A Bolt From the Blue
by InNeedOfInspiration

Summary

*Sequel to Just a Blast from the Past*
Steve's PoV post-ice sleep.

Summary: Natasha has succeeded in her mission to travel back in the forties and change the timeline in order to save Steve. But as he wakes up 70 years later, little did he expect his new teammate to be the spitting image of his great love from 1942.

Notes

Hello again for a new journey!
You were many to ask for Steve's PoV and I gotta admit I was too tempted to write it too. Hopefully, it'll do honor to what you had in mind. Please don't hesitate to leave comments.
When Steve Rogers woke up, the very first thought his sluggish brain crafted was about Bucky. A unique, obsessive thought he couldn't – and refused – to shake off.

The freshly-painted pale walls, the smell of the disinfectant and the new mattress he was lying on all seemed strangely unfamiliar to him as he opened his heavy lids. The sound of applause and the voice of a cheering man coming from inside the room caught his attention. He rose and sat on the edge of the bed, trying to shut off the sound from the radio to focus on figuring out where Bucky was.

He was alive, he had survived the crash God knows how, but all that mattered at this moment was to find his best friend.

'I see you're awake, captain Rogers,' a woman's voice pulled him out of his thinking.

He turned to her with a confused frown on his face, looking her up and down, his brain registering every familiar detail of her perfectly-pressed uniform, perfectly-combed hair and makeup style, and yet finding them all remarkably foreign to him. He had seen this military uniform a hundred times, knew it very well, and yet, the more he looked at it, the more curious it looked.

'Where is Bucky?' he voiced out softly, not out of physical weakness but in fear of the kind of answer he could get.

'You should have some rest first,' the agent replied. The wrong kind of answer.

'Where am I?' he asked. This could be useful information in case he'd have to resort to finding Bucky by his own means.

'You're in a recovery room in New York,' the lady recited.

'Tell me where my friend is,' he said, putting more energy and determination in his tone.

'The Dodgers take the lead, 8-4. Oh Dodgers, everyone is on their feet!,' the sports announcer shouted on the radio.

Steve allowed his brain to drift its attention away for a few seconds as he listened carefully to the commentator's unexpectedly familiar words.

'What a game we have here today, folks.'

'Where am I really?' he asked again, suspicious and, should he confess, slightly afraid. He felt a lump in his stomach and his first internal cry out was for Bucky. Hydra had taken him once for experiments. They could have taken him again for the exact same purpose.

'I'm afraid I don't understand,' the impostor tried to answer as calmly as possible after a barely visible gasp. The woman sounded every bit of American but he trusted Hydra had infiltrated agents everywhere.

'The game,' he spoke more hardly, not liking this whole sham in the slightest, expecting soldiers to barge in the room any second. He stood up to put himself in a defensive position then walked slowly up to her, daring the agent standing in front of him to break character. 'It's from May 1941. I know cause I was there. Now I'm going to ask you again: where am I?'
'Captain Rogers,' armed soldiers dressed in the strangest stealth outfits shouted warningly, stepping in the room at once. At this point, it wasn't really a surprise although the agent who had just spoken had the accent and the look of a fellow American, just like him.

'Who are you?' he asked astonished, looking at the unfamiliar rifles pointed in his direction that didn't look anything like the German models he had seen before. He didn't ask for their identities, he asked for their backgrounds.

Listening to his survival instinct (certainly the little guy in him), he attacked first. He bounced at his opponents and threw them against the wall which literally burst open with more easiness than he had expected. He jumped through the hole the impact had made and was hit with the striking surprise of a spacious, dark room used as a mere decorum, a stage for the masquerade in which he was the main protagonist.

He sped to the exit and ran along corridors his eyes had never seen of this kind before. He didn't have time to put much thought into it that he found other funny-dressed soldiers awaiting ahead with their weapons but somehow not showing real signs of readiness to use them for real. He dodged them anyway and barged through the door on his left which led him to the backstairs.

He bolted down the steps, carried by the electrifying confusion of moving about in an environment which was totally obscure to him. His plan – if he had one – was to escape and find Bucky.

'Get the hell out of here and find Bucky. Get the hell out of here and find Bucky,' he chanted in his head. He wished he knew what 'here' was, though.

He reached the first floor much faster than any other normally-constituted person would, faster than he had realized. He smashed the door open, looked right and left until he saw the light of the day at the end of the corridor. He ran down to the main hall then through the exit.

The deafening noises of the city hit his eardrums and invaded his mind in an instant, forming a heavy fog. He kept running though not to reduce the distance he had taken on his abductors.

He made his way through the overwhelming crowd, ran across the wild roads and slipped between the strange roaring vehicles that drove past him as his eyes accustomed themselves to the high intensity of lights coming from the shops, from the screens, from the signs. From everywhere.

He would have looked like a mad person to anybody if somebody had bothered to look at him. All these people he ran by, bumped into or grazed all went on their way without a glimpse, enthralled by an unmissable apathy.

'Get the hell out of here and find Bucky,' his mind repeated again, this time with the deepest fright he ever felt in his life and the inflexible determination to go back home.

He was stopped in his running by a strange van-looking car which drove in in the utmost silence for such a massive vehicle and cut his way. He spun around to run the way back but found a similar car pulling over.

Officially surrounded and at their mercy, Steve halted and finally allowed himself to take a look at his surroundings. The avenue, the architecture of the buildings he had drawn for many hours, many times before, but that looked irreparably altered. As hard as it was to believe and comprehend it, he was on Times Square (for there wasn't any decorum big enough to fake what he had before him); he was in New York City. He was at home – even if it looked nothing like it. How could the safest place in the world turn into this disfigured jungle?
'Captain Rogers,' a man called him with confidence and composure as he stepped out of the vehicle, dressed in a long black coat and wearing an eyepatch. Steve identified him as a senior officer from the army. He had never seen one of his kind before but he could still recognize a soldier when he saw one.

'Where is Bucky?' he asked defiantly, desperately.

The colonel raised his hand and slightly shook it in a soothing way. 'He's with us. I can take you to him if you accept to cooperate and follow me.'

'We-we crashed,' Steve breathed out, his heart pounding in his chest. 'How is he?'

The Colonel looked at him understandingly (but still with authority).

'Captain Rogers, I can assure you your friend is safe and sound.'

'If I agree to follow you…you have to take me to him right away.'

The colonel's face twitched a bit as if visiting Bucky was not initially part of the procedure. His features relaxed and he looked at Steve calmly.

'Alright. You have my word,' he said solemnly and something told him that solemnity was a great deal to the colonel. 'Look,' he went on. 'I'm sorry for that little show back there.'

Well, at least he was being frank and honest. This detail was enough to unconsciously let his guard down and listen closely.

'We thought it best to break it to you slowly,' he finished.

Steve paused, panting, dreading the revelation to follow.

'Break what?'

'You've been asleep Cap…for nearly seventy years.'

The grave look, the solemnity (again), the undeniable jungle of lights and technology around him. The colonel had just spoken the truth.

'You and Barnes,' he clarified, anticipating the next series of questions.

Steve looked at him dully, confused, but comprehending the whole situation for the first time since he had woken up. As irrational as it sounded, it was the explanation that made the most sense for all this.

Amidst the turmoil of feelings, memories and regrets that was whirling inside his head, it took a few seconds for his brain to craft a second clear thought that dominated all the others now that he had been assured that Bucky was safe. This second thought flung him straight into the past and concerned another person. He felt sorrow and sadness grow inside him as the colonel voiced the next words.

'Are you gonna be okay?'

He turned to stare blankly at the indisputable reality standing in front of him.

'Yeah…' he trailed off. 'It's just…someone promised me we would meet again.'
Her, obviously.

He died a little inside knowing this promise was to roam around in oblivion forever.
"How?" he murmured. The emotion in his voice was hardly concealed as he watched the steady and peaceful motion of his friend's chest. Standing by the foot of the hospital bed, Steve played in his head the last moments the two of them shared in the quinjet before crashing.

As real as the crash was, so was the presence of Bucky. He looked just as young as before and his face didn't show any faint sign of aging just like him (his whole body had frozen at the sight of his unaltered reflection in the car window when the Colonel and his team were driving him out of Times Square).

"It seems Hydra's experiments on your friend were far more advanced than anyone would have suspected. His metabolism is strong and resilient as if he had been given a replica of the super-serum used on you," Colonel Fury answered. He then turned his head to him with a slightly raised eyebrow. "...Which is incidentally why you also survived."

It seemed the colonel wanted to make a point to refocus the conversation on him. It was true Steve had omitted to show any form interest in understanding he was still alive.

"Then why isn't he awake like I am?" Steve asked dully.

Bucky seemed peaceful from what it looked and anyone would have believed he was merely sound asleep.

"Don't worry, captain. All the doctors are very optimistic. He will wake up soon. In this time or the other, you still do things faster than the rest of us. It's only a matter of time before he does the same... Days or weeks, at most."

Steve's face twitched. He would trade places with him in a second if he were given the choice. Part of him hated HYDRA for what they had made Bucky endure, but another part, more selfish, quietly breathed a sigh of relief for not having lost him too...for not having to go through all this on his own. They would have each other; they would face this reality together. Bucky would find the words to reassure him. He always had. Only he had to key to soothing his concerns and fears. He had done it all the times his army application was rejected and his determination wobbled; he had done it that one time he lost his mother and his world shattered. Now that his world was shattered again, Steve needed his best friend more than ever.

"The S.H.I.E.L.D. will provide an apartment for you. Nothing luxurious but still cozier than any room here," the Colonel said. "A place that would feel a bit like a home."

Home. This word sounded like a shallow shell. He had lost his home the moment he had crashed into the ocean. He couldn't think of anything from his past that could have possibly made it to the new millennium. Except Bucky. Bucky was his last and only bearing and it was still uncertain he would keep it. Not as long as he was in this coma.

"I have to stay with him," he said eventually with a strong nod. "He needs me."

Just as much as he needed him. It wasn't like he had any other place to be or a better thing to do. All he wanted - and needed – was to hold on tightly to the only constant he had in this strange, foreign world.
"Of course," the Colonel answered quite understandingly. "You can come see him as many times as you wish until he wakes up."

Steve didn't look at him – like he hadn't since the moment he had stepped into the room, incapable of diverting eyes from his unconscious best friend.

Colonel Fury stepped back and made his way towards the exit to leave him some privacy.

"Once you are ready, you can go to agent Johnson who was there when you woke up. She'll give you civil clothes and some personal belongings we managed to retrieve from the ice."

Steve hardly reacted, and even less showed any enthusiasm. His interlocutor gave him a last sympathetic nod and opened the door.

"And by the way," he said. "Welcome back."

These last words caught Steve's curiosity. Welcome back? It wasn't his world, it wasn't his time. He slightly turned his head to him and stared, at an honest loss for words. He had no idea what to answer, he didn't even have any idea how he felt. Was all this a matter to rejoice about? He certainly couldn't call it a tragedy either; he and Bucky were alive after all. But what made all this profoundly daunting was if they would truly ever belong here.

He gave a formal nod, from Captain to Colonel then waited for him to step out of the room and close the door to walk up to Bucky's side. He pulled the chair that was in the corner closer to his friend and sat next to him.

He would probably spend long hours here today, and the day after, and the day after again, sitting at this exact same spot, listening to the heavy silence hanging over them in the room, watching Bucky's unconscious body, but it didn't scare him to the least. That was the best use of his time he could ever make. Just the two of them and nobody else: that was how they had always done it anyway.

When Steve eventually left Bucky's room, the sun was going down. He looked at Bucky and promised him he would come back the next morning, then he gently closed the door behind him, irrationally anxious not to make any disturbing noise.

As he slowly walked along the corridor, he remembered what the Colonel had told him about retrieving his personal belongings. The woman who had welcomed him when he had woken up earlier in the day suddenly appeared out of a room at the sound of his footsteps, this time dressed in a uniform from her time.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Captain Rogers?" she asked formally but yet with a hint of sympathy.

He put a hand on his waist and rubbed his jaw slightly.

"Actually, yes," he said, a bit uncomfortable. "The Colonel told me some of my belongings had been found…"

The agent nodded immediately understanding where he was getting at.

"Of course," she spoke softly. "You can come with me."

She walked down the hallway to a door isolated in the corner. She took a card out of her pocket and swiped it a mechanism that didn't look more advanced than the one they had in 1942. The little LED
light bulb turned green and the sound of the unlocked bolt resonated. She opened the door and took him into an office.

She motioned for him to wait where he was standing by slightly raising her hand then made her around to the wooden desk. She unlocked the drawer using a small silver key from her pocket and took a pouch out. He realized how tragic it was that all the remnants of his past life held into a small and insignificant bag.

His heartbeat quickened as he instantly recognized the compass she took out of the pouch. She held it out over to him with a barely visible but still soft smile. He swallowed hard as he reached for it.

The object felt just like the last time he had hold it in the palm of his hand, like it was just yesterday (and technically, to him, it was). He opened it delicately, more afraid than ever to see it break due to old and rusty joints. It terrified him to realize his compass was over 75 old years old; it terrified him even more to realize he was even older.

The picture of Peggy was more worn than it used to be but it surprisingly remained in good condition considering it had lived a lifetime. He felt a lump in his throat as he gazed at Peggy and recalled their last conversation over the radio. For the first time since the beginning of this crazy day, he felt grief; grief for his past life; for his memories; for the youth he had lost, wasted away. The sight of Peggy raised a warm feeling though, like a soothing bandage, remnants of the strong affection (and infatuation) he had for her.

The agent, who was still standing across the desk, remained silent as she granted him some quiet time to digest the whole thing. She eventually said softly:

"Your uniform and your shield are safely kept in S.H.I.E.L.D headquarters for now."

As fond as he was of his shield, it sounded quite irrelevant at this moment. It wasn't like S.H.I.E.L.D planned on hiring him, right? Hydra being defeated along with the Nazis, it wasn't like the world needed him again. Captain America was just as obsolete as the compass he was holding.

The sound of the pouch being squeezed shut and put away felt like an annoying screech to his ear that made him frown.

"Why are you putting it away?" he asked.

The agent blinked, looking clueless.

"I…I'm afraid this is all we found," she answered hesitantly while probing him cautiously, understanding this wasn't the answer he was expecting.

He looked alert then stared down at the compass as he tried to gather up the right words, making sure not to display any visible emotion along.

"There…there was a paper," he babbled, holding in the sadness rising up dangerously and that was now trapped at the back of his throat, unable to make eye contact with the agent standing who was completely oblivious of the distress he was now in. "A drawing."

She looked even more clueless than before, staring at him with a combination of confusion and unbearable compassion. He didn't know if it was whether the fact she looked at him with such pity or the fact she tried to sympathize although she couldn't feel even a tenth of the unnameable turmoil he was feeling right now that bothered him the most.

"I…I think it's gone," she said as softly as possible.
It hurt him just as hard.

"No," he protested with a cracked voice, trying to make sense out of this. The thought of not seeing her face tonight (or ever) was beyond distressing, beyond acceptable somehow. He had just spent the day accepting unacceptable things but this special one at this late hour of the day was simply intolerable. "It—it was…right next to the compass on the dashboard. I had it in front of me the whole time. It was right before me."

He cut himself short as he realized his emotions had taken over and a heavy silence, just as bad as his protest, followed.

The agent looked at him with genuine softness but also with a modest distance to express how foreign she would remain to the pain he was feeling even if she tried.

"The paper must have dissolved in the water...," she murmured, putting an awful (and ruthless) lot of sense into the whole situation. "I'm so sorry."

She was, he had no doubt about it, but it didn't alleviate a thing. The worst was that his first thought was to go find comfort from Bucky. The drawing was gone, she was gone, and Bucky couldn't make this truth any less distressful. Although he had already lost her once in 1943 and accepted it, there was something more permanent and irreversible this time and what made it all so tragic was that they'd never have their chance at being together.

'This isn't our time yet.'

The words resonated inside his head as vividly as that day she had said them to him on the pavement. And God he had believed them with all his heart for it was the only way he could resort to let her walk out of his life. The portrait being gone only cemented the fact he had lost her for good on that day of 1943 to reality.

"Yeah," he said with a worn out and defeated voice. "Me too."

The next days went by sluggishly. And it wasn't until the day he was given the key to his temporary apartment that he finally took a stroll outside. So far, his days had consisted of sitting by Bucky's bedside and waiting, putting (the shadow of) his life on hold along with his best friend's. He caught himself grieving over the loss of his drawing way too many times to keep the count.

Colonel Fury offered to have an agent escort him there but he had declined politely. The colonel seemed to respect his choice.

The apartment was quite central although he still needed to use the subway to get there. The streets seemed busier and louder than what he remembered from the first time he had experienced it five days before. Funnily enough, the subway turned out to be most familiar spot of New York City as it was the least unchanged. Except for a few details and more electronics (this world seemed to be undergoing an electronics invasion without realizing), the platforms and the stations were nearly as similar as the last time he had treaded them. He stood in the middle of the train looking at the commuters and felt like stranger among them.

The apartment turned out to be as dull as he had imagined it to be. The furniture was simple but nice and comfortable, the architecture not so modern, but the whole thing lacked essence and warmness. A pied-a-terre; not a home. Standing in the main room where the sunlight barely slipped through between the closed shades, he felt like the antique piece of the furniture of the house.

When agent Johnson called that evening, he asked to have a copy of his companions' files transferred
to him, including a copy of a civilian going by the name of Natalie Rushman who lived in New York in the early 1940s. The only way he thought of to get a proper closure with his past life...or perhaps to keep a bond with it, he didn't know. All he knew was that he thrived to label every single thing he had missed. Google was good at it for the most part but there were information it simply couldn't provide; questions it simply couldn't answer.

The next couple of days improved. Steve returned to Bucky's room with an old record-player he had had the hardest time to find.

"Never heard of an iPod?" one of the salesperson had asked him dully with a stunned look.

He wished he could have responded with a good come back but it was deplorable to admit he had indeed never heard of such a thing until now.

He had accidentally walked by a 'vintage' store a few hours later and seen the record player on display.

Steve stepped out of the elevator with a genuine smile since he had woken up, thrilled at the prospect of this brighter day. The military nurses and security officers winced when they saw him carry it down the corridor to Bucky's room as it probably went against a dozen rules from the protocol. They didn't say a word nevertheless, driven by a certain respect for the figure he once had been and maybe also by some form of understanding.

He plugged it in as soon as he stepped inside the room and played 'I've heard that song before' by Helen Forrest and Harry James. It was Bucky's favorite.

At the end of the day, he played what was his favorite song of the moment, 'I'll be seeing you' by Bing Crosby. Bucky would have kicked him for it but it would have been worth it if it had meant him waking up earlier than predicted to proceed to doing so.

That same evening when he came back to the apartment, he turned on for the first time the 'laptop' that had been left for his personal use and, after multiple tedious attempts, searched the word iPod. He didn't sleep that night as he tried to read through the multitude of archives that Google had to offer.

He did the same the evenings after.

Nearly a week later, he decided to bring it along with him to fill Bucky in with all the data he had gathered.

"I won't be reading you any article from Wikipedia. I found it to be quite unreliable," he commented out loud as he turned on the machine.

When one of the nurses walked in the room and found him reading historic facts while the record-player was playing, she halted and stared with a raised eyebrow.

"You had a laptop all along?" she asked. He looked at her with a guilty expression although he didn't know what he was guilty of. This was when he found out the Internet could be used for researching, but also for listening to music for free, watching films, buying things, dating (?) and barely any other thing his brain would have never made the wish of.

When she walked out of the room and he played one of the songs on Youtube, he remained perplexed.
"What do you think?" he asked Bucky turning to him. The muscle right at the corner of his mouth happened to twitch at this moment (as it often did and that the doctors said was normal).

"Yeah…" Steve answered with a shrug. "I'm not a fan either."

He played music only on the record-player after that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the kudos and all the amazing and enthusiastic comments. You're the beeeest! I know, no Natasha yet, but I really wanted to set down the context and Steve's state of mind before he gets to meet to Natasha (don't worry, he will!). Hope you enjoyed this chapter! :)


Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your amazing comments! Seriously, they give me life! Sorry for the long wait, I've been so busy. It should get better now. I'll post the next update as soon as possible.

DECEASED

The capital red letters printed across the file etched themselves into his mind as he read James Falsworth's file while sitting in the gloomy and silent room of the apartment.

It had taken nearly a week for his request to be fulfilled due to administrative authorizations that Colonel Fury had sped up by personally interceding and asking to have the files unblocked. Agent Johnson had then brought them to him when he was leaving Bucky’s room and making his way out of the building.

He hadn't had a look at them until two hours after he got to the apartment, putting it off and watching them from a distance with an apprehensive look before he had finally resolved to sit down at the table.

Steve put the file down and opened the next one.

COLONEL PHILIPPS, CHESTER – DECEASED

And then the next.

MORITA, JIM – DECEASED

STARK, HOWARD – DECEASED

This file reading took the form of obituaries. An endless list of obituaries. He dreaded each new file harder than the previous one.

He reached for the last file and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

CARTER, MARGARET "PEGGY"

His heart pounded in his chest.

RETIRED

The word printed in black was a relief but the lump in his throat was still there. Everything remained, and was to remain, lost. He couldn't go back into the past and catch up on all those wasted decades. Not years, decades.

His bond with each and every one of them was forever broken. What time hadn't taken away through death, it had worn out to the very core. Peggy wasn't dead but he was dead to her: strictly speaking first, then his memory after a while. Peggy had certainly forgotten about him a long time
ago and had moved on.

The last thing she needed was to be haunted by a ghost from her past, not at such a late age.

Steve sat in silence for long minutes, processing the flow of information he had tried to mentally prepare himself for but had failed at nevertheless; gathering the courage to look up her file next.

The absence of document on the right side of the table made him frown. His hands swiftly roamed through all the files as his eyes eagerly searched for her name, but most importantly, her picture. He had to see her face again, just once. That would be enough to revive the memory he had of it and carve it in his mind forever. It seemed like he was losing it by any passing second, that her features were slowly and dangerously turning blurry every new morning when he woke up.

There was no picture, no name, no file, and it was distressing.

He called agent Johnson that evening firmly asking to speak with the Colonel in person. She answered he had a busy schedule but that she would try her best to relay the message to him. The Colonel didn't call back that evening.

Steve barely slept that night. He realized how badly he needed to just know. As dreadful as the outcome was likely to be, being in the dark was far worse.

At least, he needed to know she had had a happy life, and a fulfilled career as a journalist.

Colonel Fury called the next morning with a composed but curious tone.

"What can I do for you, Captain?" he asked.

"A file is missing," he answered bluntly standing up from the couch and pacing around. "I also asked to have information on a civilian. A friend."

A short silence followed but it certainly felt like a nod from the Colonel as if he had been expecting this specific complaint.

"We didn't find any Intel on that civilian and the information you provided wasn't specific enough," he said. "I will send one of my agents to you later this morning to collect more details that will help narrow down the search."

Steve didn't say a word but he felt grateful and he didn't have to say it for Colonel Fury probably knew already. There were obvious things that could remain untold and this conversation was one of them.

The Colonel turned out to be a man of words as Steve heard a knock on his door a few hours later. He opened the door to find a slender dark-haired woman with piercing blue eyes and a sharp, thin jaw. She was dressed in a formal and elegant dress along with a blazer and leather heels. She lifted her hand up to her forehead to salute him. She gave the impression of being a formal soldier but a friendly person.

"Captain Rogers. I'm agent Maria Hill. I've been sent by Colonel Fury."

He smiled slightly and stepped aside as an invitation to come in. She stepped inside and followed him into the main room. He waited for her to take a seat on the sofa then he sat on the armchair opposite the coffee table.

"The Colonel said you couldn't narrow down the search?" he started.
"We tried to find her and we still are but the fact she has a very common name makes the search more intricate. I apologize for the inconvenience it has caused," she explained matter-of-factly but with a natural gentleness. He understood why the Colonel was using her as his personal liaison officer. "I would like to ask you a few questions if that's alright."

He agreed with the combination of a sheepish smile, a thankful look and a spark of eagerness flickering in his eyes. Agent Hill smiled back and then proceeded to open her briefcase. She pulled a large-sized pad out and flipped up a few used pages over to the back, holding her pen still in her hand.

"Do you know Miss Rushman's full name?" she asked.

Blank.

"No," he answered softly.

She nodded and smiled as in to brush off the importance this information could have (and indeed it mattered).

"Do you know when or where she was born, perhaps?" she continued.

Another blank.

"No,"

Agent Hill didn't seem disturbed to the least, on the contrary, she showed composure and calm.

"Any siblings or family whose name you might know?"

Yet another blank.

"No," he replied, feeling like a fool.

He couldn't even tell if she had any siblings. It struck him to realize how little he knew about her when she had taken such a big part in his life.

"I'm sorry," he started babbling to justify the obvious lack of information. "It's just…I didn't know her for very long."

Agent Hill took her eyes off her pad to take the time to look at him. She saw his embarrassment over the whole situation right away. She smiled softly.

"It's alright, Captain. I don't know my friends half as much as I normally should, or half as much as they think I do" she joked lightly to lighten up the mood.

He smiled, appreciating the effort she put in making the whole interview less awkward.

"Do you remember what job position she had in 1942 or even earlier?"

He thought he knew the answer: *The soldiers' housewives magazine*. That was until he found out this paper was pure invention. He smiled internally at the memory of it. Of course, he should have guessed it was a fake.

"She was…wanted to be a journalist," he corrected himself as he ensured to recollect as many details
as possible. "But she was more of a freelance."

Agent Hill nodded. He looked at her apologetically.

"This can help," she reassured him softly but still formally. "We can search for any article signed with her name then trace it up to her."

"Or you may not find any," he finished. He didn't recall her telling him anything about getting published in a paper.

"Can you describe her to me?" agent Hill went on.

Somehow, that question made him uncomfortable and nervous. He could describe her perfectly, with so many details he feared to get suspicious looks.

"Caucasian. Blonde. Short, wavy hair. Green eyes. 5 feet 3."

He recalled how she had to slightly look up to reach his gaze, how he had to slightly bend over to reach to get closer to her level.

Agent Hill methodically took notes, not showing any hints of what she thought of this description.

"Anything else that might be useful?" she asked.

Steve knew little about her and he realized how good she had been at giving away as little as possible meanwhile developing a strong bond and trust with him. She had committed to their relationship without ever confiding in. He couldn't blame her for it though as he had no doubt she had been sincere and true to herself and to him (nearly all along).

When she returned that last time to say goodbye, he believed every word she said effortlessly. Not because he wanted to but because it was undeniable she meant it deeply, perhaps even to a deeper level than he could comprehend.

Her heartfelt confession, her adoring gaze and the eager kiss she had given him had felt all so profound as if she had been holding them in for a measure a time he was foreign with.

"Captain?" agent Hill called softly.

He emerged and looked in her direction. He remembered the question he had been asked. What extra information did he possibly have when it was clear she had tried to be as secretive as possible? He was hit by a memory. New Year's Eve.

That evening they strolled along the streets of New York, the first time he really talked to her about Peggy, the first time of many others she dethroned her to his eyes.

"She must be brave and strong," she had said softly.

He had gazed at her while her look was slightly down and during that moment, Peggy's continuous presence in his mind ever since he had first met her faded, overshadowed by the undeniable fascination he had for his new friend.

Peggy was wonderful – there was no force strong enough to make him revalue what was his opinion and a fact – but there, at this exact moment, as the cool wind slightly blew over her blonde hair, as the pale shimmer of the moonlight made her look more beautiful than ever before, Natalie overthrew all his beliefs in the most unexpected and delightful way. He shouldn't have thought like that, but he
had spent so many months missing Peggy and wondering what she was doing in Europe, he enthralled the appreciation of the here and now he had been feeling ever since Natalie had walked into his life carrying her leather book to have an interview.

“You are brave and strong,” he had replied, for the first time paying an earnest compliment to the woman who had started to take a place in his life Not because it was the right thing to reply and certainly not because her comment was implicitly calling for a reciprocal compliment, but because, after the many conversations he had had with her, after witnessing how she had fearlessly and confidently subdued the theft earlier on although she had never let him perceive this strong side of her, he realized what a surprising person she was and how much he looked forward to finding out about it all.

That evening he had first opened up about his growing feelings was also the night he had walked her back to her apartment.

"I know where she lived," he exclaimed to agent Hill, taken by the excitement of possessing and providing useful intel but also by the fear of getting closer to finding her. He thought hard to recall the street. He knew New York like the back of his pocket but it seemed his mixed feelings were toying with his memory. "Her address was ...37 East 64th Street"

Agent Hill nodded and wrote it down on the notepad.

"Thank you, Captain," she said after she finished. "This is very useful information. You were a great help."

He believed her and shared her opinion. He felt optimistic that him remembering her address would indeed help them identify and locate her.

He nodded shyly, rubbing the palm of his moist hand against his jeans.

She got up and stretched her hand out to him, breaking the protocol in favor of a less formal but friendlier greeting.

He shook it gladly. The encounter had been brief but it felt good to have company in this dull, empty apartment.

"Thank you," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "For everything."

She understood what everything meant and smiled, then she walked away.

This new millennium was one twisted time, he had realized. The society lived on a daily basis with a multitude of contradictions it didn't seem to be aware of anymore.

The magazines, the cooking shows all preached healthy food style but the streets were crawling with fast-food chain restaurants; the people on the media quickly called out on indecency but the internet spammed your screen with coarse images (he had lost the count of all those impromptu pictures coming up on the screen in the most random and invasive way); communication was the new thing of the century, being everywhere and coming in all shapes but God forbid you'd approach a commuter on the B line without being labeled intrusive and socially unstable; everybody praised and preached for liberty and freedom as long as what you had to say followed the public opinion; the world kept saying they had learned their lesson after 1945 but war was still the common currency across the globe; people partied harder, and to the end of the night, but somehow looked more morose the next morning than he recalled seeing at his time.
He wished he could embrace this new society and make it his as he was now part of it, but he just couldn't yet. The grief was not over, there were too many people he cared about that had been left behind.

When Colonel Fury came to Bucky's room two days later, his face gave away the unpleasant news he was bringing along with him.

"I'm sorry, Captain. We couldn't find her," he announced soberly.

Steve remained numb. The information just wouldn't compute and marked down yet another (the most unfair) paradox. How could a person mysteriously vanish in this society ruled by excessive surveillance and supervision without leaving any trace behind?

"But Agent Hill said you would try everything to find her," he started.

"And we did," the Colonel assured with a strong nod. "We checked all the local and national papers, we went through all the files of women that had the same name in 1942, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Steve gazed at him cluelessly. Colonel Fury looked at him and cleared his throat before speaking.

"Look. Natalie Rushman is a very common name, – trust me I know what I'm talking about." Strangely, he really seemed to mean that. "And without strong intel, it makes it nearly impossible to find the person. Even for us."

"What about the address I gave you? 37 East 64th Street, remember?"

Colonel Fury's mouth twitched a bit.

"There wasn't any Natalie Rushman living in 37 East 64th Street In 1942, or before. Or ever."

Steve's brows furrowed deeply. His mouth literally fell agape. Fury's gaze started to imply things he just refused to tolerate.

"No. That's impossible. I walked her there," he protested vehemently, closing his eyes as he played the moment in his head again and visualized the plate reading 37 above the thick door frame she passed after saying goodnight. "I watched her step inside."

Fury listened to him closely with an understanding nod of the head but a disapproving pout.

"The only Natalie we found living in this building was a Natalie Wirth and she was a 63-year-old widow."

Steve found no words of protest to say. He remained mute and looked away, feeling overwhelmed with confusion and dismay.

"Captain..." the Colonel began with a soothing voice. Steve's eyes drifted back to him as he watched him carefully pick the words he would say next. "Maybe we should start considering-"

"No," Steve snapped with a hard look. He would never consider it an option.

The Colonel didn't flinch at the response. He complied instead.

Steve hadn't moved yet. He stared blankly at the ground, nibbling his bottom lip, processing his thoughts.
"I'm afraid we're gonna have to suspend the search for now."

_Forever._ That was what Steve understood in this polite phrasing.

He didn't express any more sign of disagreement. The last thing he wanted was to dwell on his frustrations and regret with a stranger.

He nodded emotionlessly.

"Thank you for trying," he said with a hoarse voice, his eyes running across the hallway to avoid contact with the Colonel. Then he stepped back into Bucky's room.

That same evening, Steve grabbed his sketchbook for the first time since he had bought it, taken by the sudden urge to draw her again. If he had lost the first one, he could make another. He held his pencil tight with determination but the lead remained still on the smooth paper for hours as the lack of confidence crept up within him, mercilessly devouring any bit of enthusiasm it found on its way. As badly as he wanted some last souvenir of her, the apprehension of not remembering her features in the most scrupulous details, the fear the final result wouldn't do her justice eventually overpowered him. He encountered one of his strongest artist's block for the sake of perfection. If he had lost the first one, he could make another, he had first thought, but soon he realized it actually meant trading the original for a copy. Nothing was more beautifully sharp and authentic than an original and nothing was more dull and bland than a copy. She deserved better than that.

And perhaps, he deserved better than that. Perhaps, he deserved more than a life missing a ghost from his past by keeping dearly the only remnant of her he could find. Perhaps, as Colonel Fury implicitly advised, he had to let her go.

It was a feeling he wasn't so foreign with as he had done it once before when she had asked him to, but this time, it wasn't with the promise of a reunion, and this was what made this second farewell more painful.

A very early phone call disrupted the heavy silence hanging in the apartment.

"He's awake," the nurse said on the line more cheerfully than her military status allowed her to.

His heartbeat quickened. It was the moment he had been waiting for nearly two weeks.

"How is he?" he asked with a tight throat.

"He's fine. He's more than fine," she replied with a smile, he could tell. Those simple words were enough to blow all the anguish away. "He's been asking for you, and for food."

A snort slipped out of his mouth as he shook his head and tried to contain the happy emotions that tingled his eyes. Not only Bucky was back, but there was beauty in hearing he had remained his exact same glutton self.

"I-I'll be right there," he said after clearing his throat.

He put the phone down and sat still at the table for a few seconds. It seemed strange to visualize this world, this twisted and full of contradictions world, with Bucky in it. But somehow, everything appeared less scary and hostile. And for the first time since he had woken up here, he looked forward to what awaited him in this new journey. He could face it now knowing Bucky would be by his side. He could find logic in this new twisted time and grow to like it.

He looked down and saw the blank page of his sketchbook he had spend the whole night trying to
At this moment, he embraced the idea of living in the now and let go of the past even if that meant letting go of *her*. He exhaled a deep breath then closed the sketchbook, and with it, any further hope of seeing or hearing from her ever again.
When Steve stepped out of the elevator, he found an unusual agitation in the medical aisle with agents and nurses hastily going up and down the hallway.

One of the military nurses who was often present at Bucky's side and regularly came to check on him while he was in the room walked past him, so drawn into the work she had been assigned she didn't notice him.

"What's...going on?" he asked as he looked above her shoulder to assess the situation.

She sighed in relief, glanced behind where people were gathered then back at him. She tucked a stray of her behind her ear.

"Sergeant Barnes turned out to be more difficult to handle than we thought. He keeps asking for you and doesn't understand why we won't let him out of his room," she explained.

Steve's brows furrowed.

"You didn't tell him anything, did you?" he asked warily with a concerned expression.

"No, no. The Colonel's orders were very clear," she assured him.

Steve had indeed made a point to be the one to talk to Bucky about the whole new situation.

He made his way along the corridor, getting curious and mildly hopeful glances from the staff. As he got closer to the room, his chest tightened, excitement and stress taking hold of him. The sound of Bucky's voice coming from inside the room made his heart race. There was a mass of people inside and they all stood in a thick circle.

"WHERE IS STEVE? YOU KEEP TELLING ME HE'S CLOSE BUT I DON'T SEE ANY TRACE OF HIM. AND WHY ARE YOU SO MANY PEOPLE GUARDING THIS DAMN DOOR? WHAT IS IT YOU DON'T WANT ME TO SEE?"

"Sergeant Barnes, we need you to calm down."

"NOT UNTIL YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE DONE TO STEVE," Bucky's voice was plain raging now.

"I'm here, Bucky," Steve's soft voice resonated in the room, making everyone freeze.

The agents, doctors and nurses stepped aside, revealing Bucky's figure standing tall with a stunned expression.

They looked at each other and both seemed to replay simultaneously their last moments on the
quinjet. They shouldn't have survived and they both knew it – and their eyes showed it. Steve was still dumbfounded about it and Bucky sure as hell was dumbfounded at this second.

"I'm here," he repeated again with a broken voice, his eyes gleaming slightly. Bucky was still mute, unsure whether to drop his guard down. Steve’s mouth slightly rose into a soothing and comforting smile to reassure him all this was real.

"You can leave us, now," he said, nearly murmuring, glancing at the staff. "I'll take it from here."

They all complied with a nod and walked out of the room, the last one closing the door behind them. When the sound of footsteps finally faded away, Steve took a step closer to his friend.

"You…," Bucky started clumsily, "you survived."

Steve nodded and a vague smile came to his lips. "So did you."

They looked at each other again, one full of questions, the other with few answers to provide, but it could wait for now.

Bucky's features softened as he cracked a beaming smile and started towards him. Steve did the same and quickly ran up to him, they met in the middle of the room, their arms clutching to each other like to a buoy they both desperately needed amid this foreign sea, ensuring it was all very real.

They were back together and the universe seemed to go back to place in the most perfect way.

When they eventually pulled apart, Bucky put his hands on each side of Steve's neck – a habit he had taken since they were teenagers and that he couldn't seem to break even after he had grown taller and thicker than him – and laughed wholeheartedly.

"How?" he asked unable to suppress neither the laugh nor the grin on his face.

Steve squeezed his shoulder, mirroring the same facial expression.

"You must have many questions," he said.

"You bet!" he exclaimed. "I gotta say when I saw you I was torn between saying hi and asking what the hell you are wearing!"

He took one step back, stretching his arms to keep a physical hold of him and looked down at his outfit. "What are these clothes?"

Steve laughed. "I can explain everything but you may want to sit first. It's weird."

Bucky nodded. "Indeed, it is." He said, throwing one last glimpse at his outfit to let him know what he was commenting on.

Steve led him to the bed and sat next to him; he took a deep breath and started. Somehow, it didn't sound as scary as he had imagined it to be. Bucky had a knack for making any situation and topic less difficult to address.

The nurse had been standing behind the door for over twenty minutes, trying to catch a glimpse of the conversation that was taking place inside the room, curious and concerned not to have heard any noise or clamor since they had stepped out into the hallway.

"Are you sure we are actually in 2011?" Bucky asked. "Besides what you're wearing, I don't notice anything different."
He pointed to the furniture in the room.

"And look at that," he exclaimed, now pointing to the bedside table. "Seventy years have apparently gone by and they are still using those crappy, unreliable record players."

Steve felt a sudden rush of embarrassment.

"Actually, I brought that one. It took me ages to find it."

Bucky frowned and looked at him, an amused smile coming across his face. " Damn it, Steve."

Steve laughed. He had to admit, he wasn't exactly embracing this time.

"You haven't aged a day, though," Bucky murmured, looking at him quite amazed.

It made Steve smirk.

"Well then I've got some breaking news for you. Neither have you."

Bucky's face lit up with joy. He would soon be asking for a mirror. It was a matter of minutes.

"I'll ask Colonel Fury to let you come live at the apartment with me as soon as possible. There's no way you're staying in this cold room."

Bucky looked at him and the smile he had on since the beginning finally faded for the first time. He seemed collected though.

"So this is it?" he asked, prepping his palms on his lap, his head turned toward him. "This is our new adventure?"

Steve looked back at him, and for a moment, a silence fell upon them. There were not many words to describe their situation yet Bucky had just used the best one. "Yeah," he murmured softly. "This is our new adventure."

Bucky got his permission to leave the next day, the Colonel finally convinced by Steve's effective pressuring.

They walked down the hallway, Steve carrying the record player and all the records into a box.

"You know," Bucky started. "You could have brought some modern songs for me to listen to while I was asleep. Did you even try to catch up on their music?"

Steve smiled. "Actually, I really enjoy The Beatles."

Bucky frowned hard. "The Beatles?" he repeated. He seemed to frown upon it already.

"It's an English band that broke all records in the 1960s."

Bucky snorted and shook his head. "Congrats, Steve. Only fifty years to go."

"Well, if you insist on getting up to date, there's still Beyoncé."

"Beyon-who?"

Stepping out of the building was a big moment and the one when Bucky finally put a picture on Steve's words. He gasped in surprise, swallowing the massive and continuous information that was
shoved onto his face.

"I know. It was the same for me," Steve told him with a smirk, patting his back before stepping into the crowd.

Bucky was amazed the whole journey home. Positively amazed. He seemed to find entertainment in every new detail he depicted. He regularly pointed at a thing and whispered a comment into Steve's ear, making him laugh or smile about things he had failed to see since he had woken up two weeks earlier.

Bucky probed every male and female pedestrian and commuter he met. Probing men to analyse and even assess their outfits, taking notes of the new fashion; and probing women...well, for the sake of science he would probably answer.

"I'm liking this time, already," he said with a smirk as he glanced at the tall brunette who had just stepped onto the train, wearing those trendy skinny jeans, so tight they would have been judged indecent back in the 1940s.

Bucky flashed his most seductive smile to the lady who responded with a shy, but definitely smitten smile.

"Glad to see I was right all those times I told you my charm is timeless," he murmured to Steve with an unhidden content expression, still looking at the girl.

"But you need a haircut," Steve commented nonchalantly. He had already brought his friend a razor so he would shave but scissors had had to wait to be handled by a professional.

Bucky twitched and turned to look at him.

"You know what? So do you," he remarked. "I've only been outside for 15 minutes and I can already tell your do is way out of time."

Steve rolled his eyes. It wasn't like fashion was on his top list of concerns.

"Fine," he conceded with a smirk. "We'll go together."

And indeed, they did the next day.

The following week went by peacefully. Bucky and Steve alternated at suggesting an outdoor activity for the day, both curious and eager to discover this new world. When they were not out, they would try to fill their seventy-year long gap in History, science, music, art, society, cinema and culture. And the list was long. Their new routine was pretty peaceful and tame, a lot different than the one they had left behind. One they would have to accustom themselves to with time and patience (although neither of them would admit it out loud).

One day at a coffee house in Manhattan, Steve allowed himself to draw the high skyscraper standing before him. An old habit his fingers couldn't seem to let go of. He couldn't draw people, though. Ever since he had given up drawing her again the other night, he couldn't resolve himself to draw any person else. Perhaps as a pledge to honor her memory with the little means he possessed. It wasn't really a sacrifice; he had simply lost the yearning to sketch people.

A shadow fell on his sketch and he looked up to find the waitress filling his cup of coffee.

"Waiting on the big guy?" she asked, throwing a glance at the building he was drawing.
"Ma'am?" he asked, looking quizzical.

"Iron man," she said matter-of-factly. It was her turn to look confused. "A lot of people come here to see him fly by."

Howard Stark's son. His name and picture had shown up very early— and repeatedly— during his Google searching. The only intel he had gathered so far was that he was his father's son, although he couldn't frown upon his weapons manufacturing past career.

"You came alone?" she eventually asked, breaking the silence. "Your girlfriend?"

He held his pen tighter and frowned, wordlessly showing his confusion. She pointed at the second cup of coffee on the table. "Actually, I'm waiting for my roommate. He went to the bathroom."

"Oh, I see," she spoke softly, disappointment showing on her face. "I better get going, then."

He watched her rush away without giving him a second glance, pink flushing to her cheeks.

"Way to kill the mood, buddy," the old man sitting at the table next to him commented, making Steve even more clueless.

Bucky came out of the coffee just then, flashed a smile at the waitress then sat next to Steve.

The waitress took a couple of glimpses in their direction with a look of mild curiosity.

"Bucky," Steve started as he figured out what was the sudden awkwardness in the air all about. "I think I just found out what other meaning the word roommate has in this time."

Bucky drank his sip of coffee then cocked an eyebrow at him. The waitress casted one last glance, smiled sheepishly at them two before walking back into the coffee place.

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Steve was the one to suggest going to the old boxing gym down the street. He said his body could use some stamina. Bucky agreed with as much enthusiasm as if he had come up with the idea himself.

The next day they were exercising in the gym. They couldn't call it 'training' as it implied they had to keep fit for their job, and they had lost that job long ago. The war was over and the soldiers were back home. The last thing this country needed was veterans from an ancient time.

They spent hours working out but Steve was relentless, punching the bag like there was no tomorrow. As the punching bag kept wiggling under Steve's hits, Bucky took a break and came up to hold it steady for him. Steve's rhythm quickened as he unrestrainedly struck the bag over and over again with a growing aggressiveness.

"Wanna talk about it?" Bucky asked gently, holding the bag still and watching his friend wrestling with his own feelings.

"About what?" Steve panted out between two punches.

"About whatever it is that makes you want to murder this punching bag with your bare hands," Bucky answered half-amused, half-annoyed. He hated it when Steve put up his walls to brood on his own.

"There's nothing wrong," he answered with a shrug before punching the bag again.
"Fine, then I'll push the buttons myself," Bucky said with a pout. He feigned to take a pause although he already knew what to ask. "Do you plan on paying a visit to Peggy?"

The punching bag quivered harder in his arms. It looked like Bucky knew which buttons to push.

"I think you should. It's what you both need," he commented further. Steve kept his head down, sweat dripping down his temples, his fingers twitching at each new contact with the leather of the bag.

"And what should I tell her when I get there?" he finally muttered. "Surprise. I've been defrosted."

Bucky shrugged. "Sounds like a good start to me."

Steve shot him a hard look then resumed hitting the bag.

"Steve. There are no good words for such a situation, but I know you will pick just the right ones when you see her."

The chain to which the sand bag was attached grated above them.

"What's the point? It's lost. Everything's lost," he spoke harder as the words came out.

"It's not! Quite the contrary!" Bucky exclaimed. "You're given a second chance with her. Make it count."

Bucky had also asked to have his family files sent to him and was now waiting. But the chances of his older brothers still being alive were pretty slim.

Somehow, Bucky's words weren't enough to slow down the punching bag trashing and the mental turmoil in Steve's head.

"Unless…," Bucky trailed off. "We're not just talking about Peggy, here."

The bag convulsed abruptly. Bucky closed his eyes a couple of seconds and sighed. The puzzle was now whole again.

"Steve…," he started softly, biting his bottom lip. He didn't know what her file read, but it was bad, no doubt.

Steve hit the bag hard, feeling his knuckles crack under his skin.

"I lost it," he eventually muttered with anger. Anger against himself. The drawing had never been made official in a conversation but Bucky knew about it; and Steve knew he knew about it.

"And they say they can't find her file," he continued, hammering the bag at the same pace as he voiced out the words.

Bucky looked speechless. He seemed to realize how bad the situation was.

"What do they mean they can't find her file?" he said with a frown.

"No ID, no social security number, and the address I gave them was a dead-end," he panted out, his arm muscles growing sore. "It's like she didn't exist."

Bucky shook his head. "It's ridiculous. It doesn't make any sense."
Steve was now completely ruthless with the bag as he recalled his conversation with Colonel Fury.

"They think the reason they can't find her is because…." he felt a bitter taste in his mouth. "…it's not her real name."

A heavy silence followed. His arms had just fallen to his sides out of exhaustion. Mental exhaustion. He lifted his head up to look at Bucky who was staring with the most annoying expression. He guessed what his best friend's words were going to be.

"Steve," he started gently.

"No."

"Maybe-"

"No," he snapped even more hardly

"Maybe they're not wrong," Bucky finished reluctantly. This conversation was as annoying to one as it was to the other.

Steve shook his head. It was a hypothesis he couldn't tolerate and it was why he had cut the Colonel short before he could even voice it out loud. Admitting she had lied about her name opened the door completely to the possibility she had been lying all along and that was what made this simple conjecture insufferable.

"Steve, maybe she had her reasons," Bucky defended. He seemed to have read his mind perfectly. "Maybe it wasn't even about you. It doesn't mean she wasn't honest with you."

Maybe he was right. Maybe he was wrong. And here lay the whole problem: maybe. He wasn't mad because it was likely she had given him a fake name; he was mad – furious –because he would never find out why. Because time had taken away any chance for her to explain herself, because time had taken away the chance he still had back in 1943 to see her again as she had promised. Because time had taken her away from him.

His hands tightened into fists as he felt a new rush of stamina and the burning urge to let it all out. He wished he could take it out on his fate, but only the sandbag was available.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," he said it like a final sentence and went on to hit the bag.

Bucky pursed his lips together, unsatisfied by the answer. He suddenly moved the bag away and kept it an unreachable distance for Steve.

"You can't keep it in," Bucky whispered, taking a step up toward him and squeezing the muscle between his neck and his shoulder, encouraging him with a little nod of the head.

Steve gazed at his friend for a few seconds but the words didn't seem to want to come out.

"Let's go. I'm done here," he said, pulling away from Bucky's grip then he made his way to the changing room, his chin down.

