”

“Right.” Bucky smirks tiredly, but deep within him, there’s a spark that tells him to believe Reshanov - a little flame of hope and faith, which he knows will only make the coming months more unbearable when they prove to be endless. He doesn’t have the energy to extinguish it, and so it goes on burning.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE READ. VERY IMPORTANT.

Hi! Zack here. If you are subscribed to me or this story, then you're going to get a slew of emails sometime within the next few days. These WON'T be actual chapter updates - I just have to do a little juggling act with Sam's story line and shift some things around. If you're short on time, then that's all you need to know. Only continue reading if you want to hear my lame excuses and a quick run-down of my life.

WOW. Acting work has been coming my way! So, the updates on this story had to come to a halt for a month as I finished up a short tour of the Rocky Horror Show at the end of October, and the first half of November has been spent contending for a role in Titus Andronicus...which I just learned I got! Aside from that, I've been covering for a coworker at the library as her son recovers from an injury and playing secretary to three local groups - an LGBTQIA support group, a group called Gender Warriors, and
a group of Natives from my area - as we organize post-election peaceful protests, letter writing campaigns, and fundraising drives. So...life is amazing! Writing is...also amazing...but moving slower than I'd like.

As for the juggling of chapters...unfortunately, I knew I was going to have to do this at some point. Here's the deal. I post these chapter a few days after I get them written. This is coming together on the fly. Until I started writing the first chapter from Sam's POV, I hadn't planned to include him in such a large capacity. If that had been the plan all along, his story and Steve and Bucky's certainly wouldn't be two weeks off from one another. After a lot of drafting and brainstorming, I decided it would be best for new readers if I just went ahead and slid Sam's chapters back to their rightful place in the timeline and got the narratives synchronized. I'll also be breaking the chapters up into more digestible chunks, which will hopefully make for faster updates going forward. Nothing else will change about previous chapters, aside from the correction of a few typos and the addition of Locations and Times, so my readers that have been with me on this journey for a while won't need to reread anything.

Thank you guys so much for all your patience!

--Zack

Works inspired by this One (Project Vesna) by howler32557038

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