Twenty minutes later, as Bucky came out of the showers, he found his friend sitting on the bench, staring in silence at the red tiles on the floor. He came to sit next to him and the silence went on for a few more seconds.

"I loved her," Steve murmured, his gaze still fixed on the floor. The truth was out, but only half of it.
And the second half was what made the whole situation unbearable. He raised his head and tilted it to look at his friend. Bucky heard his next words before he said them. "I love her."

Past. Present. It was all the same in his case. Moreover, he could have felt a hundred years go by and his feelings would have still remained unchanged. The love he felt was of the type neither distance nor time could change. He knew it well for having tried both.

Part of him feared Bucky would not understand. He had always wondered whether his friend's mutism regarding Natalie after she had gone was to respect his wish not to bring her up again or because he silently resented her. He feared his confession would put his friend in a state of puzzled perplexity.

Judging by Bucky's expression, it was exactly what he wanted to hear him say. He found nothing but compassion and understanding in return.

"And I lost her."

Perhaps Bucky was right. Letting it out could be the first step to letting her go.

"So which pill would you take?" Bucky asked while he and Steve were training on the boxing ring. "Let me guess. You would take the red one."

It made Steve smile.

"As if you wouldn't take the red pill. You're more curious and stubborn than I am."

Bucky made his best outraged expression.

"First of all, your argument is debatable. I've got plenty of examples proving I can be the more sensible one. Secondly, would I trade chicken for that disgusting stew?"

"Fake chicken," Steve corrected.

Bucky shrugged. "Whatever. The blue pill has its silver linings."

"Haven't we sort of taken the red pill ourselves, though?" Steve remarked, his eyes roaming across the room to show what he was talking about.

Bucky paused, looked around too, then back at his friend. "Did we really choose to?" he answered with a smirk.

Steve slightly shook his head, a snort slipping out between his lips.

"Glad to see you're catching up quick," a voice said behind them.

They both turned and found Colonel Fury standing with his wrists clasped together behind his back, dressed in a black suit and turtleneck sweater.

"Well, well, well. If this isn't Morpheus," Bucky commented under his breath.

It made Steve smile. Now that he mentioned it, the similarity was definitely there.

"Sort of, Sergeant. Except I wear the leather coat better than he does," the Colonel said.

Bucky's features tensed. "Sorry, sir."
The Colonel eventually cracked a little smirk. "But I am indeed here to put you back in the real world."

He slowly revealed the file he was holding, marked with SHIELD emblem in its center.

Steve took a glimpse of it then proceeded to untie his boxing hand wraps.

"You're here for a mission, sir?" he asked.

"I am," the Colonel answered.

He felt the excitement run through his veins. He glanced at Bucky and noticed he felt the same.

The Colonel opened the file and showed him a picture which he knew would catch his interest for good. Steve, and Bucky standing right behind, recognized the blue cube. TESSERACT, they had named it.

"Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you." He said. Steve didn't show it but hearing that Howard Stark had tried to find them all those years back made the respect he always had for him grow bigger. "He thought what we think: the Tesseract could be the key to unlimited sustainable energy. That's something the world sorely needs."

"Who took it from you?" Steve asked.

"He's called Loki. He's not from around here. There's a lot we'll have to bring you up to speed on if you're in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know."

"At this point, I doubt anything would surprise me," he commented.

Bucky backed him up with a slight nod of the head.

"Ten bucks says you're wrong," the Colonel replied with a daring look. "There's a debriefing packet waiting for you at your apartment."

Steve turned to look at Bucky. They didn't say a word but they both thought the same thing: here was their chance to break their dull routine and leave their shapeless purgatory of theirs. The second thought they had was that they were right to think SHIELD had open access to their apartment.

"We're in," Steve said.

The Colonel's bottom lip twitched a bit.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but Sergeant Barnes can't take part in the mission."

Steve shot a look at Bucky, who remained emotionless as if he had seen it coming from the beginning.

"On what motive?" Steve asked with a sharp voice.

"SHIELD is assembling a team of highly-skilled agents that will fit the great scope of the missions they will have to achieve. I would never dare to question or minimize Sergeant Barnes' resume but what you're about to fight is bigger than what we've ever known."

Steve didn't even try to understand his point of view. It sounded all like pure gibberish to him.

It was also funny to see he looked the more outraged between him and Bucky.
"His very presence here with us proves he's not just a soldier," Steve pointed out. "He is the best sniper I know and I trust him with my life implicitly. I know nothing about your highly-skilled team but I know Bucky is the best teammate I could have."

He paused and after glancing behind at Bucky, looked at Colonel Fury with a defiant look.

"I'm sorry, sir. But either he's in or we're not."

Colonel Fury kept a firm and steady look, assessing Steve's level of determination. He found it to be very high. He pivoted his head slightly to look at Bucky.

"You sure you want to get back in the field?" he asked him.

Bucky stood firm and tall like a soldier in a regiment.

"I've never been more ready, sir."

The corner of Fury's mouth rose visibly. "And you said the blue pill has its silver linings."

And that was the Colonel let Bucky join the mission.

The next day, Steve and Bucky were on a jet taking them to SHIELD's special headquarter. Steve had no idea what could be so special about it that it made the Colonel smile with such a smug expression.

"It's an honor to meet you. Officially," said the agent who had welcomed them on board. His gaze fixed on Steve revealed which one he was more honored to meet. "I watched you while you were sleeping."

It was very subtle, but Steve heard the snort that vibrated in Bucky's throat.

"I mean, I was there while you were unconscious," agent Coulson carried on clumsily.

At the end of the conversation, when the agent stepped away to supervise the landing, Bucky didn't resist the urge to go with his personal comment.

"Wild thought, here. Do you think Phil would volunteer to become your roommate?"

Steve snorted then rolled his eyes. Bucky could tease as much as he wanted, his good mood was unbendable. Actually, with the mission waiting ahead and with Bucky's remarks, it actually felt like 1943 all over again. He revelled in this reassuring feeling of déjà vu.

The jet soon landed and Steve felt a rush of adrenaline and excitement tickle in the stomach.

"Sergeant," an officer saluted Bucky. "If you would like to follow me, please."

Bucky shared an interrogative look with Steve then walked away with the officer after giving him a nod.

Agent Coulson invited Steve to accompany him with a motion of the hand. Before he stepped outside, Steve was struck by the warm and blinding sun rays. When his eyes adapted to the sudden change of brightness, he took in the sight of the scenery before him.

"Let me introduce you to the person who will show you the surroundings," he heard agent Coulson say as his eyes kept sweeping the area, observing the soldiers move about on the runway, viewing
the military aircrafts and equipment and mentally assessing how they had evolved.

When he finally turned his attention back to agent Coulson, he was turned on the other side. Steve turned in the same direction and looked at the silhouette slowly approaching. A feminine silhouette.

Steve suddenly felt uneasy as the demeanor of the person coming to them looked uncannily familiar. He squeezed his eyes and frowned, taking a vivid interest in the stranger.

His face, his body tensed and his heart raced as the outlines of her facial features started to show behind the sunrays. His heart pounded harder and harder in his chest as he was unable to pick up one fault in the similarity of this woman's traits with her.

When she finally stood before him, barely a few feet apart, the confusion was no longer possible. He froze in an outpouring mix of bewilderment, amazement and terror. This woman standing in front of him looked exactly like his Natalie to the tiniest detail. His body's instinctive reaction was to reach over to touch her – to feel her; his mind's response was to hold himself back.

His pupils roamed over her perfect features, desperately absorbing every bit of information they revealed and beyond, taken by the irrational fear she would disappear any second. He couldn't tell if it was all a hallucination, if she was just the product of his craving (and clearly deranged) mind, but God, he wanted to enjoy the sight of it fully, as long as it would last, before he would snap back to reality. As terrifying as it was to think he had fallen into madness, he couldn't focus on anything else but the bliss of having her standing before him, even if it came with the price of his own sanity. Oh how badly he wished Bucky was here right now. He never felt more lost and lonely.

When it seemed that the vision before him wouldn't fade away or alter, he came to the realization she was very much real. The woman was the spitting image of Natalie with the exception of her hair, colored in the brightest shade of red he'd ever seen. His hand craved to touch the stray of hair near her face and brush it away like it used to for he didn't doubt his eyes—nor his mind— were failing him now.

"Agent Romanoff," agent Coulson said. She turned and looked at him. His heart skipped a beat. He swallowed the lump in his throat as his eyes desperately sought any sign of recognition from her part. But she remained indifferent to his internal plea. Tragically indifferent. "Captain Rogers"

After glancing at agent Coulson she looked back at him while he gazed into her eyes. It lasted an instant but for him it felt like an eternity during which every moment he ever spent with Natalie flashed into his head, in a frantic loop.

"Hi," she said with a nonchalant voice and a dispassionate expression.

A disheartening end to a deceitful reunion.

Not a single word could come out of his mouth. He broke the awkward silence with a nod of the head.

Agent Coulson walked off at some point apparently and soon it was only the two of them. Well, the two of them and two dozen soldiers and agents on the tarmac; but all he saw was her.

"It was quite the buzz around here when they found you in the ice," she said to him.

The tone of her voice didn't have any trace of emotion. She stated the words in the soberest way possible. Clearly, she didn't know him and moreover, she didn't bother to show any real interest. It was just small talks; a way for her to interrupt the awkward silence that came from his part.
It took a few seconds for Steve to process what she had just said, mostly because his brain was too busy drawing up the list of plausible explanations – too busy trying to rationalize a situation that bent and crushed all logic. What he was sure about was that she wasn't Natalie, for the simple fact that it was impossible for her to be standing here, seventy years later, at the same age she was in 1942. He and Bucky had broken this elementary rule but they still remained an exception.

Even if the explanation was that agent Romanoff simply shared astoundingly similar features with Natalie, it still didn't make sense he would cross path with her. It broke all the odds. And yet, here they were. Clearly, the universe was purely having pleasure torturing him by making him work with his lost love's doppelganger.

"I thought Coulson was gonna swoon," she said, unapologetically mocking her colleague.

He closed his eyes for a second, taking in her voice. His heart pounded idiotically at the illusion of hearing Natalie talking to him. Reminding himself it wasn't was another stab.

'She's not Natalie. She can't be Natalie,' his brain chanted like a mantra. It didn't slow down the pace of his heartbeat for all that.

He also tried to ignore the fact her teasing was akin to Natalie's.

He hadn't detached his gaze from her face for even one second, still contemplating and admiring the similarity of her features and expressions.

She spoke like Natalie. She walked like Natalie. She moved like Natalie.

Except she wasn't.

His reunion with Natalie's doppelganger was interrupted when they found Doctor Bruce Banner looking astray on the tarmac. Steve greeted him politely, and although he genuinely wanted to know him better ever since agent Coulson had shown them the video of him turning into the Hulk, he was too distracted by agent Romanoff to show him further interest at this exact moment.

After she invited them to step inside, an irrational panic took him over when he watched her walk away from him. He had just got her back, he couldn't lose her again.

"She is not Natalie," he scolded himself internally.

He barely took a look at the facilities and other high-tech equipment – that were certainly the source of Colonel Fury's pride, his eyes simply couldn't resolve to let her out of their sight. He caught a glimpse of agent Hill supervising all the officers. She gave him a friendly smile as a discreet greeting then turned to her computer again. It surprised him to find more warmth coming from a barely familiar face than from the face that had given his most beautiful memories and his greatest sorrows.

"So?" Fury asked, unable to hold it anymore.

Steve gazed at the breath-taking sight in front of him, but not the one the Colonel was referring to. He slid a hand into his pocket and took bills out.

"Twenty bucks, huh?" Fury said with a smug look. "When you woke up this morning you certainly didn't expect to be so dumbfounded."

Agent Romanoff was now giving instructions to an officer. Steve briefly detached his look to glance at Colonel Fury. He had no idea.
Fury smirked then left to go about his business. Steve wandered around unconsciously following her from a distance, cautious to keep her in his line of sight always.

He studied her meticulously and his fascination for her grew bigger at every new second that went by. Despite the indisputable fact she was similar to Natalie, he soon came to realize that agent Romanoff was different. Everything in her demeanor, her manners exuded a confidence differently shaped than Natalie's. While Natalie showed assurance and determination, agent Romanoff oozed boldness and audacity. Natalie had always let a sensitivity appear when she was with him that agent Romanoff seemed to keep guarded behind a straight expression. Natalie knew how to play with her femininity while agent Romanoff perfectly blended in this man's world.

And for the first time as he looked at her, he didn't see Natalie; he saw Peggy.

Bucky walking into the room took his attention away from her for a short moment. His friend walked straight up to him, rubbing his jaw.

He stood beside him and looked up, admiring the high and large glass windows.

"This place is great, I'll give him that," he commented then smirked. "Not that I'll say it out loud in front of Colonel Fury."

"Look again," Steve said. Bucky furrowed his brows and slowly followed the direction Steve's eyes couldn't seem to drift away from. As he turned, he came face to face with agent Romanoff, who was now standing a couple of feet away from them.

"Holy sh-," he blurted out but Steve cut him short with a nudge.

"Sergeant Barnes," she spoke formally, looking at him with the same level of interest she had shown for Steve. "Agent Romanoff."

Bucky remained mute. She threw him a suspicious look from behind her long lashes, seemed to label him as weird as his best friend then she walked away, followed by Bucky's wide eyes.

"Holy crispy crap!" he eventually exclaimed with a whispering voice as soon as she was far enough. "Am I hallucinating?"

"Trust me, you're not," Steve said. Whether it was a good or a bad thing, he couldn't tell yet; all he felt right now was the acute pain that started creeping up through the fading confusion.

"How is that even possible?" Bucky asked out loud.

That was the question he had kept asking himself for the last fifteen minutes.

He had a thousand questions for her actually but there was none he could possibly ask now without sounding invasive.

His first and strongest hypothesis was that she was related to Natalie. The name was obviously Russian and he started to wonder how Rushman had changed to Romanoff. His curiosity was boiling to the highest temperatures, eager to get all the answers and explanations he needed. Maybe agent Romanoff could be the key to finding Natalie. Until then, he'd have to suffer through the unspeakable pain of looking at her face and seeing nothing but a blank in return.

Bucky didn’t say anything more after that. It seemed even seventy years hadn't manage to alter his ability to know when to quit discussing a sensitive subject. He had done it back in 1943, after Steve and Natalie had parted outside the cinema, never mentioning her name again; and he was doing it
again now.

He kept staring at agent Romanoff though, trying to keep his bafflement to a moderate level. He introduced himself to Banner, keeping an eye on both Steve and the source of his silent torment as he greeted the scientist.

As she finally came to stand next to them and Fury, listening to her superior's words and chiming in with her own strategic comments, she barely acknowledged his presence, or only after a while out of politeness. Her eyes looked in his direction with a tragic emptiness when he had been so used to see them filled with tenderness and playfulness. Natalie would look at him like she knew him for a long while, with a warmth and a closeness it took years and a shared-life experience to gather. Agent Romanoff looked at him like a stranger from whom he still had to earn her respect and her trust.

This void in her look was what hurt him the most. Looking at Natalie but seeing a stranger. It was like being hit again by the realization that the woman he loved was gone, and that he couldn't dare hope to find some kind of substitute in agent Romanoff. The trap was to make her a substitute. He couldn't allow his heart to do that, out of respect for Natalie, but moreover out of respect for the woman standing in front of him.

He probed her again—one last time he promised himself—before moving on.

When Colonel Fury gave them the order to fly to Germany, he swallowed the lump in his throat and turned to agent Romanoff.

"Where is your changing room?" he asked as neutrally as possible, trying to suppress the outpouring level of adoration and hurt that was probably showing in his eyes.

She looked at him and paused, taking the time to probe him for the first time. He dared to be hopeful, only to be disappointed again. Her expression remained as detached as before.

"Follow me," she said. She took him out of the command center, walking ahead of him, turning right and left into areas she easily oriented herself in as she knew it like the back of her hand.

She halted in front of a metal door and entered a digital code. She then stepped aside to let him in.

"I'll send someone to take you to the runway in twenty minutes," she spoke coolly.

He nodded and stepped inside. He turned to look at her until the metal door closed on her face. It wasn't until he heard her walk away that he let the pain choking him come out. He pressed the palm of his hand on the cold wall and bent over, hiding behind his stretched arm.

That raging pain, he would let it overcome him all for a minute only, and then he would gag it, choke it mercilessly and bury it deep down forever. He'd let it overpower him now, then he would crush it for good, never allowing it back to the surface again.

A whimper burst out of his throat that he muffled with his fist, pressing his forehead against the iron wall, his chest shaking under the uncontrollable sobs. They seemed to hold it all: waking up in this new century far away from Natalie, the search for her, the frustration of failing, the acceptance of his feelings and of her being gone, and finally, her impromptu return into the shape of a perfect stranger.

He had lost Natalie and agent Romanoff would be there to remind him of it every single day. But he would survive it. He would learn to live with what was both a blessing and a curse.
Hey guys! Two things from me:
- First (and foremost) big thank you to all of you for your amazing comments! Seriously, you are the best! Some made me laugh, some were absolutely sweet but they made all my day. Every single one of them. You rock! I'm thrilled you are loving the sequel; over the moon thrilled.
- I'm going on vacation tomorrow, so I'd rather let you know not to expect a new chapter until 3/4 weeks. Sorry about that. I rushed to finish this chapter in time and give you a little something.

When Steve came out of the room, he didn't look any different than when he had walked in it. Nothing on his face divulged the breakdown he had just had a few minutes ago. Or if he indeed was different, then he had grown stronger. Sometimes you had to let the pain overcome you to defeat it. And now that he had just let it submerge him entirely, he had taken full control of it.

When he came out, he no longer was this man with a broken heart and a tortured mind. He was a man who had embraced and was now ready to grow from a broken heart, and this put his mind at rest somehow.

After his sobs had ended and once he had silenced his pain, he had turned to where his new uniform had been waiting. It was even more old-fashioned than it looked in the picture agent Coulson had showed him, but it indeed carry a lot of nostalgia as he had said. Seeing his shield, gently reflecting the rays from the warm light hanging above, raised an excitement within he had thought long gone. He also realized how he had missed it; not only for what it was, but for the memories it carried and what it meant to him.

Fully changed, he clutched his shield tight, ready to fight this Loki, ready to step back into the world, ready to face agent Romanoff (so far, the hardest part).

The officer was already waiting for him outside the door, as she had promised, and led him along the corridors. He met halfway with Bucky, who was just stepping out of a room, now dressed into a SHIELD navy stealth outfit. His friend shot him a concerned look.

"Are you okay?" he asked Steve, seeking the truth into his eyes before he would dare to blurt out a lie to his face.

"Yeah," he answered simply. It wasn't really a lie—he felt better than twenty minutes ago—and Bucky couldn't technically call him out on it. He nodded, not fully satisfied, suspecting an omission he had no evidence about to carry on with his investigation.

After a pause, he added. "Good, cause I didn't want to feel any guilt when I'd start making fun of your uniform. Enlighten me, are you on your way to fight an Asgardian or meet up with yourbob-sleigh team?"

Steve rolled his eyes. At least he didn't treat him like someone whose feelings needed to be handled gently.
Also, ever since they had stumbled upon this sports on a newspaper, Bucky had been dying to use it as a joke. At least, it was a fulfilled quest. Now the matter was to know if it were to be his new running joke.

"Glad to see you didn't forget your humor in the ice."

Bucky went on, totally ignoring his friend's comment.

"I'm sorry, I'll try not to make you laugh from now on. I wouldn't want you to let a snort slip and accidentally cause the fabric to burst open at every stitch."

"The fabric won't stretch one bit when I kick your ass," Steve commented matter-of-factly, a playful smirk on the lips.

"As if you'd take the risk," Bucky puffed.

On their way to Berlin, Steve and Bucky were sat at the back of the jet, staring at agent Romanoff who was inside the cockpit with another SHIELD agents.

"But seriously, how is it possible?" Bucky mused aloud, his chin pressed on his fist, leaned over to get an even clearer view than he already had.

Steve observed her, as she swiftly and confidently pressed buttons, handling the control stick.

"I don't know," he murmured slowly. There was something peaceful in watching her.

Although he knew she wasn't Natalie, seeing her face like he remembered it, seeing her move like he could recall it, put his mind at rest. It was as if he wasn't as tormented wondering where Natalie was and whether she was fine as he was before. His eyes saw her before him and somehow it did the trick: it soothed the knot he had had in his stomach ever since he had been told Natalie was nowhere to be found.

Agent Romanoff took a break from flying after a couple of hours, handing the command over to her peer, unfastened her seatbelt and stepped out of the cockpit. She came face to face with Steve and Bucky gazing at her in awe and utter fascination.

She paused a second, no longer surprised but still inquisitive. She walked past them to the equipment area.

"Would you like to have a look at the front, Sergeant?" she asked. It took Bucky out of his compelling staring. "I read you were a good pilot."

He didn't need to be asked twice. He jumped out of his seat – with an almost believable composure — to the command board.

"So what do you think about our time?" she turned to Steve, taking some parachutes away and prepping them for use. "Sure people are resigned, the politicians are nearly all corrupted, the line C subway is always smelly, but sprinkle donuts are still the best creation we've ever come up with."

She sounded so nonchalant about it all, like she had seen and experienced worse to quit taking a serious look at the world and its imperfections. Natalie kind of did that, too; holding a sarcastic and fairly rare, distant eye on their society. It was like she saw the 1940s beyond what it was with a detached interest. He had always found her vision of their time quite fascinating, and shall he say, ground-breaking and had always thought she was uncommonly ahead of her time.
He smiled. "That's one way to see it," he conceded quite amused and revelled by her oh so familiar sense of humor as he watched her untie some security ropes.

"Do you do that a lot?" she asked casually not glancing in his direction but putting her earpiece on instead. "Staring at people with so much intensity?"

He tensed, taken by surprise by her frankness and embarrassed to realize he wasn't exactly good at toning his emotions down.

She pushed him out of his comfort zone, to the edge of the cliff and she enjoyed it thoroughly he could tell.

"And so does he," she continued, moving her head in Bucky's direction. "Except he gawks, you on the other hand…," she turned and looked him straight in the eye, defying him to deny what she was about to say next. "You stare like you're seeking every last bit of my very soul."

A playful smirk rose to her lips, as she seemed to be utterly amused by a very entertaining thought; perhaps the satisfaction he would never succeed.

"I…," he started, babbling, looking for his words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be intrusive or cross you."

She cocked an eyebrow, looking him up and down; he could nearly see the rush of thoughts flashing by on her face although he couldn't read even one. Overall she looked intrigued, but she also definitely let the moment linger, enjoying the feeling of having reversed the roles between them. And she had succeeded, he felt exposed and self-conscious. It seemed she had managed to drill a hole into his head and plucked every single thought that had ever cross his mind. He nearly expected her to voice aloud the whole issue any second.

No doubt, she was good, and certainly Colonel Fury's best agent. She had this natural ability to take control and compel her victim into doing anything she wished. Perhaps, he would have even let some truth slip out if she had asked.

She didn't ask, to his surprise.

Something told him she had grasped the stake of it (to a certain extent) and had deliberately chosen to put it off for later, to make him hold his breath until when she would have decided the right time had come.

"You're a man of secret," she said with a slick voice, her dark pupils slightly dilated. "There's more to it than the war hero everyone talks about."

It could have sounded like an insult but to her it was a compliment.

He should have been scared about the promise she had just tacitly made. He should have apprehended her succeeding to let his secret out to the open; but there was just a magnetism, a shameless confidence exuding from her gaze, a sudden burst of interest that made her eyes sparkle the same way Natalie's eyes sparkled in his company. It felt like a glimpse of late 1942 all over again.

He should have been scared at the prospect of her trying to expose him, but he looked forward to it.

The capture of Loki turned out to be easier than any one of them had expected. Bucky had been a great help, firing the Asgardian enemy from the rooftop and unsettling him long enough to allow Steve to take the upper hand again.
Eventually, Tony Stark literally flew in the fight, accompanied by loud rock music.

"I don't like him," Bucky had muttered to Steve when they had got a moment of privacy on the jet. "The guy shows up playing AC/DC and that's supposed to prove he's the coolest."

Steve frowned.

"What bothers me the most in this whole situation is that you know who AC/DC are and I don't."

Bucky smirked. "Look like I've got one step ahead of you. As always."

"In your dreams."

A thunderbolt struck upon their heads. It made Loki wince, his eyes inspecting the ceiling.

"What's the matter, scared of a little lightning?" Steve asked suspiciously.

"I'm not overly fond of what follows…," Loki stated with a visibly amused expression.

They suddenly heard the loud noise of something landing over them which made the whole jet shake roughly.

Steve looked behind at agent Romanoff, yielding to his first instinct to protect her from the upcoming menace. She was holding her control stick, trying to stabilize the airplane.

Stark suited up, walking determinedly toward the exit. He pressed the button to open the back door.

Steve didn't like the billionaire's initiative as it jeopardized the safety of everyone on board (and who was kidding, mostly Romanoff's). Bucky stood aside, reaching for his rifle.

A tall, square man, dressed in the most old-fashioned way even Steve thought, barged in, looking quite belligerent. Steve stepped away, putting himself in the way into the cockpit, ready to attack in case the Asgardian would move down to the front of the aircraft. Agent Romanoff didn't notice Steve's close protection being too busy keeping the jet steady.

It put Stark on the front line, who got smacked down by the intruder's hammer and fell to the ground. The intruder then grabbed the prisoner by the throat and flew away with him.

"Now there's that guy," Tony muttered under his helmet.

"Another Asgardian?" agent Romanoff.

"Think this guy's a friendly?" Steve asked. He didn't know anymore. The file said he was. Which was why Bucky had also hold his fire but now he looked just as confused, wondering whether he had been right to.

"Doesn't matter," Stark replied, sounding like he was ready to duke it out. "If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract's lost."

"Stark, we need a plan of attack," Steve cried out through the loud wind.

"I have a plan. Attack."

And he was gone, too.

Steve turned to Bucky. His friend had that pout that meant Stark had just gotten more in his nerves
He reached for a parachute and started putting it on.

Bucky's expression turned into one of discontentment. He stepped forward, trying to stop him before shooting him a disapproving look.

"I'd sit this one out, Cap" agent Romanoff said from her cockpit, taking him pleasantly by surprise by addressing him directly for once and with such an expected ease and familiarity. Deep down, his heart flustered at the thought she cared about his well-being. He knew he shouldn't have let his heart feel this way (especially at the current agitated time), but it did. And most importantly, he enjoyed the feeling.

Unfortunately, the actual situation didn't allow him to dwell on the moment.

"I don't see how I can?" his instinct kicked in. He appreciated her 'caring' but her suggestion didn't go accordingly with his old habits.

"These guys come from legends, they're basically gods," she said.

Bucky nodded, openly siding with her.

"There's only one God," he pointed out. He would have normally added 'madam' at the end of his sentence, but she was already more than just a stranger to him. And calling her agent Romanoff would have felt cold after she had called just him Cap and it may have shut off any chance at further bonding. He rolled his eyes at himself internally. And here he had started putting too much thought into it. "And I'm pretty sure He doesn't dress like that."

He turned to Bucky.

"Stay here," he told his reluctant friend. He then threw a discreet glance at agent Romanoff, wordlessly asking Bucky to keep an eye on her. It wasn't like he trusted someone else more with such a personal request.

Bucky still looked reluctant, but at a lesser degree, cautious not to hurt his feelings regarding the whole situation with agent Romanoff. He nodded, agreeing to his demand but still disapproving of his friend's recklessness.

"Seventy years in the ice and it still wasn't long enough to develop for your brain gray matter," he muttered under his breath.

Steve smirked.

"Jealous punk."

Bucky didn't object. He smirked a little then watched him jump out of the aircraft before turning to keep Romanoff in his line of sight.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Oh my God. I did it. I thought I was never going to end this chapter!
Sorry again for the long wait. I hope the update will make it up for the long absence. :D

Back to SHIELD's helicarrier, Loki was taken to a cell – one that would measure up to his alien abilities.

When Steve entered the command room and wandered about, he saw agent Romanoff leaning over a desk, conversing briefly with the agent sitting there, the screen showing the picture and the data sheet of who seemed to be a fellow member of the organization. It piqued Steve's curiosity as it was the second time today he saw her doing it.

"Who is he?" he asked soberly to agent Hill who was standing nearby, staring at the computer screen agent Romanoff was standing by. Agent Hill turned her head and followed the direction of his gaze.

"Agent Barton," she replied sternly. "One of SHIELD's best agent. He got compromised when Loki showed up, although I can't explain whatever alien trick he used on him."

Steve nodded. That was unfortunate, obviously. But it still didn't explain why agent Romanoff was concerned about a fellow colleague so much. He didn't know her, but so far he could tell she wasn't the sentimental type.

"Did agent Romanoff ever work on a mission with him?" he asked with the most casual and dispassionate tone of voice.

Agent Hill drifted her gaze to him, staring like she was about the state a well-known fact.

"Agents Barton and Romanoff have been working together for many years. They're really close."

It rubbed him off the wrong way. It shouldn't have but it did. Part of him felt this irrational – and totally objectionable – discomfort at the thought of agent Romanoff being close to another man. And how close we were talking, here? Friendly or more? Clearly, the connection she had with Barton was deeper than simple camaraderie. He could tell in the hint of concern that slipped through the veil she wore to conceal it. She cared for Barton undeniably more than she cared for him, and perhaps just as much as he cared for Natalie. This last thought, as unreasonable it was, scared him somehow. As much as he reminded himself agent Romanoff wasn't Natalie, he couldn't repress nor control the hurt of seeing this beautifully familiar face look at another man with an affection he used to see addressed to him. He didn't know, he wasn't sure about their bond and this was the most unsettling part – imagination could have far greater devastating effects than reality. And he really wished agent Hill had been inclined to be more forthcoming about the nature of their relationship regardless of how unprofessional it would have sounded. He was a man with ethics in theory but when it came to people he cared about, his passions had a tendency to take over – and drastic times called for drastic measures.

Steve watched agent Romanoff give a grateful nod to the agent and stand erect before walking away, but not without casting one last glance at Barton's photograph. The muscles of his jaw tightened a
Tony Stark and Thor walked in, Bucky following right behind, side-eyeing one of the newcomers in particular.

Stark paraded around the room (perhaps it was unintended but it sure felt like it) while throwing humorous remarks here and there.

"How does Fury even see these?" he asked, covering one eye with his hand to impersonate the Colonel.

"He turns," agent Hill answered with crossed arms, showing how unimpressed she was with her body language and her look.

"Sounds exhausting," he went on nonchalantly.

Steve threw a glance over his shoulder to look at Bucky and found him looking at him too; they both tacitly agreed Tony Stark was a lot like his father. Bucky seemed to think he was a more annoying version, though.

All of them gathered around the table as Director Fury's interview with the hostile Asgardian came on their screens. Steve listened to Loki's every word, sitting on his chair not astonished, nor afraid to the least. Seventy years had passed, millions of light-years had separated them but Loki spoke like any man of power who craved more power. This Asgardian 'god' was as bland and common as any greedy megalomaniac on this good old planet. He didn't know whether the thought of a supposedly far more advanced civilization nurturing people with minds and ambitions as narrow and petty as the ones on Earth was sort of consoling or just plain tragic.

Once the usual speech of hate and dreams of conquest ended and the screen went off, everyone remained mute, agent Romanoff seeming to be in deep thought. Somehow he found the sight absolutely fascinating.

"Thor, what's his play?" he asked, pulling himself away from it.

"He has an army called the Chitauri. They're not of Asgard or any world known. He means to lead them against your people. They will win him the Earth. In return, I suspect, for the Tesseract."

Alright, so the basic greedy guy had an alien army. It sort of complicated things a little.

"An army?" he repeated with a slightly sulky expression. "From outer space?"

"Whatever," Bucky commented. "Those Chitau-thing can't be uglier than Red Skull."

Steve's corner of the mouth slightly rose into a smirk. Bucky had a talent at mentioning random stuff that always turned out to be pretty accurate.

"He's a friend," Thor said showing concern as he heard Banner mention Dr. Selvig's name.

"Loki has them under some kind of spell," agent Romanoff finally spoke. The features of her face hardened taking a grimly expression and the tone of her voice went sullen as she voiced out the next words. "Along with one of ours."

Steve watched her from the other end of the table trying to conceal his frown (or perhaps even hurt look) as he took in every detail. Her arms crossed on the table, her chin slightly down, the way she sorrowfully dropped her gaze, all those signs disclosed her uneasiness. And he had no doubt the
person she was referring to was agent Barton. She cared about the missing agent, there was no questioning it—and it didn't leave him indifferent.

Dr. Banner and Stark had been working together for several hours. Steve was sitting silently in the conference room finally on his own and reflecting on the recent events. He endeavored to discover what Loki's plan was, but no matter how hard he tried, his mind always wandered back to agent Romanoff.

"Captain Rogers?" a feminine voice took him out of his reverie. He shifted his eyes up and found agent Hill standing before him.

"Is there anything I can do for you? Can I get you anything?"

She stood with her arms behind her back expectantly. She really seemed to mean it.

He smiled politely. "I'm alright. Thank you."

She responded a slight nod with a faint twitch of disappointment.

"You think Loki has a hidden plan?" she asked.

Steve rubbed his jaw. "I think he's got more under his sleeve than it looks. His capture was too easy."

Agent Hill nodded. "I guess we'll find out soon enough."

She turned and started towards the exit. She then stopped and spun around.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out, making Steve furrow his brows. He looked at her with a puzzled expression. Agent Hill seemed to be carrying a pang of guilt that she was determined to let off her shoulders. "I promised you I would try everything to find your friend and I broke my word. And I owe you an apology for it."

A wistful smile came to his lips. The timing was highly ironic.

"You don't have to apologize. I am sure you tried your best as long as you were allowed to. But orders are orders."

Her jaw was tight but her eyes expressed gratitude for his understanding.

"I hope you'll find her somehow," she said.

He hoped she was right although she was completely oblivious his hope relied upon her very fellow colleague, agent Romanoff, to be the key to it.

"I don't like it," Bucky said after he walked up to him. "We know Loki is up to something and all we do is sit and wait for it to happen instead of acting."

Steve winced. He had to admit his friend was right. They both made their way to the lab to check on Stark and Dr. Banner's progress in locating the Tesseract.

Just when they passed the door, they found Stark stinging the physicist with some type of electrical shock. That had to be one of the most irresponsible and inane things he had ever seen. Bucky seemed to share his opinion, only more strongly as he probably labeled it the most irresponsible and
inane thing his eye had ever witnessed.

"Are you nuts?" Steve yelled—and which had no effect on Stark whatsoever since he went on with his conversation with Banner. "Is everything a joke to you?"

Bucky had his arms folded over his chest, implicitly reiterating Steve's question with his posture.

"Funny things are," he replied.

"If you can call that an attempt at being funny," Bucky muttered under his breath but still loud enough to be heard by the person targeted.

"Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn't funny," Steve blurted out hard. He was immediately caught up by Dr. Banner's presence and immediately regretted his burst of frankness. "No offense, doctor," he added right away, genuinely apologetic.

Dr. Banner didn't seem offended, although actually one person in the room had taken offense and it was Stark…from Bucky's comment. He gawked at him with a rush of offensive thoughts flashing across his face.

"No, it....it's alright. I wouldn't have come aboard if I couldn't handle pointy things."

"You're tiptoeing, big man. You need to strut." Stark said to him.

"And you need to focus on the problem, Mr. Stark." Steve chimed in the conversation.

"You think I'm not? Why did Fury call us and why now? Why not before? What isn't he telling us? I can't do the equation unless I have all the variables."

"You think Fury's hiding something?" he asked sort of agreeing with the man for the first time.

"He's a spy. Captain, he's the spy. His secrets have secrets." Stark turned to Dr. Banner. "It's bugging him too, isn't it?"

The two best friends looked at him with much attention. Perhaps with too much attention that it made the doctor uncomfortable.

"Uh," he started bashfully. "I just wanna finish my work here and..."

"Doctor?" Steve said gently. Of the two scientists, Dr. Banner's opinion was the one he valued the most at this moment.

"A world for all mankind, Loki's jab at Fury about the cube," he quoted.

"I heard it," Steve said. Bucky nodded.

"Well, I think that was meant for you," Dr. Banner continued, addressing Stark…who awarded his awareness and deduction skills with a blueberry. Dr. Banner dove his hand into the pack of dried fruit Stark had handed out to him and took one to his mouth. "Even if Barton didn't post that all over the news."

"The Stark Tower?" Steve frowned, surprised and clueless about why Loki would take a close interest in it. "That big, ugly…," his comment was interrupted by Stark's unfriendly glare. "…building in New York?"

Bucky didn't even try to conceal his smirk while staring at the billionaire.
The conversation went on about Colonel Fury's real motives regarding the Tesseract. Steve had protested they should all stick to the orders they had been given.

"Following is not really my style," Stark said munching the remaining of his blueberries.

"And you're all about style, aren't you?"

"Of the people in this room, which one is; a-wearing a spangly outfit, and b- not of use?"

"Funny. I was asking myself just the same about your vanity," Bucky retorted with a deep voice and a stern look. "That and the goatee. It's so 2005."

Although the first comment slid into Stark's ear and out the other with an easiness that betrayed he was quite accustomed to hearing it, the second remark had a harder time slipping out though. Stark looked at Bucky with the most defiant outrage while the other relished the moment realizing all those hours spent browsing through decades of men's fashion had finally paid off.

Stark opened his mouth, ready to snap.

"How about we postpone all this fashion chit-chat for another time and focus on what Fury really wants?" Dr. Banner spoke.

It calmed the two men down. To some extent.

"Just find the cube," Steve said then headed toward the door, closely followed by Bucky.

"So what do we do?" Bucky said as soon as they walked out of the lab.

"Fury is onto something," he spoke firmly, feeling deceived.

"Yeah. I should have known the eye patch was a dead give away," Bucky replied sarcastically.

"What are you thinking?"

Steve looked at his friend. "I'm thinking we should do our own digging?" he answered with a spark in the eye.

Bucky agreed with a smirk. "And no one ever believes me when I say you're the snoop."

After twenty minutes, the digging turned out to be very informative. Steve finally found weapons stored into crates in one of the many rooms he searched while Bucky was on watch outside the door stored. The armaments looked unlike anything he had seen before. He walked out of the room, carrying one of the guns and Bucky gave it a long look.

"Shocker. A governmental organization that aims to make even more deadly weapons. This new world never ceases to amaze me," he commented with an apathetic tone.

"Let's see what Fury's got to say about it," Steve said sternly walking toward the command center with a determined gait.

"You're gonna make a dramatic entrance, aren't you?" Bucky mused aloud, slightly amused.

They were walking past the lab when he caught sight of Fury having a heated conversation with Dr. Banner and Stark.

"… When we get a hit, we'll have the location within half a mile. And you'll get your cube back, no
muss, no fuss,” Dr. Banner was saying. "What is Phase 2?"

Steve came up to the table and deliberately dropped the gun loud on the table. It had the knack to pique everyone's attention once and for all.

"Phase 2 is SHIELD use the cube to make weapons."

And here it was for his dramatic entrance. All eyes were glued on his discovery.

"Sorry," he said ironically, "the computer was moving a little too slow for me."

He shot the Director his most judgmental look. He certainly didn't expect him to be a saint, but one thing he wished was that the world had grown to have defenders of their nation that actually cared to keep the world in peace. With people like Fury detaining high authority, the world wasn't safe to enter yet another world war.

"I was wrong, Director," Steve said after Stark showed the result of his hacking and the evidence that SHIELD was indeed working on alien weapon prototypes. "The world hasn't changed a bit."

Agent Romanoff walked in the room and put all her attention on Dr. Banner, displaying a certain defensive demeanor. It caught Steve's curiosity.

"You wanna think about removing yourself from this environment, doctor?" she said with an intent gaze and a grave voice.

"I was in Calcutta, I was pretty well removed," Dr. Banner retorted.

"Loki's manipulating you," she continued.

Steve frowned. He didn't really know nor understand why agent Romanoff had come to the conclusion that Dr. Banner was in Loki's radar but she showed an unquestionable assurance about her statement.

The tension slowly increased as everyone argued over the alien weapon manufacturing secret behind the Tesseract.

"A nuclear deterrent," Stark said. "Cause that always calms everything right down."

Stark's expression was sarcastic and judgmental, and Steve couldn't help finding it ironic. Stark Enterprise was known for selling the best weapons on the market. Even though this business belonged to the past (but still a past that went over decades), the blasé remark smelled pretty hypocritical right now.

Director Fury had the same thought.

"Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?" he told him.

"I'm sure if he still made weapons," Steve chimed in. "Stark would be neck deep-"

Stark held his hand up and stepped forward.

"Wait, wait. Hold on," he reacted quickly. "How is this now about me?"

Hands on his belt, Steve turned to him with an apparent frown on his face. Bucky stared at the billionaire with a similar expression. Stark's second ironic comment of the conversation.
"I'm sorry. Isn't everything?" Steve retorted as he combined sarcasm with an unapologetic expression.

The tension in the room reached its peak but most especially between Stark and him. Dr. Banner had also started to grow irked getting wary and guarded looks from agent Romanoff.

"Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?" Stark dared to tease yet another time at such a critical time, one hand pressed on Steve's shoulder to emphasize the nonchalance.

"You know damn well why! Back off!" Steve rose his voice, pushing the billionaire's hand off of him.

Stark stepped into his personal space with a glare. "Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me," he muttered.

Steve sensed the animosity which had made its way here quite at wrong timing. Or at least he should have realized if it weren't for him being just as busy responding with the same level of resentment.

"Yeah, big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?"

Stark cocked an eyebrow then pouted. "Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," he answered matter-of-factly.

"I know guys with none of that worth ten of you," Steve answered back more aggressively than he anticipated. Dugan, Morita, Jones, Sawyer, Falsworth, Pinkerton, Peggy. It brought back vivid memories from the field. "I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guys crawl over you."

"I think would just cut the wire," Stark countered offhandedly. The casualness in which he answered had the knack to irritate far more than what was probably intended. All those soldiers – and comrades he had seen died – whose sacrifices and heroism were diminished with the back of the hand by an arrogant, spoiled businessman.

"Always a way out," Steve smirked humorlessly. "You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero."

"A hero like you?" Stark took a step forward. "You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle."

Bucky unfolded his arms and started toward Tony Stark in a belligerent way. Steve held his arm out, motioning to him to remain standing where he was while holding a firm gaze to his interlocutor.

"Put on the suit, let's go a few rounds," he murmured hardly with a challenging smirk, wholeheartedly wishing his request would be granted. And fast.

The other people in the room chimed in with their comment or resumed trying to remove Dr. Banner from the lab although Steve was too engrossed in staring at Stark's face and anticipating how satisfying it would feel to put a fist on it.

"In case you needed to kill me well you can't!" he heard Dr. Banner yell, "I know. I tried."

Steve, Stark and everyone else in the room froze. Steve turned and gave the physicist a sad and sympathetic look. This poignant revelation upset him in more ways than anyone would have expected. Part of him couldn't help feeling partly responsible for Dr Banner's fate – after all the creation of his green alter ego resulted in the experiments to replicate his own super-serum. Part of
him felt for him as he recalled the long days and nights he had spent alone in New York after waking up from his coma; if it hadn't been for Bucky being here with him, those two miserable weeks waking for him would have turned into months and years; and soon, the prospect of living a life of solitude would have been just plain unbearable. It had frightened him to no end to just picture it the eventuality that Bucky would never wake up, and the mere thought of it had plunged him into melancholy. Who knew how many times a night Dr. Banner had felt the same way, and enough to try to end his misery.

"I got low," Dr. Banner justified as he understood he had made everyone uncomfortable. "I didn't see an end, so I put a bullet in my mouth and the other guy spit it out. So I moved on, I focused on helping other people. I was good until you dragged me back into this freak show, and put everyone here at risk. You wanna know my secret, Agent Romanoff?"

Hearing him say her name and addressing her directly with such a hard tone made Steve stand erect and alert. His eyes instinctively drifted across the room and found her discreetly unbuttoning her holster to take hold of the gun at her hip all this while keeping a close look at the physicist's every motion.

"You wanna know how I stay calm?" the latter continued, his voice dropping down an octave. Steve watched cautiously as he reached for Loki's weapon behind him. His chest and fists tightened as the realization that if Dr. Banner were to lose control, every sign showed agent Romanoff would be his first target. Or so he feared. And this was a risk he wasn't willing to take. Not with her.

"Dr. Banner," Steve spoke calmly but ready to step in. "Put the scepter down."

The physicist looked confused, even quizzical about the reason why everyone was staring at him with such a guarded expression. He glanced down and came to the realization he was firmly holding Loki's scepter.

The tension was evident in the room as it was a minute ago with the only difference that all the attention was now turned on Dr. Banner and the danger for everyone on board his transformation would bring.

A beeping went off from the computer, putting everything on pause.

"Sorry, kids," Dr. Banner said as he put the scepter back on the table and headed toward the computer. "You don't get to see my party trick after all."

"Did you locate the Tesseract?" Thor asked.

"I can get there faster," Stark exclaimed and already lurking at the exit door.

"There's no way you're going alone!" Bucky hollered.

"And what are you gonna do? Cling to me while I fly over there?" Stark retorted hardly.

"I just might. I won't be heavier than that ego of yours you carry around," Bucky snapped back.

"The Tesseract belongs on Asgard; no human is a match for it." Thor chimed in.

Stark started toward the exit listening to nothing but his arrogance. It seemed he had made it a point to go collect the Tesseract himself less for humanity's sake and more to piss Captain America and his sidekick off.

"You're not going alone," Steve exclaimed, reaching for his arm.
Stark immediately pushed it away. "You gonna stop me?" he threatened him.

Steve gritted his teeth. "Put on the suit, let's find out."

Bucky grunted behind, disappointed Steve had beaten him to the idea.

"I'm not afraid to hit an old man," Stark said, and at this moment, he seemed to mean it whole-heartedly.

Steve's blood boiled inside. He couldn't concentrate on anything other than erase that cocky look from Stark's face. "Put on the suit," he hissed.

"Oh my God," Dr. Banner whispered in astonishment.

The sound of a strong deflagration took them by surprise as the explosion that had abruptly gone off shook the whole helicarrier up and made them fall to the ground in a blinding and burning light. Steve's eyes alarmingly looked out for agent Romanoff and caught a glimpse of her being thrust out of the large window glass along with Dr. Banner.

His heart pounded harder than it already did and he got on his feet, starting towards the burst window. Bucky was propping himself up to the door frame nearby; he was soon standing on his feet, looking perfectly fine.

It was clear to everyone the explosion was what Loki had in mind all along and that his very presence in the helicarrier was to lead to this moment.

"We gotta move," Stark yelled to him. Steve didn't really hear him, busy listening to his instinct only. His guts had countless reasons why her safety was his priority – because regardless of how erroneous it was, it did feel like leaving Natalie in danger if he didn't go; because agent Romanoff could be related to Natalie and he owed it to her to protect her too; because he couldn't possibly take the risk of losing the last link to Natalie – if she indeed were. And nameless other reasons.

The billionaire grabbed his arm to hold him back.

"Hey…I'm sure the other guy and Pippi Longstocking are fine," Stark said, pulling him toward the opposite direction.

Steve's eyes were fixed on the spot he had just seen her being propelled through. He tried to suppress the unreasonable fear he felt in the pit of his stomach and reluctantly drifted his look away.

"Put on the suit," he told Stark who nodded obediently and staggered out of the room, still a bit shaken up, one hand over his mouth to prevent himself from breathing the toxic smoke. Steve followed to the door then glanced behind him, caught up by his instinct again. It tore him to have to go on to help somewhere else when all he thought about was check if she were okay.

"Steve," someone took him out of his thinking. He detached his gaze from the broken window and drifted it to whoever was talking to him. Bucky was staring intently at him, a hand pressed on his shoulder.

"I will find her," he assured him gravely and with the frown he had every time he made him a promise.

It soothed him as strongly as if he had made the decision to go for her himself. He trusted Bucky with his life, and he trusted him with hers.
Steve nodded and Bucky gave him a squeeze on the shoulder before they parted, running out of the room in opposite directions.
Loki had escaped, Thor had disappeared along with the glass cage, agent Coulson was dead and everyone's determination was down. Stark, much to Steve and Bucky's surprise, was the one who was grieving Coulson the most. But it somewhat made sense, of every person on board, Tony Stark was the only one who was a civilian. Saving the world, he knew; but losing a comrade was a feeling he was stranger with until now.

Agent Romanoff was fine. Bucky had arrived just in time to distract Dr. Banner's alter ego with rifle shots and give Romanoff a way out. Thor had then intervened, leaving the room where chaos had just happened heavily quiet. Bucky had barely had time to reach the corner where Romanoff was secluded that he found she had already gone. He later heard she had gone after the compromised agent and subdued him.

Steve had listened closely to his best friend's every word; and part of him, while picturing agent Romanoff fighting off who he had only seen break out on a screen so far, made him resent Dr. Banner. Not for who he was, but for yielding to anger and putting her in harm along the way. He wished he could have gone check on her and perhaps even soothed the anguish or the fright if she felt any, but he was immediately caught up by two reminders. First, he wasn't anyone that had earned the right to be that kind of person to her; and second, she had been alone with agent Barton since she had neutralized him.

He went on to check on Tony Stark to omit—and somehow mend— his incapability to do so with the woman whose face roused his deepest feelings and instincts.

Once the conversation ended, Steve discovered a new side of Stark which he endeavored to conceal behind false-pretenses and feigned nonchalance. A way to protect himself probably, and which he respected by not digging further. At this moment, Steve saw what the world saw in Stark: a man of iron and a man of heart— although Tony himself hadn't realized it fully yet. He carried uncertainties and prejudices which blurred his vision of himself and therefore his relationship with others.

They figured where Loki would hit next and decided the best way to stop it would be by acting together—without Fury. The trust was just gone.

Steve informed Bucky then proceeded to find a pilot he could trust. Agent Romanoff was the first person to pop in his mind. He walked along the corridor to the room where Barton was being held captive. As he stopped by the door, he caught a glimpse of them through the little window. He froze and dwelled on the sight before him a little longer than he normally should. Agent Romanoff was seated next to Barton who was now untied. They were not saying a word but it was evident from where he was standing that they didn't need any to communicate. Their silence was doing the entire job. His expression probably saddened so he looked away, clearing his throat. He then knocked on the door to make his presence known—which made Romanoff get up on her feet right away—then he opened the door. Barton volunteered to fly the jet and Romanoff convinced him he was no longer a threat with a single, confident nod of the head.

The battle in New York followed and soon Thor then Banner arrived. Together, they sort of became this group of remarkable people Fury had talked about. The Avengers.

"Call it, captain," Stark said simply, symbolically passing the authority to him. Bucky stared with a pleased expression.

For Steve, the exercise was comfortable as an old shoe. Seventy years had gone by, but here he was
handed out the position he had earned back in the 1940s. For the first time, it felt like being at home.
He thought strategically, sent Stark to restrain the perimeter, Thor to block the passage, Barton, and Bucky on the roofs as lookouts.

Agent Romanoff was standing a few feet away, patiently waiting for her orders.

"You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here," he said.

His choice would have probably seemed anything but dispassionate but in reality, it was essentially strategic. He had watched her fight and had assessed her skills were exactly what he needed to complement his and make the fighting on the ground much more effective. Knowing he had her by his side in the (unlikely) scenario-case she would be in danger was a perk.

"So tell me," she casually said at some point after taking a Chitauri down and making the time for a chat amidst the chaotic fight. "Is this world as bad as you pictured it?"

He knocked an enemy over with his shield. "I'm still waiting to try a sprinkle doughnut before making any conclusion."

He turned to look at her and found her watching him with an amused smirk.

"If we make it out alive," she said. "I'll take you to the best doughnut store of the city myself." Her casualness brought back familiar memories. He shook his head and smiled.

Some minutes later, many Chitauri were down but many more kept coming.

"Captain," she panted, out of breath after shooting an alien with its own weapon. "None of this is gonna mean a damn thing if we don't close that portal."

"Our biggest guns couldn't touch it."

"Well, maybe it's not about guns." She looked at the Tesseract at the top of Stark's tower.

"You wanna get up there, you're gonna need a ride," he said. And their quinjet was crashed somewhere on the Fifth Avenue.

She dropped the alien weapon like a useless mop now that it had served its purpose. "I got one," she answered turning her back to him walking away. His quizzical look was slightly apparent. "I could use a boost though."

She glanced skywards and he understood. One of the Chitauri's flying machines. She was going to fly up to try and stop the aliens and she was going to do it riding one of their jets. That was insolently bold, and he liked it. But he was caught up by technical details. How would she manage to fly an alien item? How would she get the alien mount to obey her?

He glanced at one of them flashing right above his head. These things were fast, and not exactly safe.

"You sure about this?" he asked more to himself than to her.

She slightly wiped the blood on her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. "Yeah," she breathed out with an octave higher. "It's gonna be fun."

He wasn't so sure about that. His face was serious and reluctant, but he complied nevertheless. That was still the best chance they got.

He slightly folded his knees to make leverage and held his shield tight with his two hands. She
locked her gaze on a Chitauri flying machine heading toward them and she ran up to Steve. She hopped on the cab’s hood to gather momentum then landed down on his shield. He thrust her upwards and she twirled up in the air before taking hold of a bar placed underneath the alien jet just when it flew by. She was instantly launched away at high speed and with such easiness it would have made anyone think she had done it all her life. His gaze remained fixed on her, watching her fly away with bright and lively eyes. An exclamation of surprise came out of his mouth as his pupils stared with amazement. Natalie wasn't in his mind for once as he was completely enthralled by Romanoff’s singularity. He thrived to know her better for who she was as an individual.

"We really need to close that portal," Bucky said in the earpiece.

Steve looked up to get a visual of his friend. Bucky was firing on site from the top of the roof, very much focused on the flying targets in front of him. Steve suddenly caught sight of a Chitauri flying straight at him from behind.

"Watch out!" Steve cried, clutching his earpiece tight. Alarmed by the panicked warning that could only be addressed to him, Bucky flipped his head around just when the Chitauri was coming at him. The flying machine passed right by his side and the enemy kicked him in the face, knocking him over the edge. Bucky fell off the roof, thrust down the building.

"Bucky!" Steve cried out with the last of air he had left in his contracted lungs as he helplessly witnessed his friend's fall. His chest tightened, his breathing became jerky and even painful as his eyes locked on the horrifying sight of his best friend's numb figure making its deadly descent. Steve's mind crawled with a billion thoughts until it went totally blank from the brutal and sudden saturation. One obsessive thought remained though, hammering relentlessly into his head: he wasn't going to be able to save him. He was going to lose him for good this time. That was an indisputable fact that he wanted to scream out with sheer rage. Bucky was falling to his death and he was powerless about it. He squeezed his fists so tightly the nails bit into his flesh and his jaw tightened.

A red figure suddenly flew in. Stark followed Bucky's trajectory before his strong iron arms locked around his waist and interrupted his fall.

Steve's squeezed fists released the pressure as he ran up to the landing point. Stark was gently putting Bucky down on the ground.

"Not as light as you thought, Sergeant," Stark teased while Bucky turned to face him.

"Thanks," he breathed out softly, still numbed by the quick succession of the events.

"Bucky," Steve cried again when he finally reached his side, instinctively reaching for his shoulder to get a concrete grasp of his best friend. "You okay?" he asked out of breath, locking gaze with him.

Buck nodded. "I'm alright," he answered reassuringly first. "You know how I like to be under the spotlight." The little smirk and the ironic tone were his instinctive attempt at concealing his embarrassment.

So Steve respected it and restrained himself from hugging his friend and expressing any more relief. He communicated it in a nod and gently squeezed his shoulder. He then turned to Stark who was standing a couple of feet behind on the lookout.

"Stark," Steve started, looking at him with a mix of sheer gratitude and remorse for ever thinking wrongly about him. He slightly parted his lips to voice out loud how thankful it was. Stark's iron face was gazing at him and it was quite difficult to read out his face underneath.
"Just did what had to be done, Cap," Tony chimed in quickly with a feigned dispassionate tone. Steve nodded at him gratefully nevertheless and Stark answered with a silent nod too before flying away.

Steve watched as he disappeared into the sky as a thought embedded itself with more certainty. Tony Stark was a lot like his father. And he and Howard were friends. It opened a door for him and Tony in the future.

When the Chitauri were all defeated and New York City (and the rest of the world) was safe, and agent Romanoff was for the most part responsible for it. They had all fought hard to protect the planet, but she was the one who saved it. Steve valued her as one of the strongest assets of his team. She couldn't summon thunder, she couldn't fly, she couldn't smash effortlessly but it was her boldness and determination who had taken them to victory. She was undeniably one of the best agents he had ever met and in his definition—although he wouldn't say it out loud cause he had a feeling she wouldn't want to hear it— a hero.

Loki was taken back to Asgard by Thor and the Avengers soon parted to go their own way. For now. Until the world would need them again.

"I'm not saying you're indebted to me," Tony started nonchalantly while walking up to Bucky. "But you owe me your life. Big time."

Bucky snorted. He held his hand out and shook his hand. "Glad to know this episode won't fall into oblivion." He paused and smiled. "No pun intended."

"I'll just turn a deaf ear to this one," Tony said. "We both know you can do better."

"Wow. A life rescue and a compliment. This is unheard of."

"Groundbreaking is my middle name."

Bucky sighed then looked at the billionaire with an amused expression. "And you were doing so fine. But your ego had to kick in again."

For the first time, he didn't actually mean it as being an entirely annoying flaw.

"How would you feel about working for SHIELD? We could use someone like you." Romanoff said to Steve on the other side of the road, her arms folded across her chest and a little smirk on her lips. "You and Barnes."

Steve smiled. "Fury asked you to recruit me? Like he asked you to recruit Dr. Banner?"

She dove those gorgeous, familiar green eyes right into his, a playful smile tucking to her lips.

"He asked me to drop the question," she conceded unashamedly. "But the compliment is on me."

It sounded like nothing but he had a feeling it meant something to her. She wasn't exactly the type to butter people up. She paid him a little compliment but it was her way of opening up to him.

Director Fury was untrustworthy and he didn't like his methods but SHIELD was still the only way he got to stay in touch with agent Romanoff.

"I can't work with people I know nothing about," he said implicitly. They both knew it wasn't Director Fury they were talking about here.
She looked at him warily but with a playful expression shimmering behind her pupils. She cared to satisfy Fury's request, but not at the price of her personal boundaries. She saw in his eyes how he silently challenged her to disclose herself. To what degree, she didn't know, and this was all the risk he was waiting on her to take anyway.

After another second of hesitation during which she tried to probe his next move, she finally gave in to the challenge, yielding to temptation, curious to find out what he had in mind.

"What do you want to know?" she asked with feigned disinterest.

He held up his gaze. "How about your name?"

She looked at him intently, her features gently relaxing. She looked even more curious than before.

"That's it?" she asked with an arched eyebrow, probing any sign of lie in his upcoming answer.

But he didn't need to. Not with her. "For now," he nodded.

She smiled slightly, seeming to like his answer even more than the one she expected, almost eager to get started with the game he had just established. Her pupils dilated a little. She was entertained and he knew it. She had the same expression Natalie had whenever she was in a playful mood.

"Natasha," she answered.

His heart pounded on one beat at the sound of the first syllable, taken by surprise by yet another similarity added to the stack of similarities he had been fighting hard to ignore. He kept the best poker face though and nodded in silence—mostly because of the lump in his throat—and watched her get in Barton's car before he drove away.

He felt the trap he had been in ever since Natasha Romanoff had walked into his life tighten around him a little bit more.
Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry, for the delay! It took me forever to find the right way to finish the last scene. I had to think about it for almost a week and I finally thought of something decent just today!
Enjoy the chapter!! I have a little surprise for you in there *winkwink*
And thank you for your oh so wonderful comments!! I love each and every one of them with a passion!

"You've got to be kidding me."

Steve was sat on the couch, the temple of his head pressed against his closed fist and his elbow propped on the armrest. He watched quietly as Bucky stared down at him after getting up and blurting out his exasperation at what he had just heard. As it seemed he wouldn't get any more comment, he decided to walk it off around the room. He came back a few seconds later, rubbing his jaw.

"Okay, you gotta confront her on this," he continued.

Steve looked up at him quite apathetically.

"Don't give me this look," Bucky warned. "Clearly, they're related! Make her spill the beans."

Steve shook his head and sighed. "Don't tell me you don't think the same!" Bucky protested. "Shall I remind it all to you?"

He held his forefinger up and proceeded to do the counting -and secondarily dramatize his argument. "They look exactly the same...They have the same mannerism ...They look exactly the same....Their first names start with the same two syllables... They look exactly the same ...Their family names both start with 'r'."

"Yeah well I'm gonna need more than a last name starting with the same letter to call her out on her lies if she denies."

Bucky shrugged. "Fine, I was just trying to make the list longer than it. already. is." He emphasized the last three words. "But I still say the fact her name starts with 'r' is no coincidence," he chimed in.

Steve snorted humorlessly. "I think the whole situation is making you slightly paranoid."

"I think I've been keeping my cool, on the contrary. If it were down to me, I'd say they are the same person and hell with everything else-"

It made Steve twitch as if he had been stung in the ribs. Just the mere thought –the totally illusory and absolutely chimerial concept- of Natalie being somewhat present in this decade physically hurt, first with sheer happiness then with profound disappointment at the quick realization it wasn't even an option.

"-but we both know it's impossible," Bucky continued. "So yeah, I'm actually really taking it easy
"It's still too early to confront her or expect her to reveal anything about her past to me," Steve said. "I can't take the risk of getting her back up."

Bucky didn't say a word but his expression did all the talking. He disapproved of Steve's soft modus operandi.

"I don't think Romanoff is the type you can coax," he said nicely but determinedly. "She won't open up to you because you will have given her the time and space. I think she'll appreciate you being honest and frank even better."

Steve was quite doubtful. Although Bucky may have had a point about the right strategy to take with agent Romanoff, he doubted that would be enough to make her crack. She wouldn't disclose a thing even then, he was sure of it. It was part of her training – and with time and practice it certainly winded up being part of her.

Maybe the best way to avoid any more longing from his part was to avoid joining S.H.I.E.L.D. altogether. Working for S.H.I.E.L.D. would mean going on missions with her; spending a significant amount of time together; dwelling on all the beautiful features and characteristics she shared with Natalie. Joining S.H.I.E.L.D. would mean inflicting more pain on himself.

Perhaps, it was best for everyone if he just let go.

This was why he hadn't replied to Director Fury's job offer yet. It was a heavy decision –especially emotionally speaking, which deserved he would take time to ponder on it. Was getting himself in a roller coaster of emotions and forever unanswered questions the best way to fit into this new world? Wasn't keeping his distance the right (and rightful) way to move on? If he stopped seeing agent Romanoff, maybe it would stop his torment? God knows his mind hadn't been able to find rest ever since the moment he had laid eyes on her. Maybe keeping his distance was the solution. Out of sight, out of mind, they said.

He reckoned Natasha Romanoff certainly wasn't someone easy to forget but maybe time could deal with it –like it dealt with everything else.

_Sitting in a chair at the café, he hurriedly stood on his feet and a bright smile came to his lips as he caught sight of her figure approaching. Her blond hair was styled up in an informal bun, her white neck covered with the fabric of her bottle green coat, each step she made revealing the cream dress she was wearing underneath._

"Hi, Steve," she said softly and the way his name rang out made him irrationally smile more. He liked hearing her say his name and it seemed she liked saying it as well.

_He watched her take her coat off (something he was still uncomfortable with but that she wouldn't let him do –she had declined his offer to help all the other times before)._ 

_"I appreciate the gesture but I appreciate me doing it even more," she had told him with a smirk. As much as he thoroughly followed the etiquette, he was respectful of her preferences, regardless of how unusual they often were, even more._

_He sat after she did and he gazed silently as her eyes roamed around the room. Natalie always seemed to take in every detail of her surroundings wherever she was, her eager pupils disclosing a_
combination of innate wariness and sheer curiosity.

"No notebook, today?" he asked eventually. At every meeting, and ever since the very first time she
had walked up to him after the show, Natalie had always brought along a leather book in which she
wrote notes during their discussions. She never wrote much he had noticed and he was quite
appreciative of her ability to store up so much information in her head.

She smiled at him, her eye twinkling with audaciousness. "I didn't open it the last two times we met. I
reckoned it was time to take the leap and leave it at home."

His lips tucked into a smile and mirrored her expression. It was true they couldn't fool anyone: the
last meetings they had been more social than professional. Their dialogues had naturally drifted into
casual conversations. He couldn't quite explain how but it was like Natalie always knew which
direction to take to keep the discussion flowing naturally, continually triggering his easiness at
conversing like a close friend of many years would. She made him comfortable as if she knew which
roads to take to reach this point.

A sudden and quite alarming thought emerged.

"Does it mean the interview is over?" he asked politely when really, it wasn't quite what he cared to
know.

Natalie gazed at him intently. "Do you mean are we going to keep seeing each other?"

A bashful smile rose his lips as he looked away furtively.

Her eyes probed him silently and he could swear he saw a glimpse of endearment flash by. "I
believe I answered your question two meetings ago."

And her reply couldn't have made him happier, and probably beyond what he could sensibly
explain.

Steve had been waiting in the light corridor for several minutes. He had phoned several days ago to
forewarn the medical staff of his visit. To rectify, he had called to know if it was safe and reasonable
to see Peggy knowing the shock it would be for her. They had rung him back soon after saying that
her family wanted and approved of this reunion as it was the right thing to do by her.

Her daughter, accompanied by a doctor, had broken the news to her and again the following days as
a repeated reminder in a way to avoid any emotional shock when she would see him in the flesh.

"Mrs. Carter," the nurse was speaking softly. "Your friend Steve is here. You remember we talked
about it, do you? He's waiting right outside the door."

"I know what you said and I heard the frozen in the ice story just about enough," an elderly and yet
familiar voice answered and it made his heart quicken. She sounded dubious. "But I'll only believe it
when I see it. So how about you let him come in before he ages and becomes just as old as I?"

The door opened and the nurse invited him in with a gentle nod of the head. Steve felt his heart
tighten as he made one step forward after the other into the room. The first thing he noticed was a
bouquet of pink lilies put on the table in the corner of the room and the subtle scent of vanilla. He
then caught sight of her pale and thin fingers impatiently roaming over the sheet, then the back of her
head as he walked further in, her white hair elegantly brushed into soft waves.
He wanted to say something—anything, but the painful lump in his throat kept him mute.

She slowly turned her head to the direction of her visitor and a few seconds followed during which she seemed to process the sight in front of her. He saw straight in her eyes when she eventually did, and it was also the moment a high-pitched sob escaped her lips.

He clutched the flowers he was holding tight and tried to make up his earnest smile but the envy just wasn't there. Peggy's features contorted into a twitch of sheer pain as her bottom lip started to tremble beyond control and her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Steve," she sobbed, a tear rolling down her cheek, then another. "Steve."

Peggy was inconsolable and the nurse, although she expected such a reaction, stepped in to comfort her. Peggy stopped her by gently pressing a hand on her forearm.

"All this time you spent in the ice...all this time lost," she wept uncontrollably, shaking her head. "I'm sorry I didn't look for you. I'm so sorry..."

Steve pursed his lips together as his eyes watered and a tear escaped from the corner and slid down his face while her jerky sobs resonated in the room and echoed in his heart.

"You couldn't know," he voiced out hardly, forcing a way through his tight throat and faking a smile "And I'm alright."

Peggy shut her eyes tight, biting her bottom lip and shook her head slightly as a negative response to his attempt at comforting her. Many decades had gone by but she was still obstinate, and he could tell when Peggy Carter wanted to carry the blame or the guilt of an action upon her shoulders alone.

He turned to the nurse. "Could we...have some time on our own?" he asked politely then he gave her a reassuring nod.

The young woman pouted slightly, casting a glance at her patient with a saddened expression then nodded. "Call me if you need anything," she said quietly before walking off the room.

Once the sound of her footsteps faded away all was left was a heavy silence interrupted here and then by Peggy's soft sobs. Steve put his flowers at the foot of the bed and walked up to her.

"It's good to see you, Peggy," he said with a heartfelt smile after sitting on the chair by her bedside.

The smile that rose to her lips meddled with her crying expression. "It's good to see you, too," she moaned, quickly caught up by a new flood of sobbing. She reached for him and he squeezed her frail, soft hand tight. "But it's been so long," she cried regretfully.

"And I am here, now." He said, stroking the back of her hand softly. Apart from its appearance, it had the same shape and touch than the last time he had held it, one evening of 1944. He felt drowning in regret. It had been so long indeed since the last time he had felt her touch, seen her face and heard her voice; and his heart still tickled at the remembrance of these young memories which were now so far away. His heart glowed again actually as the feelings he once had for her—and that he still carried now with him and on until the very end—although they had shifted at some point along the way (and part of him would always remain wistful about the lost potential of a romantic relationship), were aroused again at this very moment. He cared deeply for Peggy and would continue to do so until his very last breath, and it became a blinding and undisputable certainty.

"Forgive me for not coming earlier," he whispered softly. "I won't let you go again," he said and she brushed the side of his face with tenderness and in homage of the happy ending they could have had.
if everything had been different.

"I guess that makes us two," she smiled at last and the silence which followed filled their long overdue reunion with grace and perfection.

A couple of hours later, silence had long gone and made room for eager catching up. Peggy told Steve about her, about her career, her children and grandchildren and progressively the heartfelt smile that was on her lips eventually reached her eyes as her pupils twinkled at the tale of her well-fulfilled life.

Clutching her wrist, she stopped midway in her sentence and furrowed her brows. Her eyes then patrolled across the room.

"My watch," she said. "Where is it?"

Steve frowned in surprise. "Your watch?" he repeated.

She patted her hands all over the bed. "Suzie, my nurse, keeps misplacing it and it has great sentimental value," she said, sounding slightly grumpy. Steve reached for the bedside cabinet and opened the drawer. An old, brown leather watch was neatly lying next to a book. He picked it up and showed it to her. Peggy's face immediately lit up in relief. She hurriedly took it and clutched it in her fist.

"Howard brought it to me from Switzerland as a gift after S.H.I.E.L.D had officially been founded—and also to replace my favorite gadget watch which I had to get rid of because it was permeated with radioactive gamma energy. Howard's doing."

A smile rose in the corner of his mouth. "Sounds like quite a story," he said.

Peggy chuckled like a young child would. It warmed his heart to see the years hadn't stripped her off of her joie de vivre. "Howard never deprived me of the thrill of a good adventure. And I loved it...although I never said out loud."

"You've had a wonderful life," he said with a smile. "I couldn't be happier."

Peggy paused and looked at him affectionately. "I just wish you had yours, too."

He shrugged casually. "Children, a family. I don't think I was ever cut out for it anyway."

Peggy let out an amused chuckle. "You are still a terrible liar."

He snorted quietly. It seemed she knew him just as much as he knew her, although he wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. There was a time he longed for his own family, certain it was what would make him happy, but then everything had changed. He had lost the yearning without even realizing and now it just seemed pointless to even try to get it back.

"I guess it is no longer relevant," he concluded musingly. He was ready to accept it and as a matter-of-fact, he had accepted it for a longer time than he was probably aware.

"Steve, I want you to have everything that was taken away from you seventy years ago. Your and Bucky's return is nothing short of miraculous. It is your right—and your duty—to live it to the fullest."

"Yeah, it's just...it's difficult to move on when it means leaving everything and everyone I knew behind."
"And you don't have to. One can go with the other. You can carry all this with you but without letting it become an obstacle or a burden." She added after a pause. "Did you find everybody...as you found me?"

He nodded stealthily.

"Even her?" Peggy asked as she eyed him closely. "Your journalist friend...Natalie."

His body stiffened at the sound of her name coming from Peggy's lips.

"No," he murmured as he looked away so that Peggy wouldn't read any emotion that he wouldn't have been able to conceal in spite of his effort.

"I'm sorry," Peggy answered eventually with a soft, nearly motherly voice. "I relate to the pain and the disarray you must be in –I've been there."

Her words intrigued him and he turned to gaze at her. She looked back at him with kindness and serenity. He shook his head, looking down, trying not to disclose something that would hurt her feelings. "It's just...I mean it's-"

"Do you still want to play this game? After all this time?" Peggy snorted. Her laughter was stripped off any form of resentment or bitterness; she was just genuinely amused by the situation that was unfolding here. "You cared for her. I get that. I always knew that."

She looked pensively at the white wall in front of her. "From the moment I saw you at the bar with her," she finished. "And it just continued to amplify from there."

He looked at her closely –cautiously—feeling ashamed. Not ashamed for developing feelings for Natalie but ashamed for not sparing Peggy's.

"We don't have to talk about her," he started bashfully. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

She smiled again. "I got married, I had children and grandchildren. We have gone past uncomfortable, don't you think?"

She cast a tender look on him.

"I'm sorry...," he started.

"Only you can apologize for something only your heart has control over," she said amusingly taking the whole matter more lightly than he was, but after all, it only felt like a few weeks ago for him when seventy years had gone by for Peggy. She then turned pensive. "You are just as self-righteous as I recalled and it warms my heart," she mused aloud. "When I founded S.H.I.E.L.D. it was because I wanted to carry your legacy and fight for truth and justice as you would have if you had still been here, and when I left S.H.I.E.L.D it was because I had found people ready to take over."

He listened attentively.

"I had lost you twice. First to another woman and then to death. My husband, God rest his soul, gave me more love than any woman could ever receive, and S.H.I.E.L.D was a means to keeping your memory alive." She paused. "But it's all over now."

Peggy had a wistful look, as every time she had mentioned S.H.I.E.L.D. She clearly cared for it in a deeper way than he had expected.
Her face suddenly changed as if she seemed to recall something that had slipped her mind.

"Where is my watch?" she asked, looking befuddled and glancing at the bedside cabinet. "It was a present from Howard."

Her eyes ran across the room again. "I keep telling Suzie to be more careful with it but she always misplaces it."

"I think you were holding it in your hand," Steve said softly.

Peggy shook her head vehemently. "No, I wasn't. I think Suzie misplaced it again."

She sounded annoyed, but mostly, she sounded alarmed.

"It's probably somewhere on your bed," he spoke soothingly but it didn't help decrease the panic that was quickly overtaking her. He started patting the blanket.

"It's not here. Why would it be here?" she cried and he searched for the watch more hastily. A sob slipped between her lips. "This is all I have left," she moaned as she began to wriggle in her bed.

Steve heard a quiet thud and looked down. The watch was lying on the light blue fitted carpet. He bent down and reached for it.

Peggy's disarrayed expression turned into one of sheer relief that could only be explained by her old age, and yet that was how she felt. The relief and satisfaction she was feeling right now were just as strong as the anguish she was in a few seconds earlier.

"Thank you," she murmured with the most earnest tone and held the watch dearly against her chest. "Howard brought it to me from Switzerland to celebrate the official launching of S.H.I.E.L.D," she repeated again but with the same intonation as if she was saying it for the first time. What pained him was that she was totally oblivious of it. "We were...so proud," she recalled vividly, a merry grin coming up to her lips. "It was like we were finally honoring Steve. We never made a decision without gauging first if it was what Captain America would do."

Peggy was deep in her memories looking blankly in front of her although it seemed she acknowledged a presence by her bedside. "I just wish...," she paused as her expression turned more melancholic. "I wish Steve knew. I wish he knew that I never let go of him, that I never forgot him."

His eyes watered and his pupils quivered as he gazed at the emptiness in her expression that let him know her mind was no longer present in the room with him. He swallowed hard as he both cherished Peggy's commitment to their common history and felt guilt over disappearing out of her life so abruptly.

"Peggy," he called in an effort to reach for her mind and pull her back. "I'm here."

Her head moved slowly and he watched her expression literally drift back to reality. "Of course you are!" she exclaimed naturally with a lighter expression and he recognized the Peggy from the beginning. She showed no awareness of her absence from a minute ago.

It crushed him in a way he didn't even know it existed, however, he didn't disclose any sign of it. His mind wandered and pictured young Peggy relentlessly devoting herself to a relationship of which one half was missing. Peggy had done right by him beyond time and reason, and for that, he could never repay her enough.

But most importantly he realized how S.H.I.E.L.D embodied her whole and unshakeable
commitment. It wasn't just an intel organization, it was the extension of their common fight for freedom and justice and the continuation of their relationship if fate hadn't come between them. And it also embodied who he was back in the 40s, a soldier who fought for freedom.

"Tell Bucky he owes me a visit," she said with an amused smile carrying on with the casual conversation they were having a few moments ago.

Steve reached for her hand and held it tenderly between his. "Peg," he started. "I will look after S.H.I.E.L.D. for you. It will be my honor to carry out the fight you have fought for so many years."

Would he have joined S.H.I.E.L.D. if it hadn't been for his plane crash? Most certainly. It was logical that he would do now the thing he hadn't been given the chance to achieve. He would honor Peggy as she did him. And neither agent Romanoff's presence, nor Natalie's haunting memory that would ensue could be a big enough obstacle to achieving this.

S.H.I.E.L.D once represented Steve to Peggy, and it represented Peggy to him now. He would serve for S.H.I.E.L.D like she was the one still running it.

Peggy looked surprised then a smile rose to her lips. He smiled back and gently pressed the back of her hand against his mouth and gave it a soft kiss.

This same afternoon, he called Director Fury to say he was in.
Steve and Bucky had officially become members of S.H.I.E.L.D. for two weeks, and Steve had been trying to casually get information from Natasha for nearly just as long. But Natasha had been tenacious and unbreakable, deflecting any question that was getting too personal slickly and craftily.

"So...do you have...any family around here?"

"Depends on what you call family," she had answered with a smirk.

"But surely you have people you care about, don't you?"

"Why Rogers? Eager to know if you're on that list?"

Or also.

"Where are you from?"

"You know, here and there. I have lived in so many different places, I have had so many aliases that home is both everywhere and nowhere."

"But you're Russian, aren't you?"

"I was for a while," she had said with a slightly amused look.

"And your parents? Your family? All Russians?"

"You know, I don't exactly have a family tree on a wall of my apartment."

"So it isn't completely impossible that someone from your family was American?"

"And they say life is not full of surprises," she had concluded ironically.

"I give up for now," Steve sighed as he let himself fall down in the chair at the refectory right across Bucky, who was eating his lunch. No further explanation was needed, he knew immediately what Steve was talking about.

"You can't give up!" he said.

Steve shook his head, looking at the strange meal his best friend was having, a combination of lasagne, French fries, coleslaw, and onion rings. Bucky was unstoppable and eager to catch up on all the seventy years of cuisine he had missed. "She's a hard shell."

Bucky's look turned serious. "Leave her to me," he said determinedly. "I'll crack that hard shell of hers."

Steve furrowed his brows. "Why does it sound like a bad idea?" he feigned to muse.
“You want your information—and hell I want it too—so just let me handle this. You just stay quiet and watch.”

Steve agreed, mildly curious about the approach his friend would use, but mostly confident it would be a beautiful disaster. The next day, Director Fury was holding a meeting. At the end of it, he sent Steve, Bucky, and Natasha on a reconnaissance mission.

The three of them were now getting prepared on the jet flying them to the location. This was the moment Bucky chose to start his own reconnaissance mission.

"So Romanoff," he started casually but with a tone of voice that failed to conceal his determination.

"Barnes," she answered casually as she checked the magazine was full then swiftly slid it back into her gun.

"How long have you been in the U.S for?"

"A while," she answered concisely and with an obvious lack of interest.

Bucky nodded and an apparent pout showed on his face. Steve, sitting by the side, shot him an expressive glance.

"And did you leave your family in Russia?" he inquired again fuelled by the desire to prove his best friend's glance wrong.

Natasha remained mute an extra second more than she normally would. "My family history is pretty common and boring, Sergeant."

"Okay, so you won't mind sharing it, then," he answered back with a shrug and an arched eyebrow.

Natasha reached for her Black Widow's bites and pressed a button. A blue electrical spark surged with a spooky noise (of which they had often witnessed the effects of the electrical discharge it made) while she gave it a close and intent look and it seemed the jet went quieter than a moment ago. "I'm Russian and so is my family," she spoke soberly, clutching the bracelets around her wrists.

"All your family?" Bucky asked challengingly. She turned and looked at him with a curious look. He pouted again. "You don't happen to have some family you may not know about that could have lived in...let's say, New York."

Natasha didn't look unsettled to the least. A smirk rose to her lips. "By definition, if I don't know about it then I can't answer."

Steve watched the whole scene quietly, as promised, but not for the reason his best friend would imagine. The truth was he was too highly entertained to say anything, literally sitting on the edge of his seat to find out how this verbal jousting would unfold next.

Bucky felt Natasha closing up. His expression slowly shifted and became more relaxed and less antagonizing.

"I mean," he let out a laugh, "I just found out I got family in Europe. Turned out one of my brother's son got married to a Scottish girl and he moved to Glasgow with her. And their daughter is a sales rep and got a job in Munich."

True story here. Bucky had finally taken a look at the containing all the intel of his family files S.H.I.E.L.D. have given him after the battle of New York. His older brother had passed away about
fifteen years ago and the younger one was living with his family in Massachusetts. The former was the one whose son and daughter lived in Europe. Bucky had just paid a visit to the latter the weekend before and he was now waiting to be introduced to his nephews, nieces and their own families.

Natasha smiled a little. Her face softened and she seemed to put her guard down. Steve watched, sort of amazed by his friend's cleverly-executed ability to get himself a way out of Natasha's web.

"All I'm saying is…maybe you have some family that was originally from here."

Steve rolled his eyes. Of course, Bucky would not give up so easily. Natasha's friendly face faded fast.

"Well, there isn't," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Such as?" She asked more hardly.

"I don't know," Bucky feigned to shrug numbly. "Someone like your grandmother? Or her estranged twin sister who would have had an anonymous life in America working as umm a secretary…or a journalist. Have you tried to look more into it?"

Steve lifted his hand up to cover his face and sighed quietly, he then silenced himself by pressing his finger against his lips. The whole situation was awkward, and most of all, utterly embarrassing. Natasha was staring with a similar expression.

"Into what? An unknown great aunt who would be my grandmother's secret twin who was stranded in America? No, I gotta say it never crossed my mind."

"Obviously, this is all just a thought thrown out there," Bucky added with a snort to discredit what he had just said.

"Obviously," she repeated but a hint of suspicion lingered on in the tone of her voice.

"Are you naturally red-haired, by the way?" Bucky started again, relentless. "This is quite a vivid shade of red so I wondered if it was something running in your f-

"Bucky," Steve rushed in, pressing a hand on his shoulder as a way to restrain his friend from voicing out any more word. "Wanna come and give me a hand with the equipment?"

Bucky was surrounded, physically trapped by Steve and captured under Natasha's intent look. He looked into her eyes for an extra couple of seconds in order to catch any hint that would help him say she was lying or hiding something, then he eventually surrendered and walked to the back of the jet with his friend.

"The hell?" Steve whispered hardly.

"I almost had her on the ropes," he whispered back with just as much vehemence. "I was so close."

"No, you weren't. The only thing you were close to was to get in her radar."

Bucky sighed and folded his arms over his chest, looking away. When he eventually looked up at Steve again, his expression was stern.

"Her likeness with Nat can't be a coincidence and we both know it," he said more thoughtfully but sounding more determined.
"But seriously, the secret twin story? That was just insane." Steve exclaimed, then lowered his voice again.

"You would rather I broke it to her it is very likely you had a romance with her grandmother?" Bucky retorted, raising an eyebrow.

It had the knack to shut him up.

"We're not even sure they're related at all," he sighed.

"I don't exactly believe in doppelgangers, Steve."

"It doesn't matter for now. We're not telling her anything until we find more data on Natalie."

Bucky grunted to express his discontent.

"Fine, but I don't like it." He said, putting words on his previous groan in case it hadn't been clearly understood then he walked off.

He never tried to worm something out of Natasha again.

One of the perks of joining S.H.I.E.L.D was that Steve had open access to unlimited intel. He spent many hours of the evening after work searching for any trace of Natalie.

Fury had said the truth about Natalie's supposed home address, it was a dead end. There was no record, no letting contract of a Natalie Rushman being a lodger in the residence. And there was no trace of an article or interview of him published in a newspaper that could have been written by her, either.

He tried everything. He went with the hypothesis that she had indeed lied about her last name and proceeded to go through any newspaper article signed by a female journalist called Natalie, regardless of what the family name could be. After days of research, this turned out to be a dead end, too. None of the Natalie details he found matched his.

Sitting his desk for long hours, his fingers hovered above the keyboard but remained still, his mind desperately seeking any detail from the past that would point him a direction in which he could start investigating.

One afternoon in the office, an agent knocked at the door and walked in with some paperwork to sign. As he walked back to the door, he halted, took a deep breath and turned to face him.

"Captain. One of these days, if you don't mind of course, would you mind signing a photograph of you from one of your USO evening shows? My father took it," he said proudly.

"Of course," Steve smiled. He hadn't thought of his USO tour in a while, and as the agent left the room, he was hit by a thought.

Natalie had attended quite a few of his shows and these evenings were always an opportunity for photographers to snap pictures. Maybe, if he went through all the photos ever taken during his shows, just maybe, he could find a photograph where Natalie would appear.

It would not help him find her but it would quench his undying need of seeing her face again a little. One single photograph, even the blurriest, would help to soothe the loss of her portrait.

He relentlessly looked through all the archives of the USO and even asked help from a data agent to
find even more photos. The same agent came to the office the next day saying he had found the
address of the USO national tour official photographer. He had called his family who had promised
they would send all the films they would find.

It was a wonky lead but it was still the strongest he had had since the beginning. His heart glowed
with the hope this new lead could be productive although it would never fulfill his need for answers
regarding Natalie.

"Where are you?" he whispered musingly to himself.

"Knock, knock," a familiar voice rang out amusingly and it aroused all his senses. He looked toward
the door where Natasha was standing and his body unnoticeably tensed in his seat (as it always did
somewhat whenever he caught a glimpse of her).

She walked into the office and *innocently* let her eyes wander about the room, taking on every detail
they could find. An old spy habit of hers, probably.

"'Knock, knock', that's what you said too back in the time, didn't you?" she asked absently, her
fingers sliding along all the medals and titles he had earned posthumously and which were now
hanging on the walls, into nice wooden and golden frames. "Or did you people not have doors yet?"

Steve smirked lightly, shaking his head. Natasha had made it her own little entertainment to tease him
on his old age.

"What can I do for you, Romanoff?" he asked.

They had naturally quit calling each other by their ranks as they had grown acquainted but nothing
more personal yet. He still found it difficult to call her by her first name, not only because they hadn't
known each other for more than a month, but mostly because it sounded too similar to Natalie.
Calling her Romanoff was still the easiest way to keep a certain emotional distance with her.

"Simple. I came here so you can answer this one question: what are you doing here?" she asked,
strolling around his desk. "Fury gave you the day off today, remember? Why are you spending it in
this veterans memorial museum?" She pointed at the posthumous medals with a raised eyebrow and
a teasing smirk. "Nobody's ever told you it looks very macabre in here? How do you keep the taste
for life after sitting here all day?"

"I saw your office and it doesn't exactly inspire thrill for life either. It looks like an armory."

"You know me. Better safe than sorry. Plus, I like the smell of napalm in the morning," she added
with a smug smile.

He looked at her silently, slightly frowning in confusion. She waved her hand at him. "Don't worry,
I'll show you the film."

"Sounds like a terrible movie," he said under his breath.

"I won't tell anyone you said that," she whispered suavely then propped her hands on the desk and
leaned over toward him eyeing him closely. It felt like an intrusion in his personal space and in his
intimacy and he stiffened a little. "Slightly pale skin, barely colored lips, haggard look," she voiced
her diagnosis with a stern expression but with the hint of smirk tucked in her lips. "You need a
doughnut."

The tone of her voice sounded firm and definite like a doctor who would have just given his
diagnosis. She stood straight back up and took a step back.
He looked at her with a visible frown on the face. He thought she had forgotten about the promise she had made back during the battle of New York or that she had only said that in the heat of the action without really meaning it.

She headed to the coatrack by the corner and grabbed his leather jack. "Come on Cap, time to take a bite of life. Literally."

She smiled to herself, smug with her pun and it amused him. She was the only former-assassin he had ever heard of who was so fond of little jokes. It couldn't help but find this other side of her endearing in a way.

She held the jacket out to him, her head tilted to the side, with a playful smirk plastered on her lips. Maybe he could put Natalie aside for today to spend some time with Natasha instead. He rose to his feet and took the jacket.

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Steve and Natasha were strolling in Central Park, each holding their doughnut into a napkin.

"I can't believe you drove us all the way from D.C. to try this doughnut," Steve said, an amused smile playing on his lips.

Fine, she had a Corvette, but it had still taken a good three hours.

"As I said, it is the best," she answered casually, not trying to justify herself. "And now I am sure you won't be tempted to go back to the Triskelion."

The sun was shining high in the sky and it was indeed a beautiful day to spend out of the office. Spending it with Natasha made it an undeniable bonus.

She headed to the bench and he followed.

"So, what do you think?" she asked, casting a glance at his doughnut after they had both sat down.

The corner of his mouth rose into a smirk. "I gotta say it definitely raises my grade for this century to a good seven."

She arched an eyebrow, obviously content with the answer.

"But what was your rating before? I can't appreciate the value of my doughnut if I don't know the initial grade."

Steve shook his head. "That I'm not telling you."

"Oh, back at it again with secrets," she said nonchalantly. She then rubbed her hands together off to remove the crumbs, put her legs up and tucked them under herself before looking at him intently.

"How were the 40s like?" she asked. "Tell me about it. I don't think I would have liked it. The war propaganda, the more obvious sexism, the fedoras and suspenders, and those awful puffy hairstyles that women had to put up with. I wouldn't have borne spending a single day."

He looked at her curiously. "What do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Tell me something I wouldn't find in any History book."

He probed her for a little while, trying to pierce through the game she intended to play, but he didn't find anything. Natasha was genuinely interested in knowing more about his past life, and about
himself, he liked to believe. "The vibe felt different," he said and shrugged with one shoulder. "Not better or worse. Just different. The technology wasn't as advanced as it is now but it didn't keep us from living fast. People weren't so cynical: they believed in the American dream and in freedom. Finding a dollar on the street was an omen of good fortune coming ahead; a random encounter could be the start of a promising friendship. We certainly weren't perfect. We were flawed in more than one way but we were still hopeful, even during a time of war."

"Interesting," she said musingly. It seemed she gave credit to his statement without condition as if she knew he would not have said what he said if it had not been true or valid. "But I still wouldn't have lasted more than a day. And you would probably not have enjoyed my company. You would have found me too cynical for your liking."

He laughed lightly. "Is that so?"

Somewhat, he did not agree with her. Natasha was a chameleon, she could naturally morph herself to fit any unfamiliar environment or entice any person. It was very likely she would have fitted in the 40s. Survival Instinct.

"Who are you missing, Rogers?" she asked eventually. Her voice was soft and soothing. Her straight-forward question took him by surprise.

He eyed her carefully.

"What do you mean?"

Natasha bent closer, leaning on her elbows which were propped on her knees.

"You're clearly nostalgic and you're a people person. Barnes is here with you and yet you keep saying 'we' as if part of you was still back there. I conclude you left someone you cared about behind."

Touché. Big time.

Romanoff could act casual but her natural instincts always kicked in (unless they were never away). She had read through him with an unsettling easiness like she did with everybody else. He hadn't even realized how obviously melancholic he sounded until she had pointed it out. The forties were and would always be close to his heart but he was the type of person to find a home in people. The geographical location was secondary. New York never felt more like home than when it meant coming back to Natalie; and flying back to Europe always felt like exile. Home was all those evenings he spent with her and Bucky at a venue.

"I left many people I cared about behind," he said conclusively.

Natasha observed him quietly. She seemed unconvinced but she dropped it anyway because it was the right thing to do. She was the kind of person who liked to put people on the edge to see what they got, then it was her decision whether to push them or pull them away.

"I would have thought Captain America was the kind who liked to play honesty games," she spoke with a hoarse voice, slightly smirking.

He turned his head to look at her.

"Not if I'm the only one playing it," he answered simply without any accusative undertone.

She shook her head and smirked sassily, unabashedly. "I don't do that. You're asking too much."
He gazed at her intently. "I never ask from someone more than what I know they can give me."

Her cheeky expression faded somehow, replaced by some certain form of astonishment, as if she was genuinely surprised, given her past and her nature, to be perceived as someone who could one day become entirely honest and trustworthy.

"I never give my trust first, Rogers. Or anything for that matter." There was no cheekiness this time, no boldness. This was the first time she was being truthful with him, even if it was to forewarn him not to expect her to be truthful again any time in the near or far future. If it was true they had learned to trust each other in missions, it was premature to expect the same on a personal level.

And at this instant, he distinguished a difference—a wide difference—between her and Natalie. Natalie had given him her trust first, she was the one whose natural sincerity kindled their relationship and strengthened the bond they had. Things would not have gone the way they had if she had been wary (as Romanoff was now) and if she had not consistently established a candid connection between them. She had readily offered him her trust and it was what had made him want to mirror it. She had opened up to him and he had opened up back and she hadn't been afraid to do so. And here it was the other way around; he would have to be the one opening up first if he wanted Natasha to open up back.

He understood what Bucky meant when he said she would appreciate his honesty better.

"It's okay. I'm not pushing you," he said.

Her playful smirk came on again. "But saying you're not pushing me is kind of pushing me to hurry, you feel me?"

"You're feeling pressured? Good," he teased back.

She looked at him appreciatively, showing signs she was enjoying the natural banter between them.

The rest of the conversation went naturally—nothing deep or serious but a pleasant, casual discussion nevertheless. Time flew and he realized it was the first time he was enjoying himself with someone other than Bucky.

There came a moment where they quit talking or bantering, and she turned to watch a man and his dog pass by in front of them. He looked at her, and as a warm sunray shimmered over her face in this flawless moment of silence, he found it difficult not to admire her beauty the way he used to do with Natalie when she wasn't looking.

Thus he drifted his gaze away.

When the man and his dog eventually disappeared down the path, she slowly turned her head to him and, looking serene, slowly parted her lips.

"Why were you staring at me the first day we met? And why are you still doing it from time to time?"

He understood they had reached the time when Natasha would want to get an answer to the question she had asked back on the first day on the jet. She had waited, postponed it, but now she wanted to know. Maybe because the reasons why she asked the question had changed between then and now; maybe because she was driven by genuine interest this time and not just curiosity.

He swallowed discreetly and felt his heartbeat quickened as he remembered Bucky's advice. Natasha, more than anyone else, deserved the truth.
"You remind me of someone I used to know," he answered softly, hardly. He fought hard to conceal the emotion that made his pupils quiver.

Natasha squinted her eyes, openly probing him with a dubious expression. When she found nothing but sincerity from his part, her features softened and the corner of her lips rose into a smirk.

"You know, it's funny. I've never heard that one before," she said, sounding genuinely amused. "Men usually tell me they've never met a woman like me."

She didn't sound like she was gloating to the least. On the contrary, she sounded like someone blasé of hearing the same words coming from all men. He didn't doubt she had heard it many times during cover missions.

"I had never met a woman like her," he answered.

Peggy had also been a woman unlike any other, being a woman worth a dozen men. She had impressed him, she had astounded him. But Natalie had swept him off his feet like the fiercest tornado without making any show of force. She could not fight like a man, she could not fight or lead like Peggy, but her wit and her strong temperament had conquered him all with the force of a military alliance, implacable and formidable.

Yes, he would have without the shadow of doubt admired Natasha for being unlike any woman he knew had he not met Natalie first. And he probably admired Romanoff now because she reminded him of her.

"It must be hard," she murmured sympathetically.

Her likeness (although she probably didn't suspect to what extent). The absence of this woman. Her presence.

Them, here and now in this park.

Them, at S.H.I.E.L.D., every single day.

Natasha seemed to measure the depth of it all and she sympathized greatly.
Hi. Sorry for the delay, I went on a trip to Budapest and Vienna! Anyways, here's the new chapter. I hope you'll enjoy it :)

The next morning, Steve and Bucky were making their way inside S.H.I.E.L.D. facility, greeted as always by all the agents, regardless of their ranks. As they turned around a quiet corridor, Bucky leaned in toward Steve.

"You went on a date with Romanoff?!" he exclaimed with a low voice.

Steve rolled his eyes. "For the hundredth time, it wasn't a date."

"Took you long enough to tell me though," Bucky retorted with an accusative tone. Indeed Steve had waited until they were driving to D.C. to let him know about how he had spent his afternoon the day before.

"For the simple reason I didn't want you to harp on about it for the whole evening. Considering how you've been harassing me with the same question all morning my fears were clearly legitimate," Steve said.

"Well, it's rude! I've always told you how my date nights went."

"And I wish you didn't," Steve commented matter-of-factly, a little smile playing on his lips. "I'm glad this conversation had at least the merit to get this off my chest."

He had to admit his best friend's detailing had decreased through the years, especially compared to their teenage years.

Bucky grunted and shrugged. "Fine, then let's go on with our thing. I'll keep punishing you by telling you all about my dates, and you'll keep punishing me by not spilling a damn thing."

A glorious conclusion to a glorious conversation. Or so Steve thought.

After two minutes, as they stepped out the elevator, Bucky, unable to hold it any longer, went on again.

"A date with Romanoff!"

Steve sighed. This was to linger on forever.

"It wasn't a date."

"Only one way to know," Bucky retorted. "Did you kiss?"

"We ate a doughnut," he said.

Bucky's face slowly morphed into an expression of utter confusion and puzzlement.
"Wait, what?" he hissed, furrowing his brows hard. "Is that a secret code? It's an idiom they use nowadays for something else, isn't it?"

They had just reached the end of a long corridor. Steve slightly turned around, facing his friend, pressed his shoulder against the door and leaned forward to push it open. Only Bucky could come to such a conclusion after an answer as simple as the one he had provided.

He waggled an eyebrow and smirked in silence like the one and only response to Bucky's internal torment. Knowing him, he was sure he would rack his brains over it for at least two days.

He could swear he heard a roar coming from inside his friend's throat as if he was aware of the fate he had just been sentenced to. He shot him a hard and fairly hostile glare.

"You a-," he began to grumble with passion.

"Gentlemen. Morning briefing is about to start," an agent said gently as the door opened on him.

Bucky shushed himself and solemn silence, meant to conceal any trace of the colloquial conversation that had just been interrupted, followed. To Steve's advantage.

"I'm not done yet," Bucky muttered menacingly.

"I'm sure you're not," Steve answered with a nonchalant smile.

They parted, one looking insatiate and frustrated, the other smug and content, and sat in their respective seats, then they regularly threw each other eloquent glances across the large, rectangular table for the whole duration of the meeting.

Bucky had a visible frown on his forehead throughout the different agent's presentations, a finger pressed against his temple as he evidently tried to figure out how the afternoon out with Romanoff had gone.

And the afternoon had gone fine, even after Steve had revealed the truth to her. Although it could have (rightfully) made her uneasy, she had remained natural and surprisingly understanding. She had not asked any further question (not even a name) as she had supposed that this woman who she looked like was in all probability the person he was missing. She had not asked to what extent their likeness stretched, probably to preserve herself from finding out something she would not like, but she had assumed their similarity was striking enough to have caused such strong reactions from him and Bucky.

Natasha had put on a smile because she had noticed his had faded and she had naturally slipped to another topic. So adroitly, so easily, that he had gone along readily without realizing what she had done until a few minutes later when their conversation had resumed to light-hearted banters.

Director Fury paid them an unexpected visit.

"Something happened yesterday night at the National Bank," Fury started sternly as soon as he reached the front of the table, standing straight and square.

"What is it?" Bucky said, intrigued, at long last turning his attention away from Steve and Romanoff, at last, to concentrate on the latest hot news.

"It's a place—supposedly safe—where people can store their money. You know those pieces of green paper you carry in your pocket and that strangely allow you to get any item when you hand them in exchange?" Natasha commented casually not detaching her eyes from the file she was
browsing through.

She knocked the folder onwards on the table to look at Bucky with her lips tucked into a smirk. He stared back at her with an apathetic expression.

"Hilarious, Romanoff," he said flatly.

Her playful expression was unapologetic.

"Well, we have got 10 million of these pieces of green paper missing," Fury commented. "We think a Cuban terrorist recorded in our Intel could be behind this. I want him found but most importantly I want the money back within the next 72 hours."

"Well that's some realistic expectation," Bucky murmured to Steve under his breath after the meeting ended.

"Don't be mistaken, Barnes—I'm missing an eye, not an ear," Director Fury said sharply as he swiftly walked past between the two friends to his office.

Bucky winced, slightly bothered that this comment would eventually turn against him.

"You're growing on him," a suave voice came from behind them.

Natasha was standing a few feet away, holding her file between two fingers. "It may not seem evident like this but the animosity is Fury's way of expressing affection."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for clearing that up."

She smiled slightly in response then she drifted her eyes to Steve.

"Cap, you're coming with me. Glucose-free expedition this time."

The hint of a smile rose to her lips. It made him instinctively smile back.

"They've just found their car. We need to get there before the police touch the scene."

Steve nodded. "I'll be right there."

She returned the brief nod and walked away nonchalantly.

When Steve turned to his friend, Bucky was openly displaying a look of utter shock and consuming curiosity.

"What's going on between you two?"

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Do you like her?"

This question took him by surprise. He frowned deeply and shook his head.

"I don't…I don't see her that way."

Natasha undeniably looked like the woman he loved and who would take his breath away every time she had walked into the room. It was also indisputable that he had been attracted to Natalie beyond reason; not a minute had gone by during which he hadn't craved for her voluptuous lips and her soft
skin—and his whole body had ignited that day outside the cinema when she had given him her goodbye kiss.

But it was because Natasha looked exactly like this woman he had loved and desired that he could not—and could never—feel the same way about her. By definition, falling for Natasha would mean staining Natalie's memory. And this was a thought he could not tolerate. Morally, it was wrong, and he could possibly not fall for Natasha for the same reasons he had for Natalie.

"Well, you're the only man on this planet who doesn't see her 'that way'. Why? Are you—" Bucky froze for a second, his eyes progressively widening as a thought took shape inside his mind. He seemed to have been hit by a realization. He squeezed Steve's shoulder tight. "Are you afraid you might be Romanoff's parent!?"

Steve's eyebrows furrowed hard. "What are you…talking about?" he voiced out slowly with a confused expression.

Bucky's response was simply to gawk back at him. "You and Natalie…I mean if you two…you know?…things happen quickly…and maybe she didn't tell you or she found out after she left…Yeah, that would be definitely icky if you liked your own-"


Bucky did not seem convinced, ready to list out all the arguments that would make his theory valid.

"It's not even a probability," Steve summed it up shortly although in retrospect the thought of it having happened and what it could mean for Natasha rose goosebumps at the back of his neck. Bucky still looked unconvinced.

Steve let out a deep breath and lowered his voice slightly. "We didn't…"

Bucky's mouth took the shape of a perfect, smooth circle, genuinely surprised. "Really? Not even once?"

Steve answered with a straight face, silently exhorting him to let it go.

Bucky had an expression of sheer disappointment.

"What a waste…," he muttered staring at blank, pensive, sounding almost grumpy. And that was the end of this awkward conversation.

Less than thirty minutes later, Steve and Natasha had arrived at the scene to search the vehicle used by the robbers. The black SUV was half on the sidewalk, the bumper crashed into an electrical pole.

After a long talk where they had to make the FBI yield, they let them access the restricted area to investigate.

"Don't make our boss text your boss and let the awkward ensue, gentlemen." Natasha had said with a feigned (but mocking) smile and a firm voice. And soon they had been let in.

Steve opened the front door and leaned in to search for clues. His eyes went across the dashboard, the front and back seats and then the mats. He slid his hand between the two front seats then underneath. He opened the ashtray, found it empty then closed it again.

Natasha opened the passenger's door and searched inside the glove compartment. She pulled two
matchbooks out and held them up in front of her face to have a look.

"Anything?" he asked as he roamed his hand over the compartment under the wheel.

"The usual. Our robbers also happen to be pigs. The matches come from two strip clubs," she said casually, opening the lids and checking the content.

"Shocker," Steve commented. It reminded him of all those police movies he had watched that somehow always included at least one scene in a strip club.

"Those two clubs are quite low-key and only accept regulars and VIPs. Needless to say, the name and the wallet are the only things that can get you in," she went on.

"Do I want to know how you know so much about D.C. strip clubs?" he asked with a little smirk on while patting the driver's seat.

He shot a glimpse at Natasha who simply smirked back. "You probably don't," she answered suavely.

He smiled and drifted his attention back to the searching.

"I can send Jordan and Ramirez there," Natasha said after a pause.

He shook his head. "That will be a dead end."

She slightly tilted her head and shot him an inquisitive look.

"The ashtray is perfectly clean—untouched actually—, the seats have no smell of tobacco and the matchbooks are clearly new. It's just a diversion."

She looked at him for a little while, appreciative of his deduction skills.

"For anything, we can 'offer' them the lead—get them off our backs," he said, swiftly throwing a glance out the front window to the two F.B.I agents who were standing a few feet away as a continuous reminder of their physical presence and as a way to mark their territory.

Natasha smirked. "I'm upset you got the idea first," she said.

He leaned forward inside the car to get closer to her and show his searching was over.

"What do you think?" he asked, looking around them to specify he meant the case.

She smiled and unnoticeably leaned closer too. She seemed to be enjoying how he turned this investigation into another form of banter in which she was fully included.

"Clearly a stage. No brake trail on the road, the airbags didn't come out and I would say the car body could easily be fixed and for cheap if you know the right address," she made a short pause and the corner of her mouth rose slightly. "It didn't even ruffle their hair."

"So they deliberately crashed into the pole and left the car here on purpose," Steve went on tit for tat, agreeing with everything that had just been said. "Where is the street heading?"

"The freeway to get out of town is only a few blocks down," she answered.

"And what's up the road in an eight miles radius?" he asked after mentally assessing the weight the bags of money would have.
"Just a few residential streets and the docks."

"Let's try the docks, then. They steal the money, stage an accident with their car in a convenient location to lead the police on a fake trail then they walk with their bags somewhere they can hide until the whole frenzy dies down a little." Steve said. "There's no harm in checking."

Natasha probed him curiously. "You think they'd be hiding a few miles away from this crime scene?"

"If I learned anything since I woke up and after meeting Loki it's that criminals are all the same. And luckily for us, they're not very smart –especially when they think they are."

They shared a knowing smile and pulled out of the car, standing straight back up. They left the doors open and walked around the SUV to meet at the front where the two agents were waiting with folded arms and sulky pouts.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Natasha rubbed it in and it took a great deal for Steve not to let a smile show. "The car is all yours."

She held her arm up and opened her palm. "As a peace offering," she said, revealing the matchbooks.

The two agents unfolded their arms and grunted slightly but still loud enough to make their discontent known and accepted the gift (which they considered was rightly due to them anyway had they not been put aside in the first place).

Twenty minutes later, they were walking along the docks. There was no car or trace of activity but again this was what they expected anyway. They hadn't called for backup because again there was no evidence whatsoever they would find anyone there.

They reach an isolated warehouse and got in. Officially, they were not on reconnaissance and it showed in their gait, but they still remained on their guards.

"I still say it's too easy," Natasha spoke in a low voice. "Back when I was an assassin I never would have made such a dumb mistake."

"And this is why you didn't stay one very long."

He glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. They never talked about her past, all he knew was only what S.H.I.E.L.D wanted him to know. Natasha's official record was very slim and he was vaguely familiar with her professional reconversion. He hadn't asked for further details because there wasn't anything that he needed cleared up. Natasha had proven herself to be a valuable member of the Avengers to whom victory was mostly owed. This was the only data he needed.

They carried on inspecting the desert warehouse.

"What did Barnes think of our little escapade yesterday?" she asked. She needn't have to ask whether he had told his friend, she knew for a fact he probably had.

"I told him we had a doughnut. The rest is up to his imagination."

Natasha smirked. "Can I take advantage of that and play around about it a little?" she said.

Steve turned to her and frowned. "You mean torture him?" He didn't doubt she would come up with
dozens of ways he never would think of to tease Bucky. It sounded kind of funny. He shrugged. "Have at it."

Natasha had a pleased expression which promised a lot.

"Since you're in an amenable mood today, can I know what made you join S.H.I.E.L.D. after all?"

He halted and slightly pivoted himself so she would be in his line of sight.

"Has anybody ever told your way of making transitions is quite peculiar?"

She eyed him teasingly. "I couldn't be bothered. And we both know you would have seen me coming anyway."

He probed her silently for a few seconds then resumed walking. She followed, waiting patiently.

"I'm doing it for someone," he answered soberly.

He looked at her and her brows were slightly furrowed. "Who?"

It then hit him that Natasha was curious and inquisitive if she wanted to be but that she deliberately made the choice to be curious on specific topics, and as it may not have seemed obvious, the less sensitive ones. She was asking about his motives regarding joining S.H.I.E.L.D but adroitly avoided inquiring about that woman she had found out she looked like.

He wondered if he should answer her question as it would mean opening the door to discussing Peggy and what was once their close relationship. Natasha was a colleague, and so far, that was pretty much the whole extent of it. Their banterers and teasing comments didn't reflect any deep bond or friendship. He considered her more like Fury's agent than a comrade truth be told, as trust was not something going strong between them yet. Again, not because of her obscure past but because of her alliance to a superior he found secretive and, to his definition, deceitful and untrustworthy.

Natasha looked at him, seeming to wait for an answer to her question and he hadn't decided what it would be.

He parted his mouth when the noise of metal being trampled loudly and hurriedly caught them off-guard. His head flipped around in an instant and he just had time to catch sight of an armed man, standing on the upper level, holding a rifle aimed at them, ready to fire.

Steve left his arm up, holding his shield high and stepped to Natasha's side who slightly bowed down in response to hide under it. The gunshots went off and hit the shield with a rattling noise. Natasha slipped her hand down between their two pressed bodies to reach for her gun.

When the gunshots ended, she stood straight up again while he lowered his shield a little, stretched her arms out, resting her elbows on the edge of it for balance and shot at the attacker. The latter muffled a groan when the bullet hit his knee.

The sound of other assailants coming running echoed and Steve and Natasha agreed with a silent nod to part and go the opposite way. They ran up to corners where to hide followed closely by bullets being fired at them. Squatting down behind a pile of crates, she riposted with gunshots, making diversion while Steve climbed his way up to them.

He sneaked behind them and arrived behind them just when one of the two criminals was shot by Natasha and fell to the ground. The second one spun around and Steve threw his shield at him, knocking him down to his knees. He caught his shield as it jolted back, ran up to the man and
knocked him unconscious with a knee kick in the head.

More shooting went off from the lower floor and his eyes instinctively drifted to Romanoff. He watched her shooting her last bullet at three criminals coming her way and he clutched hard the fence he was leaning on with an alarmed look.

Natasha dropped her gun to the floor and ran at them, throwing herself forward. She grasped the neck of the opponent the nearest to her with her two hands and swung herself, using him as a counterweight to thrust herself and clutched her thighs around the neck of the second man standing right behind. She let go of the first one after, knocking him down unconscious with her widow’s bites, and reached down for the gun of the criminal she had just latched onto. She used the gun to shoot the third man standing a bit farther away and then snapped the prey under her unconscious with a swift motion of her thighs. He tumbled down and she landed on her feet. She stood, hardly breathless, in the middle of the three armed opponents she had just taken down.

Steve let out the breath he had been holding in his compressed chest for longer than he could tell. Natasha looked up at him and pouted a little.

"Fine. I was wrong."

When his muscles loosened and he finally let go of the fence, he found the rusty bar was curved in the parts his hands had had a grip on. He stared at the bent metal, the scar of his earlier distress, and pursed his lips together, mute and uneasy.

He cleared his throat as a way to clear out of his mind of the multitude of uncertainties rushing in.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hey!
Here's the new chapter. Shorter than usual though.
Thank you for your awesome comments! They never fail to make my day!!

Back to S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve and Natasha were making their way out of Fury's office to give their verbal report. As they stepped out, they found Bucky walking up to them.

"Seriously, guys? You are sent to search a vehicle and you come back with the money and the criminals? So cocky," he said.

"Why? You intended to impress Fury yourself?" Natasha retorted with a smirk on.

Bucky cast a glance on her and dodged the remark with an apathetic look.

"How did you know where to find them?" he asked, looking at Steve.

He shrugged. "We just followed a hunch," he answered.

His friend nodded, paused then probed them both; his expression changed noticeably.

"And how did it go for you two?" he interrogated with a feigned casual expression, slightly emphasizing the last word.

Steve tried to hold back a sigh. Not subtle, not subtle.

"Smooth, as always," Natasha replied with even more nonchalance, an attitude she mastered without a wrong note. Her voice subtly modulated one octave down. "Actually, we thought about celebrating the success of our mission with a doughnut but we realized it would be indecent to do it with the other agents around."

Bucky remained neutral, or so he attempted, but his pupils quivered slightly, betraying his consternation and curiosity.

As for Natasha, she acted perfectly stoic about her innocent comment. She turned to Steve, letting a smirk dwell on her lips long enough for Bucky to notice it but brief enough to appear genuine and spontaneous.

It seemed she sashayed her way down the corridor and turned at the corner, throwing one amused glimpse in Steve's direction.

"What is she talking about?" Bucky fired away the instant she walked out of their line of sight.

Steve turned to his friend and smiled a little. "Like she said, we almost had a doughnut."

He couldn't lie—he was enjoying this greatly. He walked away casually too, to let Bucky alone with his wild imagination.
When Steve walked into his office, he found a large, light brown envelope lying on the desk. He picked it up and his heartbeat quickened when he read the name written on it. The photographer's name. He hastily went and closed the door of his office like someone guilty of sinister acts and sat in his chair. His first instinct was to tear the envelope open but his fingers unglued the band with delicacy as the prospect that a photograph (or more) of Natalie could be inside. He pulled the pictures out carefully and his heart glowed when he noticed how thick the stack was, therefore increasing the chances to find something.

The first picture at the top of the pile showed him standing on stage in his old costume, surrounded by his dancers, the *Star-Spangled singers* as they were called. He recognized Lizzie, Susan, Dorothy, and Jemma. He hadn't expected it but looking at this photograph raised a wave of nostalgia within him like a low tide ascending, unnoticeably but inevitably.

He realized how long it had been since the last time he had thought about his time in the USO shows. In retrospect, it hit him he had actually grown a soft spot for that part of his life.

He looked at the background and saw the large glittery banner reading *Ultimate show before national tour* and he felt like his heart wanted to jump out of his chest. This wasn't just any show; it was the show where he had met her for the first time.

The nostalgia faded, overcome by frantic eagerness. He put the photograph down on the desk and proceeded to look at the rest of the stack. He flipped through the pictures, first slowly, dissecting every face closely, then more quickly as impatience and the growing fear of not finding her at all progressively took hold of him.

There had been plenty of women that night, more than he had realized back then. Eventually, when he put one photograph down on top of the rest of the analyzed pictures, he realized it was the last one. His heart seemed to tighten. He looked at the stack of photographs he had just gone through and suddenly, it appeared slimmer than he had thought. Frustration started to cloud over his mind and he clenched his hand into a fist before releasing the pressure.

He had to have done it wrong. He hastily collected the heap of photos and leafed through them one more time—more rapidly than the first time around but still at a moderate speed. There was no corner his eyes hadn't delved into, no cropped silhouette he hadn't surveyed. It almost infuriated him to find the same women appear a couple more times in other shots when the one he desperately sought was not even in one. His pace sped up, and soon, he flipped through the photographs mechanically, frantically, in desperate need to prove the thought forming into his head wrong with nothing but the sound of the coated paper grazing together echoing in the office.

When he came across the same picture for the fourth time and the realization that this lead was yet another dead end finally sank in, he dumped the whole pile on his desk.

He was angry and everyone was to blame. He blamed the photographer for failing to snap one relevant picture; he frowned on the audience for being too crowded to leave the photographer a chance to do so; he felt jealous of those people who had had the luxury of appearing in more than one photo; for a brief second he bore a grudge against Natalie for depriving him of a single picture of her he could have cherished as if she had deliberately been avoiding the camera's flash all evening. But most importantly, he blamed himself for hoping this was even a possibility. Ever since he had woken up, his journey regarding Natalie had been a succession of disappointments and obstacles and he had been a fool to believe he could break the series now.

Truth be told, he was the one to blame altogether. Not the photographer, not the people present that night, not her. *Him*, for being naïve and hopeful. The Natalie situation was an impasse—the most
intrinsic web he couldn't untangle his way through no matter how hard he tried— and he should have known better than to delude himself into believing he could solve it. He should have realized sooner all the wishes he had and might have had in the future had dissolved at the same time his drawing had into the water.

He rose to his feet and clenched his fists, suppressing the grunt threatening to slip out and hit the desk instead, leaving a slight crack into the wood.

When he took control of his frustration again, he slumped back into his chair, exhausted. He hid his face into his hand and peered at the crack between his fingers.

This would serve as a reminder never to make such a mistake again.

It had been nearly a week since the successful mission with Natasha and the fiasco with Natalie and Steve had made sure not to mention either to Bucky as it would only raise questions from his best friend.

"I don't know what's going on around here" Bucky murmured, sounding slightly alarmed. "I can't explain it but it feels like I've been more engrossed in this story of you and Romanoff hanging out than I thought. Like an obsession."

Steve frowned. "What do you mean?"

Bucky winced. "I mean I see it everywhere."

"It?"

"Doughnuts," he answered with the straightest voice.

His friend seemed genuinely concerned for his own sanity. Steve snorted. "Who's being dramatic now?"

Bucky shook his head, pressing a hand on his friend's shoulder and leaning closer.

"No, no. I'm not kidding. It's like the whole universe is playing with me. First last Tuesday, when I came out of the building to grab some lunch, there was this guy handing out advertising leaflets for the new doughnut shop that opened and he gave me one."

Steve shrugged. "And?" Steve asked.

"And the shop is over 10 blocks down," Bucky muttered. "Do you know many businesses that sent their employees to advertise this far?"

Steve didn't really put too much thought into the question as there wasn't any material for it.

"Maybe he just strayed farther than he realized."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too. But then, it went on. Two days ago at the canteen, after I chose from the buffet, Jason asked me if I wanted to have a doughnut with my meal. He never asks me this usually, why do it now? And then this morning, there was a box of doughnuts outside my office, and when I thought it was a prank from you, Grumlow came running saying it was his delivery but that it must have been dropped off to me by accident." Bucky pointed a firm forefinger down. "Don't tell me these are just coincidences. It's like I'm being constantly reminded of this stupid doughnut story."

Steve furrowed his brows and turned to face his best friend. Now it was starting to make an awful lot
of coincidences. Bucky crossed his arms then looked right and left.

"Did you tell anyone else about this?" he asked sternly but with a hopeful expression. The hope of putting some sense into this irrational situation.

Steve kept his best neutral face. "No," he answered matter-of-factly.

Bucky probed him for a couple of seconds then pouted, fairly disappointed with the answer.

"Fine, but I know there is something fishy going on around here," he grumbled then walked off.

Later this morning, Steve stopped by an office and knocked on the open door. He slightly leaned in inside the room, pressing his hand on the door frame.

Natasha, who was typing, looked up over her computer screen in his direction.

"You might want to take it easy with Bucky. I fear he might develop an acute case of paranoia."

A playful smile slowly rose to her lips. "So it's working?"

"It's working too well," he rectified then paused, watching her. "How do you do it?"

She seemed flattered he asked the question. "All it takes is a creative mind and a bit of bribing. And subtlety. The secret is to make the person doubt their own mind."

"You're too dangerous to play pranks on people, Romanoff."

Natasha smiled. "Everybody has to have a flaw." Seeing the reluctant look he gave her from where he was standing, she added: "Relax—I'll stop before it reaches suicidal ideation."

"How considerate of you," he commented sarcastically but with a faint smile showing.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hi! Thank you for all your amazing comments! You are the best!! Keep them coming!

It was Friday evening and Bucky had wanted to go out to party. Steve had declined, claiming he had some reports to finish and some sleep to catch up on. Although the latter wasn't exactly untrue, he had made sure not to precise it was his racking his brains over Natalie's fate that kept him awake long hours at night. Bucky had first grumbled then eventually accepted, promising he wouldn't wake him when he'd come home later in the night.

Steve was sitting on the couch, channel-hopping between an old baseball game rerun and some World War II documentary.

"In 1932, Adolf Hitler won the election by one vote"

"Erroneous," he muttered to himself and sighed in exasperation. Then he switched back onto the baseball game.

A knock on the door disturbed the quietness in the apartment. He frowned, unused to such an event occurring, then rose to his feet. It had to be a mistake, probably a delivery guy again. Last week, the boy who had knocked was supposed to deliver a pizza one story below.

He opened the door wide then froze in shock at the sight before him. Romanoff, dressed in dark jeans and a leather jacket was innocently standing in the hallway of his building.

"Hey. Is Barnes here?" she asked, leaning sideways and openly snooping into the apartment.

"He's…out," he answered numbly.

Natasha pouted slightly then shrugged. "That's a drag. I guess my prank will have wait till Monday morning, then."

She showed what she was holding behind her back. "I brought some films. You have some serious catching up to do."

He opened his mouth, ready to speak but his mind was saturated with confusion. Part of him wanted to protest, as the last thing he wanted was to trade an evening of putting his thoughts together regarding Natalie for a movie evening with her doppelganger, but Natasha was already in. She swiftly walked through the door and made her way to the living room.

She headed to the TV set and knelt down. "Wow. I'm almost speechless to find you have a DVD player," she commented casually.

He stood awkwardly behind the couch, shielding himself whilst watching her with an agape mouth, slowly processing the prospect of the evening.

"I have two DVDs," she went on naturally and he surrendered to her formidable invasion. "I let you choose. One is Twelve Angry men – a must-see but quite gritty, and Some like it hot."
He arched an eyebrow and peered at her inquisitively.

She smiled.

"It's totally decent….Well, in second thought, you may find it shocking since it was quite controversial at the time it came out. But Jack Lemmon is exceptional in it. And it's indisputably Marilyn Monroe's best film."

It piqued his interest and his mind was thrust all the way back to 1942 with Natalie.

Romanoff shot him an expectant look.

"So?" she asked.

He nodded numbly. "Some like it hot."

She smiled, looking smug. "I was secretly hoping you'd answer that. Clint was the first person to show it to me and I loved it. I'm passing it on now."

He nodded in silence, biting his bottom lip slightly at the mention of Barton's name.

After putting the DVD to play, Natasha sat on the couch in the most natural way possible as if it was hers as much as it was his. Steve sat down too, intentionally leaving some big enough space between the two of them; partly because he had been raised to respect women's personal space, partly to preserve his own.

His body remained stiff for the good first twenty minutes of the film, his mind unable to shift away from the fact Natasha was in his living room.

It was one thing to get accustomed to working with her every day (although it still remained a thing he had to process continually); it was another to open up to the idea she could become more than a colleague. In fact, he was fine with them being colleagues (or correction, he had learned to be fine with it) as it implied keeping a certain emotional distance he desperately craved in order to put up with this extraordinary situation on a daily basis. But letting their working relationship develop into something less casual meant bonding intimately and this was something he felt he could never be prepared for.

Their professional status, their apparent ease which doesn't get beyond the surface, his calling her Romanoff; he liked it this way as it served one unique purpose – maintain an emotional distance to counterbalance her physical presence in his world.

Natasha seemed oblivious of his mental torment, her eyes fixed on the screen with a riveted expression. It went without saying he was going to overlook the fact she had come up with Marilyn Monroe when the first person to have (ever) brought her up was Natalie herself. Of course. Yet again another connection, another thread, and another link to the lengthy chain of coincidences he was fighting hard to ignore for the sake of his sanity.

Eventually, and for a reason he couldn't quite explain, he relaxed. Natasha would interrupt the silence with witty remarks regarding the characters and she soon entertained him just as much as the movie did.

He swallowed hard at the sight of Marilyn Monroe walking along the train platform, his mind invaded by the memory of Natalie coming up to him for the first time, watching Tony Curtis' character being shaken upside by her bewildering entrance just like he had been that night after his USO show.
He shouldn't have but his eyes slowly glanced over to Natasha, yearning to see those familiar features.

"So was she big?" he asked at some point.

"Yep. Very big."

He snorted lightly. "She was right," he murmured, barely audible.

But not inaudibly to Natasha.

"Who was?"

He frowned and cleared his throat. "A friend of mine, back in 1942, she had said it would happen."

"Smart woman," Romanoff commented approvingly.

Marilyn Monroe's character was now performing on stage when Steve turned to Natasha.

"So what was the prank?" he asked.

Natasha averted her eyes from the TV screen to him. She raised an eyebrow.

"You said you came for Bucky. What was your plan?"

She raised her hand and waved it off. "The usual. Something devious."

He probed her inquisitively for a few seconds, somehow unsure what to think of her answer as it didn't really sound like her.

"He's gone on a date, hasn't he?" she asked, staring at the screen, the hint of a smirk playing on her lips.

"I don't know," he answered although it was very likely to be the case indeed.

"Barnes has a pattern," she smirked, taking his answer as an affirmative one. "Clean-shaven look, expensive perfume, and slightly fancier hairstyle. Subtlety isn't his thing."

And it hit him. She knew. She knew all along Bucky would be out tonight and he wouldn't. She knew she would find him right here in his apartment. She had it figured all out somehow. She knew Bucky's habits and he didn't doubt she knew his just as well.

There was never any prank planned for tonight. It was nothing more than an excuse to justify her turning up here tonight. There was nothing but the sound of the trumpet and Marilyn Monroe's honeyed voice playing in the background.

*I want to be loved by you, just you,

and nobody else but you.*

She smiled at him knowingly as if she read in his look he had understood but she remained quiet on a truth they both wished it remained unspoken. They were aware why she was here tonight and it was enough.

*I couldn't aspire*
"And why DVDs?" he asked.

"No one should have to watch Some like it hot alone," she said with a playful look, but mostly a soft voice. She made it sound like she meant it for herself when it was obvious she meant him. Her very presence tonight was for him. Somehow, for some unclear reason, his solitude didn't leave her indifferent and she had endeavored to help diminish it for tonight. Maybe because she suspected this said solitude was partly due to that woman from the past she reminded him of; maybe because she reckoned her presence could, in a manner, fill a bit the wide void left by this other woman's absence.

For the first time, Natasha showed him she cared and he appreciated the gesture certainly more than what she intended to. Probably deeper than he could discern yet.

He was gazing at her intensely, with more tenderness he had probably ever shown her. As he stared at her, he wasn't reminded of Natalie, he distinguished Natasha—for the whole individual and person she was—and he liked what he saw. A caring and selfless person, more generous and sensitive to other people's concerns than anyone would give her credit for.

Natasha pouted. "And I guess it was also an excuse to see for myself if you could manage a TV set."

He cracked a smile and snorted, watching the teasing smirk on her lips.

"We had televisions in the 1940s, you know." He answered, quite entertained.

She cocked an eyebrow. "You still need some practice with the remote control though."

She smiled, unapologetic then turned her attention back on the screen while his gaze dwelled on her for a few more seconds.

**Ba-deedly-deedly-deedly-dum-ba-boop-bee-doop**

**Boop-boop-a-doop!**

The ending credits rolled and they started to talk. Nothing deep or personal but just a dialogue that flowed naturally. The wit and confidence she showed whilst conversing should have reminded of his long chats with Natalie hadn't he been so enthralled in the moment.

When she eventually rose to her feet and headed to the door, he grinned quietly and it seemed he heard loneliness beginning to creep back in already.

"It's probably best not to tell Barnes I was here tonight …or actually you know what? You can tell him—it may be entertaining." She smirked deviously.

He smiled and opened the door for her and she stepped out into the hallway.

"Rom—...," he cut himself short as calling her by her last name felt somehow off at this exact moment. She looked over her shoulder.

He slightly pursed his lips together, more nervous than reluctant. "Thank you," he said and smiled softly.
He realized it had been easier to say than he had thought—and mostly due to the fact he trusted she
would have a good reaction. And Natasha didn't disappoint. She smiled back, genuinely appreciative
of his gesture but not demanding for more.

The sound of steps of someone coming up the stairs interrupted them and Natasha walked off. She
went past the person who had just reached the top of the staircase and happened to be his neighbor, a
nurse he had concluded from the pink overalls she wore frequently when coming home in the
evening. They smiled cordially as they walked past each other. His neighbor pulled her keys out of
her purse and gave him a brief, shy smile before unlocking her door and stepping in; he watched
Natasha proceed down the stairs until she disappeared from his sight.

He closed the door and, still holding the knob, smiled blankly to himself.

The next day, Steve was making breakfast in the early morning—he and Bucky had gotten this habit
of waking up with the first sunrays of the day. He had found the door of his best friend's bedroom
closed and had gone straight to the kitchen without noise to prepare something for when he would
wake up.

He felt in a light mood although he didn't really notice and replayed some scenes from the movie in
his mind. Sugar's performance was somehow the scene that stood out the most.

The front door opened slowly and Steve watched, quizzical, his best friend tiptoe his way in.

"What are you doing?" he asked and Bucky jumped in surprise in the middle of the room, before
flipping his head at him with a startled expression.

His slightly pale look and dark rings under his eyes revealed he hadn't slept one bit.

Bucky sighed. "Fine. I was out all night."

"Yeah, I can see that. But why were you sneaking in?"

"Because I didn't want you to give me that look."

Steve stared blankly. "What look?"

"This look!" Bucky exclaimed, pointing at him. "This judgmental look of yours that makes me
question whether I'm a worthy heir of my motherland and the American Constitution."

"Yeah. Because you were sneaking in."

Bucky rolled his eyes and put his palms flat on the kitchen counter. That was his way of pressing
pause with the disagreeable talk.

"How was your evening? Was it alright?" Bucky asked. He had now a brotherly, protective look.
"I'm sorry I didn't drag your stubborn, goody-two-shoes ass out with me."

Bucky looked like he genuinely hoped he had done it.

"Your apology is overwhelming," Steve commented sarcastically. Then he smiled. "My evening was
good actually."

Bucky pouted slightly, but judging from Steve's sincere expression, gave up and smiled back.

"Hey," he said suavely, with an octave down. "I met this girl—"
Steve grunted. "Come on! I haven't had breakfast yet."

Bucky let out a long sigh of agony. "I'd have far more compelling conversations with an Orthodox mother superior."

"So do you think you're going to see her again?" he asked after rolling his eyes.

Bucky proceeded to scrape off a stain of a perfectly spotless piece of the counter. "Maybe," he said evasively. "Are you doing it again?" he asked, intentionally keeping eyes fixed in the opposite direction his friend was standing. "Giving me the judgy look."

"You know what? I might be," Steve answered. "What was wrong this time?"

"I don't know…I guess she wasn't the girl I'm looking for."

Steve showed no restraint in showing he didn't approve of his friend's behavior. Bucky smirked deviously.

"Actually…," he started slowly, purposely letting it drag on. "I've been thinking…since you specifically said you weren't seeing her that way. What about Romanoff?"

Steve raised his eyebrow high then frowned deeply.

"I mean, Natalie was gorgeous, there is no denying that," Bucky went on and waved a hand off. "And it's true I kinda tried to hit on her—"

Steve widened his eyes. "You did what?" he shouted out.

It had happened years ago, he trusted Bucky more than anyone else on Earth but yet this revelation bothered it a very vivid way.

"Relax," Bucky said nonchalantly, not impressed to the least. "I stepped back really quickly when I realized I wasn't the guy she had her eyes on."

Steve's agape mouth shut instantly, and soon, annoyance was replaced by relief and —should he say—content. Bucky didn't linger on the matter any further.

"Anyhow, the red hair, it adds something —some wild side and unadulterated badassery that tickle my interest. Maybe," he paused and looked up at Steve. "…I could, I don't know, ask her out."

Steve clenched his jaw. "She's off limits," he warned hardly, pointing a patronizing finger at his best friend. And here he was bothered again. "I'm serious, Buck."

Bucky's playful expression faded. "Just kidding. I haven't been thinking about it at all. It didn't even cross my mind." He said, averting his eyes away from Steve's unwavering look.

"But is she off-limits from me only or does it include the entire male population?" he asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Steve frowned.

Bucky looked him straight in the eye. He was calm and composed.

"You're jealous and it's fine. I get it."

Steve shook his head and he took on a stern expression. "It's not that. I don't even consider it a possibility. I don't see her like this."
Bucky walked around the counter and grabbed the toast that had just popped out of the toaster.

"Keep telling yourself that," he said in a low voice, bit into his toast and threw Steve a knowing glance before walking away to his bedroom.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys! Thank you so damn much for your comments. I know I'm repeating myself but they make my day - every single one of them is like a ray of sunshine! And It makes me write faster oddly enough!
Anyways, enjoy the update!

That night became the first of several more. Natasha's movie selection was endless and very eclectic: Apocalypse now, The Time machine, Roman holidays, … She would turn up to the apartment, always when she was the least expected, with other DVDs to watch. The next two times, she came when she knew Bucky would be away – and these evenings had been some sort of secretive thing just between the both of them —, then one evening, she just knocked on their door and walked in very much naturally, joining the two roommates for a movie night. Bucky was first surprised and puzzled, then suspicious as he noticed Natasha had her bearings all around the apartment and moved smoothly about, acting like she had been here several times before.

"I wonder if the living room and the kitchen are the only two rooms she's familiar with in this apartment," he whispered to Steve as he walked past behind him to the couch.

But Natasha worked her magic just like Natalie had after he and Bucky had returned from Europe and soon, he enjoyed her company and treated her as the rightful third roommate of the apartment.

After a few weeks, Natasha was already teasing Bucky about finding him a girl.

"What about your neighbor? The cute blonde," she once said.

Bucky shook his head and grinned smugly. "I doubt she'd be interested in dating a sergeant."

"Right. She's more into captains," Natasha commented with the same conniving tone and a smirk before taking a sip of her coke.

Bucky and Natasha both laughed while Steve watched them with a clueless expression and an awkward posture. The night went on but this brand new piece of information wouldn't slip his mind somehow. It first stunned him to realize he had failed to see what Bucky and Natasha—who was simply a visitor— had noticed so easily; then it made him uncomfortable for more than one reasons.

By the end of the evening, as Bucky went to the kitchen and Natasha got up calling it a night, she stood by behind the couch and leaned over to him.

"Don't worry. I won't try to set you up with her," she murmured into his ear. "Nor anyone for that matter." Then she patted his shoulder and stood straight back up again.

He turned his head toward her, watching her quizzically and she smiled softly, in the most reassuring way. Natasha was aware that woman from his past took too big of a place in his heart and she figured out he wasn't anywhere near ready — or more precisely willing — to fill in the void of her absence with anyone else.

She never mentioned the nurse again after that and he was grateful for it.
Weeks went by and a routine settled down—a quite enjoyable routine. Life was different but nothing the two friends could not grow accustomed to. The difference between the 1940s and now was palpable but somehow it felt quite the same because they had each other.

Bucky eventually gathered up the courage to pay his living brother a visit and insisted Steve would accompany him. It was an emotional moment that was a combination of sadness and happiness. Bucky remained admiringly composed as he watched, once a young and vigorous man, now crooked into his armchair with grey hair. Bucky crouched down and held the hand of this familiar stranger who responded with a feeble squeeze. He gasped slightly at the sight of his younger brother's intact face.

"I saw you on TV after you saved us all in New York," he spoke softly with a shaky voice.

Bucky smiled fondly and stroked the back of his wrinkled hand with his own.

"It took me long to come," he replied regretfully then leaned in to kiss his brother's forehead. "But I'm home now."

And both he and Steve spent the rest of the afternoon at the Barnes' house. Bucky was a happy uncle. He turned out to be an admired uncle and an indulgent grand uncle. The children loved him instantly, seeing in him the formidable Avenger from the news who turned out to be family.

Bucky often visited after that, bringing toys and cakes whenever he could. And bringing along uncle Steve too.

"Is it true you're Captain America?" little Tommy asked.

Steve nodded.

"I don't believe you," Tommy said firmly. "Captain America is wearing a blue uniform and you're wearing jeans and a jacket."

It made him chuckle.

"Captain America has a helmet and you're not even wearing a hat," Tommy continued solemnly, sounding very smug with his deduction skills. "Captain America has a big, round shield and you don't have one. At all."

"Ouch—it hurts," Steve commented with his best wounded face. "How can I go against so much logic?"

Tommy grinned, swaying left and right. "But uncle Bucky says you are Captain America so it means I have to believe him because uncle Bucky never lies."

"Then what shall we do?" Steve asked, wincing. "You say you must believe uncle Bucky but then it's true my clothes tell a completely different story."

Tommy leaned over and clutched one arm around his neck, proceeding to whisper a super secretive secret into his ear.

"Maybe," Tommy started in a very low voice with a hand covering his mouth as he spoke. "Maybe you could bring the shield over next time."

Steve smiled then raised an eyebrow as he turned to look at the little boy.
"You know what, Tommy? I think this is the best plan I've ever heard. And I know what I'm talking about— I'm Captain America."

He then lifted his hand and waited for Tommy to give him a high five.

But the routine was also at work. Steve and Bucky had become two legitimate members of S.H.I.E.L.D. and had made their place into the team. Considered like two superiors, the tactical teams and other agents were under their commandment, both for hierarchical and personal reasons since they openly looked up to them.

Another full member of S.H.I.E.L.D. made his return after a long and unexplained sabbatical period. Barton turned up to the Triskelion in the most agitated way. An agent who was trotting by quickly caught Steve's attention.

"What is going on?" he asked curiously.

"Agent in medical, Captain. We don't know how serious it is and Director Fury is asking for a report promptly."

He frowned. "Who's the agent?" he asked, suspecting this level emergency could only be for a high-grade officer.

"Agent Romanoff, sir," he heard him answer and everything around him seemed to shatter. He dashed for the elevators without a second thought. "Agent Barton is with her right now. He's the one who brought her in," the agent continued reassuringly but Steve didn’t hear any of it as his mind was now in a blur and his ears buzzing.

He hastily slipped between two other agents standing by the elevator and got in, requesting it for himself only as he needed to reach the medical floor as fast as possible. He pressed the floor button repeatedly and the doors closed, leaving him alone with his arising panic.

Natasha had gone off for a mission a week ago and he hadn't been informed of any further detail. His mind began to scatter across a range of thoughts and theories, each darker and more dramatic than the other.

The doors opened eventually and he stepped out of this oppressive space, rushing to the medical room. When he arrived at the end of the hallway he found the door to one of the medical rooms closed. He quickly had a look through the little window and found Natasha sitting on the examination couch with a cringe of pain visible over her face while Barton was standing before her holding her hand. He said something to her and lifted his hand to cup her face.

This was when Steve held the handle and stepped in. Clint slowly dropped his hand off her face down to her forearm.

"Are you alright?" Steve asked.

Natasha turned to look at him and all he saw were the bruises, the cut lip and the yellowish swelling on her cheekbone. It turned his stomach upside down.

"I'm fine," she said with a far more vigorous tone of voice than anyone else in her condition would use. She smiled slightly, then squinted her eyes and abstained as this simple motion was enough to tickle her sore skin and muscles. "Clint was with me," she said.

He turned and looked at Barton who, dare he notice, looked fine in comparison. "What were you doing there?" Steve asked, genuinely curious.
"I was on the mission with her," he answered simply.

"I didn't know you were back," he frowned.

"I wasn't until a week ago."

Steve nodded briefly, unsatisfied with the brief and vague answer, then turned his attention back to her. "Has the doctor come for you?"

"She's alright, although from what I could tell I'd say she's got one or two cracked ribs," he looked sternly at Natasha. "Or even worse—broken."

"It wouldn't be the first time," she answered with a light tone and the corner of her lips slightly rose.

Clint and Natasha seemed to be taking the situation a lot more lightly than he was.

It upset him to find out about the possible gravity of her injuries, and it bothered him to hear that the reason why Clint could affirm it so confidently was—in all likelihood—because he had felt the area with palpations all over her waist.

The doctor came into the room and walked over to Natasha, taking Clint's spot. The two men folded their arms over their chests and watched as he started to examine her. He pressed his thumbs over her face making Natasha cringe slightly whilst Steve winced from where he was standing too.

"So far, no broken bone," the doctor stated then carried on. He motioned a brief sign to her and Natasha proceeded to open the zip of her catsuit. The stretch fabric went loose and she swiftly slipped one arm of its sleeve, revealing her cleavage and the black brassiere she was wearing underneath.

Steve held back his gasp and bit his lip before drifting his eyes away to the suddenly very fascinating white wall. Clint did the same, although more collectedly, and stepped forward to him.

"What happened?" Steve asked sternly, keeping his mind out of the fact that Natasha, Natalie's flawless doppelganger, was undressing less than five feet away from him (and he had now seen more of the former than he had ever dared to dream of for the latter).

"We had some unexpected incoming," Clint had the knack to over-summarize. What Steve needed right now were details.

"What have you been doing for the past week?" he asked.

"Collecting intel."

"On whom?"

Clint shook his head. "It's confidential."

"Where was it?"

"Confidential again."

Natasha muffled a groan of pain and it took a great deal of strength not to avert his eyes in her direction.

"I guess you were lucky," the doctor said. "You only have two cracked ribs."
"That must be where I get my good poker hand from," she commented dryly.

"Nailed it," Clint chimed in with a neutral tone. "I might want to consider a career reconversion into medical when I grow too old for this job."

"Well, you're already too old," Natasha said.

Clint cringed at her remark then turned his attention back to Steve.

Steve grunted, mostly because he was growing frustrated witnessing this light banter in such a grave situation. "Come on, Barton. Give me something."

He seemed to concede to the request.

"It was a last minute mission and we lacked precious data before going in the field. You can still go and ask Fury if you feel like chatting to a wall—he's the one who sent us there."

Steve clenched his jaw and sighed. He walked out of the infirmary after the doctor assured there were no further injuries.

"How could you send one of my men on a mission without informing me?" he asked hardly.

Director Fury, sitting behind his desk, looked up at him without the shadow of a frown.

"Romanoff is my agent before she is yours, Captain. Her being a full member of the Avengers doesn't mean she's under your sole authority."

"But she's under my watch," he spat back. "Just as Bucky is. I am responsible for her safety as I am for any other member of my team."

Fury cocked an eyebrow. "Even Thor who's currently in a completely different solar system?"

Steve furrowed his brows, taken aback by Fury's nonchalant attitude.

"Agent Romanoff is also my co-worker here, and as such, her safety is directly bound up with me," he spoke firmly. "And why wasn't I informed of Barton's return?"

"Rogers, contrarily to what you seem to believe," Fury started, "I don't owe you an explanation for any decision I make."

"That's where you're wrong. If I hadn't been kept in the dark, maybe you wouldn't have had to deal with an injured agent right now. Cooperation is what makes a team work coherently and effectively. It's the first thing you learn when you join the army."

He held a solemn and confident gaze, daring Fury to disagree, then walked out.

When he returned to the medical room, Romanoff had had her waist wrapped up in bandages and Clint was by her side. Steve watched as he leaned in and kissed her forehead gently. When he saw him standing in the hallway, Clint headed towards the door.

"Whatever rumors you heard about Nat and me, they're all false," he said after he stepped out into the corridor.

Steve held an unwavering look and tensed a little.

"Rumors that you're romantically involved? That you're together?"
He had no right to ask, but he did. He had no right to dread the answer, but he did.

"Oh these ones are completely true," Barton answered bluntly. Steve nodded blankly, pursing his lips together as he swallowed down the information he should have seen coming miles away really. But then Barton looked at Steve and an amused smirk rose to his lips.

"I guess it's flattering –although I find it a bit creepy," he went on coolly. "Let's just say I don't do girlfriends."

Steve held back his 'oh' of surprise and nodded. "So you…you have a roommate?"

It surprised him. Clint hadn't given him the impression he was into men (not that there was a specific type).

Barton raised an eyebrow, looking slightly quizzical. He then smiled and shrugged.

"I guess we can say that," he said to himself, a bit pensive then walked out.

Steve watched him go down the hallway and feeling of relief took hold of him. He shouldn't have—and it was probably the most selfish he had ever been—but the thought of Natasha being single, not committed to any man, soothed him. Natasha was not his, and she would never be, but it made the whole situation less painful and awkward knowing her heart didn't belong to anybody else either. Selfish, and horrible, but he was not quite ready yet to share her with another man.

He stepped into the medical room and Natasha slightly shifted herself in his direction.

He wanted to ask her if she was alright but he knew she would brush off his answer with sarcasm. He wanted to ask her if she was alright but he already knew: Natasha was tougher than a dozen soldiers. But still, he wanted to ask. Perhaps, because he needed to hear it.

"So I presume you won't tell me a word of what happened, right?" he said without really asking.

"I fell in the stairs," Natasha answered, the corner of her mouth tucked into a little smirk.

He took in her joke with a shallow, probably borderline bitter, smile. Natasha wouldn't side with him against Fury and it reminded him where her allegiance was regardless of their evenings at his apartment. Perhaps, it was something he had started to omit. Part of him had hoped she would bind up with him like he had started to bind up with her.

"But I appreciate your concern," she continued. It pulled him out his deep thinking and he frowned slightly. "It's not something I'm used to."

She smiled to herself. "Except with Clint."

He nodded, somewhat grateful she had made a step forward to him.

"I guess I need some rest," she added, snorting slightly, but for an instant—an instant as brief as the flick of light—he saw in her eyes the unmissable shadow of weariness. Unmissable to him as he knew the way it looked all too well. Romanoff was undeniably a warrior, and part of her was addicted to the adrenaline that was intrinsic to the job, but part of her was consumed by it. She would heal from her cracked ribs and her bruises but there was this other thing working in the shadow that would inescapably keep on wearing her out. Slowly, almost unnoticeably, but certainly. This was the burden of all heroes.

He gently grinned at her, acting oblivious of what he had just perceived, and walked to the door. As
he held the handle, he halted then turned back to look at her.

"And Natasha," he said softly, hearing for the first time the sound of his voice call her name. She looked at him, with a collected expression of surprise. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

He smiled. It had been easier to say than he had dreaded –mostly due to the fact it was indeed the right moment to do it.

It had taken several months and it suddenly seemed evident that she had been Natasha to him for a little while.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I know! I'm sooo late! Author's block. But I'm back. The chapter is not super long but I had to make myself write or I wouldn't have updated at all.
I hope you will like it! Thank you all for your wonderful comments! :D

It had all started like a regular mission. A regular mission that had turned to be a complete fiasco with Steve and Natasha trapped in a forest with a crashed quinjet, no back-up, no radio to ask for some and no signal. As they were flying over a supposedly safe zone, their jet had been hit by hostile shots, and after Natasha had managed to land safely, a 'welcoming' committee was waiting in the woods to neutralize them.

They had taken down many men but, as they ran out of munitions, they had no choice but to retreat deep into the woods.

Steve and Natasha had trudged all day and the foliage, the thirst, and exhaustion had taken the best of them.

"Romanoff to headquarters. Romanoff to headquarters. We need assistance. Do you copy?" Natasha breathed out into her transmitter for the nth time. The silence was the only response she got.

She grunted and turned to him. "Any chance you're going to break into a confession and admit what would normally be awkward but in this context would actually be considered salutary hidden talent for smoke signal any minute now?"

He frowned.

"What?" she defended herself with an innocent look. "I'm just asking. Knowing your date of birth it wouldn't so far-fetched to assume you're familiar with these Amerindian techniques."

He kept a straight face but the corner of his mouth rose slightly into an amused smile.

"I'm sure you've had worse," he commented as he kept leading through the foliage.

Natasha was following right behind.

"Oh, I've had worse,' she said matter-of-factly. "It's just that I didn't think my first mission after my convalescence would have me trekking across a forest until dawn."

"You're the one who begged Fury to let you resume work."

"Clearly the request of a delirious person drugged with too much medication," she commented and he heard a smirk in the tone of her voice.

"S.H.I.E.L.D will issue the alert when we don't report back in due time. From there, they should locate our last position and send back-up in less than 12 hours."

"Lovely. The humidity and the foam have started growing on me anyway," she said sarcastically
She then looked up.

"It's almost night. We need to find a safe place to stay for the night before it gets dark."

He nodded and resumed walking. They eventually found an isolated cave covered behind thick trees. They entered and found a dark space hardly lit by the ray of light that could slip through from the top and dry ground. For both of them, it was the quintessence of a decent makeshift shelter.

"It's probably not safe to start a fire," he said, referring to the possible enemies wandering out there and sighed internally. It looked like a delightful night was awaiting them.

They went out again and parted searching for supplies. Steve and Natasha came back with a few fruits they had had a hard time to find and that would have to quench their thirst for the night as well.

When it went completely dark, they were both plunged into obscurity with a shimmer of light coming from the full moon hanging above them in the sky.

Leaning their backs on a hard and uncomfortable rock; they both looked into the dark.

"This may sound incredibly out of place," Natasha started and a snort slipped between her lips. "But I would kill for a doughnut."

Exhaustion and probably the ridiculousness of the whole situation put him into an unexpected giggly mood. He chuckled at her comment.

"Hopefully Bucky will bring a big box," he said.

"Chocolate glazed," she started to fantasize.

"With sprinkles," he chimed in. "Or sugar-powdered. I'm not picky."

"What was her name?" Natasha said flatly.

"What?" He shifted his head in her direction and found her staring skywards.

"That friend of yours from the past," she went on placidly, not fooled by his attempt to blur the lines. "What was her name?"

He exhaled slightly louder. It could have been awkward to talk about her with Natasha but somehow, it hit him that it made complete sense.

"Natalie," he spoke and realized he hadn't said her name out loud in a while.

Natasha remained quiet -not that there was much to say.

"You said you had never met a woman like her before," she eventually spoke again. "Why?"

They were now both staring at the sky as it seemed to be the only neutral spot to look at in this confined space.

"She went against all expectations and codes. It was like..., " he couldn't help but slightly laugh at all the memories inhabiting him. "...she was from another time."

For a moment, he dwelled on some specific recollections from the past and noticed how vivid they were as if they still belonged to the present. Memories couldn't easily be erased and he didn't wish to. His shared moments with Natalie would forever remain part of who he was. And it didn't cross his
mind he could ever want to part from a piece of him, regardless of how painful or sour it could feel.

The cool breeze coming from outside began to crawl into their shelter and soon the cold deprived them of their words for long minutes.

Thankfully their respective suits kept their bodies at a reasonable temperature but didn't shield them completely. He slightly turned his head to look at Natasha. Her face was stern, her jaw contracted as she stared absent-mindedly in front of her, her two arms wrapped around her knees.

He gazed at her in awe, realizing he had never seen her so vulnerable before. It seemed like the cold was consuming her from the inside at a deeper level he could comprehend.

"When I was twelve-," she started gently with the soft voice of a child, rocking slightly back and forth. She cut herself short and her pupils darkened, barracked into silence by the recollection of an oppressive, dark memory.

She looked up at him and her stern expression had morphed back into her usual cynical, detached self. "Never mind," she said with a nonchalant smirk. "Just an old memory flooding in."

She let out a snort but her eyes conveyed more distress than he had ever seen condensed into one person. Her expression struck him to the core as he reckoned Natasha, although it had been brief, had slightly let her shell crack. A thin, short one but still a crack which, in Natasha's scale, was equivalent to something as deep as a chasm.

In the strangest place, at the most unforeseen time, she had allowed him to glimpse at her abyssal and meandering complexity and the little he saw astounded him and left him contemplative.

He would lie if he said he didn't crave to know more about it as it meant deciphering the mystery that was Natasha Romanoff.

He leaned closer to her, trying to express physically how close to her he felt emotionally at this moment. He shouldn't have but as he let nothing but his current emotions speak, he held his hand up to her face seeing the expression of the frightened twelve-year-old version of the woman sitting a few inches away from him. Her skin was cold and blended with the warmth of his hand.

Natasha stared silently into his eyes showing no sign of protest.

It both revived him and killed him to notice the curve of her jaw fitted perfectly into the palm of his hand like Natalie's used to; however, the aftertaste it left wasn't as sour as it once was.

"I know a lot about these," he murmured softly and they both seemed to realize they weren't so different after all. He then smiled tenderly and nodded, reassuring her about the motives behind his gesture.

Natasha's lips parted a little and her eyes seemed to speak beforehand.

"I know," he beat her to it with a calm voice. He knew she wouldn't tell him more about it, he knew she didn't want to, he knew and accepted she wasn't ready. He knew it wasn't who she was.

Natasha seemed grateful and let her guard down.

His fingers slipped away from her face and perhaps with more reluctance, he would admit. He then raised his arm up to put it behind her back.

"It's cold tonight and I've got enough heat for both of us."

She smirked. "Let me guess, another perk of the super-soldier serum?"
He answered by shrugging one shoulder.

Natasha slowly wriggled herself closer and pressed the side of her body against his as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

Her body was first stiff - as was his - then progressively, her muscles surrendered and relaxed.

"Are you nervous, Captain?" she asked playfully.

He was thankful she turned this intimate moment into derision. Natasha was gifted when it came up to lighten up a situation.

"Nah. Why? Are you?" he asked, trying to keep some composure into his voice.

"I've had to get to far worse extremes to survive but cuddling an old man is one of a new kind."

He sighed. "Natasha, just keep your thoughts to yourself."

"Copy that."

And she went quiet again. After an hour, her forehead fell onto his torso and he knew she had drifted off.

He didn't sleep that night.

To stay on the lookout in case of an attack;

to keep an eye on the vulnerable assassin who was now sleeping in the crook of his arm;

and deep down, secretly, to remember every second of this unique moment.

The next morning, the sound of a helicopter flying over the area caught his attention and the moment came for him to let her go as Natasha jumped erect on her feet. She didn't seem to suspect he hadn't slept all night and stood before him

"Well, that was interesting," she commented flatly with a collected expression while rearranging her gunbelt then headed towards the exit.

"I thought you would say awkward," he said with a frown.

She glanced behind her shoulder, looking particularly amused by the whole situation, and even more by the look of confusion plastered all over his face. "It would be awkward only if you said I snored."

She smirked and headed out of the cave.

When S.H.I.E.L.D.'s helicopter landed on a plain, Bucky was the first to jump out to the ground holding his rifle up to his eye. He lowered his weapon as soon as he recognized his two friends.

Bucky walked up to them with a steady pace and a cautious look.

"What happened here?" he asked suspiciously, clearly diverting from the main matter, eyeing them both like the culprits of a shenanigan he had kept out of.

Natasha shrugged and walked up to him. "Nothing much. We slept together in a cave. Steve will fill you in."
Bucky's eyes opened wide and he immediately goggled at his friend with a wildly curious expression.

She patted his shoulder and threw a triumphant and entertained wink at Steve before walking up to the other agents.

"We may have enemies around. Set up a perimeter on a five-hundred-mile radius and call for aerial backup," she commanded making the men nod and spread out whilst she picked up munitions into the helicopter and loaded her guns.

"What does she mean with you slept together in a cave?" Bucky asked eagerly.

Steve sighed. "Not now. I'm tired and I didn't sleep a wink."

Bucky gawked even harder. "Wait. It went on all night?" he gasped.

Steve rolled his eyes and walked off.

The following evening, lying in his bed, Steve stared at the ceiling, his restless fingers tapping against his torso, begging for activity. This had been going for a few hours and it seemed his mind wouldn't find rest until he expressed the latent yearning that was consuming him ruthlessly.

Haunted by the event of the night before, it seemed the image of his hand gently pressed against the side of her face was carving itself into his brain. Listening to the heavy silence, he tried to make sense of the turmoil going on inside his head. Finally he understood; and eventually, he yielded to the call.

He rose to his feet, opened the drawer and pulled out his sketchbook. He held the pencil between his fingers and the lead danced across the paper, swaying, twirling, waltzing until the first outlines took shape. He drew the curve of her eyes with an easiness he would not have suspected as if his fingers had never forgotten how to shape them. He traced the plumpness of her full lips with a faded hint of nostalgia. He sketched out her curly locks with details and fastidiousness.

Once his mind finally found rest, he felt the stiffness into his fingers and stopped to look at what his draft looked like so far. His breathing almost halted as he stared deeply into those familiar, big eyes.

He had drawn Natalie again and the idea that he had finally been able to break his promise because his wound had somehow become less painful comforted him. Maybe he had indeed finally come through and his sudden yearning to draw her again was the expression of the emotional healing he was going through.

He looked at those features he hadn't seen on paper for many months and smiled to himself as he couldn't help to feel proud of his achievement. It wasn't over yet but he would make sure that this new portrait was as flawless as the first.

He was hit by the memories of all those hours he had spent drawing at the camp or during dawn outside when waiting for the regiment to wake up. He recalled the excitement, the apprehension of when he would finally show it to Natalie, but mostly the plenitude he felt every time he yielded to the need of drawing her.

Although things were different today and that he would never get to show her this new one, he still felt serene and satisfied. He realized all these months during which he had forbidden himself to sketch her portrait again had been a waste (albeit necessary and salutary) and that he had now reached the point where he could draw -or more simply think of her- without being overwhelmed by
negative emotions and thoughts.

He closed the sketchbook and put it down, knowing he would get back to finish it sooner than later and that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He lay under the sheet and finally found sleep.
Hey, there!
So sorry for the long wait. I've been so busy.

I wanted to apologize for being an awful, ungrateful author, by posting a teaser of the next chapter. Just a little something to nibble on until the real deal arrives.
I hope you like it! I would love to hear your feedbacks and what you think will happen next!

Sitting at his desk, Steve was typing some nth report Director Fury has asked for. If there was one thing he had a hard time to appreciate in this new time, that was definitely all this endless -in his opinion pointless- paperwork. Why settle for one when you can get plenty? seemed to be this new millenium's motto. He missed the time when each and every action or decision made in the field didn't need to be explained in a long paragraph. There was a time you could make a call without having to depict it rationally because, for most of the time, it was a gut decision. Battling in the field and putting it into words on a report were two completely different matters which he didn't expect the bureaucrats sitting in their offices to understand.

He printed out the report and quickly skimmed through it as he walked back to his desk. He signed it then he opened the top drawer to reach for his stamp but didn't find it. He pulled the second drawer open and halted at the sight of the large envelop lying there. It seemed like he hadn't seen it in ages although he knew oh too well what was in it -or rather, what wasn't in it. Funny how the past and the regret it always brought along could catch you again at the most unexpected time, in the most unexpected places. Funny how his greatest disappointment was now lying at the bottom of a drawer. He hadn't had a look at the photographs since that day the envelop had been delivered to him and he didn't wish to do it again any time soon. Even if Natalie was nowhere to be seen in all those pictures, they were all haunted by her ghost. He pictured her leaning on each wall, standing in every corner, sitting at every table. The absence of her filled every empty spot in those photographs.

Steve closed the drawer slowly and found the stamp standing by the computer screen but his mind had already started to wander back into the past. Not as far as 1942, but to nearly a year ago, when he was waiting for her file to be sent to him. Time could indeed accomplish miracles; as he put himself back into his own shoes as he was being informed that no data on Natalie could be found, it didn't hurt him as much as it did back then. The burn he had felt at the time was absent now, only the scar it had left tingled him at the memory.

Every thing deserved a closure (or a continuation in the best case scenario) and he had been deprived of his, however he had learned to live with this void inside of him. His only comfort was that he had been fortunate enough to find one with Peggy (who he kept on visiting almost every weekend) and that Bucky had gotten his, too. James was currently planning his trip to Europe to visit his brother's family. Something that made his best friend both thrilled and nervous about.

To fill the void of his greatest unfinished business, Steve put every effort into closing every other part of his past he still had control over. It meant visiting his late companion's families, watching videos of Howard's conferences and catching up with decades of new technologies and scientific discoveries.
He reckoned he had been doing pretty fine until two minutes ago when he felt the void crack slightly deeper. The urge to fill it up fast emerged.

As he pressed the stamp on the paper and closed the file, he recalled there was still a matter he had never gotten to finish. Insignificant it would seem now -after so many years- but that still deserved he would look into it (again).

He stood up and left his office promptly, as curiosity and genuine interest slowly rose inside him.

"Agent Hill," he called as he walked into the intel office.

She flipped on her heels and gave him a solemn look. "Captain Rogers."

"I would need you to dig up and find a file for me. Try to gather as much intel as you can."

"You'll have it," she nodded at once. "Who is it about?", she asked. Her question seemed to bring up memories to the both of them. Agent Hill seemed determined to fulfill his request this second time around.

"It's not exactly about a person. Not anyone I know at least," he said. "It's an investigation that was run following one of the most important missions we had with the Howling Commandos."

"Arnim Zola's capture and the mysterious stranger that was on the HYDRA train with you" she finished, nodding to herself, as she crossed her arms over her chest and smirked.

He frowned. "You know about it?"

"Everyone in S.H.I.E.L.D. knows about the Howling Commandos' missions. And about the stranger agent on the train even more," she commented. Then she added: "It was never solved though."

"Good. Forward me the file." He slightly tucked the corner of his mouth into a smirk. "I'm going to solve it."

He gave Hill a nod and started walking off.

"What for?" she asked fairly curious. "Let's face it, this mysterious female agent probably died years ago."

At least, that made one woman he might still have a chance to find.

He turned to her and the prospect of putting a closure on one unresolved situation from his past pleased him more than anyone could understand.

"Call it unfinished business," he said determinedly before walking out of the room.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I did it!! It took a couple of hours to complete the teaser and make it a decent length chapter!!

I'm really gonna try to do better this time. I'll make myself start the new chapter tomorrow. Hope you enjoy this one in the meantime and appreciate the full irony!
Lots of kisses to you amazing people for commenting and being patient.

Sitting at his desk, Steve was typing some nth report Director Fury has asked for. If there was one thing he had a hard time to appreciate in this new time, that was definitely all this endless -in his opinion pointless- paperwork. Why settle for one when you can get plenty? seemed to be this new millenium's motto. He missed the time when each and every action or decision made in the field didn't need to be explained in a long paragraph. There was a time you could make a call without having to depict it rationally because, for most of the time, it was a gut decision. Battling in the field and putting it into words on a report were two completely different matters which he didn't expect the bureaucrats sitting in their offices to understand.

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Steve was leaning on the kitchen counter, drinking coffee as the first bright rays of light started to flip through the blinds into the apartment. Bucky arrived, dressed and ready for the new day, except this morning, he had a visible frown across his forehead.

"So," Bucky began casually, pouring himself some coffee. "What's up?"

He shrugged. "Nothing"

"Yeah?" Bucky said glancing behind his shoulder at him. He walked round the counter, across from his best friend. There was something in his look that betrayed his real intentions. "Nothing at all? Not
even that thing you don't seem to want to tell me about but that I do know about anyway?"

The corner of his mouth rose slightly then he held his mug up to his lips and took a sip he seemed to particuarly enjoy at this very second as if his being a step ahead in this conversation gave the coffee a richer taste.

Steve stiffened slightly.

"Good," he went on with contement. "Now that I have your attention, do you mind telling your pal what you're up to exactly?"

Steve's mind went erect like an emergency alarm that had been set off. His first instinct was to recall where was the last place he had left his drawing book. He had officially finished the portrait a few days before and kept it ever since into the drawer of his bedside cabinet, peeking at it from time to time when he felt the urge. But Bucky's expression shook up his deepest certainty that his secret was safe. It was rare that Steve kept any secret from him, and funnily enough, it seemed that when he did have one, it was always somehow related to Natalie. Not that he had ever taken him long to unveil it, anyway.

"What are you talking about?" he asked cautiously, tiptoeing around, testing the waters.

Bucky shrugged with a disinterested, innocent look. "You know, the mysterious stranger on the HYDRA train."

His muscles relaxed and he slowly let out the breath he had been holding.

Bucky stroked the wooden counter, wiping off the inexistant dust of it. "Not that new sketch of yours that you keep hidden in your book," he continued then he looked at him with a triumphant smile. "That would be very tactless of me."

The initial shock of this unexpeted revelation soon disappeared to leave room for indignation.

"I can't believe you snooped through my stuff," Steve exclaimed.

Bucky seemed to show absolutely no sign of remorse to the pint it compelled admiration. "I was in urgent need of paper and you had so kindly left your book out in the open."

Bucky was having a hard time concealing the wide smile rising up on his face.

"Cut the crap," Steve muttered. "You haven't used paper since 1931."

Bucky held his hand to his chest, feigning being stabbed right in the heart. "Who's being tactless, now?"

A short silence followed. It would be an overstatement to say Steve was angry at his best friend for being nosy -and part of him suspected that it had been out of concern that Bucky had had a look at the book after observing him drawing in silence for several days-, but yeah, he was probably slightly annoyed.

"Plus I thought we had no secrets for each other ever since you mooned me in Coney Island that day of summer 1936," Bucky added with the perfect tone to make him sound like a pervert before sipping his coffee, again, with great satisfaction.

It threw him back to that sunny afternoon they had spent on the beach, young and carefree, Bucky wooing and being wooed by girls while he carried a thick towel over his shoulders to a) avoid
catching another pneumonia, and b) because he was self-conscious of people's looks at his thin, fragile figure. Bucky and his mother were pretty much the only people he didn't dread they would judge him silently.

"You wish you were bigger and I wish I were smarter," Bucky looking at him through his shades. He had made up and decided he would join the army, the only job he could be good at without messing up everything. "What you look like doesn't define you. I know a dozen chums broad as trees but that don't have your strength."

"What strength?" Steve answered, crouching on the sand as he gently readjusted the towel that was falling off his arm.

Bucky turned to look at him and took off his sunglasses. "The one that you carry around like a shield against people's trifling prejudices and society's mind-numbing, stultifying standards and that will you take you to the top," he said with the most composed, unquestionable confidence. "You're not as little as you think."

Steve looked up at him and grinned slightly. "And you're not so dumb yourself...every now and then."

Bucky looked amused and reached over to pat his back. "See? We totally got our chances."

Then he put his shades on again and lied down on the towel.

But Bucky was here bringin up another 'highlight' of this day.

"First of all," Steve started. "I didn't moon you as you say, I was changing my swim shorts for dry underwear; and second, you're the one who came from behind and ripped my towel away."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Details," he protested dramatically. He then added: "Anyway, it's a very nice drawing. Beautifully executed. It's a portrait of..." He trailed off, his tone, albeit neutral, seemed to be a tad interrogative as if he dared him to confess by himself.


Bucky gazed at him over his mug. "Right," Bucky said quietly with a faint spark in the eye he couldn't quite identify.

"How do you know I asked for the file?" Steve changed subject.

Bucky followed.

"Agent Hill- came and asked me if I wanted a copy of it, much to my surprise."

"You mean she came all the way to your office?" Steve said with unhidden consternation, furrowing his brows.

Bucky gawked at him. "Yeah, why?"

"Cause she can barely stand you, here's why."

Over the months, the relationship between her and Bucky had taken quite a funny curb. The initial respect and admiration she had for the both of them had split into two different directions. With Steve, it carried down on the same path and evolved into genuine esteem while with Bucky, it took a detour and progressively morphed into mild irritation, exasperation and intolerance. She would watch
him from the corner of her eye with utter disdain or fold her arms across her chest and slightly pivot her body away from where he was standing when he started to speak. Although Steve couldn't exactly pinpoint when the breaking point had happened, he would say it begun after Bucky started to crack some teasing comments and show off his natural flirtatious persona. She would often respond to his attempts at getting cozy with sharp comebacks always uttered with the most uneflexible tone of voice.

"She doesn't not stand me! Where did you get that from?"

"Her repulsed expression and her barby comments, for one."

It was funny how the conversation had steered and how the tables were turned. Bucky was now the one looking utterly outraged while Steve watched him with an entertained smirk.

"Tasha gives me crap on a daily basis!"

"Except, it's totally different. It's just some playful teasing fondness coming from her. With Maria Hill though... The very fact you can call Natasha Tasha proves my point."

Bucky shrugged it off, sulking, and strangely enough, shushing himself.

"If you say so. Apparently you know best," he muttered quietly. "Anyway, she fought off the overwhelming aversion she feels for me and was in my office because you know, you and I were both took part in that mission. Therefore she assumed I might be interested in having the file as well."

A big smile took over.

He put the mug down and looked across at him. "So what is this about? I appreciate your trying to avenge me for that nasty hit I got in the head but much water has flowed under the bridge."

He smirked teasingly. "I allow you to let go."

Steve shook his head, smiling.

"Don't tell me you've never wanted to know, though? We're talking about someone who was clever and efficient enough to lead a mission along ours, who undermined everybody but yet who didn't harm us when she could have easily done it. I guess part of me wanted- still wants- to understand who this woman was and what her motives were." He paused and smirked. "Besides, you know, clearing your honor."

"Who says it had anything to do with us? It coul be a personal vendetta."

Steve shook his head, dubious. "Clearly not Zola. She vanished without even trying to reach the head of the train."

"Because she didn't expect us. She found us on her way and had to abort the mission."

He wondered if Bucky had had a look at the file yet, or if he had accepted to get a copy when Hill asked for that matter.

"Except according to the investigation, it is very likely she got on the train from Switzerland. Why wait so long? She could have reached Zola a long time before the train arrived at our curb."

Bucky crossed his arm over the counter and bent a little forward. "So you think she knew we were coming?"
It seemed far-fetched, quite illogical knowing she hadn't even tried to hurt, but it was the only explanation that made sense so far.

"The CCTV shows she attacked barely a few minutes before our mission started. This can't be a coincidence."

Bucky shrugged. "Maybe she was an agent hired by our own government. People who didn't think we would be able to catch Zola and who sent her as plan B."

Steve remained quiet. This theory could have been plausible if it weren't for the fact she was female. Peggy had only managed to make it to a boot camp and thus even after proving her value a hundred times over. She was the best agent out there, but still no better than any man soldier. There was no way that in the fourties a secret governmental agency would have put the fate of one of their most major missions to winning the war into the hands of a woman.

"There are still some blanks in this story," he said. "And this is exactly why I required the file. So I can fill them."

Bucky nodded. He agreed in silence as he couldn't think of any counter-argument to voice aloud.

A couple of days later, Natasha was in for the evening and had brought pizzas. After eating, Bucky glanced at his watch and hopped down his stool.

"I gotta go," he said as he put on his leather jacket. He went over to the table, grabbed a slice of pizza and bit into it. "I have a date."

A date Steve had been aware of for a few days but yet didn't know much about. Bucky had remained disturbingly quiet about.

"This time it's different."

It was the only thing Buck had been willing to share. That could be a good sign.

Natasha snorted. "Tell her I'm sorry."

Bucky responded by picking up the slice laying on her plate and shoving it into her mouth. She snickered while chewing the bit she had been forced to eat and put the remaining back into the plate.

"You're just disappointed I'm not giving you 100% of my time," he winked at her and rushed to the front door, leaving the two of them alone in the apartment (something Steve no longer found awkward).

After a few minutes, Steve put the dishes into the sink whilst Natasha folded the cardboard boxes and shoved them into the trash can. It had become a natural routine.

She then went over to the living room and slumped into the couch.

"So another date?" she commented.

"Yeah. Bucky won't tell me more about it, though. Not that I'm complaining. But it doesn't mean I don't wonder why."

"Hmm, I may have my little idea," he heard say quietly.

"What?" he asked, fairly intrigued.
"Hey. What's this?" she called and he threw a glance behind his shoulder. Natasha was holding the file high in the air for him to see. "Can I have a look at it?" she had the courtesy to ask.

"Suit yourself. It's a bit your apartment too after all," he said amusingly. He was pretty sure Natasha spent more time here than in her own place although he didn't really know why. He suspected it had something to do with the fact she didn't like loneliness. Another thing they had in common. Those first few weeks waiting for Bucky to wake up had been the worst.

Natasha smirked and opened the file, skimming the first pages.

"What is it?" she asked. He wiped his hands into the teatowel nearby then walked over to the sofa.

"An old mission in Germany that didn't go exactly according to the plan." He frowned a little, remembering what Maria had said. "But I thought every agent of S.H.I.E.L.D knew about it."

Natasha took her eyes off of the file and smirked. "Well, I haven't always worked for S.H.I.E.L.D as you know," she said then turned her attention back into the case.

He told her about that day, the mission and the intruder on the train. She listened with much interest.

"So you were the first to conclude it was a woman?" she questioned looking at all the photographs and documents she had spread over the table to have a clear and broad at it all.

"Well, afterwards, we found this hair pin," he said, pressing his finger on the picture showing the item. Although still covered with stains of dry blood, it was both distinguished and made into a solid, and therefore expensive material.

"So it's very likely she used that same pin to unlock the door of the wagon," she mused aloud.

He nodded. "According to the documents, the security on the train was at its highest. Each passenger had to be searched before getting on the train."

Natasha listened carefully and read through all the reports and conclusions.

"She was very good," she eventually commented. "And I'm only admitting this cause her style is very similar to mine. Well, this is how I would have proceeded if I had to break into a military train."

"She must have been from the upper class if she had been granted the right to buy a ticket."

Natasha shook her head slightly. "This may only be a diversion to make the investigators look the other way. For all we know, she might have gotten this ticket in less conventional manners."

He looked at her concentrated face as her eyes swept across all the papers. "As in replicate it?"

Natasha shrugged. "Maybe, but it's still too big a risk to be refused on board. For this type of missions, you can't leave anything to chance. The ticket had to be 100% authentic. She could have stolen it. Any record of a theft claim?"

Natasha was remarkably in tune with that mysterious woman. On the investigations they had carried out together before, she had always managed to think like the criminal she was hunting or like the prisoner in the interrogation room she wanted to crack (and she always succeeded) and this time was not any different except for the fact there was no disdain or seeing this woman as inferior to her; she treated her like a formidable equal who deserved her full attention and to an extent, her admiration.

Steve mentally went through all the papers that were in the file and that he had read many times over.
"Not that I can recall."

"I'll look into it," she said.

Natasha looked focused and engrossed into the case. He realized the investigation had moved forward a lot thanks to her input. There was a reason Fury often put them together on a case and it was due to their mutual understanding and partnership. They reasoned and fought as if they complemented each other. And here they were doing it again on a seventy-one year old case.

She soon grew just as frustrated as he was not to have not even the slightest idea of what this agent looked like.

"What about the other passengers and the waiting staff? No physical description?" she asked.

"It took a long time to track the witnesses most of them had died by then and the others couldn't recall anyone who stood out."

She smiled. "Sometimes the best witnesses are those you fail to see."

She reached for a picture, a black and white only photograph that had been taken for the launching of the train. She pointed at a stern looking woman standing on the platform, holding the hand of her son who was playing with a cup-and-ball.

She tapped slightly on where he was standing. "Maybe he saw something."

It wasn't the strongest lead but still the best one he had. Now it was all a matter of luck. Finding the mother's name, tracking the son hoping he was still alive and that he could easily be contacted.

Eventually, they ran out of clues (for the simple reason this mysterious woman had ensured to leave as little of them as possible) and they gathered up all the papers.

As they cleared the table whilst he put everything back into the file, he heard Natasha say:

"And what's that?"

He looked up just quick enough to watch her reach for his drawing book that he had stupidly left on the table when the door bell went off. His chest squeezed and every muscle into his body tensed. Just the mere thought of Natasha seeing the portrait literally terrified him, and the conversation that would ensue just as much. Perhaps Natasha would be simple about this, maybe she would understand it was Natalie -and in the process would realize how far from the truth he was when he had said she looked a lot like her-, but he still wasn't ready for it. He wasn't ready for her to confront the image of her lookalike and part of him didn't want her to know the big place she still held in his current life.

"No!" he cried out and bounced using the speed the super serum had bestowed on him to grab it and jerk it as far away as possible from her just when her fingers grazed it. He protectively clutched it against his chest and felt himself relax instantly.

Natasha stared at him, both puzzled and amused.

"You know you send contradictory signals, don't you?" she teased referring to his sudden change of behavior.

"Sorry," he said with a casualness that didn't exactly fit his panic crisis from two seconds ago. "I don't like to show my drawings."
Natasha gazed at him, genuinely surprised. "You draw?"

He nodded. "Just some doodling."

She looked curious, eager to hear further details about this secret hobby, but she retreated somehow.

"I get it," she shrugged, mirroring his easy tone. "I don't like it either when someone comes anywhere close to my assortment of firearms and knives."

He mused about this one a little. "Hmm, I guess."
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Here it is! So, so, so sorry. I wasn't happy with it so I just put it aside and I finally decided to get back on it today.
The next chapter is in the works. I'm halfway through.
Enjoy!

The next morning, Steve was standing by the kitchen counter, looking at his watch. Bucky was running late, something that had never happened before. When he eventually stepped out of his room, he felt himself watched.

"What?" he asked suspiciously.

Steve shrugged. "Just waiting for you."

Bucky nodded without a single word and grabbed one of the toasts left for him on the plate which had now completely cooled down.

"So how was it, yesterday?" Steve asked.

Here came the suspicious look again.

"What about yesterday?" He answered casually.

Steve arched an eyebrow. "Your date. Remember?"

Bucky sped up the pace around the kitchen, slamming the cabinet doors shut, pulling drawers open and closed again in an attempt to make himself looking busy and, in the process, creating unnecessary rush to justify why he couldn't fully be involved into the conversation.

"Good," he said evasively then grinned.

"How did it go?" Steve went on, genuinely trying to start small talks.

Bucky laughed a fake laugh. He suddenly got very defensive. "What's with the sudden interrogation, this morning?"

That was hardly called an interrogation when you only ask two basic questions.

"I don't know. I'm just...asking. Usually you force me to listen to your morning debrief."

"My point, exactly," he retorted. "Why are you suddenly willing to hear it?"

Okay, now that was getting weird.

"Why are you suddenly unwilling to share?" he answered daringly with a similar tone.

A short silence followed during which Bucky nervously scratched his right temple.
"When are you finally going to give Tasha a spare key to the apartment? She can't keep breaking in everytime she feels like sleeping on the couch?"

Steve had a comeback ready but almost choked when hearing this unexpected revelation instead.

"Wait, what? Natasha slept here?" He instinctively threw a glimpse over at the couch behind him as he clearly recalled them saying goodbye the night before, watching her walk down the corridor then closing the door. He had a hard time picturing her snuggled in the couch all night.

Bucky shrugged casually, making no effort to appreciate the fact it was all breaking news for his best friend.

"Yeah, I found her sleeping there when I got home last night. Again."

Second bombshell.

"What do you mean again?" he asked, totally incredulous.

"She does it from time to time, actually. By the way, you should stop putting the chain lock. It makes it trickier for her. It means she has to slip in through one of the windows."

Steve was dumbfounded whilst he watched James coolly spread butter on his toast like he had just given him a summary of today's weather forecast.

"You say Natasha breaks in through the windows?"

Bucky pouted with extreme apathy when you consider what the topic of the conversation was.

"She slipped in through the window of my room the other night because you had unconcernedly locked all the windows in the living room. She called it a jerk move. And I gotta say I agreed." He licked the extra bit of butter on his thumb and put the knife into the sink.

Steve's mind was buzzing with a hundred questions (many of which being why Bucky seemed so nonchalant and detached about the situation and why he had waited so long before telling him) and he found it difficult to prioritize them - putting aside all the the how and other technicalities ones. Why did she sleep here? Did she do it often? How come he had never noticed? Why had she felt more comfortable letting Bucky know and not him? Did it mean she liked it here? When did she plan on telling him? Had she ever planned to? Why did she always disappear before dawn? When had it started? Would she stop now that he knew?

He suddenly felt uncomfortable thinking of all those nights he had been sleeping only a few feet away from her without ever knowing.

"Okay, let's go. Look who's running late, now," Bucky exclaimed.

The ride to the office was silent as Steve endeavored to answer all the questions listed above knowing too well he couldn't possibly expect Natasha to do it. Somewhere amid that tornado that was wrecking havoc in his head, part of him couldn't ignore the fact that Bucky had brought this up as an (outstanding and successful) attempt to create a diversion. It made him even more determined to find out more about this secret date.

As soon as they reached the headquarters, Steve was eager to come across Natasha. They were greeted by all the agents as they made their way along the corridors whilst he yearningly waited to catch sight of the only familiar face he wanted to see right now.
It wasn't until he sat at his desk, giving only half of his attention to the paperwork waiting for him that Natasha stepped into his office, coming straight to him about some formal administration procedure.

Standing across from him, he hurriedly signed the papers then slowed down as he thought of a good strategy to start the topic.

"How was the traffic last night after you left?" he asked naturally.

"Pretty smooth," she shrugged. Her outstanding level of calm would have almost made him question his own source.

He looked up at her. "I bet," he said, pouting. "Especially if you didn't make it as far as round the corner."

Natasha eyed him acutely, decyphering his true intentions straight into his eyes. Her pupils went still as she seemed to have cracked the code. She shook her head and smirked.

"Barnes told you," she stated without the hint of a doubt, rolling her eyes.

It made him frown, feeling irked. "Maybe I just figured out by my myself."

Natasha brushed off the possibility with a slight motion of the hand. "Please. If I wanted you to find out, you would have."

"So you didn't want me to know. Why not?"

"Because I knew you would make it bigger than it is."

He stood erect. Natasha mastered the art of dodging and he wasn't exactly keen to play along. "Then tell me what it really is."

She shrugged. "My neighbors next door have very loud sex and I need to catch up on sleep from time to time."

He knew exactly what she was trying to do: making it awkward by scorching his old-fashioned etiquette so he would abort the conversation on his own. "Natasha," he sighed.

"And you don't know everything," she went on. "It gets worse when you hear the sound of the leather whip flapping and the man roaring like a-"

"This isn't gonna work," he said.

She cocked an eyebrow and looked at him with an impressed expression. "It isn't? Then congratulations, you're officially a member of our depraved society."

He stood, impassible, watching her silently, pressuring her to answer the question.

"So," she started hesitantly, a tad uneasy. "I guess it means I was right to think it would make you uncomfortable. Don't worry, it won't happen again."

She concealed her disappointment behind her usual smirk. It surprised him to see her so "affected", it annoyed him to realize he might have made her feel unwanted, and inside, he uncontrollably panicked at the idea this might make her take some distance, that he might lose her a little.

"No, no," he rushed to answer. "Nat," he called her quietly, prepping his knuckles on the desk and
bending forward, closer towards her, thinking of nothing but the fact he might have not handled the
conversation the right way. "You're probably right. I probably made it bigger than it is. You are more
than welcome to stay at the apartment. As often as you wish."

Natasha's smirk morphed into her second smirk, the one meant to tone down the fond contentment
she seldom allowed to show. He nodded quietly and smiled back at her.
"Glad we could work it out," she purred nonchalantly.

When she stepped out of his office, he was struck with two realizations.

First, he hadn't gotten an answer to his essential question (and to any other question, for that matter)
and he had fallen into her little act like a real amateur. She had played him like a child played with
their toys, and he had watched her do it many times enough to know she had fooled him like any of
the people she had ever fooled. She had handled him like a puppet and make him say the words she
wanted to hear. And there was just no point into trying again as it was undeniable Natasha was the
one with the upper hand in their relationship. She would always find a way out because it was in her
nature to deflect things and because it was his instinct to keep her close.

Secondly, he had called her Nat. A nickname he had always reserved to one single person.

Until today.

The rest of the morning went on normally. And, as unexpected as it had been to hear himself use
'Nat' for someone other than Natalie, somehow it hadn't felt unnatural. And it was probably why it
didn't really disturb him, past the initial feeling of guilt towards Natalie. It was evident he and
Natasha had reached a point in their relationship when it was legitimate she could inherit this special
nickname.

During briefing, Steve, skimming through the report given, watched as Maria Hill walked into the
room, running a bit late, and froze for a second at the sight of one last remaining available seat next
to Bucky. She silently made her way along the table and sat down. But then something happened
that caught Steve's interest. Maria prepped her left elbow on to the table as a physical barrier
preventing her from catching sight of Bucky who was sitting at her left; and James automatically
responded to it by slightly pivoting his chair a few degrees away from her.

This could have been a meaningless detail if it weren't for the fact that this usual animosity between
them somehow felt contrived here, and that, until now, Bucky had never responded to it. Her barby
comments had always found nothing but playful smiles or teasing remarks from him in return. It was
like her animosity unwillingly only fueled his good spirit. He always took great pleasure in not taking
any offense from her. So why the change, now?

And as Steve watched them both as they tried their utter best to make eye contact with absolutely
everybody in the room (including Fury's leather eyepatch) but each other, he started to consider that
perhaps, his best friend's date wouldn't be so hard to find after all.

When briefing ended, he rose to his feet and stood between agent Hill and Bucky, enjoying the
advantage he had just gotten himself.

"Captain," she greeted him quickly, showing eagerness to step out of this triangle.

"How was your evening?" he asked, looking straight at her then watching surreptiously Bucky out
of the corner of his eye.
Maria grinned and he watched out for any alarmed or unconscious glimpse into Bucky's direction. "Nothing special. Quite boring."

Steve smirked discreetly. The situation was getting funnier by the second, and even more with Maria's attempt to be casual. He glanced at Bucky's impassive expression suspecting he was probably silently taking the blow at this very second.

"Aah. Next time with the right company." Steve rubbed it in.

Maria nodded then excused herself saying she had some work to finish.

As they walked out of the room, it seemed Bucky had been struck by muteness.

"Hill is a great woman," Steve started, having far more fun than he should. It was his revenge for this morning. "She needs the right guy. Someone intelligent, witty, built to handle her strong personality. Ain't I right?"

He gazed at James deviously. It took Bucky a second too long before he started to nod.

"Right, how could you know what she wants?" Steve went on before he could speak. "She can't stand you."

He watched as his friend seemed to be literally boiling from the inside from not speaking up. It made him laugh.

"What's so funny?" Bucky asked with an underlying resentful tone.

"You. Trying to hide the fact you're dating agent Hill."

He waited for any physical reaction that would betray his best friend. Bucky's pupils quivered a little then his features unexpectedly relaxed.

"Is that what you think?" Bucky asked. "That I'm dating Maria Hill?"

His confident expression was quite impressive to watch.

"Why is everybody trying to fool me, today?" Steve thought.

"Don't deny there is something going on between you two."

"I'm not," Bucky said. "But it's not her I'm dating. It's her sister."

Consternation ensued, and not the one Steve had seen coming. His own. He had expected his friend to deny strongly or, on the opposite, to confirm boldly. But not this.

"Wait...what?"

Bucky nodded and lowered his voice.

"It was a coincidence. I met her one evening, and when we started to get serious and she introduced me to her sister, I found out it was Hill and well, she didn't take it very well."

Steve blinked. He reckoned this could explain the animosity that had been going between them.

"But why would she take it badly?" Steve asked. Bucky was a national hero; he was perfect boyfriend material.
"I don't know...I think it has to do with the fact she's seventeen. I'm not trying to understand Hill's logic."

"WHAT?" he exclaimed outrageously. Of all Bucky's shenanigans, this one had to be intolerable and unforgivable one.

Bucky stared at him impassively then a snort started to vibrate in the back of his throat before he burst out into laughter. He patted Steve's shoulder a couple of times.

"Oh man, that was too easy."

It didn't make Steve any less confused and he still couldn't figure out what was the joke part. Obviously, he wouldn't admit it aloud.

"Fair enough, you got us. I was with Maria last night."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"And you couldn't just admit it?"

"And let you think you won?" Bucky snorted. "You know I'm never going down without a fight."

He smiled smugly.

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Steve asked after rolling his eyes.

"I wanted to. But Maria is waiting for the right time."

"Why?" he furrowed his brows. "It's not like I would disapprove of you two being together."

And he meant it. That description of the right guy Maria needed, that was all he thought about Bucky.

"I think she's a little nervous. She has so much respect for you," Bucky paused and chuckled. "Probably much more than she has for me."

He smiled at him as he seemed to thoroughly understand why his girlfriend would admire his best friend more than him.

"Well, well, well," a voice muttered from behind. Natasha was walking up to them with the bait of a feline and her prey was Bucky. She slightly raised her chin up. "You threw me under the bus faster than it takes to say the word 'hair gel'." James gave his most unapologetic grin.

"Traitor," she muttered.

"Squatter." The corner of his mouth was up.

It was hard to tell which one was enjoying this conversation more. It stimulated them both on a level only them could understand.

"All this to keep your little romance secret for two more minutes."

"Aha!" Bucky pointed at her. "I knew you told him! Steve wouldn't have noticed a thing otherwise."

Surprisingly, the comment titillated Steve only.
"Not me," Natasha shrugged. "You see, I am not a snitch."

She slurred the words slowly, aiming them right at him.

"Hey." Steve spoke out, feeling a little insulted. "I'm right here."

Natasha and Bucky didn't react, too busy gazing at each other with an unyielding daring look.

"And I didn't need anybody's help to figure it out," Steve added, feeling the urge to remind his audience and save his honor. "You're not that subtle, Buck."

Bucky's phone beeped in his hand. He checked out the text and sighed.

"Gotta go finish a report," he said with a severe lack of enthusiasm.

"I'm coming with you. There's some paperwork I need you to sign," Natasha said smugly, content this conversation wasn't quite over yet. She turned to Steve and smiled before following Bucky up the hallway. A triangle he was happy to step out of.

"So where are those papers you want me to sign?" Bucky asked as he glanced down at her empty hands.

"I dropped it on your desk last Thursday," she replied.

He snickered. "Clearly not or I would have already signed them."

She put a hand on her hip. "Blue file reading IMPORTANT on it with a yellow post-it saying 'sign me please' with a cute, smiling emoji drawn by me."

He shook his head and shrugged.

Natasha walked up to him, standing less than a foot apart, gauging him with her puzzling, large green eyes, then she brushed past him to lean over towards his desk. She grasped something between her thumb and her forefinger and pulled it out of the messy pile of paperwork lying wildly on the table.

She stood straight back up and held the file up to his face, detached the yellow post-it with the emoji and showed it to him with a smirk playing on her lips.

"I-I didn't have time to tidy up my desk last weekend," he justified then rolled his eyes when he got nothing but a dubitative look from his friend.

"Fine. I'm messy. Sue me," he grumbled then walked around his desk. He glanced at the papers spread over the table then back at her in a defying way.

"So you're not going to pretend to tidy up your desk even just a bit to prove me wrong?" she asked.

"Why bother? We both know it would only be an act."

She smiled. "James, your frankness knows no bounds."

The way she said it it was an earnest compliment. A trait from him she admired.

"Believe it or not, there is some logic in this chaos," he explained, pointing at the mess. "I organize myself in it." She swayed the blue file in the air in response with a nonchalant expression. He smiled.
"This was just an exception. I was in a rush last weekend."

"Yeah, you had a date to plan."

A short silence ensued.

"How did you find out about me and Maria?" he asked her.

They looked at each other. "It's my job to see what is hidden."

Bucky nodded. He didn't expect any less from her.

"I'm sorry, by the way," he said. "For outing you earlier."

She gauged him shortly and rolled her eyes with an amused look. "No, you're not."

They both snorted at how acurate her statement was.

Bucky paused and his expression turned a bit more grave. "It was time. He deserved to know."

"Yeah, well, don't make it a habit."

"Why? You're hiding something else?"

Natasha smirked. "I'm always hiding something else. Call it second nature."

Bucky smiled back then reached over for the blue file. He signed it then handed in back to her. He chuckled slightly.

"You know, our conversation earlier? It felt like a déjà vu. I had a very similar one back in the 40s."

"With whom?" she asked.

His mouth twitched a little, his lips were tight, his look fleeting and slightly uneasy.

"Natalie," he answered evasively.

Natasha took the file and nodded. "Right," she said. "The mysterious Natalie whose existence shall be quietly acknowledged but never brought up aloud."

Bucky remained uncharacteristically quiet. She briefly bit her bottom lip, aware she was about to cross a line she had tacitly agreed to stay away from until now.

"How similar are we, exactly?" she asked coolly. She both dreaded and craved for this answer.

Bucky sighed, not exactly thrilled to be included in the matter. "Why don't you ask Steve? You know he will answer you honestly."

Yes, indeed -she knew.

"He has the answer but he's not ready to hear the question, yet." She spoke gravely then she modulated the tone of the conversation. "Come on, James." She purred, leaning in, brushing the edge of the desk with her fingertips. "We're close, remember? I even sleep in your pajamas. You can tell me."

She smirked playfully.
"I'd rather you don't bring that up in front of Maria. It sounds wrong."

She smirked harder.

"Very similar," he said.

She nodded bluntly. That, she already knew.

"As in sisters kind of similar?" she pressed him.

"No, as in beyond logic kind of similar. She looked just like you," he said. "A dazzling, flawless doppelganger."

The answer hit her stronger than she could have ever anticipated.

"Except she was blonde," he added without much interest, fully aware it was an insignificant detail compared to the bomb he had just dropped.

Natasha furrowed her brows as she seemed to gauge the immense size of the hidden part of the iceberg (when she had only be given the visible tip to examine until today).

"Troubling, I know" Bucky commented with the voice of a man who knew far too well.

"Well, I didn't have any family in the U.S. in the 1940s," she said.

Bucky remained quiet. A type of silence that revealed he didn't completely believe -or at least agree with- the statement.

"Who was she?"

"Hard to say. She introduced herself as a journalist but it turned out to be a lie. And the place where she supposedly lived also turned out to be a lie. Who knows where was the truth in what she said?"

"You didn't trust her?" Natasha asked.

"Actually, Natalie was also my friend." He shook his head. "Someone who refreshingly didn't fit any mold of the society."

She watched as he let his mind wander out into old memories and it made her wonder if Steve was the only one who had to cope with her loss, after all. Bucky was more discreet about it, and probably out of respect for Steve's greater grief.

"What was her name?"

"Natalie Rushman."

Her mind stood erect at the familiarity of it for being one of her most common aliases.

"What?" Bucky's voice was inquisitive.

She shrugged. "Nothing. Just a detail."

A queer detail but that still remained random and plausible.

She had one last question to ask. A question she knew she had no right to have answered, but she had lost to curiosity a few minutes ago already.
"And who was she to him?" she said softly. "To Steve?"

Bucky watched her knowingly, his long pause betraying his answer.

"I think you figured it out long ago," he said.

And with this non answer, he confirmed everything she suspected and beyond.
Hey, guys!
I hope you like this new chapter. I can't wait to read your impressions about it! Thank you so very much for your comments on the last update. I'm glad you liked it.
Bad news: I'm going on holiday next week so I don't know it's going to take before I write and post the next chapter. I'd rather give you a heads up, now. I'll try my best, though.
Merry Christmas and Happy New Year if I don't manage to return earlier!

He knew he shouldn't but Steve couldn't help feeling engrossed in his unofficial investigation. "Obsessed" was the word Bucky, who didn't know how (or actually, couldn't be bothered) to say things by half, had used.

"Why do you care so much about this?" he exclaimed, not so pleased to watch his best friend replacing the chasing of a ghost by yet another.

"Why don't you?" Steve retorted.
Bucky remained silent but they both knew what the answer to this question was.
Bucky had moved on and let his past behind, and more so than Steve.
And how could he not? Bucky had nothing from the past he felt the need to grasp on. He had his family, who had given him a bigger family, he was a fully respected officer and he had a girlfriend; an unknown secret agent from an old mission was the least of his worries.
All Steve had ever had belonged to the past, and more importantly, had been ripped off from him, and grieving was a harder process for him than it had been for James. And solving this cold case was a way to come to peace with his lost life.
"I think you're afraid to let go of 1942," Bucky said matter-of-factly, perhaps a bit bluntly as way to confront him to reality.
Steve folded his arms and snorted as a defense mechanism. "Why would I be afraid of letting go?" he protested.
Bucky looked him deep in the eye, already remorseful of what he was going to say next. "Because that would mean letting go of Natalie."
Silence, one so heavy it banged against Steve's eardrums. He began to understand why his friend had endeavored to show as little interest to the investigation as possible, as a subtle attempt to slow down his 'enthusiasm'.
Bucky looked hurt and apologetic for stirring painful matters.
"I know it's hard but you got to let her go, Steve, you gotta. You need to close this door. That's what she would have wanted you to do."
His best friend's words rang into his ears and soon her own words echoed inside his head.

"You have to let me go, Steve. You need to forget about me."

Those had been her exact words before she walked out of his life. He could hear them just as clear as the day she had voiced them aloud.

"I need to finish this, Buck." Perhaps it was the determination in his voice -or the despair in his look-that made Bucky yield in and nod silently.

And this conversation was never brought up again.

They didn't really the discuss the case again. The rare times James would try to show interest and ask questions about the evolution of the case, Steve would always find a way to shut it down by answering vaguely or moving on to a lighter topic. Not out of resentment, but to respect Bucky's decision not to dwell on into the past.

Steve eventually received the box containing all the physical evidence from the case. And as he looked at the long, blood-tainted hair pin through the plastic pouch he was holding between his fingers, he thought of what the report said. According to the autopsy report, after analyzing the blood on the object and examining the wounds on the dead HYDRA soldier who had been collected at the bottom of the bridge he had fallen of during the train ride, the medical examiner had concluded that the hair pin had been planted straight into his right eye.

Steve tried to play out the scene in his head, and as he remembered it himself. He could still clearly visualize himself banging madly behind the metal door with a heavy, slab made of steel he had found nearby, trying to decipher something from the blurry and indistinct figures moving around through the cracked glass of the little square window. The two figures in motion were absolutely unidentifiable - and never would he have guessed one of them was female, he had felt like going mad thinking one of them could be Bucky, fighting all alone and him being stuck outside, watching it all unfold helplessly. So he had relied on his hearing: many groans and muffled whimpers from pain. Then the two figures eventually stood still and it seemed one of them slowly hovered slightly higher than the one it was facing as if it was being lifted off the ground, fighting to break free with little, shaky motions.

He hit the door harder, panting, feeling it started to yield.

Then the imprisoned figure had suddenly jerked its arm towards its opponent's face, and that when he had heard it. This terrifying cry of pain that sent a rush of shivers down his spine, horrified at the idea it might be Bucky's. He banged harder on the door, desperate to come and help, internally praying the scream came from whoever that second person in the carriage was.

Then another sound rang out. A more sinister one although it was duller. A gun shot. Followed by the most tetanizing silence. He banged again and again, determined to break this door open even if he had to bend it with his own hands. Who had pulled the trigger? And who was standing on the other end of the barrel?

The door screeched loudly as it finally gave way. He dropped the slab down and held firmly to the side, using all the weight of his body to pull until he would have enough space to slip through the gap. He noticed through the window that there was now only one figure standing in the other wagon.

When he eventually barged in, he barely had time to catch sight, out of the corner of his eye, of the bottom part of a lean silhouette whisk up into the air and land with a faint sound right above his head,
on the roof. Shockingly, the carriage looked empty. It had gone from two people brawling ruthlessly in a kill or die face-off to none. His throat squeezed and his heart ached at the thought that Bucky might have been pushed out of the train and his instinct was to run to the edge and look down, even if he was fully aware that from this height, and at this speed, he wouldn't see anything.

But then he saw a hand lying on the ground, down the carriage, behind the shelves. He dashed and found the familiar figure of Bucky lying face down, unconscious. He screamed his name and shook him, reaching for his neck to feel a pulse. The sheer relief was overwhelming when he saw him wriggle and slowly open his eyelids, showing no sign of harm of any sort except that looking groggy and stunned.

"Somebody knocked me out. I think," Bucky said.

And as a million questions buzzed into his head, he suddenly realized that the stranger who had escaped the carriage before he could see them and who had landed just a few seconds ago on the roof, hadn't run away. He hadn't heard runny steps that would indicate the intruder had gone.

He rose to his feet and ran back to the head of the car, where the giant hole was. And as he did so, he finally heard the stranger above him do the same, running in the opposite direction, towards the tail.

He took hold of the handle near the edge and leaned forward, looking up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fugitive, but he was already too far out of his line of sight.

And yet now, this scene he remembered so well, had felt different once he had discovered there was indeed a third person in the wagon, and that it was a woman.

Still looking at the hair pin, he pictured her fighting for her life when the HYDRA soldier had squeezed her throat and lifted her up in the air, reaching probably for the only item she could use to defend herself, her hair pin, and made it a weapon. He still didn't know who she was fighting for and if she were a hero or a bad guy, but part of him admired her for her resilience and relentless courage.

Part of him felt somehow guilty for not being there to help her. And he couldn't help but wonder what had happened of her afterward. Even if she had defeated the soldier, had she been badly injured, too? Had she made it out of the train only to die from her wounds a few hours later, trapped in the snowy mountains? Or had she gone back home? And where was her home?

He gazed at the dark stain of dry blood on the pin and had an idea.

The next morning, he went to Jason, one of the lab engineers at S.H.I.E.L.D.

"I would like you to analyze this," he said, holding the pouch up with the pin inside. "And see if you can find fingerprints."

Jason looked mostly stunned to have Captain America standing in his laboratory, asking specifically for his help. When the moment passed, he nodded and started to mumble a few words.

"Of course, Captain Rogers. What case reference is it so I can register it and send all the data straight into the file?"

"It's not related to any S.H.I.E.L.D investigations. It's an old case I was working on back in 1943, in Germany. And the report I read doesn't mention any fingerprint scan."

"The fingerprint identification didn't become regular until decades later, and it took even longer to have a proper fingerprints data to search into," Jason started. "Without mentioning the possibility that the process was delayed in the other countries before being fully operational. If the person you're
looking for passed away before giving fingerprints became mandatory, they won't be found in any system."

Steve nodded, fully aware. Chances were slight but stil worth the shot.

"I know. I guess I'm just relying on luck. Can you try anyway?" He asked.

"I will try my best, sir."

He handed the hairpin over, slightly reluctant to separate from it.

Later in the week, Natasha walked into his office with a smug smile on.

"I hope I'm your favourite cute but not entirely principled Russian," she purred, swaying up to the desk.

"You come a close second after Stalin," he commented while finishing writing down notes. "Why?"

He looked up and found her smirking.

"Well, this better give me number 1 ranking." She held a file out to him then sat proudly in the chair across from him. "I pulled some strings and asked a few people from the German secret service to help me out on your case."

She intentionally paused, relishing the sight of his full interest. "That little boy in the picture. His name is Ulrich Kaiser. He's eighty-two and still alive. He moved to America and started his business in New York in the early sixties, made a little fortune and retired to let his children take over the business family."

Steve opened the file and looked at the photographs, from child to young graduate, to businessman and family father.

"Tell me he's still in America," he murmured.

Natasha smiled. "He now lives in the Hamptons."

He gazed at her, appreciatively (but what else is new?). "In retrospect," he began. "Joseph Stalin wasn't that special."

After smiling with contentment, she added:

"By the way, I also consulted the archives and found an old report filled out by the Geneva train station security team stating they had to intervene to stop a man on the platform who tried to get on the HYDRA train without ticket. A respectable man from the higher German social class. He claimed he had his special ticket but must have lost it on his way to the station. The whole area was searched but the ticket was never found." Natasha paused. "Of course, it might just be a coincidence or maybe your mysterious intruder got hold of it."

Steve nodded. There was no coincidence with her type of intruders. The professional type.

"I asked at the lab to search for fingerprints on the hair pin."

"Great," she said with the satisfaction of a detective getting close to catching his criminal. "The trap is closing around her."

She had a devious smile when saying it, almost as eager for answers as he was.
He called the number provided in Kaiser's file and asked if he could pay him a visit. An appointment was booked for the following weekend.

He rode on his bike to the Hamptons and pulled over in front of a light blue painted house facing the sea.

He was welcomed by the governess, who smiled a smile that didn't reach her eyes, before formally inviting him to follow her. She led him through the spacious hall, into the beautifully furbished living-room to the bright glass veranda where an old man was sitting in a white armchair, an old German song playing in the background.

He felt himself thrown seventy years back, sitting outside the tents with his comrades, silenced filled with the only German station their little radio could perceive. He had listened to so many similar songs whilst drawing alone in his sketchbook at dawn.

"Your guest is here, Mr Kaiser," she said with a stern voice.

Ulrich Kaiser turned his head and smiled. Steve slightly bent over to shake his hand.

"Please, have a sit," the man said with a German accent that had been softened by many decades living in the country, motioning him to sit on the long white sofa adjacent to his seat.

"Thank you for having me today, Mr Kaiser."

He looked at the old man sitting in front of him. There was hardly anything left from the young boy in the picture who was playing with his cup and ball toy on the platform.

"The honor is mine. It's not everyday you get a call from Captain America asking if he can visit."

Steve grinned sheepishly. "I really appreciate your receiving me so fast."

Mr Kaiser nodded. "How can I help you? From what I understood, it's regarding an old case from 1943."

"That's right." Steve reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled the black & white photograph of the train platform. "It's you in the picture, isn't it?"

The man gently took hold of the picture with a slightly shaky hand caused, not by any sort of nervousity, but the old age. He reached into his pocket, took a pair of reading glasses out and looked at the photograph with more attention.

"Indeed," he said. "But it's the first time I ever come across this photograph."

"It was taken by the Company staff for the first departure of the Schnellzug EB912 from Geneva." He paused. "I was hoping you could answer a few questions."

The man lifted his hand up, wordlessly asking him to hold on. He propped his hands on each side of the armchair and pushed himself up to his feet. He then went to the music player and turn the sound down, the sound of the female voice singing reduced to a whisper.

"I will try my best," he said after returning to his seat.

"There was a woman on the train who, we believe, wasn't supposed to be on the train that day. She was traveling alone. I was hoping you could remember some details from that day and perhaps give me a description of her."
He tried to keep the details as vague as possible because 1/ that was pretty much all he had himself and, 2/ not to influence his testimony.

Ulrich frowned. "Why would you be interested in an old German case?"

"It was tightly connected to one of my missions in Europe during the war," he explained. Kaiser didn't seem to find any more logic into it. "Can you think of any woman who might fit the description I gave you?"

Kaiser looked down at the photograph, using it as support to immerse himself back into this old memory.

"I remember there were almost only businessmen, politicians or couples from the most noble German families. My mother and I were traveling back to Munich after a short holiday in Switzerland. It was my father who had gotten us the tickets. You know, there were only sold or offered to people with close links to the Reich government?"

"I know," Steve answered, silently wondering what had been Mr Kaiser's close link to the Nazi government. "Wasn't there a woman who stood out, though? Or whose behavior might have seemed a bit out of the ordinary?"

Steve started to question whether this visit would be of any help in his investigation. His questions were so vague, and the memory so old and blurry, he didn't expect his possible witness to have an answer to all his interrogations.

"Well...I recall this woman," Kaiser began to speak. "She was traveling on her own and she got on the train barely a minute before the train departed. Then she went to sit at the far end of the carriage where it was the quietest."

Steve nodded encourageingly. "What made her stand out from the rest of the passengers?"

Ulrich paused, thinking carefully about his next words. "It may seem improbable, or even crazy, but I don't think she ever got off the train when we reached Munich."

Mr Kaiser didn't suspect, but he had just gotten Steve's full attention by bringing up the crucial detail he had intentionally not revealed until now. "What makes you say that?"

"A few minutes after it was announced the train was entering the station, she got up and went to the bathroom, which was near the exit door but...when the train stopped, I didn't actually see her step out of the restroom and leave the train. I remarked on it to my mother and she scolded me saying it wasn't appropriate to notice people's coming and going to the bathroom. Especially a lady's." He chuckled lightly at the memory and then shrugged. "I was certainly wrong. There was no way a young woman had vanished through a train's restroom."

Kaiser had no idea, but he had given Steve just what he had come for. The description fitted what had in all likelihood happened.

"Do you remember what she was wearing?"

"She looked very elegant and undoubtedly had the manners of the upper class. I think she was wearing a refined black coat coat with a grey fur collar and fur hat."

Just like the coat and hat that been found along with an empty purse by the side of the railtracks. Another striking detail that meant Mr Kaiser was describing his unsub.
"And a dark blue jumpsuit," he continued.

"A jumpsuit?" Steve repeated. This was an unknown detail.

Mr Kaiser nodded. "Yes, quite an elegant one. It wasn't something as common to wear as it is now, but it was something fashionable and modern women would wear."

'And the most practical outfit for a mission,' Steve thought to himself.

"Are you sure she was German?" he asked.

The old man grinned. "I have no reason to doubt it. She spoke German flawlessly, and with the slight accent people from the noble class would speak it."

Steve took a mental note of it, then asked the most important question.

"What did she look like?"

Mr Kaiser thought silently for a couple of seconds, gathering as many details as he could.

"She was incredibly beautiful; the kind of stunning beauty that would leave any man speechless, and she exuded the confidence of a woman who wouldn't so easily accept an invitation from any of them. In her late twenties, or early thirties, I would say. Blond hair, light-colored eyes with distinct facial features and a fair skin." He trailed off a little. "She had the universal beauty so dear to the Reich, the Caucasian type."

A short, uncomfortable silence followed, and there was nothing but the low sound of the singing woman echoing into the room. "Obviously," Ulrich spoke. "This isn't the kind of things we can say now."

There was some unsettling hint of nostalgia in his voice.

"Not now, nor ever." Steve said, suddenly plunging back into the memories of old Nazi propagandas and speeches.

Kaiser looked pensive, nodding blankly. "It may seem like the world has changed a lot in seventy years, but only on the surface. Dead dictators have been replaced by new ones, and fascist ideology lives on even in a world that prides itself for achieving globalisation. Which is exactly why people need a hero like you. A figure from the past to remind them not to fall into the same traps the former generation fell into. Your mission isn't over yet, Captain Rogers; and deep down, you know it will never be. Humans are doomed to never get along."

The German singer's voice rang out in the room.

"I think fear is the trigger. Humanity can live peacefully if it feels safe."

Ulrich Kaiser remained stoic. He smiled pensively.

"You probably think I'm just a cynical old man," he declared, a little amused. Then he turned serious again. "You've got a young soul, Captain Rogers -and it's probably one your strongest assets. If you had lived eighty-two years with people, you would probably think the same as I do."

He internally tensed at the thought of it becoming true, him losing faith in people. That was an idea his mind couldn't quite comprehend. He had suffered from bullies who had beat him to the ground when he was young and little, seen the horrible things evil people could do at times of war, fought
against the vindictiveness of an Asgardian who desperately wanted to crawl out of the shadow of his glorious friend by seeking power, however, amidst all this, he had only also come across the kindness of compassionate people who had helped him up, fought alongside heroic soldiers and seen those brave policemen and firefighters who had run to rescue the civilians whilst the Chitauri created havoc in Manhattan. Humanity had flaws -numerous ones- but it also the brightest virtues that could shine brightly through the darkest obscurity. This was what he had chosen to see.

"But you're not here to listen to my rambling," Mr Kaiser spoke again after a few seconds. "That mysterious passenger of yours...She had that timeless, vintage beauty from the time. Like Hitchcock actresses: Grace Kelly, Janet Leigh or Kim Novak. Or like Marylin Monroe, too."

Steve nodded.

"Is there anything else you remember, perhaps? Any detail?"

The old man snorted. "You're asking too much from the memory of a twelve-year-old boy."

Steve nodded quickly, caught up by the realization his eagerness for answers had gone off limits. "Of course. My apologies."

"Your tea is ready, Mr Kaiser." The governess announced matter-of-factly as she stepped by the doorframe.

He responded with a floppy hand gesture, motioning her to let them.

Steve took it as his cue and sent signals of his imminent departure.

"Is there anything else I can help you with, Captain?" Ulrich asked cordially.

Steve shook his head slightly and stood up.

"No, that will be all." He shook his hand. "Thank you for your time and for your inestimable help, Mr Kaiser."

He started towards the door.

"Oh and Captain," the man called from his chair. Steve turned to look in his direction. "I hope you find her."

It seemed like the room went totally silent.

"I have never been to war -so I can't compare myself to you-, but I know for a fact that unresolved issues from the past can cling to you, and often, without you realizing when it happened, you find yourself you're clinging back."
Chapter Notes

Whoa. I really thought I had given up on that fic and then today I was bored and wrote a chapter. Not as long as usual but I'm slowly trying to get back to the story. Really really sorry for everyone who's been waiting for an update.

Steve and Bucky walked out of the cinema. They had both made it a point months ago that going to the movies at least once a month was to remain one of the few routines they should keep from their past lives. Things had changed though. All movies were in color now, often and more than necessary in 3D, and they relied more on action packed, bomb exploding scenes than an elaborated storyline.

“So what did you do yesterday?” Steve asked, hands in his pockets.

“She took me kickboxing,” Bucky answered. A smirk played on his lips. “She knocked me out like one or two times. Perhaps even three, not that I would know for sure.”

Steve smiled. “It’s great,” he said. “I’m glad things are going well between you two.”

Maria Hill and James had been dated for several weeks, although he couldn’t exactly tell for how long considering he had found out about their relationship not so long ago.

“Does she know I know?” he asked.

Bucky’s cringe gave his answer away before he said anything. “Well, not exactly.”

Steve sighed. “I thought we talked about this. You ought to tell her. If she finds out on her own she’ll –”

“-probably knock me out a fourth time. Yeah, I’m aware.” Bucky cut him in. “Don’t worry, I’ve been dropping hints, you know, like suggesting to let you in the know.”

“And?”

James slightly pursed his lips together. “She’s warming up to it…slowly…I guess.”

Steve rolled his eyes, not because of Hill’s reluctance to being introduced to him as the girlfriend, but because his best friend’s mind-blowing incompetence paired up with extreme lack of enthusiasm.

“She said she’s waiting for the right moment. Maria is not the type to mix professional and personal life. I mean, she’s barely recovering from breaking her number one rule with me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve said as a way to put an end to this conversation. “I guess letting it drag on for a bit longer isn’t a problem.”

“You’re just scared you’ll blurt it out yourself.” Bucky said. He seemed to process his own words then pointed firmly his forefinger at him. “By the way, don’t,” he added in a warning tone.

“Are you seriously putting this on me?” Steve exclaimed.
“We all know you’re a lousy liar. She’s going to crack you open like an egg shell and you’re gonna drag me with you.”

“That is…absolutely not true,” he snorted, a deep frown on his forehead. “I can keep it together.”

They both on the sidewalk, Bucky gave him a blasé, stern look that seemed to carry years of past experiences and grudges then he resumed walking.

A few days later, after a jog cut short by unexpected rain, Steve came back home and headed to the kitchen for a morning coffee. The first few sunrays had barely cracked through the sky and the quietness in the apartment suggested James was still asleep. The evening before, after getting a text from Maria, he had dashed out for an improvised late date night which also meant bailing out of their morning jog.

Slightly leaning on the kitchen counter, he opened the newspaper and skimmed the headlines. His reading was interrupted by little, muffled footsteps walking up the corridor. He looked up and unexpectedly came across agent Hill, hair loosely tied into a messy bun, yawning as she entered the room and stretching up, wearing Bucky’s favourite baseball team large t-shirt. Wearing nothing other than his favourite baseball team t-shirt.

A heavy silence that seemed to last an eternity (and a half) ensued as they both made eye contact. Maria’s groggy expression soon turned into one of sheer horror as she came to the realization that not only the kitchen wasn’t unoccupied, but that she had come face to face with the person she least wanted to see in this outfit.

Her arms jerked and grabbed the bottom of the shirt pulling it down as far as cotton could possibly stretch, and repressing the squeal of surprise in the back of her throat while Steve flicked his eyes away and pivoted the upper part of his body to face one of the living-room windows.

Words dangerously lacked them both but soon he found himself fighting the amused smile that threatened to come up to his lips despite the awkwardness of the moment.

“So I was thinking I could make you waffles. This is a Ma’ Buchanan recipe and I promise you they’re the best p –” Bucky froze as he stepped into the room and was thrown into the awkward act that was playing out in the kitchen.

“Oh. You’re here…” Bucky commented quietly, slurring the last word. Maria shifted half of her body so it would be concealed behind his back.

“It’s…raining,” Steve said, pointing to the window and at the same time putting the blame on the weather.

He and Bucky shared a look that was worth a thousand words. Then James bit his bottom lip, lifted his eyebrows and his eyes swept across the wooden floor.

“Well, I guess it’s out of the bag,” he said absent-mindedly, seeming to be way more preoccupied about the aftermath then the present moment.

“I –I better go,” Hill said sternly, sounding surprisingly more collected and self-assured than anybody would expect. But again, she was trained to keep her cool in far more jeopardous situations.

She dashed out in an instant, leaving the two friends alone in the kitchen. Bucky raised his hands and mimed slow clapping without ever allowing his palms to touch. Steve gawked silently in response.
When they heard the door of his bedroom close, making sounds became permissible again.

“Don’t put this on me,” Steve whispered sharply. “If you had let me know she was staying over for the night I would have gone elsewhere and remained there all morning.”

“Well, it’s a known fact you’re as regular as a clockwork,” Bucky snapped back with an even lower whispering voice. “You were supposed to be back home at 8.15 sharp and it’s barely 6.40. I had this under control until you decided to go all spontaneous today. I have to say your timing is on point.”

Steve furrowed his brows, a look of discontent showing on his face. “Wait. Are you calling me boring?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. He leaned backward to peek into the corridor.

“Now is not the time for this bickering. I am so in trouble. I told her I got this.”

“I didn’t know she was staying over from time to time.”

“Because she isn’t,” Bucky grumbled. “Yesterday was the first time. And probably the last.”

“Well, at least now she knows. No more secrets.”

Bucky stared blankly. “Your optimism is inspiring,” he said ironically. “But not sure it will help me make it through tomorrow. Maria is going to kill me.”

Steve paused, tapping his fingers on the counter. He folded his arms across his chest and sighed.

“Just put it on me. Tell her I’m the one who went off schedule.”

“You think this wasn’t my plan already?”

Steve rolled his eyes. Of course, it had been his plan the second he had stepped into the room.

“But it’s not going to be enough. I still got a red target on my forehead.”

“Fine. Let her kill you. I’ll see you tonight,” he shrugged.

The bedroom door opened and their lips sealed tight. Maria reluctantly made her way into the room as there was tragically no way out of the apartment other than the one through the kitchen. She was wearing blue jeans and a dark leather jacket.

“Maria,” Steve called. “Would you like to stay for breakfast?”

He smiled lightly with a friendly and welcoming look.

“Thank you but I have a few things to do before heading to work.”

Steve nodded quietly. “I guess I’ll see you there, then.”

These simple words made her wince at the realization this was ought to happen indeed. Eventually.

“Of course,” she nodded back, quickly glancing in his direction then back at the exit door.

“Let me accompany you,” Bucky spoke.

“No.”
Short. Flat. Trenchant. This one word said more than if she had given a Shakespearian monologue.

And few seconds later, she was out of the apartment, closing the door behind her.

Steve went to pour himself his morning coffee and walked up to his best friend with a smirk plastered on his face.

“I guess this wasn’t what we all had in mind when she said right moment.”

Bucky suppressed the urge to curse and stomped to his room.

It had been a week since Steve had given the hairpin for fingerprints search and yet he still hadn’t received any results. Impatience took over which resulted to a surprise visit to S.H.I.E.L.D. lab. He walked straight to the agent he had given the precious exhibit to.

“Captain Rogers.” Jason smiled, although uneasy as if he was taken aback by this unexpected visit.

“Do you have the results of the fingerprints scan I asked for?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain.” He answered uneasily.

Steve frowned. S.H.I.E.L.D wasn’t known for being slow or sloppy.

“Did you run the tests?”

“I have,” Jason began then trailed off. “But I can’t have a look into the file.”

“Why not?”

“Tests have been suspended and access to the file has been disallowed. To everyone.” Jason added.

Noz Steve was the one taken aback. He looked bashful and sorry to have been put in this embarrassing position.

“By who?” Steve asked.

“Director Fury.” And after he said the name, he gave him a pinched smile and walked away to resume work.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Steve was stepping out of the elevator and making his way to Fury’s office. He knocked briefly, opened the door and walked into the room before he had been given permission to enter (he was having one of his dramatic entrances as Bucky liked to call them).

He found Fury sitting behind his desk, skimming through what was very likely to be a confidential file judging from his swift motion at closing it when he saw the door open.

“You suspended lab tests that I asked to be run. Why?” he went straight for it with a determined look.

“Good afternoon to you too, Captain Rogers.” Fury’s voice was remarkably calm.

Steve prepped his fists on the desk and leaned forward.

“Why can’t I access the file of an investigation I am running?”

Fury got up and stood tall and square. “Because it is a seventy-year-old investigation that is no longer
relevant,” he said simply. “You can’t possibly expect me to let my agents spend time and energy on a cold case.”

His voice was, albeit collected, daring and cold.

“When I joined S.H.I.E.L.D. you told me it granted me access to all the intel I wanted and would need.”

“To find people you used to know and to have a closure with your past, not to stir it up. And this, Captain,” Fury slurred his words carefully, “is a serious case of stirring up.”

Steve stood back up straight, staring sternly at a man he knew he could definitely not trust and possibly not look up to.

“Why do you care?” he asked boldly. Fury wasn’t the type to care about his men’s emotional state for the sake of it. There was always a reason behind it, and often, this reason was linked to what was his personal interest.

“I need agents who have their head in the game, and I need to know that you’re 100% invested into your work.”

“Except I am not one of your agents,” Steve retorted. “I am not one of your puppets whose strings you’re pulling.”

Fury seemed to finally look offended. Not to be called out a puppeteer but to be called one straight to his face.

“You may not be an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D but you’re a soldier and as such you appreciate what it means to follow orders. And Captain, in here, I’m the one giving orders. You better get used to it.”

His dark, formidable eye pierced into his.

A knock on the door pulled them both out of their silent row.

“Hold on,” Fury said out loud to whoever was waiting behind the door without breaking eye contact with him.

“Access to the file remains suspended as well as any other tests remotely related to that old case,” he announced like a sentence, but even more so, like an order.

Steve exhaled hardly, his look probably displaying all the frustration and anger he was feeling at this very moment.

When both acknowledged his silence meant surrender, Fury spoke again. “Come in,” he said out loud again and sat down in his chair as the door of his office opened.

Steve stood there a few more seconds, debating whether he should stay and fight back or walk out. He chose the latter for the simple reason he now had no doubt that Fury could be the most formidable opponent anybody could make. Director Fury was the sly type, the one that worked in the dark and had power on his side. He was the type to say one thing and mean the other (or not), pretend to give when he is actually the one taking, make you believe he is giving you the choice when actually you have none, show you one thing to better conceal the one he is hiding.

He realized how right Stark was. His secrets had secrets. And if you wanted the truth, the last thing to do was to go to Fury to get it.
Steve walked out of the office with a silent anger but vivid determination to get what he wanted.
Thank you so much for all your encouraging comments. You have no idea how much they boosted me. Here’s the new chapter. Longer this time, and a little surprise in the end ;) Enjoy!

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The punching bag shook violently under Steve’s punches, with nothing but the sound of his hits echoing into S.H.I.E.L.D’s gym.

“Easy there,” he heard a husky voice call from a distance. His muscles froze at the familiarity of it.

Natasha walked across the room, dressed in civilian clothes, the shadow of a smirk already playing on her lips. Steve paused, taking on the sight coming toward him. He hadn’t seen her in nearly a week, since she had popped into his office to give him the address of the little German boy in the picture, and in all honesty it felt she had been gone for longer than what it really was. His eyes lingered on every feature of her face and memorized every detail, trying to quiet down this irrational fear that he might have forgotten the perfection of them. And, as he did so, he felt progressively enveloped by an inexplicable wave of quietude at the realization she was back in his vicinity.

“How was your mission?” he asked to make conversation. They both knew it was just an informal question that would not get a real answer.

“Nothing thrilling,” she answered evasively with a shrug.

He nodded softly then resumed hitting the bag.

“How’d you find me?” he asked between two punches.

“Bucky told me what happened earlier so I assumed you’d feel like taking it out on a harmless punching bag,” she answered as she approached. She stopped and stood next to the bag, facing him. She then leaned forward, turned her head and peeked at the punching bag hanging before him. “Oh,” she said teasingly, keeping her gaze on it. “I was expecting to find a colored picture of Fury pinned to it.”

She shifted back to her initial position and smiled.

“I’m visualizing it just as fine in my mind. Call me eco-friendly.”

It raised a mischievous smirk to her lips.

“Fury has his good days. I guess today wasn’t one of them.”

Her comment irked him more that it would normally have in other circumstances. He paused and looked at her inquisitively.
“Was it you?” he asked as he recalled that Natasha was and remained one of Fury’s agents, if not one of his closest. “Did you tell him I was working on this old investigation?”

Her smirk didn’t fade but it took a different shade.

“Uh-uh,” she shook her head. “You know I’m on your side on this one. I want to find out who that spy nearly just as bad as you.”

He looked at her silently.

“And I’m going to give this blow a pass. I reckon my Black Widow reputation always precedes me.” She said it matter-of-factly, without a hint of reproach, although it seemed he caught sight of a formless, hardly noticeable bitterness.

This was enough to make him angry at himself.

“Sorry,” he said as he felt the urge to blow off more steam than before and punched the bag hard. “It wasn’t intended.”

“I know,” she answered quietly. “And besides, you are wise not to fully trust me.”

She smirked playfully again unaware that these simple words crushed him deep inside. He wanted to tell her that all of him wanted to trust her fully and blindingly in spite of her job, of her persona and of her reputation, that he yearned to put all prejudices and facts aside and see her as Natasha only. Not Black Widow, not the S.H.I.E.L.D agent, not the spy. Just Natasha.

But he kept all these words in and let out a sigh heavy with regret instead.

“So how did it go with the German?” she asked. “Was he any helpful?”

He stepped away from the bag and began to remove his boxing bandages.

“He confirmed pretty much what we suspected,” he said, looking down at the fabric he was untying. “She left the civilian carriage from the bathroom window so her absence would go unnoticed then she waited for the right moment to strike.”

Natasha leaned her back against the ropes of the boxing ring nearby.

“And anything about her?”

“He says she was German. Probably from the high class.”

Natasha nodded. “I guess it makes sense. She kind of has an Eastern European style.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Methodical, neat, rapid. She was a killing machine. She didn’t try to neutralize the soldiers or avoid them because it would have meant taking the risk of jeopardizing her mission. She took them all down because she had one clear mission –or target – and they were standing on the way of it.”

She trailed off though and frowned.

He knew exactly what she was thinking. “But it doesn’t make sense that she would just knock Bucky out and leave us both alive,” he finished, putting her thought into words.

“It doesn’t add up, no.” She said. “Because your presence on this train was unexpected she should
have treated you both like the most jeopardous factor to achieving her mission. She should have killed you just as she did everybody else.”

He agreed with a nod. He had thought exactly seventy years ago when they had been searching for clues on the HYDRA train.

“So what’s your theory?” he asked.

Natasha shrugged. “More than one, actually. Maybe she had been specified to kill Nazis only, maybe her agency was collaborating with the American Service –but in that case the chances of her being German are getting slim. A German killing other Germans? Unless she was part of the Resistance. But then, what was her mission? Zola? Then why abort the operation and flee before reaching the head of the train? Why did she not start from there in the first place instead of going through numerous wagons filled with Nazis beginning from the tail?”

Natasha paused and smiled. “The more I think, the less sense it makes. We have already established she is a driven, attention-detailed spy so why did it get messy near the end? Why get sloppy halfway and take the risk of leaving two possible witnesses alive? Let’s say your being there made her abort the mission, then why not just leave right away? Why did she stick around to kill that one last HYDRA soldier that was in the wagon with Bucky? What was so important in that wagon that she couldn’t just head back and leave her presence unknown?”

“Maybe she was here to steal something,” he conjectured. “But what exactly? The train was just carrying weapons. What technology could she possibly want to take from there?”

“Maybe. After all you said you concluded at the times she had gotten hands on the plans of the train. Maybe there was something valuable on this train that you didn’t know about and she was here for it.”

“Wouldn’t it be safely stored at the head of the train with Zola, though?”

She pouted slightly. “I don’t know. We don’t have enough intel. Hard to tell what her intention was and hard to understand why she didn’t treat you as hostiles.”

“Whatever her mission was, it seemed that Bucky and I were not part of it,” he said.

The room went silent.

“Or maybe you were,” she said pensively.

He furrowed his brows. “Think about it. Why did she wait so long before breaking in the train?”

“Maybe because she had to wait to be close to her extraction point,” Steve said.

“And this happened to be practically at the same time you jumped on the train roof? Talk of an unfortunate timing.”

He shook his head, mouth slightly agape, having a hard time processing where this conversation was heading. “That’s impossible. Our mission was top secret. We worked weeks on it.”

He still remembered all the weeks of preparation leading to it. Hours of planning with the Howling Commando, the Colonel and Peggy under the most strict secrecy, both of them always insisting on how crucial to the mission success it was to keep it quiet. The idea somewhere that at another place, another team was preparing a similar operation in parallel and with even more secrecy sounded left him stunned.
“I’m just thinking that the whole thing is starting to sound an awful lot sloppy for a spy as meticulous as her.”

He frowned. “What are you saying?”

Natasha arched an eyebrow. “I’m saying maybe you weren’t the only ones who knew about your top secret mission.”

And proud of having dropped this staggering twist, she smirked long at him.

This new theory raised a whole lot of questions, many of which he knew he would never get answers to. Who was she working for? Who were these people? What were their true motives? But again, the more he thought about it, the more sense it began to make. After all, it would explain why the agent had, not only not killed them, but also made sure to keep them alive (as it seemed their safety had mattered to her to some extent). But more importantly, it shed a new light on this mysterious passenger. They had all been calling her an intruder but now, if Natasha’s theory were to be correct, it appeared that her very presence on the train was legitimate. Maybe who he thought was a foe might turn out to be an ally working in the dark. If that were indeed the case, he considered it was his duty to find the truth and let it be known and clear her name. Either way, never would have thought that this old investigation, this cold case as Fury called it, would wind up being even more fascinating than it already was seventy years before.

He felt a new kind of excitement take over him and he couldn’t wait to share all these new conclusions with Bucky, although he wished his best friend was more invested in it. In spite of this, he took great satisfaction in having Natasha as a co-investigator whose views and deduction skills were a real blessing to the solving of the case.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, looking at her with a smile. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Her eyes slightly squinting, she probed him closely. “Oh, I know that,” she purred.

Maria Hill emerged from her self-cloaking the day after and allowed herself to walk in the same hallway as he did.

“Captain Rogers,” she started, glancing at the floor then back at him. She clasped her hands together before her chest and closed her eyes. “I am sorry for what happened the other day. This is the last way I wanted you to find out about this. It was unprofessional and I regret that.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” he shook his head. “Someday, we’ll laugh about it. Actually, would it bad to admit I already do?”

She eyed him for a few seconds before she cracked a little smile.

“I think I’m going to need a bit more time before I can,” she snorted.

He smiled back. “The breakfast invitation still holds. Doesn’t have to be breakfast, obviously,” he added amusingly.

She looked pleased with the idea.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

“And so she forgave you just like that?” Bucky grumbled for the tenth time the next morning during
their jogging.

“I don’t think there was really something I had to be forgiven for,” Steve answered. “All I did was
turn up unexpectedly.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Details. I mean, how unfair is that? You’re just a co-worker. She’s still
giving me a hard time for it and I’m the boyfriend.”

“Which is exactly why she’s giving you a hard time,” Steve smirked. “You’re the boyfriend.”

“And so you say she was open to the invitation?” Bucky continued. “As in, me included? or just the
two of you so you can bash me together?”

“Please,” he huffed. “You know it would be the second option if it was up to me.”

Bucky looked at him and snorted.

A few minutes later, they reached the Capitol where they saw a running silhouette down the path.

They soon caught up with him and as Steve ran past first, he said:

“Oh your left.”

The jogging man slightly turned his head in his direction and frowned quizzically. It was until Bucky
came around, following slowly behind.

“Oh your right,” he said to the jogger as he ran past him on the opposite side.

Once their first lap completed, the two friends went on and found themselves running toward the
same jogger as some minutes before. What had started as a simple, polite warning turned into the
entertaining moment of their jogging.

“Oh your left,” Steve said again as he jogged past the stranger.

“Yeah. Got it,” the man replied ironically. “And let me guess…”

“Oh your right,” Bucky chimed in as he followed shortly after.

“Yep. Just as I thought,” he said coolly behind them, oozing sarcasm.

Bucky and Steve glanced at each other and shared a conniving smirk. Without a word, they both had
the idea to speed up the pace to make three a charm. And thus, some minutes later, wound up behind
the jogger, getting dangerously close to running past him yet again.

Hearing them approaching, he threw a wary glimpse above his shoulder and sped up too.

“Don’t say it,” he shouted out daringly as Steve grew closer.

“Oh your left,” Steve said, dashing past.

Bucky came running on the side.

“No, no, no,” the jogger grumbled flipping his head to the right side, gathering the last strength he
had gotten to not let himself be outrun.

“Oh your right,” Bucky announced triumphantly, before grinning smugly and running away.
“Come on!” they heard him growl then panting hard as he tried to catch up.

When they reached their four laps, they found the jogger sitting on the grass, leaning against a tree, catching his breath.

“Need a medie?” Steve asked jokingly.

Bucky nudged him. “Don’t joke. He looks like he might die on us any second,” he smirked.

“I need a new set of lungs, dudes. You two just ran like 13 miles in 30 minutes.”

“Ouch,” Buck winced before shaking his head with a disappointed look.

Steve mirrored the feeling. “Yeah, looks like we had a late start.”

“Uh really? You should be ashamed of yourselves. You should take another lap,” the jogger said in a sarcastic, reproving voice. Then after a brief pause, he gawked at them. “Did you just take it? I assumed you just took it.”

Bucky smiled the kind of smile that meant he was already fond of the guy and of his humor. Steve smiled the kind of smile that meant he agreed.

Introductions were made.

“Sam Wilson,” he raised his hand. Bucky leaned over and took it.

“Steve Rogers,” he said while Bucky helped Sam up.

“Yeah, I kind of put that together,” he breathed out as he rose to his feet. “And James Barnes,” he added, looking at him.

“Bucky,” James said with a friendly smile.

“Must have freaked you out coming home after the whole defrosting thing?”

“Things aren’t so bad,” Steve said. “Food is better, we used to boil everything. No polio is good.”

“But men’s skinny jeans were definitely the downfall of humanity,” Bucky retorted.

Sam smirked.

“Internet. So helpful,” Steve continued.

“So helpful,” Bucky repeated with more feelings.

Sam Wilson smiled then raised his hand. “Marvin Gaye. 1972. Troubleman soundtrack.”

Steve nodded and took his pocket notepad out. “I’ll put that on the list.”

His and Bucky’s phones rang up.

MISSION ALERT. EXTRACTION IMMINENT. MEET AT THE CURB :)

“Hmm interesting,” Bucky mused aloud while peeking at Steve’s screen. “She put a winking emoji on mine. Sounds naughtier.”

Steve rolled his eyes but with an amused smile on.
“Alright Sam, duty calls.” He told Wilson. “Thanks for the run, if you want to call that running.”

They shook hands.

“Oh, that’s how it is.”

“That’s how it is,” Steve and Bucky answered at once. Sam smiled and invited them to come and meet anytime at the V.A.

Natasha’s black Corvet pulled over behind them.

The passenger tinted window went down.

“Hey, fellas,” Natasha called huskily. “Either of you knows where the Smithsonian is? I’m here to pick up two fossils.”

“That’s hilarious,” Steve commented flatly, walking up to the car.

“Laughing so hard, right now,” Bucky chimed in with the most placid face and a dead look. “Inside.”

“Smart move,” Natasha answered back almost instantly. “Better not have that skin of yours rip up like paper.”

Bucky ignored the barb as he was too busy gawking at the car. He rushed to the passenger door and opened it.

“Don’t get your hopes high,” she said. “You’re sitting in the back.”

Bucky let out a growl. “I thought I was your favorite. What was that winking emoji for, then?”

“That was at the prospect of this very moment.” She grinned wickedly at her comeback.

They both got in the car.

“Can I drive it someday?” Bucky asked.

“When I die and my bones have turned to dust, even then you can’t have it.”

Then she slightly leaned forward to catch sight of that stranger who was staring from the sidewalk.

“How you doing?” he purred the words with a smile. Steve stiffed a bit in his seat, watching the scene.

“Hey,” she answered back with a smirk that suggested a lot but didn’t promise a thing. It was Natasha’s way of approaching any male she knew she could have in the palm of her hand, like a spider with its prey. Her instinct told her to capture any person who had been reckless enough to tread on her web. She kept her eyes on Sam, compelling him from the distance. Obviously, it was working. Nobody could escape the Black Widow.

“Can’t run everywhere,” Steve said with a content expression.

“No, you can’t,” Sam smirked back taking on the pleasant sight of the sports car and the femme fatale sitting behind the wheel. His eyes seemed to scream ‘Captain America is living the life’.

And for a minute, Steve let himself think the same.
On the S.H.I.E.L.D. jet flying somewhere above the Indian ocean, Rumlow pitched the team on the situation. A ship belonging to the organization had been taken by French pirates and crew on board, including a high-ranked S.H.I.E.L.D officer, were held hostages.

Steve sighed. It was not the first time he was sent to fix those types of situations where the big lines were blurred. Fury always gave a portion of the information only.

“I’m getting a little tired of being Fury’s janitor,” he muttered softly, in which ‘a little’ actually meant ‘a lot’.

“Isn’t it more like, tired of Fury, period?” Bucky teased with a little grin in the corner of his mouth.

Was he still mad at Fury for blocking access to the lab tests? Most definitely. And was it the reason why he blurted out being tired of doing this type of job? For the most part. But not only, fact remained he had a feeling he was being used like a puppet, sent wherever Fury needed him to be, to do his dirty work. And that was the other reason why he had complained aloud.

“Relax, “ Natasha said casually, seeming to memorize every bit of data shown on the computer screen. “It’s not that complicated.”

Steve didn’t argue for the simple reason he was driven by the need to save people, and the crew held hostage on that ship fell into that category. Regardless of the sketchy circumstances surrounding this attack and of Fury’s secrets and eerie schemes and methods, he would go and be his janitor once again as he simply couldn’t walk out knowing there were people out there putting up with bullies.

“Alright,” Steve gave the instructions. “I’m gonna sweep the deck and find Batroc. Nat, you kill the engines and wait for instructions. Buck in lead, you sweep aft, find the hostages, get them to the life-pods, get them out. Rumlow in support. Let’s move.”


Steve, Bucky and Natasha made their way to the tail of the jet, getting prepared before reaching Drop Zone.

“Did you do anything fun, Saturday night?” Natasha asked with a smirk.

He understood her question actually meant ‘Did you do anything fun Saturday night, without me?’

“Well, all the guys from my barbershop quartet are dead, so no, not really.”

He smiled back the same playful way she was. “I guess we could fix that next weekend,” she commented implicitly. “Movie night?”

“Are you gonna be there Bucky, or do you have a rendezvous scheduled already?”
“Actually, I’ll be in Europe,” Bucky grinned smugly.

James was bound to fly in two days to meet his other brother’s family who had emigrated to Scotland years ago. He was just as excited and nervous as the day Steve had accompanied to visit his living brother and nieces and nephews.

“Means you two will get the apartment all for yourselves,” Bucky trailed off with a teasing undertone. Steve rolled his eyes but with an amused grin on. “What could you possibly do with all that free space?”

“I’m sure we’ll figure out something without you there. As we always do.” Natasha replied mischievously, thrown into a game she was always pleased to play along. She turned to Steve. “I’m open to suggestions.”

She looked him in the eye long enough to know when it would make him shy away; just as he was well aware she didn’t expect a proper answer to her question.

“I guess we’ll see,” he said, stepping away both literally and metaphorically.

Natasha and Bucky glanced at each other and smiled.

“What is it, Steve?” she called loudly so he would hear her over the wind blowing in now that the jet back door had been opened. “Too shy or too scared?”

He turned to look at her as he attached his helmet.

“Too enticed,” he teased back with a grin. Natasha seemed surprisingly pleased he had pushed their banter even further. He then jumped off the aircraft.

“Was he wearing a parachute?” an agent asked, stunned.

“No, he wasn’t.” Rumlow smirked, obviously used to the sight.

“What about you, Sergeant?” the agent stared.

Bucky was putting on his parachute. Even if HYDRA’s experiments on him had enabled him to survive the plane crash and the seventy-year-old coma in the ice, even if he was faster and stronger than the average trained agent, he suspected jumping without a parachute wasn’t an option. It looked thrilling, though.

“I never took the chance,” he answered. He made his way toward the tail, leading the S.T.R.I.K.E. team. “And they call me the reckless one.”

He smirked and jumped, followed by the rest of the tactic team.

When they grew close to landing on the ship, Steve had a gun pointed at him while standing above unconscious pirates. Rumlow aimed at the man and shot him.

“Thanks,” Steve said.

Rumlow grinned. “Yeah, you seemed pretty helpless without me,” he said ironically then walked off to take his position.

Natasha landed soon after and swiftly slipped the parachute off of her like it was a jacket. She walked alongside him.
“How about a pool night?” she asked. “Are you decent at pool or is it going to be boring for me?”

He fought off the urge to smile.

“Secure the engine room, then arrange us some plans.”

She slowed down and headed towards the rails. “I’m multi-tasking,” she retorted, jumping over and vanishing in the dark.

The rest of the mission went smoothly, everybody made it to their positions and the hostages were released. That was until Steve was informed Natasha had missed the rendezvous point and had gone silent.

He left his position, searching along the deck for Natasha, progressively taken by the fear she might be in danger.

“Natasha, where are you?” he whispered into the transmitter as he worked on repressing the anguish that was rising inside. His mind started to play a hundred scenarios of how things could have turned badly for her while he had been too busy doing his job – being Fury’s janitor – to realize something had gone wrong.

“Bucky. Can you see Nat?” he called. James had gone to the upper deck to secure a sniper backup after releasing the hostages.

“Negative,” he answered, his grave voice betraying his concern.

“Natasha,” he called again, sounding more pressing this time.

He found Batroc on his way at the worst timing possible and a fight ensued.

When he knocked him down through a door, he heard a familiar voice.

“Well, this is awkward,” Natasha said lightly.

He rose to his feet and found her leaning over a computer, typing on the keyboard.

“What are you doing?” he frowned.

“Backing up the hard drive. It’s a good habit to get into,” she answered coolly, keeping her eyes locked on the screen, seeming unaffected by the concern in his voice.

The relief of seeing her standing and fine passed quicker than he would have ever thought, being filled instead with the irking realization he was being played. And not by anybody he couldn’t care less about. By her.

“Bucky and Rumlow needed your help,” he hissed slightly. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He finally got himself to take his eyes off of her and took a proper look at the screen.

“You’re saving S.H.I.E.L.D. intel,” he spoke quietly, stunned and quizzical. What could Natasha possibly want her own agency’s data for? It went against every agent’s work and personal ethics. Any member of the team catching her doing that would accuse her of treason. Torn between confusion and reprobation, he worried for her and that someone might walk in on her any second.

“Whatever I can get my hands on,” she said matter-of-factly, still leaning over the command desk, looking adamant and placid. He realized he was dealing with the Black Widow and couldn’t get a
glimpse of Natasha. She was determined and her emotionless, uncompromising tone of voice suggested nothing could possibly divert her from completing her task.

It threw him off to see that side of her personality.

“Our mission is to rescue the hostages.”

She unplugged the flash drive and walked away with a nonchalance that irked him greatly at this moment.

“No, that’s your mission,” she answered with a light tone that fitted neither the situation nor his mood. “And you’ve done it beautifully.”

Good news was Natasha wasn’t a traitor – she was following orders – and probably from the very person who had sent them on this operation in the first place. Director Fury. And it hit him. Right there and at this very moment. Natasha was his agent, and according to his definition, was one of his puppets whose strings he was pulling. Steve had been so blinded by her appearance and features, then by their growing friendship that he had let himself overlook who she was while, he realized now, she had never really lost sight of it in his company.

He wouldn’t have taken it so personally if she was just a co-worker. But she had grown to become much more than that. And the thought that she had not been reciprocating it, that she had just been pretending and playing a role, hurt him physically like he had just been punched hard in the guts.

No matter the connection he thought they had, she had always remained the Black Widow and the spy. He began to wonder whether she had been snitching on him to Fury, always keeping him updated on his and Bucky’s evolution. He started to question every little thing and to what extent her honesty with him had gone. He wondered if it had also been her mission to grow close to him and Bucky, spying on them up close.

Natasha didn’t suspect anything, but Steve felt betrayed at a deeper level than a simple side mission he had not been made aware of.

She smirked, oblivious of what she had just triggered, and started off again. This attitude was the last thing he needed from her as he expected – yearned for – at least an explanation. Honesty had always been a thing they had. Or only for his part, he realized now. He instinctively held her arm to stop her from walking away from an explanation he considered he earned. Natasha remained calm, not the least startled by this sudden invasion of her personal space. She glanced down at his hand and he immediately let go of her when he processed what he had just done.

“You just jeopardized this whole operation,” he said coldly, looking at the stranger standing just in front of him. He wondered who she really was and if he would ever find out.

“I think that’s overstating things,” she commented funnily enough as if she had read his mind.

A noise coming from the door took them both by surprise and they watched as Batroc ran through the door after throwing a grenade in their direction.

Steve deflected it with his shield and ran the opposite way along with Natasha. She pulled her gun out and shot at the windows of the room on the side to break in. Focused on nothing more but keeping her safe, he slid his arm around her waist and scooped her up as they both plunged through the window. The grenade went off just when they passed the frame and fell to the ground behind the wall while he used his shield to cover them both from the debris.

Leaning against the wall, dust floating in the air, they both panted hard and he swiftly glanced in her
direction to check she wasn’t hurt. When his mind found rest from the sight of her looking fine, he looked away.

“Ok,” she breathed out. “That one’s on me.”

He was angry, he was disappointed, he felt deceived but overall he wasn’t that surprised. He recalled her words in the gym ‘You are right not to trust me fully’. He also was aware that Natasha hadn’t earned Fury’s best agent status for nothing. She excelled at her job, and as an agent, she appreciated how important it was to follow orders. No matter what. No matter who.

“You damn right,” he muttered, unwilling to look straight at her. He got up and walked away, unable to stay in her presence.

“Steve,” he heard her call with earnest worry.

He brushed it off and left the room without glancing behind, fuming internally against the very person who was responsible for pitting them against each other.

The flight back home was silent. Steve sat far from Natasha although he felt her glimpses of concern in his direction throughout the flight, Bucky going back and forth between the two of them to keep them company.

“Steve,” James eventually said. “You know she was just doing her job. Nothing personal.”

Deeply, he really wanted to believe that but it wasn’t in his nature to move past such things.

The face-to-face with Director Fury quickly turned into a heated conversation, Steve fuelled by the latest twist of events. Fury didn’t deny giving Natasha a mission, but again, it was the canny way to go to admit it upfront. Obviously, he wouldn’t explain his motives and it was why Steve didn’t even bother to ask.

“Agent Romanoff is comfortable with everything.” Fury said and these words echoed into Steve like the daunting ringing of a bell. It was still difficult for him to accept that Natasha’s moral spectrum was so easily malleable. In his definition, that made her unreliable and untrustworthy. A truth he could never come to terms with.

Being pressed for a brief moment of truthfulness, Fury took him down to see Project Insight with his own eyes. What was supposed to bring them closer only managed to draw them further apart.

Steve paid Peggy a visit which was something that happened every fortnight or so. He mentioned the whole Fury and Natasha topic in vague words. Peggy’s response was very clear.

“You’re always so dramatic,” she commented with an amused smile that looked just the same as in 1942. He snorted quietly. He knew he had this tendency to see the world and people in black or white. Peggy, although she had always shared the same vision and hopes for the future as him, had always been aware that they were almost always a mix of the two.

“The world has changed, and none of us can go back. All we can do is our best. And sometimes the best we can do is to start over.”

He listened to her wise words silently and took them into consideration.

“I saw her,” Peggy said softly. He looked at her and frowned. “Fury is kind enough to pitch me on
S.H.I.E.L.D. from time to time and I saw a picture. Agent Romanoff. It’s startling.”

Steve nodded quietly, looking away. When he looked back at Peggy, he found her eyes staring right at him with love and compassion.

“It must be unbearable,” she said and it hit him how deep his connection with Peggy was that she would know exactly how he felt. “How do you cope with it?”

Part of him refused to talk about such a sensitive topic with her but another part yearned to confide in.

“I got used to it,” he said, choosing option A.

“You know you don’t have to do this with me.”

And he considered it for a few seconds. Peggy was one of his oldest friends and she knew about Natalie, which made her the best confident he could ever ask for, Bucky being out since he didn’t want his personal grieves and failures to make his best friend feel bad or uncomfortable about his happy and fulfilling romantic life.

Peggy watched him closely, dissatisfied with the answer he had given her. But suddenly her look morphed into something else, she stared at him differently, her eyes filling with tears.

“Steve,” she called.

“Yeah.”

“You’re alive. You came back.” Her mouth twitched and she closed her heavy lids for a couple of seconds. “It’s been so long,” she cried, tearing his heart apart in the process like all the other many times it had happened during his visits. “So long.”

“Well,” he forced a smile. “I couldn’t leave my best girl. Not when she owes me a dance.”

He put aside the idea of sharing his burdens with Peggy who deserved to have her mind in peace.

And conversations went back to 1942 for the time it lasted.

The next day, Steve accompanied Bucky at the airport.

“Maria is not coming?” he asked.

“She said she doesn’t want to be third-wheeling for our goodbyes,” Bucky snorted, rolling his eyes.

Steve smiled. They paused when they reached Security. Bucky flipped around to look at him. Steve put his hand on his friend’s shoulder who felt just as stiff as he looked. “You got this. They’re going to love you just like the rest of your family here.”

Bucky closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. “You’re right. I got this.”

Steve smiled. “See you in a week.”

“Don’t do anything stupid while I’m away,” he warned.

They both got a throwback to 1942.
“How could I? You’re taking all the stupid with you,” he repeated word by word.

It made them both smile then they hugged in the middle of the Terminal. It was the first time they were separated for real since they had woken up in this new century. They were each other’s bearings and letting go turned out to be harder than they could have suspected.

“Oh boy,” Bucky coughed when they pulled away. “She would have been third-wheeling.”

They both laughed and Bucky made his way to the security gate, Steve watching him with a quiet mix of emotions. Bucky paused and turned around.

“Tasha,” he said softly with a grin. “Don’t be stubborn. Give her a call.”

Steve pursed his lips together and dug his hands into his pockets. Bucky passed the security gate, and for the first time since he had been waiting for his best friend to wake up from his coma, he realized how heavy loneliness felt.

Anxious to fill the boring day ahead, he decided to pay Sam Wilson a visit at the VA as he had suggested.

After what seemed to look and feel like an AA meeting came to an end, Wilson came up to him.

“Where is the other running man?” he joked with a wide smile.

“Visiting family abroad. He says hi, by the way,” he answered then looked at the people leaving. “It’s pretty intense,” he said.

“Yeah brother, we all got the same problem. Guilt, regret.”

“You lose someone?” he asked.

“My wingman, Riley.” Wilson said sternly. “Flying a night mission. Standard PJ rescue op. Nothing we hadn’t done a thousand times before. Until an RPG knocked Riley’s dumb ass out of the sky. It was like I was up there to watch.”

Steve looked at him quietly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t imagine what it feels like.”

He felt thankful he still had Bucky by his side. He didn’t want to imagine what his life here would have been like without him.

Wilson asked if he considered getting out, he answered he didn’t know. With Fury as his chief, he didn’t feel like tagging along forever, even if he had promised Peggy to look after S.H.I.E.L.D. for her.

Wilson asked if he had any idea what he would like to do if he did get out. He realized he had absolutely no clue. His life seemed suddenly like a rough draft pending completion.

Heading back home, it seemed that the hallway was quieter than usual. He didn’t have any plans for the night, not that any particular activity sounded appealing right now.

The adjacent door to his and Bucky’s apartment opened and the nurse neighbour stepped out, whilst speaking on the phone, carrying a basket of clothes for the laundry he reckoned.
“My aunt,” she said with a smile after she hung up. “She’s kind of an insomniac.”

He smiled back politely.

“Any plans for tonight?” she asked as he was walking to his door.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” he said, sheepishly.

“Shame,” she said lightly. “A guy like you shouldn’t be alone.”

He didn’t quite understand what she meant or implied exactly but he realized what she said made sense. She was right; he didn’t want to be alone tonight and he shouldn’t have to be, and he knew exactly who he wanted by his side to make it through the end of this lingering day. He nodded and took his phone out, sliding down the screen to Natasha’s number. He stood in the hallway, thinking of what words to type in his text.

“And I think you left your stereo on,” the nurse said.

“Right. Thank you.” He waited till she had gone down the stairs then he put his phone in his pocket and proceeded to enter his own apartment, Natasha style, through the window.

What he found in there and the consequences it would have exceeded all his expectations.
Chapter 20

Fury was in critical condition, surgeons and doctors leaning over him as they tried to keep him alive. Steve watched gravely from the other side of the mirror, stern and mute.

The squealing of the beeping coming from the machines suddenly got covered by the sound of the door behind him being smashed open. Natasha barged in with a blank expression and a haggard and lost look as she stood right beside him, her eyes locked on Director Fury.

Standing still, he slightly turned his head to look at her. Her face displayed an expression he had never seen have before. She looked numb, distressed, confused. It was like she had been drained of all the confidence, boldness and nonchalance that always accompanied her and that she never let go of. He furrowed his brows, concerned to find her so affected, surprised by this twist he hadn’t seen coming.

“Is he gonna make it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he muttered almost inaudibly

“Tell me about the shooter,” she spoke blankly but with the trail of a shaky voice not diverting her gaze from the surgery room.

The scene from an hour before played out in his head again. Everything had gone so fast. After entering his apartment from the window, he had been taken surprised to find Director Fury sitting in his armchair and in the dark. Fury looked injured, exhausted but most of all incredibly cryptic in his choice of words. EARS VERYWHERE he had typed on his phone and shown him to justify his odd behavior. And then the shots fired from outside, straight to his chest. Fury collapsed on the floor, choking in pain. He slipped a flash drive into his hand, warning him not to trust anybody before going quiet, physically unable to speak any more. Then it all rushed; someone broke into the apartment, his neighbour, still dressed in her nurse apparel but looking nothing like one as she entered the room holding a gun up in front of her, alert and confident. She introduced herself as a S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Special Forces agent, affirming her mission was to protect him, on Fury’s orders obviously. As she saw her boss lying on the floor, she lowered her weapon and knelt down. She pulled a walky-talky out of her pocket and called for medics. And that was when Steve saw him, the silhouette of the sniper who was responsible for all this.

“He’s fast. Strong,” he said knowing those two simple words, coming from him, would be far from an understatement. Steve had had to run fast to catch up with him, and the man, hiding behind a dark mask, hadn’t had much trouble stopping the shield when he had thrown it at him, using all of his tall, thick body to counter it without losing his balance. He had then jolted it back at him with almost as much strength then jumped off the roof, disappearing into the night.

“Ballistics,” Natasha went on, addressing Maria this time to get those technical details.

“Soviet made,” she commented after she had got the description of the bullets.

The sudden continuous beep of the electrocardiogram took everyone’s attention back to the surgery room. Steve tensed, anxious that the outcome he dreaded might become true. Natasha watched silently, her mouth slightly agape.

“Don’t do this to me, Nick” he heard her murmur.

“Pulse?” the doctor asked.
“Negative,” the colleague answered for the second time.

The constant beeping became daunting and soon Maria let out the sound of a soft whimper. Natasha remained strong, impassive but shaken nonetheless.

Steve was unsettled too, perhaps more than he would have imagined but the sight of Fury’s lifeless body made his stomach twist. He diverted his gaze and stepped away from the window as the doctor asked for the time of death.

Director Fury had just died and he hadn’t been able to stop it.

Less than thirty minutes later, they were allowed in a room to see the body. Fury was lying peacefully Steve could tell from where he was standing, leaving Natasha intimacy to say goodbye.

He watched quietly as she stood by his body, her arms crossed over her chest. The moment lasted longer than expected, so long that Maria had to step in bashfully and say she needed to take his body. Natasha didn’t move an inch, indifferent to Hill’s request.

Steve glanced at Maria who glanced back at him, looking slightly helpless and unsure about how to react, so he took over. He walked up to her and stopped a footstep behind from where she was standing.

“Natasha,” he said gently. He suddenly found his call to be cold and impassive when it wasn’t what he was feeling at this moment. Seeing her so hurt and vulnerable crushed him inside and he wished he was in an environment private enough that he could let himself comfort her the way he wanted to. “Nat,” he called again, more softly and in a way that he found more suitable.

Natasha reacted eventually; she laid a hand on Fury’s forehead and bowed her head down as the only gesture of surrender to the sadness she was feeling. She dashed off the room an instant later but his eyes fixed on her had had the time to catch sight of the tear that rolled down her cheek.

His heart squeezed and his first instinct was to go after her and work on finding a way to soothe her regardless of the way she needed it to be. Truth was he had never seen nor suspected this side of her, so vulnerable and distraught. Maria was affected but it didn’t come anywhere close to the kind of affected Natasha was. For a moment, he would have believed she had lost the closest she had to a father.

For the past few hours, he had questioned whether she had ever taken her guard off around him but here and now she had let a whole wall fall down. Natasha did care and this was what he needed to shush his irrational concerns.

Natasha walked down with the grit and determination of someone gone on a vendetta, ready to murder.

“Nat,” he called after her.

She flipped around and looked at him coldly.

“What was Fury doing in your apartment?” she snapped, suddenly interrogating him.

The tone of her voice seemed to suggest she didn’t ask because she was suspicious or wary, as anyone who would have been watching could have concluded; she was irked and hurt that Fury hadn’t chosen her to seek shelter and help.
Part of him wanted to tell her the truth about the flash drive but his irrational concerns struck again and he found himself recalling Fury’s last words not to trust anyone. As much as he trusted her, he didn’t have enough faith in her at the moment (and after the last mission) to share.

“I don’t know,” he lied and he felt a lump in his throat for making the choice of being untruthful to her (not that it was something she had never done to him before).

Rumlow stepped in, saying that he was needed at S.H.I.E.L.D immediately.

When Steve turned his attention back to her, he found she was staring at him with a judgmental and cold expression.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she uttered dryly, her eyes barely concealing the disappointment of not being trusted.

She walked off without giving him a second look. He sighed deeply. How had they come so far apart in such a short span of time? He feared there would be no fixing it this time.

Steve walked past Agent 13 as she was coming out of Alexander Pierce’s office. She suddenly turned sheepish when she saw him, nearly embarrassed that he might misjudge her or hold a grudge for playing a double game. He wanted to do nothing of the sort for the simple reason he had never given her enough importance or interest to feel betrayed. She was just his and Bucky’s hall neighbour; nothing more, nothing less. The only resentment he felt was that Fury had yet again done something on his back.

“Captain,” she said as she walked past.

“Neighbor,” he answered in way to let it known that he had no appreciation for people who played games (except for his own problematic, puzzling, double-faced, red-haired friend).

The meeting turned into an implicit interrogation from Pierce whose behaviour made him look more shady than trustworthy, and it became indeed the truth when Steve was attacked by Rumlow and his tactic team in the elevator.

He escaped, jumping off the thirty-storey building (something Bucky wouldn’t have approved off and called irresponsible and cheeky) and then facing a jet (something Bucky would have called just plain stupid). When he finally fled the premises, he knew this was only the beginning of trouble.

After changing into a discreet-looking tracksuit, Steve made his way back to the hospital to retrieve the flash drive from the totally clever and unperceivable hiding place he had left it in before heading to S.H.I.E.L.D. He stopped in front of the vending machine and froze in horror as he found the chewing-gum spot in which he had hidden the flash drive had only one pack left, meaning someone had gotten their hands on the valuable object. His mind buzzed with a thousand questions starting with who was the person who was now in possession of the flash drive. A civilian? Or the people who had gone after Fury and killed him?

A dark silhouette appeared on the vending machine’s glass and as the person stepped closer Natasha’s face reflected on it. She didn’t speak a word but conveyed everything she had to share by blowing a big, pink bubble out of her mouth that she burst noisely before chewing her gum again.

It became clear she was the one who had the flash drive and that the reason she had it was because she had spied on him after pretending to walk away earlier. His body tensed, angered that she had played him yet again. He spun around, grabbed her arm and forcefully ushered her into the nearest,
unoccupied room. She ended up her back slammed against the wall and he froze for a brief moment as he was hit by some sort of déjà vu. The least expected blast from the past in such a moment of tension. One with Natalie.

“One going to slam me against the wall, next?” her words echoed in his head as vividly as when he had heard it for the first time in 1942. He recalled how taken aback he had been when Natalie had said the words with unwavering confidence, as he would have never even thought about doing such a thing, let alone to her. And yet seventy years later, here he was doing it. To Natasha.

He looked down at his hands that were clasping her arms and dropped them immediately.

It took him a few seconds to get his head back into the current situation. But he was still too angry at Natasha to apologize.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“Safe,” she replied cryptically.

“Do better,” he muttered.

“Where did you get it?” she asked, deflecting his question. They didn’t talk like friends but like two agents wanting answers from each other.

“Why would I tell you?” he said coldly. Thirty-six hours ago, he would have probably shared everything he knew with her. “Keeping secrets is just what we do, after all. Isn’t it?”

Natasha’s look changed. It softened until it nearly looked regretful. Her eyes glanced away then moved back on him as if she seemed to brush aside a roaming thought.

“Fury gave it to you. Why?” she figured out quickly.

“What’s on it?” he asked as he was certain she had thoroughly browsed its content already.

“I don’t know,” she said. It angered him to see she wouldn’t yield in and be honest for once.

“Stop lying,” he hissed.

“I only act like I know everything, Steve.”

He knew the whole thing was related to their latest mission as Pierce had let it on, the hostage rescue mission on the ship when Natasha had stolen intel for Fury.

“I bet you knew Fury hired the pirates, didn’t you?”

What was it if not one more secret piling up with the rest of things she kept from him? She could at least admit this one.

“Well, it makes sense,” she answered. “The ship was dirty. Fury needed a way in, so do you.”

“I’m not gonna ask you again,” he pressed her with his tone only. “You owe me the truth. For once.”

Natasha gazed at him with her big green eyes, probing him quietly.

“I know who killed Fury,” she started as a peace offering. It seemed she traded her lack of information on his question with another type of intel, just as valuable. “Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists but the ones that do call him Reidlos. He’s credited with
multiple assassinations in the last fifty years.”

This sounded like weak information. How could an assassin have been working for fifty years at least?

“So he’s a ghost story,” he said.

Natasha paused a few seconds. “Five years ago I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran. Somebody shot out my tyres near Odessa. We lost control, went straight over a cliff. I pulled us out but Reidlos was there. Luckily for me he wasn’t the finest sniper. If he had been able to anticipate my next move he would have shot us both at once,” she paused briefly and smirked. “And bye-bye bikinis.”

Here was the smug expression again, and he wasn’t sure he believed her story either. “Yeah, I bet you would have looked terrible in them.”

She seemed pleased to see he was going along with the banter, even if it wasn’t the usual playful kind.

“Then what happened?” he asked.

“I dove aside at his first shot but he didn’t miss the engineer the second time around. Soviet slug, no rifling. That was the ME’s report.”

Like Fury’s bullets.

“Going after him is a dead end. I know, I’ve tried.” She pulled the flash drive as a second peace offering, which was probably more than she had ever done in her whole career. “Like you said, he’s a ghost story.”

And with this honest gesture, she offered to work as a team again.

A couple of hours later, they were walking in the mall on their way to the Apple store in order to look into the flash drive ‘safely’. It was her idea.

After finding a map of what used to be his training camp, they left the store, only to find S.H.I.E.L.D’s patrolling in civilian clothes. He was ready to attack but Natasha offered her own kind of alternative: sneaking out. It turned out to be more effective and less straining than his method. Hiding under their hoodies, she made him put his arm around her shoulders and laugh as they passed two agents. And then they got to the escalator.

She suddenly turned and looked at him.

“Kiss me,” she said quietly. His ears rang at the sound of these words and it took him one or two seconds to process they were indeed the words she had just said.

“What?” he said quizzically, watching her with a slightly open mouth and probably a stunned look.

“This was neither the time nor the place”, he thought. And did it mean she saw him this way? And did he want it to happen? His heart raced at the prospect of it. And would it feel like that kiss Natalie gave him? Surely her lips looked the same and his body stiffened and mellowed at the thought of his lips them again, but what if they felt or tasted different? Or what if it would feel better? He mentally shook himself up. But this was neither the time nor the place!
“Public displays of affection make people uncomfortable,” she pulled him out his mental row and he was grateful for it.

“Yes, they do,” he said, talking more about himself than ‘people’.

She didn’t let him finish. Her hand slid around the back of his neck and she pulled him in to her face, catching his lips between hers. His whole body froze while his mind seemed to need to be at full capacity to concentrate solely on the unexpected thing that was happening. His eyes were shut, first out of surprise and then, progressively, his lids relaxed as did the rest of his body. He felt all his muscles mellow under the soothing sensation of her warm and soft lips brushing his like the most comforting caress. He felt his shoulders be released off the weight of all his burdens, present and past. His hand went to her waist before he could even think about it and he let himself surrender to the moment.

When she pulled away it seemed to have lasted as long as a heartbeat and, as his lips started to grow cold from the absence of hers, he began to feel the void they had left.

“Are you still uncomfortable?” she asked nonchalantly as she went down the escalator.

He realized he had no real comeback that would suit her playful tone.

“That’s not the word I would use,” he answered cryptically.

Surprised, dazed, pensive, wistful, content. Only to name a few.

Driving to the boot camp that had been mentioned in the flash drive, Natasha spent long minutes of the ride glancing at him with a smirk she seemed to be having a hard time to tone down out of diplomacy.

“I’m not going to ask but I suppose that was your first kiss since 1941,” she eventually blurted out, unable to hold it anymore.

“I thought you were not going to ask,” he commented coolly although his heart pace had just raced a little.

“Come on, this is a long ride and I’m bored. And mildly curious,” she smiled mischievously. “I mean, I’m sorry if I sound blunt b–“

“Are you?” he furrowed his brows in an amused way.

“Well, probably not, I’ll give you that. But don’t you miss it? Being close to someone?”

The conversation had turned grave and deep quite quickly (at least, as far as he was concerned). He had asked himself that question so many times and the answers he had come up with had never been clear and simple. Was being alone and remaining as such for a large amount of time pleasant? Definitely not. Did he miss having someone though? No, not really. He had Bucky; and with time Natasha had made herself a spot, too. Her presence, her company somehow filled the void Natalie had left. Whether as a colleague, teammate or a friend; whatever role she was willing to endorse, the place she had taken in his life wouldn’t lose any of its value. Strictly speaking, he was in peace with not being with anyone, and he hoped someday, when the right time would come eventually, his heart would open up to somebody new.

“It’s hard to find someone with shared life experience,” he said.
“Are you looking, though?” she said softly, anxious not to push him. “It’s not hard, anyway. You just make something up.”

He snorted bitterly. Was that her MO with everyone, including him?

“Like you?” he asked.

“I don’t know. The truth is only a matter of circumstances. It’s not all things, to all people, all the time. Neither am I.”

“Wow. So that’s your life motto, huh?” he commented dryly. “You should have it tattooed, just in case you dare to stray from it just a little.”

Natasha nodded.

“Copy that. You’re still mad at me. Subtle, much.”

“Perceptive, much.”

His tone was flat and stern. She just smirked in response.

“Don’t take it personally,” she said. “It’s just my thing.”

“Well, being personal is my thing. As it is everyone else’s. You can’t connect with someone if you can’t tell who they really are. Otherwise, it’s just an illusion.”

“A chimera,” Natasha murmured, musing aloud. “Illusion is all I can give.”

“It’s a tough way to live,” he said. He couldn’t even begin to measure the depth of her solitude.

“It’s a good way not to die, though.”

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. She looked wistful. It pained him to realize that she had found the most faithful companion in loneliness.

It went quiet in the car. “I know you don’t understand it. It’s an unfamiliar concept to you.”

“Not so unfamiliar, actually,” he said. He clenched the wheel a bit tighter. “It’s happened to me before with…her. With Natalie.”

Natasha arched an eyebrow.

“I found out not so long ago that she hadn’t said the truth on many things.” His mouth twisted a bit. “On so many things. It’s become hard to tell what was true and what was a lie.”

“And you resent her for it?” she asked.

He thought of all these times frustration had taken over and led him to believe that he had been deceived. But then now, in retrospect, he knew there were things that just couldn’t be faked. And their deep connection was one of them. In spite of the lies she had told him –and those he still probably had not found out about –, his love for her remained intact, immaculate. But maybe Natalie had fooled him and here he was fooled again, by Natasha this time.

“I don’t know. I’d like to think she had her reasons. I just –,” he shrugged slightly as a way to compress the emotion that was threatening to show in his voice. “I just wish I had the chance to ask her.”
He silently cleared his throat to get rid of the lump that had appeared. What he wouldn’t give to get to have her in front of him for just five minutes (four minutes of which he would take to hold her tight and breathe in her scent), to get to understand her point of view (God, he knew he would understand it, to forgive her. And this was what hurt the most. He yearned to be given just the slightest opportunity to wipe out any kind of negative emotion that was blurring his perception of her, for he wanted to have for her nothing but all the admiration she deserved to receive.

“You can ask me,” she said quietly, pulling him out of his reverie

Steve frowned in surprise. He looked her in the eye and found she was encouraging him to take her up on her offer.

For the first time, Natasha was initiating a moment of truth and, therefore, let herself be vulnerable. He appreciated that she tried to do right by him where Natalie had failed.

“Did you spend all this time with me and Bucky because Fury asked you to?”

She shook her head gently. “No.”

Her answer was concise and definite at the image of it not even being a possibility. And yet, it wasn’t totally satisfactory. He yearned for more.

“Truth be told,” Natasha continued as she seemed to realize she hadn’t given him enough. “I haven’t been much of my usual chimera self with you, and Bucky. I gave more things, more often than I ever would. You say you can’t connect to a person unless you know who they really but you’ve seen more of me than anyone else.”

There was a gravity in her voice that he had never heard until now. Natasha rarely gave moments of truth but this was one of them. And judging from the look on her face, it was one of her first.

He gazed at her and the shadow of a grin came to his lips, silently thanking her for her honesty with a light nod of the chin. Natasha nodded back and the silence that followed was of a new kind. It wasn’t resentful like the one from a few moments before; it was serene and peaceful.

“I guess I have bent my most precious life motto for two Ancient relics,” she shifted back to nonchalance.

The corner of his mouth rose slightly.

“Bent?” he teased.

“I’m not the melodrama type. You can’t expect any flight of lyricism from me. The only moment of gushiness I’ve ever had is that time I had a cup of real coffee after returning from a 3-week-long mission in the tundra.”

He rolled his eyes amusingly.

“Plus if I had said ‘broken’ we both know it wouldn’t be true. I’ll never completely break this rule. For my own safety.”

He regretted that.

“You know I would never do anything to harm you,” he retorted. There was absolutely no imaginable situation where he’d end up fighting against her. Absolutely none. Even if they somehow were to be fight on opposite sides, he never would perceive her as an enemy. He would always see
her as Natasha.

“There is more than one way a person can be harmed, trust me. And the most painful wounds are the ones you can’t see.”

Maybe it was how she said it, or the flicker of horror that flashed through her pupils, but he understood that she had once been broken and damaged in the most enduring way. Survival was second nature but it was the result of having had to face something worse than death itself.

“Now it is my turn to ask you a question,” Natasha said, breaking the silence. Her large green eyes dove into his. “Who do you want me to be?”

Her words lingered on in the air and brought along more earnestness than he was prepared for. He was not sure he had an answer to this question. At first, she had been another type of bearing than the kind Bucky was. While James was a steady, anchored bearing that had never left his side, Natasha had been the reassuring, familiar face in this foreign world. Then she had been the bandage that kept the stabbing, open wound that was Natalie’s loss closed as tight as possible. But then she had become more than that. To what extent though? He couldn’t tell; and perhaps part of him didn’t want to define their relationship or put a label on it.

Natasha’s gaze was still fixed on him, determined to get an answer to her question.

He eventually took his eyes off the road.

“How about a friend?” he asked. A truthful (as truthful as Natasha could be) and loyal friend he could finally trust fully.

She raised an eyebrow and smirked. A cryptic, unidentifiable emotion flickered over her eyes.

“There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business,” she said amusingly.

“Is that what you and Barton tell each other whenever you meet?” he teased.

Natasha snorted. “It’s different. We didn’t choose to be friends. It kind of fell on us. We’ve been through things together that brought us close,” she explained. “I guess what you call shared life experience.”

“Yeah. I saw that,” he said matter-of-factly. “For a little while I even thought you two were together until he kinda let it slip it was not possible.”

“He said that?” she mused, sounding intrigued. “Why wouldn’t it be possible?”

He glanced in her direction and frowned. “You know why,” he started hesitantly. “Because he’s into men.”

“Say what?” she exclaimed before bursting into laughter. “Did Clint really tell you he was playing for the other team?”

“He didn’t but he sort of implied he was not interested in engaging into any kind of relationship with a woman.”

It somehow triggered a new fit of laughter from her; enough to make him doubt of his interpretation of that conversation they had both had outside the infirmary.

“I can assure you that Clint is very much into women,” she said with a slightly husky voice. Steve
suddenly felt an uneasiness thinking of what her statement implied on her relationship with Barton that made her affirm he was straight with such confidence.

And Natasha spent the rest of the car ride interrupting the silence or their conversation with impromptu burst of giggles.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! Thank you so much for all your glowing comments! You know how much they mean to me (seriously, I do - I read them a few times over). Here is the update: a long ass chapter which I hope you will like. Meet you at the bottom for an explanatory note. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Natasha and Steve soon arrived at the abandoned training camp. Steve looked at the place, at every corner, and realized how it had become just a shell, void of all content. And yet he remembered all those mornings feeling every muscle in his body burn in agony, his arms screaming in silence as he was clutching his rifle and the rest of the equipment tight against his thin chest, but still running far behind his fellow comrades.

They walked inside exploring the empty premises whose faded grey on the walls was the last remaining evidence that they used to be occupied.

Some frames hanging to the wall immediately caught his attention and he stepped closer gazing at the photographs of Peggy and Howard, an old friend he had been missing he realized and Peggy who looked as young, strong and beautiful as he remembered she was not so long ago from his time perspective.

“Who’s the girl?” Natasha asked, breaking the silence.

He chose to leave it unanswered and walked away, physically trying to move on from that overwhelming waft from the past that was trying to cling to him.

They found a hidden elevator that took them all the way down to a backdated intel room. Somehow there was a modern flash drive device put on the main desk. Natasha plugged Fury’s flash drive in, starting the whole system. A familiar voice started to speak in the largest computer screen standing in front of them.

It turned out to be Zola, an old foe, HYDRA’s scientist and the man who had experimented on Bucky in a way that he had survived over 70 years in the ice along with him. His mind had somehow been transferred into this machine.

“For nearly 70 years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war, and when history did not cooperate, history was changed,” Zola boasted.

“With the Reidlos,” Steve eventually said after Zola finished to explain how HYDRA had been surviving S.H.I.E.L.D. all along. “Your soldier, spelled backwards.”

“He’s been given this name specifically because he isn’t one. He is an anti-soldier, a ruthless killer with no morals and no military conditioning. One of your missions back in 1942 counteracted my initial plans. So I had to find a new specimen for my experiments and we got our hands on a criminal. He first lacked the discipline but his total absence of moral sense and his inner brutality made it easier to have him rally behind our cause.”
Natasha and Steve glanced at each other; it explained quite a few things, including how she had gotten out alive from his ambush.

“Speaking of, where is Sergeant Barnes?” Zola continued. Steve’s posture changed and his hand squeezed into a fist as he heard his friend’s name. “Seeing you here Captain has made a little nostalgic. The scientist in me would like to take a look at what could have been my most beautiful creation.”

He furrowed his brows, not quite understanding what Arnim Zola meant with ‘his most beautiful creation’. What kind of creation was Bucky meant to become?

“Steve, we got a bogey,” Natasha said before he could ask anything. “Short range ballistic. 30 seconds tops.”

“Who fired it?” he asked although he already suspected what the answer would be.

Natasha took her eyes off her phone and looked slightly shocked. “S.H.I.E.L.D.” she said numbly, confirming Zola’s words had been true.

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Captain,” Arnim’s robotic voice spoke. “It's better this way. We are, both of us, out of time.”

Rage took the best of him and he punched the screen hard, leaving a big mark of the impact right where the image of Zola’s face was just a second before.

Steve and Natasha were both trapped with no chance of escaping in time. He went for the hatch in the middle of the room and opened it. He then quickly helped Natasha down and jumped in right behind just when the bogey hit the premises. The ground quaked, their skin instantly turned hot and sweaty from the fire burning everywhere above them and debris fell upon them. Standing in this confined space, he held a protective arm around her as she squeezed herself against him clutching his body tight while he kept his shield up high to shelter them both from the falling pieces.

Eventually the heat and exhaustion got the best of Natasha and she fell unconscious as he felt her light breathing in his neck.

When the deflagration and its aftermath finally came to an end and was followed by a heavy silence he used all of his strength to push all the debris upwards and out of his way. He then gently held Natasha’s body into his arms and carried her out of the building.

He reached the car they had borrowed and found it had been untouched by the explosion. He made sure to lay her carefully into the seat and anxiously looked at her. Listening to nothing other than the urge to check she was alright, he reached for her face and brushed her hair away. His fingers softly stroked her pale skin down to her chin. When he felt her shift a little, his body slightly bent over and he let out a sigh of relief while the fast racing of his heartbeat slowly went back to a milder pacing.

As he drove back to D.C., she eventually awoke some time later.

Steve stopped at a telephone booth in a quiet street and dialled a number.

“Hello,” he heard a voice say cautiously.

“Bucky,” he started.

He heard his friend breathe out loudly on the other end of the line.
“Oh my God Steve, are you alright?” James asked as he seemed to be walking to another place and speak in a lower voice. “I’ve been worrying sick. You know you’re S.H.I.E.L.D’S most wanted man, right now?”

“Yeah, I might have forgotten to hand in a report on time,” Steve said humourlessly.

Bucky wasn’t in a joking mood either.

“What the hell happened? I tell you to be careful while I’m away and you make yourself America’s public enemy!”

“Are you safe?” Steve asked as a matter of priority. Zola’s words echoed in his head.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. They’ve called me and asked if I had been in contact with you and I said no. But I don’t think they believed me anyway,” he said. “But what’s happening?”

“It’s bad, Buck. S.H.I.E.L.D. is compromised and HYDRA is responsible for it. We didn’t get rid of them. We never did.”

James remained quiet for a few seconds. “Are you safe?”

Steve bit his lip. He had to make the situation look less desperate and dangerous than it was in reality. “Yeah. Nat took us to one of her hideouts. We’re okay. I’m calling you to warn you not to trust the authorities.”

“Of course,” Bucky said. “I’m leaving right away for the airport to keep everyone here safe.”

That was the part he dreaded would happen.

“No,” Steve cut in firmly, clutching the speaker and turning his back to the passers-by to keep their conversation even quieter. “I need to know you are safe. Stay in Europe. You’re safe there and out of HYDRA’s reach.”

“Bu –,” his friend started.

“Bucky,” he spoke sternly. “Please. For once in your life, do as I say.”

It wasn’t like he could make him swear on his mother –he now knew for a fact it had as much value as if he had sworn on his last glass of milk.

Bucky sighed. Eventually he spoke again.

“Is Maria okay? I haven’t heard back from her since they said Fury was dead. Have you gone to her?”

Steve winced lightly. He didn’t know how to approach this topic. Maria was S.H.I.E.L.D. so by definition there was a probability she was HYDRA.

Bucky was silent, waiting for an answer.

“We- we don’t know who to trust.”

It had been more difficult to let the words come out than he had thought.

“You can trust her,” Bucky said assuredly. “Steve. You can trust her like it was me.”
When Steve hung up the phone he deeply wished he could but he knew he could possibly not trust any S.H.I.E.L.D. agent (or anyone for that matter) like he trusted Bucky.

Steve and Natasha eventually abandoned the car (in quite a decent state, dust from the deflagration put aside) and walked to the only person he could think of in Washington who wasn’t likely to be a HYDRA mole. They wound up knocking on Sam Wilson’s front house door in the early morning.

“Hey man,” poor Sam said cheerfully. He then frowned in surprise assessing the poor condition they were presenting themselves in.

“I’m sorry about this,” Steve said. “We need a place to lay low.”

“Everyone we know is trying to kill us,” Natasha spoke, trying to keep the conversation as brief as possible to make it inside the house as soon as possible.

Sam glanced behind them. “Not everyone,” he uttered gravely and let them in.

Sam was kind enough to offer them to use the bathroom but most importantly he gave them privacy in his bedroom to gather their thoughts. Steve went to the bathroom after Natasha for a wash-up but as he glanced in her direction, he noticed the melancholic look on her face. One look that Natasha wasn’t the kind to have in normal days.

“You okay?” he asked as he sat down on the chair opposite the bed. Natasha was absent-mindedly drying her hair with the towel.

“Yeah,” she answered. It was the least credible lie she had ever given.

“What’s going on?” he asked with a softer voice, leaning forward toward her.

“When I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D. I thought I was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but I guess I can't tell the difference anymore.”

He finally understood why Natasha was ‘comfortable doing anything’ as Fury had called it. She was comfortable doing anything for him because she had deliberately made the choice to be loyal to Nick Fury no matter the cost. That didn’t make her an amoral or unprincipled and unscrupulous agent as he first feared, it made her a loyal and reliable friend. You just had to earn to be considered worthy of her devotion.

“There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business,” he teased instead of getting into a more profound conversation he had a feeling she didn’t want to have.

Natasha smirked weakly and looked him deep in the eye, seeming to appreciate how he had dodged the uncomfortable talk.

“I owe you,” she began.

He shook his head. This was the last kind of relationship he wanted to have with her.

“You don’t and never will. You’re my friend.”

She stared numbly at him.

“If it was the other way around and it was down to me to save your life, now you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it, no matter what?”
He understood ‘no matter what’ meant regardless of any secret mission or personal interest she might have.

He nodded. “I would.” He smiled. “And I’m always honest.”

Natasha shifted slightly farther out of the edge of the bed to get closer.

“I once told you that you were right not to trust me fully. And I regret it,” she began, glancing down at the carpet then right back at him. “I hope someday I will earn your full trust.”

He stared back into her eyes.

“You already have. Probably for a longer time than I had realized.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

He sighed internally at the evidence of the answer.

“Because it’s you,” he said simply. Matter-of-factly. And these three words could go a long way to justify almost any of his actions related to her.

Natasha’s smile looked different than any other. It wasn’t a smirk or a sarcastic grin; it was a slightly bashful smile.

“And who am I, Steve?” she demanded. “To you. I did mean it when I asked you who you wanted me to be.”

“Steve,” she said as she shifted so close there was no room left between him and the backrest. “I did mean it when I asked you who you wanted me to be.”

Her large green eyes seemed to shine brighter than normal, or than he had ever noticed before at least.

He shook his head. “Would it change anything?”

“It could,” she answered equivocally. She glanced up at him again and smirked.

“There is one thing though,” she began more gravely. “I don’t want to live in the shadow of a ghost forever.”

He found this conversation to be more unsettling than this whole S.H.I.E.L.D. situation. He could fight off all of HYDRA at once without blinking but he was now totally and irremediably overpowered by Natasha’s gaze.

She smiled encouragingly, perhaps to him, to herself or to them both. “Could you assure me that Natalie –her memory and our likeness – aren’t part of the equation in our relationship?”

He gazed into her eyes and as much as he wanted to answer yes, he felt pulled back by his feelings for Natalie. Would he ever stop loving Natalie? Could he tell without the shadow of a doubt that what he felt for Natasha was related to her only and not to her resemblance to Natalie? He couldn’t clearly answer these two questions and this was the whole problem.

“I...don’t know,” he whispered.

Natasha’s smile faded slightly then she briefly pursed her lips together.
“That’s what I thought,” she murmured with a strange combination of disappointment and complete serenity and acceptance. She shifted back to her initial place leaving a heavy emptiness between them. Part of him wanted to ask her to move close again just as she was a few seconds before and how good it felt but he also knew he wouldn’t do right neither by her nor Natalie.

She smiled at him dearly. “Then friends is as great as we can get.”

He mumbled then leaned forward to reduce the unbearable large space she had made between them.

“You’re not…,” he shook his head, silently reprobating his own choice of words earlier in the car. He looked her straight in the eye. “You aren’t just a friend. You do have a special place –such a special place in truth –, but…”

Maybe it was the fear of diving again into intense feelings and taking the risk of getting hurt all over again, maybe it was the apprehension of being unable to keep up because of his own past romantic life; either way, Steve was convinced he couldn’t fully give her what she had every right to get.

They were two people who deeply believed they didn’t deserve each other.

“…it wouldn’t work,” Natasha finished, nodding as if she seemed to have been telling herself the same thing for a little while. She shook her head and laughed it off. “It’s better this way.”

So close and yet so far. They seemed to be destined to be each other’s almost something. And ‘almost’ was never bound to become real. Almost was something you could admire from a distance, yearn to achieve someday but that slipped out of your reach at the very last moment to forever become a regret. And probably they would never stop regretting each other, from time to time sighing in the dark as they would muse ‘what if?’

Sam walked into the room, both depriving them of and sparing them an extended time of silent intimacy before this conversation would remain behind them for good.

Steve was on the roof, cordially trying to worm information about Zola’s algorithm out of Sitwell while Natasha was standing behind, bored.

“Is this little display meant to insinuate that you’re gonna throw me off the roof?” Sitwell said in the most unafraid way while Steve was holding him near to the edge. “Because it’s really not your style, Rogers.”

Steve grinned. He let go of Sitwell.

“You’re right. It’s not,” he conceded, straightening Sitwell’s suit where his hands were clutching the fabric a moment before. “It’s hers.”

He stepped sideways and let free path for Natasha who didn’t have to be asked twice. She raised her leg high and kicked Sitwell on the chest right off the roof. His screaming echoed in the air as he was falling down.

“No offense,” Steve said sarcastically.

Natasha smirked. “None taken. I like it when you let me embrace my naughty side.”

“I’d lie if I said I don’t find it enjoyable to watch,” he smirked back.

Jasper Sitwell appeared again, loosely carried by Falcon like he was infectious waste. He then
dropped him off on the roof before landing smoothly. This was enough emotions at once to make Sitwell spill the beans.

The attack on the freeway was as violent as it was unexpected when Reidlos started shooting at Natasha from the roof of the car. She dove to the front of the car onto Steve’s lap and swiftly saved him and Sam from flashing bullets.

As Reidlos shot one of the tires, Sam lost control of the vehicle. Steve took them all out, using his shield as support, just when the car began to flip upside down.

Steve and Natasha were still cradled together on the shield when they looked up and saw the assassin standing down the road, reaching for a rocket launcher. They rose to their feet and as it seemed that Reidlos was aiming specifically at Steve, he pushed Natasha away, urging her to flee. She ran off and Steve squatted down behind his shield just before the rocket hit him and thrust him off the bridge into a bus driving by below.

After taking down the HYDRA agents, he proceeded to chase down Reidlos, following the civilians’ screams of terror. When he eventually caught sight of him amidst this scene of chaos, Reidlos was standing on a car about to shoot someone. Steve glanced down and recognized Natasha’s figure who was panting, clutching her shoulder and looking helpless. His heart pounded hard in his chest and he raced across the road as fast as his feet could possibly take him.

He leaped on the assassin and both landed on the ground, then a ruthless fight ensued. Reidlos was strong and there was something barbarous in the way he hit, so much that it became a brawl. He lacked discipline in an unsettling way that it made it a little difficult to anticipate his next hit or move. After being knocked to the ground, the assassin stood to his feet and ripped his black mask out of his face with rage. His face carried the scars from a past life. He then furiously spat some blood out and wiped off is mouth with the back of his hand.

A rocket suddenly flew his way and he escaped before it would hit him.

When Steve looked behind, he saw Natasha was the one who had fired it, her quivering body feebly leaning against the car to keep herself standing.

He started toward her but Rumlow and another agent took hold of him and brought him to his knees, arresting him, Natasha and Sam before the eyes of journalists flying above their heads in a helicopter. They were officially caught in HYDRA’s claws.

Seated and handcuffed in the SHIELD/HYDRA vehicle that was probably taking them back to the headquarters, Steve had his gaze locked on Natasha who was acrosss from him on the iron bench beside Sam. Having a hard time to keep her eyes open, she was weakly swaying with the van’s motions and looking numbly at a blank spot in front of her. He cringed as his eyes roamed down to her shoulder where her blood was oozing from a wound in her skin.

Sam was staring at her too with a concerned look.

“We need to get a doctor here,” he shouted at the two masked HYDRA agents. “If we don't put pressure on that wound, she's gonna bleed out here in the truck.”

One of the two agent pulled out a baton in response and switched it on, electricity flashing through it as they held it up menacingly. Wilson went mute. Unexpectedly, the agent struck their peer sitting right beside with it and knocked him out unconscious. Sam, Steve and Natasha stared at each other
Then back at the mysterious agent, who took their mask off, revealing Maria’s face. She brushed her hair out of her face and sighed nonchalantly.

“That thing was squeezing my brain,” she said coolly, then stared at Sam. “Who is this guy?”

Steve gave a faint smile, relieved and glad to find that Bucky’s girlfriend was on their side as he had affirmed she would.

Natasha’s wound had been stitched up and Director Fury, who had turned out to be alive, had had no other choice but to go with Steve’s plan to take everything down, S.H.I.E.L.D. included.

As the last preparations were being made, Maria came up to Steve as he was seated alone in a quiet room.

“Thank you,” he began. “For earlier.”

“Of course,” Maria nodded with a friendly smile.

“I’m glad you’re one of the good guys,” he continued then paused. Silence hung above them again. He rubbed his chin and looked back at her. “Bucky has been worrying about you.”

Maria’s dropped her special agent persona and her expression softened. “You spoke to him? How is he?” she hastily asked as she sat across from him.

He nodded. “He’s good where he is.”

They shared an approving smile. “Actually, he wanted me to come to you…to seek help. He trusts you implicitly.”

He internally blamed himself for not having given her that same kind of trust. Maria grinned softly, not only pleased to hear she had her boyfriend's complete faith but also grateful that Steve had made it a point of sharing this with her.

“He’s good where he is.”

“Steve,” she spoke. He appreciated her calling him by his name. “That operation, and actually everything HYDRA related, I don’t want him to be involved in any of it.”

He looked at her gently as he realized that Bucky had now a second person in his life who cared about him as much as he did.

“I made it clear I wanted him to stay in Europe until the whole thing has been sorted.”

Whether James would listen was a completely different matter. Maria nodded with a lack of enthusiasm, aware this would never be enough to keep James away from all this.

She pressed her palm on the table.

“I made a call and asked a detective friend of mine to take him to the station for some made-up minor infraction. Should buy us some time.”

It made them both grin mischievously.

After ‘borrowing’ his old uniform from the Smithsonian Museum and suiting up, Steve felt like it was 1942 again. The costume fitted him just like seventy years ago when he had put it on for the first time. He recalled how proud Peggy had looked when he had stepped into the room. This time, when
he stepped out, Natasha was standing with a faint smirk on, arms folded over her chest.

“After second thought the 40’s did have some ups,” she commented.

“Sure did,” Sam chimed in standing right beside her.

Steve remained quiet, frozen to the core. Natasha was wearing a classic royal blue skirt suit with a blond wig, as according to the plan. But there was something about seeing her with this shade of blond that propel him all the way back to 1942, with Natalie. Natasha, although she was undoubtedly stunning, had at this very moment a timeless beauty –and for the first time, he realized how she could have naturally fitted in his decade.

“You look…,” he trailed off, looking down at her intensely on the verge of expressing his thought aloud. He cleared his throat. “You look ready.”

He scratched his temple nervously.

Natasha nodded. “Nearly am. Just waiting for the Photostatic Veil to be calibrated.”

Their individual missions were going to set them apart for the first time since that whole thing had started. It felt weird. They had been through so much together those past few days that he couldn’t really imagine not finishing it with her by his side.

“Steve,” she called as he was walking away. He turned and found her looking at him closely. “Be careful,” she said.

He looked at her softly. Who knew how the mission would end. “You too,” he said barely audibly then walked out of the room.

Thanks to Maria’s perfect knowledge of the headquarters, they sneaked in without being seen all the way to the monitor room. Maria sat down and switched on all the speakers for Steve’s speech. He propped his hands on the desk and leaned in.

“Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, this is Steve Rogers. You've heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it's time you know the truth. S.H.I.E.L.D. is not what we thought it was. It's been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The S.T.R.I.K.E. and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want. Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won't end there. If you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way unless we stop them.”

He paused. At this very unexpected and tense moment, his mind roamed back to an old memory from 1942. He recalled something that Natalie had told him before leaving forever that he hadn’t really understood back then but that made a whole lot of sense in this very situation. It seemed that, for an unknown reason, she had chosen to sacrifice their relationship for something greater than them both.

“I know I’m asking a lot. But the price of freedom is high,” he quoted the exact words her voice was dictating in his head. “It always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not.”

Maria turned off the microphone and it took him a second to leave the wistful state of mind he was in. Sam stepped in and pulled him out of it without realizing.

“Did you write that down first, or was it off the top of your head?” he teased.
After the two men headed out the helicarriers, Maria remained in the monitor room to supervise the whole operation. As she kept an eye on all the camera surveillance, her phone laying on the desk beeped. She would have ignored the text and its content if it weren’t for the contact name showing in glowing letters. She quickly slid her thumb across the screen and read the text intently while a frown appeared on her forehead.

“Damn it,” she muttered to herself.

Two helicarriers were down and there was only one to go with a ticking clock. Steve made his way up to engine room but came face to face with Reidlos.

“Stand down,” Steve tried with a hard voice. “It’s over.”

The assassin stared right at him with an impassive, inhuman expression. He charged at him ferociously and tackled him to the ground. They brawled relentlessly until Steve eventually got the upper hand and strangled his opponent until he fell to the ground, seemingly dead. Steve then raced to the engine and swapped the served blades just before the end of the countdown. He sighed in relief and the sound of a fire shot rang out. His body jerked in pain as he felt the bullet pierce through the skin of his thigh. When he turned, he found Reidlos standing at the bottom, a gun pointed at him.

He pulled the trigger again and Steve dove sideways; the bullet made a clinking sound as it hit a steel girder. Steve limpingly raced at him, ignoring the racking pain radiating in his leg, and pinned his opponent down to the ground. The assassin riposted with a headbutt to the face before kicking him away. He then jumped on top of him and punched him repeatedly. Steve caught sight of a gun a few feet away. He blocked his foe’s next punch and hit him in the throat. As Reidlos choked, Steve got away from his grip and crawled toward the gun. Just when the tips of his fingers grasped the grip, Reidlos leaped on him and squeezed the wound of his leg, viciously sinking his fingers in as Steve grunted in pain. He held on to the firearm nonetheless and aimed it at the assassin’s face but got his arm brutally tackled back to the ground just when he shot the fire and the bullet dug itself into the glass below them, splitting out into large cracks. Reidlos grabbed his collar and lifted him up before smashing him down against the glass again and again until Steve’s gaze blurred and he began to lose full awareness of his surroundings. His skull repeatedly hit the glass until the pain turned mute, becoming numb instead. His eyelids started to feel heavy and his body to cave in under his ruthless assailant.

The cracks beneath them kept spreading with the hits and eventually it crumbled completely. Steve felt himself sucked down by gravity and fell off the helicarrier shortly followed by Reidlos.

His dull body eventually plunged into water and he sunk down. When the pressure of the water began to feel heavy on his chest, his survival instinct took over and his brain sent an electric signal that made his whole body spasm in response. His eyelids opened wide and he found himself drowning. He flapped his arms as strongly as he could to push himself upwards to the surface. He gasped when his face eventually got out of water and panted hard for air. His eyes frantically roamed his surroundings and he saw the shore some yards away.

He swam hardly toward it, pressing one palm against his wound to slow the bleeding. When his feet eventually touched the sand he fell to his knees and painfully made his way out of the water. But he was suddenly thrust backward and found himself face to face with his enemy. Reidlos hit and kicked tirelessly drawing energy from his bottomless rage.

He pressed his hands on each side of Steve’s throat and squeezed.

“Extermination,” he muttered under his breath, licking his teeth like a craving animal.
Steve took a fistful of sand and threw it at his face and although he did jerk in response his hands remained imperturbably locked around his throat. Steve suffocated, trying to kick his legs clutched under Reidlos’ body. He rose his hand to the assassin’s chin and tried to push his face with the remaining of the strength he had left.

And it went off. The deafening sound of a fire shot echoing across the shore. Steve went still and Reidlos jerked up. Time seemed to freeze. He then looked down at Steve and his hard, murderous pupils, blurred into blankness. The grip around his neck went loose then his body slumped sideways. His face fell silently on the sand, his dead eyes staring into nothing.

Steve gasped and as he finally diverted his eyes off the lifeless body of Reidlos he looked up to see the face of his assailant’s killer. His eyes stung but when his sight finally adjusted to the brightness, the silhouette standing above grew clear until it revealed the last person he expected to see.

He breathed hard and frowned, wondering if his eyes or his mind were deceiving him.

“B-Bucky?” he eventually gasped.

James lowered his gun and smiled reassuringly.

“Don’t worry. You’re safe now,” he said calmly and knelt down beside him.

Maybe it was the relief or the pressure of the whole crisis situation being over dying out, but this was the moment when the little left of Steve’s strength vanished and everything went black.

Steve woke up with the sound of music from the 1970’s playing in the background. He opened his eyes and found himself in a different environment than the last one he had seen. A hospital, in all likelihood.

“On your left,” he heard a familiar voice speak in a soft and smiling voice.

He turned and saw Sam seated on a chair by his bedside. The relief of seeing his new friend in good shape and the happiness of realizing he had remained on his side until he woke up mixed together.

“On your right,” an even more familiar said from the opposite side.

He was smiling before his head even completed the 180° turn. Bucky was looking at him with a grin.

“You…didn’t listen to me, again.” Steve said.

Bucky shook his head. “Of course you would want to have this conversation right away.”

“You didn’t do as I said,” he went on.

“When have I ever done as you say?” Bucky arched an eyebrow and smirked unapologetically.

“And I thought I told you to be careful,” a feminine, husky voice said.

Natasha was standing a few feet behind Bucky. Her smile was earnest and benevolent.

“Don’t mind him,” Bucky commented nonchalantly after a couple of seconds. “That was just his chronic attention-seeking habit kicking back in. It always activates in times of great hazard.”

“That explains a lot of things,” Sam said musingly from across the bed.
Steve snorted quietly. He couldn’t hope for a happier reunion.

The cemetery was as quiet as you would expect it to be. Steve, Sam and Bucky were standing a few feet behind Director Fury who was ‘poetically’ laying flowers on his counterfeit grave as he had considered that remaining dead to the public eye was his best way of staying alive.

“So, you’ve experienced this sort of thing before,” he said to Steve and Bucky.

“You get used to it,” Steve answered. Bucky nodded quietly.

He asked them if they would accompany him to Europe to track the rest of HYDRA.

Bucky and Steve glanced at each other. They had both agreed that they needed to take a step back from their past and focus on the present. For Bucky, most of the present meant Maria who had just joined Stark Industries in New York. For Steve, well, it wasn’t clear yet. And part of him dreaded that Natasha would choose her loyalty to Nick Fury over anything else and go along with him. She hadn’t shared what her intentions for the near future were.

“Maybe not for now,” Steve said for the two of them. “But do call us if you need us.”

Fury nodded quite understandingly much to their surprise.

“How about you, Wilson?” This was Fury’s compliment in appreciation of the skills Sam had shown during the operation. If Fury wanted him by his side, it meant he was one of the best. “Could use a man with your abilities.”

“I’m more of a soldier than a spy,” Sam answered politely but still flattered.

“Anybody asks for me, tell them they can find me right here.” Nick shook their hands and walked away.

“You should be honored,” Steve recognized Natasha’s voice behind him. It made him grin. “That’s about as close as he gets to saying thank you.”

Natasha and Steve walked up to each other, meeting halfway. She was wearing an elegant leather blazer and dark jeans with tall riding boots.

“Not going with him?” he immediately asked, his heart subtly pacing up at the apprehension of her answer.

“No,” she answered simply. His grin slightly widened.

The smirk playing on her lips faded a little.

“But I’m not staying here, either.”

Steve furrowed his brows. “I blew all my covers,” she explained briefly. “I got to go figure out a new one.”

His body stiffened underneath his thick layer jacket.

“But this might take a while,” he said.

“I’m counting on it,” she smiled cheerlessly. “I’m persona non grata at the moment.”
He had heard about all her files being open to the public. A choice she had willingly made when she released all HYDRA and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets onto the Internet. He hadn’t been bothered nor even curious to look at them. Although he suspected how dark most of Natasha’s secrets were he had no desire to know any of them. He didn’t need to.

He took a step closer to her.

“You’re not. You saved many innocent lives,” he whispered as he looked right into her eyes. “Those files—and whatever they say about you—I don’t care. They don’t mean anything now.”

Natasha dove her eyes deep into his with a slightly stunned expression. The shadow of a wistful grin came to her lips.

“But I do care,” she retorted softly and her pupils slightly quivered. “And so should you.”

She gently put her hand on his forearm and walked past him. She smiled at Sam then walked over to James.

“See you around, Bucky.”

He smiled sorrowfully in response. They both leaned in for a hug.

“Just don’t take too long, okay?” he said quietly into her ear and she smiled.

“Of course. What would you become without me?” she teased.

When they pulled apart, she turned to Steve. Bucky discreetly motioned Sam to follow him as he stepped away.

It was only the two of them below the great tree.

“I know you don’t approve of this…,” she began.

“You’re right—I don’t,” he cut her in.

“It’s the best for everyone,” she assured. “I need to keep a low profile for a little while and prevent you and the others to be tainted along because of my past.”

It all sounded so clear and lucid in her mouth but he couldn’t make sense of any of it anyhow. It was like his brain had completely shut down after hearing she was leaving. An unexpected panic took hold of it and the distressing feeling of being abandoned by the most important woman in his life again overpowered him. He found himself as clueless and desperate as he was the first time it happened over seventy years ago. Anyone would presume it was easier to handle the second time around but he found it to be just as harrowing as the first time, if not even more because of the memories it brought back.

“Don’t—,” he began weakly then stopped himself as he realized it wasn’t his place to ask anything from her. It was her decision and there was nothing he could do about it. He felt powerless. Heless. He looked at her with an exhausted expression and posture. “I need you.”

Natasha rushed up to his side. “I know,” she breathed out with a voice cracking near the end. She fixed him with an intense look. She held the side of his jacket and squeezed it. “I will come back, Steve. I promise.”

This déjà vu was getting harder and harder to put up with.
“I’m asking you to trust me fully on this one. Okay?” She asked softly, her eyes brighter than a moment before.

He looked at her, pursing his lips together. Could he trust her to keep a promise Natalie had broken? Part of him badly wanted to believe it.

He nodded, resigned.

“Okay,” he whispered under his breath, hoping that he wasn’t putting his heart again into a promise that would never be fulfilled.

Natasha tried to smile but it came out like a wince, then she stood up on her toes and laid a kiss on his cheek that she let linger for an extra second. When she started to pull away, he looked at her and they were never so physically close to each other.

She took a step back, turned around and walked away without ever glancing behind her shoulder.

She didn't see the tear that rolled down his cheek as he watched her leave.

And it was probably better this way.

Chapter End Notes

And this was my take on the Winter Soldier narrative. First of all, I chose to have another special assassin because it made sense that HYDRA would have gone through with this project anywawy, regardless of Bucky. Also, I felt it was meaningful and important to have Reidlos -the new Winter Soldier- taken down by Bucky. Who else could it be? It comes full circle with the whole purpose of Natasha's time travel in the first place. Let me know what you think.
Hi! Sorry for the delay. The new chapter is here. Hope you enjoy it! Thank you for all your amazing comments. I didn't answer but I read and re-read them all several (they always mean so much to me!). A rain of kisses for all of you guys who take the time to share their impressions -you rock!, and fthank you to all the others who read the new updates faithfully!!

It had been weeks since Natasha had left and time seemed to go as slow as ever. Since S.H.I.E.L.D. had gone, Steve was pretty much living the life of a retired soldier. Tony Stark had sent him a couple of emails but he hadn’t be bothered to read them yet.

He and Bucky spent most of their days together when he wasn’t with Maria.

“So,” Bucky said one day, slumping into the couch next to him. “Can I resume poking fun at you or are you still grieving?”

Steve rolled his eyes. He cocked an eyebrow at him. “Did you even stop?”

Bucky smirked cheekily.

“She’ll come back,” he said with an assertive tone.

“Natalie also said she’d come back, and look now,” he retorted.

Bucky shook his head. “Maybe she did,” he said simply. His look turned more serious. “Maybe she came back and you were the one who was gone. You can’t keep holding a grudge on her for breaking a promise she might have kept.”

Steve frowned. He realized it was a possibility he had never considered. “What are you saying?”

“All I’m saying is that it’s not always all black or white. Let alone when you don’t have the clear picture.”

They looked at each other silently. Bucky cleared his throat and brushed his upper lip with the back of his thumb.

“And If I remember well,” he went on. “That’s exactly made you like her in the first place –the unclearness.”

He snorted at Steve’s reaction face.

“Don’t give me that look, Steve. I know that behind all that self-righteousness of yours there is also a
reckless transgressor, who antagonizes his superiors and jumps off sixty-story buildings, planes and other helicarriers any chance he gets.”

“The last one was involuntary.”

“Still proves my point,” Bucky brushed it off quickly. “Obviously you would fall for an unconventional, mysterious and with a slight taste of danger woman. That’s how you like ‘em.”

Bucky cocked his eyebrow and smirked, smug and yet seeming to suggest he implied much more.

Steve scowled and huffed.

“I don’t see why I keep having these conversations with you. You’re a terrible counselor.”

“I think the word you meant to use is ‘terrific’,” he brushed his knee, pretending to take a bobble off his jeans. “Besides, this is your reaction every time I am spot on.”

“Not sure about that. It happens so rarely.”

Bucky reached over and patted his shoulder. “She’ll come back,” he spoke assuredly. His hand squeezed him then he got up. “And now, read your emails. They may be worth checking out.”

“You mean Tony’s emails?” Steve frowned. “You got one, too?”

Bucky nodded. “I’ve been waiting for you before making a decision.”

“What decision?” He raised an eyebrow.

Bucky winked then left the room.

Tony’s tone in the emails had progressively shifted. The oldest one from three weeks ago was cordial, although filled with sarcasm, while the newest one from days before had no other purpose than to convey his frustration.

Hello 1944!! –this is a desperate attempt to make contact from the future, the email title read. Steve rolled his eyes.

Dear veteran Rogers,

You are cordially invited, first and foremost to step the hell out of this gloomy, untouched-by-technology, barbaric time bubble of yours; and then to come meet me at the Stark Tower. There is something I would like to discuss with you that might pique your oh so fugacious interest.

Yours strenuously,

Tony Stark

Steve sighed then began to type his reply.

Since you are asking so nicely –how could I decline?

Yours stoically,
The meeting was scheduled for a couple of days later. Steve and Bucky were standing at the bottom
of this steel tower, whose shadow was threatening to gobble them mercilessly. They glanced at each
other, wincing, then stepped in.

A host welcomed them in the hall with a smile, and without saying a word, invited them to follow
him into the elevator. The journey seemed to drag on.

Bucky leaned toward Steve and whispered into his ear. “Obviously his office would be on the top
floor.”

Steve answered with a grin. The doors eventually opened and they made their way down the
hallway.

“Thank you, Thomas. I’ll take it from here,” a feminine voice said and a smile grew big on James’
face. Maria came up to them, dressed in an elegant dark grey skirt suit and remarkably different from
the black catsuit she used to wear when working for S.H.I.E.L.D.

She led them to the large glass door standing ahead of them. She knocked, slightly stepped in and
announced them before opening the door wide for them.

Stark was typing on his big hologram computer table while J.A.R.V.I.S. was reporting to him with
statistics.

“Break time. We’ll take it from here later,” he told the voice then stepped away.

He turned to face his visitors. Tony was dressed more formally than what they had been used to, a
black suit over a navy V-neck T-shirt.

“I thought you’d never come,” he said, looking straight at Steve.

He shrugged. “Well, you know me. I can’t resist turning up behind time when I am the least
expected.”

Tony smirked then motioned at them to sit down. Maria moved to stand on the side, halfway
between her boss and her boyfriend.

“How was your trip to Europe?” Tony asked, casually.

“Brief.”

Tony sneered. “Right, you aborted your stay quite unexpectedly, didn’t you?”

“Sneakily,” Maria corrected barely audible then cleared her throat in a quiet way to convey her
unabating reprobation over the matter.

James raised his hands off his lap. “Is no one actually going to thank me for it?”

It had turned out that Maria’s detective friend had never had the chance to find James to take him to
the police station as she had requested. Bucky had lied about his whereabouts and was already on his
way to the airport when Steve had called him from the telephone booth. From there, he said he knew
where to find Steve by heading where there was trouble—which, in this case, happened to be three
massive helicarriers flying adrift.

“I think what you did was great,” Tony stated matter-of-factly with a firm nod.
Bucky’s face lit up. “Finally!” he exclaimed with relief, then threw judging looks at Steve and Maria for not having been supportive the way Stark was.

“I would have done the exact same thing,” Tony chimed in.

Bucky frowned a little.

“Wait. I’m no longer sure it is a compliment,” he said with a sarcastic, pensive tone.

Tony smirked in response then walked around his desk, slumped into his leather armchair with a loud noise and spun to face them.

“I asked you to come because I have a proposition to make you that you won’t be able to refuse,” he trailed off with an expectant look, slightly smug with his own wording.

“We saw it,” Steve said quickly with an imperturbable tone of voice.

The corner of Tony’s mouth rose. “Good. No awkward moment,” he said. “So I can skip straight to the next part.”

He prepped his forearms on his desk and leaned forward. “This is something I have been thinking about. You took HYDRA down – and kudos, by the way –, but now that S.H.I.E.L.D no longer exists, the world has become a more vulnerable place. And from what I understand you and Barnes are both unemployed, or should I say retired?”

Bucky and Steve stared coolly at him. It had the knack to trigger Tony’s impatience.

“I want to reinstate project Avengers and make it more…constant.”

“More constant?” Steve questioned.

“I don’t want the Avengers to be a resort used at outmost crisis. I want people to know they can count on us at any time and that we are here to protect them from whatever might jeopardize their safety. I think, I think this is what Fury would have wanted,” he finished with a grave voice.

Bucky, Steve and Maria remained quiet and inexpressive regarding a secret the three of us shared.

“So you want us to work together on a daily basis?” Steve asked.

“That’s exactly it! And with S.H.I.E.L.D. being gone we wouldn’t have to report or answer to any government.”

Steve noticed Bucky’s face had lit up at the realization that it would mean no more paperwork and other report writing.

“What do you think about this tower?” Tony asked them. “Now that you’ve seen it up close.”

James snorted. “Surprisingly, it is more pompous and ugly from inside than –”

“Scratch that,” Tony cut in with a slight sigh but still a cordial tone. He did care a lot about this project. “We’ll make it the Avengers tower. With all the equipment, technology, intel we would need. We have private apartments you could move in, a gym, a swimming pool and plenty of other facilities to make your stay agreeable.”

“Who else is in?” Bucky asked.
“So far Banner, I’m still trying to get in touch with Thor; Barton hasn’t officially confirmed yet but he’s in.”

Steve’s mind immediately wandered at the possibility that Clint might have news of Natasha.

“Barnes has heard my proposal already, and I totally understand why he chose to wait for you to hear it before making a decision,” Tony said and he looked right into Steve’s eyes. “This team wouldn’t function without you leading it.”

Steve watched him cautiously, unsure whether a humorous comment would follow. But none came.

They looked at each other silently, but that was the first proper conversation they had ever had.

Project Avengers was on again and, a couple of weeks following the meeting, Steve and Bucky officially took up residence in the tower. Stark had already begun the works to rename it.

Their individual condos were bigger than the apartment they shared.

“You’re just one story apart. You think you’ll survive?” Tony had asked, faking deep sympathy.

And maybe it was better this way. He and James had moved in together and built routines along with each other since they had waken up from their comas. Time had come to take a little bit of distance (on every level) to adjust their focus to the rest of the world instead of just each other. This would be easy for Bucky –and it had already begun – since he was dating Maria. For Steve, well, it was a matter of finding something other than a person to refocus on. Work could be that thing.

Thus, Steve invested all his time and effort in the Avengers. He was always the first to start work and the last to finish. While Tony was in charge of the tech side of things, Steve would deal with the practical matters: training, tactic and strategy, and any other field that would improve the skills and effectiveness of the Avengers both as part of the team and as individuals.

Thor arrived a few days later, and so did Barton although his private apartments were more of an inhabited pied-à-terre than actual accommodation.

One day the two of them practiced together in the training room, Steve trying to make his way across the room and avoiding the different types of arrows Clint was shooting at him (something impossible, as Barton never seemed to miss). He dodged, he ducked, he jolted them away with his shield but somehow the arrows always succeeded to slow down his progression. At some point, an arrow flew right outside the corner of his eyes and planted itself in the wall behind him. Steve looked up at Barton who was perched on the deck and frowned in surprise.

“Wrong hit?” he asked dubiously.

Clint lowered his bow and sneered. “You looked like you could use a break.”

Steve snorted. “Did I?”

Clint didn’t answer and slid down the pole.


“Are you asking me if I was mad at you when I found my pay had been cut drastically? Well, it sure wasn’t agreeable.”

Steve just smiled, waiting on a proper answer. Clint shrugged.
“I’m not the sentimental type,” he said. “S.H.I.E.L.D. was compromised. I guess a spring cleaning was called for.” After a pause, he added: “But I don’t think all secrets should be unburied.

They both knew whose secrets he meant. There were still articles published about Natasha’s past missions.

“I know it was the right thing to do,” Clint explained. “But we’ve all done things that would be considered questionable or downright wrong depending on which side of the line you’re standing. The only difference is that she’s the only one who had a valid excuse for doing them.”

Steve look at him closely. “She told me what you did for her, how you saved her.”

Clint shook his head. “I didn’t. I merely showed her there was an alternative path and she took it. The only person who ever saves Natasha is herself.” The corner of his mouth rose slightly into a smirk.

Steve smiled faintly as the urge to know soon took fully hold me.

“Do you know –,” he furrowed his brows. “How is she doing? Have you heard from her?”

The need to hear actual news about her was stronger than the uncontrollable hint of jealousy he would feel at Natasha choosing to make contact with Clint over him.

“No,” Barton said.

The answer stung him in the chest and his face slightly twisted into in a cringe in response.

“I know secrecy is a sacred oath –“

“Cap,” Clint cut in. “I’d like nothing more but to get news from her –and she would probably shoot me in the eye with my own bow for daring worry for her as much as I do- but she will come back home. I know that.”

Maybe it was because they came out of her best friend’s mouth, or maybe simply because it was hearing them be said out loud and not just in the quietness of his own mind, but those words reassured him just as much as if Clint had told him he knew for a fact Natasha was somewhere safe and sound.

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Missions as the Avengers followed one another and always worked successfully. With time they had acquired the natural flow and automatism the team hadn’t necessarily had the first time during the Manhattan attack. And yet Steve was missing other more familiar automatisms. With Natasha. He missed the team the two of them used to make. And his shield usage seemed somewhat incomplete now that he wasn’t sharing it with her. There was a proximity, an affinity between them which showed through to the very way they fought alongside.

Bucky of course was his strongest ally, and would forever remain his comrade from war, but he often worked in the background as a sniper, and when at the front, he was an excellent support.

Natasha on the other hand complemented him, like in an orderly and synchronous ballet choreography, either anticipating his next move or concluding it. They were like the two opposite sides of the same coin, different in appearance but similar to the core. Compatible.

Her absence in the field emphasized her absence in his daily life altogether. Over the weeks, he grew closer to Barton; not only because Clint was the closest link he had to Natasha, but because in many
ways he saw in him what had drawn her to become his friend. His wit and his personality undeniably resembled Natasha’s, and some of the banters he and Steve had wound up feeling somewhat familiar. And when Barton would set off to unknown places, those were the dullest days.

“Come on, Rogers. You got everything you need—and probably things you didn’t know you needed—and yet you look like this isn’t still quite it.” Tony exclaimed one day as he walked in the kitchen and found Steve sitting alone by the counter. “Where’s Barnes? On a romantic getaway with Hill?”

Bucky and Maria (but mostly Maria) had made it a point to keep their relationship secret from the rest of the team, which meant everybody knew about it before the end of the first week. They had been standing in the spotlight and the attention around them still didn’t seem to decrease. They were the main protagonists of all the jokes and teasing remarks and there was no contender on the line to replace them any time soon.

“I don’t know. Believe it or not, Bucky and I are not joined to the hip.”

“Or not,” Tony commented while pressing the button of the coffee machine to fill his mug no one was allowed to touch and that read ‘MOST IRRITABLE GENIUS’ – a gift from Pepper Tony was very sentimental about. He once found Bucky drinking from it and it nearly triggered a civil war.

“What do you intend to do with those decayed, slimy things you call lips on that mug?”

“To drink. That’s how humans do it.”

“It has my name on it.”

Bucky feigned looking for it on the mug.

“Genius. I mean, is that not evident?” Tony was staring at him with wide eyes.

Bucky looked him up and down then shrugged apathetically. “No, not really.”

“Well surely, it doesn’t refer to you,” Tony retorted.

Bucky feigned to look at the words again.

“Maybe irritable—but it doesn’t quite cut it.”

By this point, the two were too far gone to reason with.

“You know you can use J.A.R.V.I.S. as much as you need. There’s nothing he can’t do for you,” Tony went on, stirring the spoon and walking over to the counter. “Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t like to boast but it is true,” J.A.R.V.I.S’ voice rang out in the room.

Steve’s interest was quipped. “Can you access old data base?”

“Affirmative.”

Steve jumped from his stool. “Thanks for the advice,” he said to Tony, who looked puzzled, then quickly left the kitchen toward the elevator.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.” he spoke again after the doors closed behind him. “I’m gonna need you to run fingerprints on an old object.”

And he felt again all the excitement he had to put aside after Fury has cut his old investigation short.
After scanning the hairpin and making a 3D picture of it, J.A.R.V.I.S. had forewarned that finding a match might take a little while, as he would have to search for and through the entire fingerprint databases he could find from 1940’s onward.

“Patience seems to be today's virtue but it might be time to get to your apartments, Captain.”

Steve nodded quietly and, following J.A.R.V.I.S' advice, went straight back to his private floor. The doors of the elevator opened and he stepped out silently, his fingers fiddling with the hairpin carefully sealed in its plastic pouch. He felt getting closer to solving the mystery than ever before. Looking down at it, he grinned. Once resolved, this would have to be the longest investigation in History. That mystery woman on the train was probably dead, and even if she wasn't, never would she believe that someone somewhere had been working on figuring out her identity.

The corner of his eye caught sight of a presence in the living room of his apartment. He jerked his head up, taken by surprise, although he expected it to be Buck.

It wasn't Bucky.

His breathing halted without him realizing as his eyes immediately identified the silhouette sitting on his couch. His pupils dilated as he recognized the figure and the face his brain had forever carved into his memory.

The red of her hair.

The curve of her eyes.

The green of her irises.

The unfathomable smile playing on her lips.

His brain captured the moment to become what would forever remain a fond memory replacing their goodbyes in the cemetery which would soon become a remote image.

“Why did you have to move? I miss the time I could sneak in through a window,” Natasha said as a hello with her usual, teasing smirk. It had been over three months and she talked like she'd just come back from the donut shop around the corner.

She got up and stood still, as if giving physical evidence of her presence. “I came back. I kept my promise.”

She smiled gently, content with herself.

He slightly cleared his throat to soften the lump that had appeared so he could speak the words. “Yes, you did,” he said barely audible.

He swiftly walked over to the couch and wrapped his arms around her holding her as tight as his super soldier serum allowed him to without causing pain or discomfort.

“You came back,” he whispered again, to himself, speaking the words he dreamed he could have said seventy years ago (to another woman whose return he had waited on), in vain. They sounded just as beautiful and soothing today, in this living room, nonetheless. Never would he have thought than another woman could somewhat ease the grief left by the previous one and yet, she had done it. Natasha, from the very beginning, had always soothed like a balm the wounds left by Natalie.
He buried his head in the crook of her neck and smiled.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

I did it! I didn't take so long this time *self pat on the back*
Can't wait for you guys to read it! I hope you'll like it!!
So many thanks for your wonderful comments :D

Natasha was allocated private apartments (vacant and already reserved for her) a few stories below Steve’s.

And the Avengers were whole again.

As for Steve, he felt whole again as well to some extent, now that one piece of his mind was no longer wandering off along with Natasha. It found peace after she had returned.

As per usual, she was very secretive on her whereabouts and as badly as he wished she could have confided in him, he was too pleased to have her back to sulk over her quietness. But she did drop some locations. One mostly, London. His only attempt at getting answers was dodged craftily.

"How was London?" he asked her one morning as they were in the elevator.

"Rainy," she smirked.

The doors opened and she stepped out.

The men were all sitting on the leather couches, having small talks.

"Did I tell you Pepper received a nomination for most successful businessman of the year?" Tony said, then smirked smugly. "And yes, I said businessman. The gender was just a detail for Pepper."

"Oh I wouldn't know about that," Thor answered with a cockier smirk than Stark’s, standing in the middle room as if to make an official announcement. "I've been too busy rejoicing for Jane's Prize. You may not know, but she was rewarded for her brilliant essay on Monecular Energy Transfer."

Tony rolled his eyes. But soon he and Thor turned to look at the only other teammate in a relationship, Bucky, who was gobbling a handful of peanuts. He looked up at them.

"What?" he shrugged carelessly. He wiped his hands noisily then stood up, too. "Maria could kill them both using just two fingers while typing the strategic action plan she's designed for the next mission with her other hand."

He wiggled his eyebrows contently. Thor and Stark stared at each other. Clint watched the whole interaction with an amused and slightly mocking smirk then sipped his coffee.

"There's...a sick logic in what you just said," Tony eventually spoke, rubbing the back of his neck. Thor didn't say a word but a subtle nod of the head was enough to express he thought likewise. The two men sat back down, completely mute. Bucky never looked so proud than at this moment.

He chuckled. "She wouldn't do it by the way," he eventually said in a reassuring way as if that
needed to be said out loud. And, heading to the kitchen to grab a snack, he paused, squinted his eyes and added with a grave voice and a mischievous look. "Or would she?"

Steve and Natasha snorted quietly while James was spinning his finger around in a dramatic, slow motion close to his temple as a thought for the two Avengers to mull over then walked over to them.

"Tasha," he began after he walked up to them. "When are you going to admit you came back because you missed me too damn much?"

She smirked. "Not gonna lie. I missed the sheer feeling of satisfaction I have every time I put you back to your place."

Bucky cocked his eyebrow at her. "That's how it always begins. Maria gave me hell for months before falling for my charm and it was all the fun in it. Just give in, already."

"Maria has always been more..." Nat paused, feigning to choose her next word carefully, "...magnanimous than me. A trait I have learned to appreciate now more than ever since you've been dating. Besides, you couldn't handle me."

She smirked and he smiled back. He shook his head slightly. "It's great to have you back," he said quietly.

Stark's phone beeped.

"Looks like we might have found a lead on the Krumer's investigation. His gang just struck the bank in Brooklyn." He said, scrolling his finger down the screen.

"Alright," Steve spoke. "Barton, you go check it out and interrogate the witnesses."

Clint nodded then gulped down the last sip of coffee laying at the bottom of his mug.

"I'm coming with you," Natasha said, leaving Steve's side. She and her best friend stepped into the elevator and the doors closed.

"Banner and I are gonna see what J.A.R.V.I.S. can find in the security footage," Stark went on, jumping off his seat, followed closely behind by the doctor.

Thor offered to go patrol in case Krumer and his gang might turn up somewhere in the city. Steve approved with a nod then threw a glance at Bucky who nodded in return.

"Going as well," he said in response and soon Steve found himself alone in the room.

He went to his office and looked into the files again for clues he might have missed.

"Captain Rogers", he heard a familiar voice call.

"Yes, J.A.R.V.I.S.?" He answered, his eyes skimming across the documents.

"I have completed the fingerprint search you asked for."

He paused and put the file down.

"My apologies for taking so long but I mistakenly presumed that you wanted me to search for a match in the database of 1940's."

Steve frowned. "Yes, that's what I wanted. Why? You didn't find any match?"
"Not so outdated. There was no match to find. However, I have found one in the recent database."

"Recent?" He asked, utterly intrigued. He had given up on the idea of finding the mysterious spy alive. "Who is it?"

"There is a match with agent Romanoff's fingerprints."

The words came into in his ears and left them ringing.

"That's...impossible. I found this hairpin over seventy years ago. Natasha was not even born, then. Did you check again?"

"Affirmative, Captain. I ran the scan twice."

Steve found himself thrown into a black hole of nonsense. There was no theory or explanation that could justify how her fingerprint had ended up on an object from his decade.

"Is it possible that there's been a mistake somewhere?"

"It is very unlikely." Jarvis answered. "It is true the fingerprint is quite small and has undergone through seventy years that might have resulted in some advanced state of decay but if the scan does find a match then its result is indubitable."

Steve rubbed his forehead. "Thank you J.A.R.V.I.S. Keep this information classified for now."

"Of course, Captain."

Steve remained sitting in his office until an hour later, when the team eventually came back.

Natasha and Clint were sharing all the information they had managed to gather. She smiled at Steve when she saw him walk in. He barely grinned but kept his composure throughout briefing, while Bucky threw glances in his direction from time to time.

As soon as it ended, everybody rose to their feet to get to informal activities, mostly sharing a beer in the living room.

When it got eventually quiet later in the evening, Natasha sitting by his side, he asked the question that had been lingering on his mind.

"Nat, you...you never took the hairpin out of the bag, did you?"

Her making an error was the only plausible theory he had come up with so far.

Natasha furrowed her brows, her face split between an amused smirk and a quizzical look.

"Is that a trick question? Are you going to ask me next if I splutter on all the exhibits to leave my DNA? Cause I will have to use my joker for this one," she teased then went serious when she realized he remained serious. "Of course I didn't. Why?"

It was the answer that he expected and that made the most sense and he felt thrown back to square one.

"Apparently the fingerprint is compromised," he said vaguely without getting into details.

Natasha pouted, looking genuinely disappointed. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I know how much it meant to you. We'll find another lead."
He nodded faintly and she turned her attention back to Clint but his mind was still buzzing with a thousand questions.

The next morning for breakfast, Steve found Bucky in the kitchen (as they both remained the early birds of the team).

James poured him a glass of orange juice and slid it down the counter over to him. He took it and sipped it slowly.

Bucky was watching him.

"How long before you tell me what's on your mind?"

"What makes you think I have something on my mind?" He asked.

Bucky smiled. "Very simple: one, because you always do that thing with your face and two, you always have something on your mind."

Steve snorted humorlessly.

"J.A.R.V.I.S. ran a print scan on the hairpin and there is a match," Bucky's eyebrows rose high with excitement. "With Natasha."

His friend's brows dropped and furrowed deeply.

"How is that -"

"Possible?" Steve finished. "That's what I've been asking myself since I found out."

"That doesn't make any sense," Bucky exclaimed. "Two people can't share the same fingerprints last time I checked."

He paused, tapping his fingers on the counter. His voice went quieter, almost like a whisper. "Don't you think Natasha might have compromised the hairpin on purpose?"

Steve sighed. He saw that one coming.

"Why would she do that, though?" he asked. "She has no reason to want to undermine my investigation."

"Or so you think," James said. "I mean, she's the spitting image of your former girlfriend and now we find her fingerprints on an object that belonged to a German spy from one of our missions. That's beginning to make a lot of coincidences."

Steve frowned. "You're being paranoid," he uttered.

"And you're being naive," Bucky retorted.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Why would she want to hide the identity of the woman on the train? And how does it have anything to do with Natalie?"

Bucky gawked. "I don't know!" he howled. "And I'm not pretending to have the answers or even clearly see the beginning of them. All I'm saying is that Natasha has a fishy connection with our past."
After a pause to let his statement sink in, he added:

"What does she have to say about the fingerprint?"

"She says she didn't touch the pin."

"Shocker," Bucky commented ironically. "Did you expect a blatant confession?"

Steve stared at him incredulously.

"So you think she's lying?" he sighed. "And I thought you had dropped the whole conspiracy theory about her ages ago."

"Natasha cares about you - I don't doubt that. But she's also very protective of her past and she'd keep her secrets hidden at any cost."

He looked intently at him with a hard expression and Steve's mouth went agape, listening to his friend's words with sheer outrage.

"She divulged HYDRA's secrets at the cost of her own," he defended, merely audible, staring back as steadfastly as James before. "Did you forget?"

"I haven't forgotten," Bucky answered gravely. "But maybe she has other secrets bigger then those."

Steve heard his best friend's words but found them to sound senseless. What could Natasha possibly be hiding from her remote past that could somehow be connected to his old mission on the HYDRA train? Why would she bound to keep secret a matter that didn't personally concern her since she wasn't even born then?

Moreover, he had seen it in her eyes - she hadn't lied. Nobody could be that good at feigning oblivion. This wasn't him being naive, he was certain Natasha had been truthful and honest regarding the whole investigation (and even about Natalie, for that matter, had he come to conclude over time), and nobody could convince him otherwise - not even Bucky.

He looked into his friend's eyes.

"I believe her," he said adamantly. Reasoning, guts and trust weighed on the side of Natasha's innocence on the balance and his verdict was incontestable.

Bucky muffled a sigh. "She is a spy," he objected.

This sounded like Bucky's biggest argument.

"So is Maria," Steve retorted calmly. "And yet you trust her."

James paused. He looked pensive for a short moment and then he smiled with a genuine soft expression. He nodded in soundless agreement and this was how the hairpin revelation was a dismissed case.

Steve sort of dropped the investigation after that. Not because he had run out of leads and clues, but because, over the weeks, he found the fulfillment he needed in his life in leading the Avengers and in having Bucky and Natasha by his side. Maybe what they said was true: maybe there wasn't anything that time couldn't heal, even the loss of the person you thought you loved the most. He still thought of Natalie, very often, but the memory of her didn't sting like salt on a wound anymore. It hurt in a painless way if that made sense to anyone other than him, playing fond and bittersweet memories of
his head. And, as much as he attached himself to his past, he didn't let it grasp him back. Bucky's words made sense as he realized that solving this old case or not solving it at all wouldn't make any difference. Maybe he would get back to it, someday. *Someday.* What a beautiful way to envision time without giving it any definite shape. *Someday* was a shape-shifting concept that he could mold to his liking, an open window hovering in the corner of a room; distant enough not to become an obsession, close enough to be accessible any time he would decide.

In one word, he was serene and that was probably the best thing Bucky could ever wish on him.

One day for a mission, the whole team was out to catch Krumer and his gang in hiding in some valleys in New Mexico.

The capture went rather smoothly but the extreme heat made the Hulk particularly cranky but very efficient.

"We got a fugitive heading East towards the warehouse," Barton called out in the transmitter from the flying jet. "Fugitive heading East."

Steve pressed two fingers on his earbud. "I'm on it," he said, leaving the main group of prisoners to Bucky.

Banner was the first to arrive at the abandoned warehouse, breathing heavily. He heard noises coming from the far right corner and ran up to it growling, only to find the spot behind the crates unoccupied.

He was suddenly struck by a high electric discharge that made him roar with rage. He flipped around and hit the wanted criminal, who was holding an electric baton which, judging from the size and the advanced technology, had been especially designed for him. The man fell unconscious while Banner bent in, prepping his thick knuckles on the ground and grunted threateningly.

Steve ran inside and found the Hulk leaning above the criminal, he ran straight to him but was violently struck in an instinctive move from Banner. His body flew across the warehouse and hit a metal pillar that left him a little dizzy. The ground shook under the Hulk's frantic running and he glanced up. Banner looked furious (more than usual when his alter ego was out), growling at him.

"Doctor, it's me." He said hardly with a jerky breathing because of the hit he had just received. The Hulk raised his two fists high together, ready to strike again.

"Steve!" He heard Natasha call alarmingly.

She ran through the door over to him.

"Nat, no!" he shouted out forcefully after gathering enough breath to speak up. But Natasha didn't listen. She stood tall and firm before him, making herself the physical barrier between him and the Hulk.

"Easy, Banner." Her voice was calm but firm, holding a steady gaze on him although the fear her trembling pupils betrayed the trauma she had from their last confrontation in the helicarrier. The Hulk growled right back at her, so close to her face her hair fly up and her body staggered for a second. But Natasha didn't step back an inch. She even glanced down at Steve to check on him. "It's okay Bruce," she said more softly, taking a step closer to him which earned her a disapproving grunt from Steve. She held her hand out to him and grinned, quietly inviting him to do the same.

The Hulk was first disconcerted, then slowly, after sensing her good intentions, gave in. He raised his hand up and reached out to hers; his fingers gently grazed her palm while he looked closely into
her eyes. She nodded reassuringly and his heavy lids closed. His breathing slowed down, his muscles relaxed and soon his body shrank back to his normal size. Dr Banner fell to his knees, physically exhausted.

Natasha immediately turned around and helped Steve up. She pressed her hand on his arm, examining him up and down.

"I'm okay. Thank you." he breathed out then frowned. "How did you do that?"

They turned their attention back to their teammate.

"Dr Banner, are you alright?" Steve asked him. Bruce took his eyes off the ground up to them with an apologetic (and shameful) expression.

"Sorry about that, Captain" he murmured then forced a little grin. Once he took full possession of his senses again and realized the condition he was in in front of his colleagues, he cleared his throat.

"Agent Romanoff," he started bashfully. "Would you..?"

He wrapped his arms around himself and it made Natasha raise an eyebrow in amused puzzlement.

"Don't worry about me. If that can make you feel any better, I've seen more men in the nude than you would in the locker room after a football game," she said coolly with a nonchalant shrug. It made Steve twitch and frown at her.

"Well it doesn't," Banner murmured before clearing his throat again.

Natasha slightly rolled her eyes and headed out of the warehouse.

"What did I do to deserve to be surrounded by a bunch of prudish and modest males?" she said under her breath as she walked out.

"That's something I can easily fix if you like," Bucky sniggered deviously in the transmitter.

"Shut up," her voice answered on the line.

The incident in the warehouse was a big revelation for the team in that it meant The Hulk could be controlled to some extent. Summoning him had become an easy thing for Banner but putting him to sleep was always a more difficult task. Stark suggested that this "lullaby" as he called it should be put into further practice.

Natasha and Banner began to spend more time together than they had ever before as making the lullaby effective rested on a solid bonding. Not only did the Hulk become easier to put to sleep in the following missions but even Dr Banner's behavior and demeanor changed. He seemed more relaxed and approachable; Natasha had this power to crack open any person she intended to, and not even Dr Banner's thick walls look so impenetrable to her. She made him laugh and often found the right words to take some guilt off his shoulders.

As a team leader, Steve could only be pleased by the results and the evolution of their connection, and yet he wasn't. As an person and Nat's friend, he couldn't help being bothered. As selfish and unreasonable as it sounded, part of him resented Bruce for taking some of the time Natasha could have spent with him instead. As he would walk by Banner's laboratory or stand by the kitchen counter or even from the couch he was sitting on, Steve always yielded in to the urge to watch them interact out of the corner of his eye.
"So how are things going between you and Banner?" he asked her once in the gym in a very professional tone, while holding the sandbag for her to hit.

"They're going well," she breathed out between two punches.

He found the answer too vague for his liking and for putting his mind at rest.

"Looks like you two are hitting it off," he commented, watching her reactions closely.

Natasha shrugged, brushed a damp lock of hair behind her ear and resumed hitting the bag.

"Yeah," she said. He found her lack of loquacity at times he needed the most very frustrating, even more so at this very moment, "I never would have guessed it at first, but we get each other."

His grip went loose just when she threw a punch and the bag shook sideways. She frowned at him, her silent way of scolding him, and he cleared his throat before holding it tight again.

"What do you mean you get each other?" he asked.

"I think he's the person who's the most like me" she said simply. "I can tell him things."

Her words left him speechless. He couldn't see what made them so alike. And what did she mean by 'most'? Most than him? He felt a sudden surge of jealousy toward Banner, he who had managed to get Natasha to confide in him in such a short length of time.

"You can tell me things," he said softly and his hand reached out to rest softly on hers.

Natasha paused, staring absent-mindedly at his hand that lay on her knuckles then her green eyes rose up to him watching him from behind the damp strands of her hair. She had never looked so vulnerable.

"I...I can't," she began, shutting her lids with a subtle grunt of frustration. "I can't have you look at me differently."

She took her hands off the sandbag and stepped away to face him. "I've been trying so hard to change and become better. But no matter how hard I wipe out my ledger, I know the red will always remain. It's part of me. But you..." Her voice slightly broke and she plunged her eyes into his so deep he was at a loss of words. "The way you look at me, the way you treat me...like I am your equal - sometimes even like you wonder at me - that's unsettling. I can't live up to it."

His eyes filled up with water and began to sting, he glanced away to gather his composure again. When he stared back into her eyes, he found they looked the same as his.

"I'll never reach-," she went on then interrupted herself. "You're you and I'm me. If you knew everything, it would never be the same between us. I would lose...you wouldn't look at me the same, But not with Bruce. He's become a friend and he understands how I feel."

He rose his hands up to her arms.

"Then please tell me," he pleaded gently, begging her to confide in with every fibre in his body. "How do you feel?"

Natasha pursed her lips together, weakly trying to break out of his grip and giving up on the idea immediately. She looked at him with the exhausted look of someone who had had enough trying to keep heavy secrets buried.
"We're both fighting a darkness within waiting for us to wane to consume us completely. We're both damaged..." she whispered in a thin breath, staring blankly. He cupped her cheek and his thumb stroke her skin in a desperate attempt to soothe her. "...beyond repair."

Her words had the same effect than a blade ripping his chest open, and everything inside him hurt in the most acute pain. It was something he had always suspected, but hearing her say it made the truth even uglier. He couldn't comprehend how the woman who had helped him heal his broken heart could not see the beauty in herself; how she could not see herself the way he saw her.

He didn't think she had a darkness that could take her at any moment. She had the heart of a hero. Truly. A brave heart could not be corrupted so easily.

He leapt forward, pressing her body against his in the softest collision. "Oh, Natasha," he cried out in a whispering voice as he held her tight against his chest.

"I know your value," he said into her ear, his fingers sliding down her ponytail to the back of her warm neck. "And you're worth so much."

And he continued to hold her tight as long as it would take to begin repairing her.

"So much."
Chapter 24

Although returning from the gym in the evening, Steve had left his mind there, replaying what had happened with Natasha over and over. He sat on his couch in the dim light of the living room part of his private apartment, one arm stretched on the armrest as his fingers gently tapped against the fabric.

That moment they had just shared had to be one of the most intimate between them and it left him both fulfilled and empty, content and guilty.

He went for his sketch book, sat down against his bed on the carpet floor, staring out the large window to the amazing view of Manhattan at night. He began to draw the outlines of the skyscrapers, slowly adding up more and more details.

After a while, when it began to take shape, he sighed and leaned his head back against the mattress. The activity wasn't as soothing as he expected it to be. Somehow, the sketch and the model felt ill-suited and impersonal.

He flipped a few pages back to the drawing of Natalie he had done a while ago. He held his pencil between his fingers and started shading it. He did the work minutely and soon calmness enveloped his mind. When he finished and considered the portrait was officially complete, he gently put his pencil down on the carpet and had a look. Progressively, as he came to realization to what he saw, a deep drown rose to his forehead and his breathing quickened a bit.

Staring at his sketch, it hit him. The woman he had drawn - the person he thought he had been drawing - was not Natalie. It laid in the small details: the curly hair, the spark in her expression, the hint of a smirk playing on the lips; the sketch was a portrait of Natasha.

He felt an uncontrollable rush of panic take over him as he was struck by the fact he had been fooled by his own mind, or that he had somewhat turned a blind eye on his real model. How come he had never realized it was Natasha he had been drawing in this portrait all along? And why did he find out tonight? And what did it mean?

He had sworn to never draw someone again since he had lost Natalie, and now that he had broken his promise, of all the people in this world and across time, he had chosen Natasha.

Whatever lie or excuse he could make up, it was obvious that the woman drawn on paper, despite being totally identical to his old lover, looked undeniably like his teammate. He closed the sketchbook with a mixture of shame, self-resentment and utter confusion, knowing he would not only never resolve to tear it up but that he would also come back to look at it (like he had often done the past few months) and that there was nothing he could do to stop.

The next few days went on peacefully. Natasha and Bruce still conversed often but Steve didn't watch them with the same unreasonable curiosity. He understood there were things she would rather share with the doctor than with him. He did that too with Bucky. He knew that, now. Natasha looked more comfortable too since what had happened, like she had been relieved off a burden laying on her shoulders, and their smiles to each other carried the memory of their moment in the gym.

One quiet afternoon, as he was standing on the Avengers tower main terrace, he heard footsteps of
someone approaching. They were familiar enough to his ear not to move or react and Bucky came to stand next to him, leaning on the bar of the glass rails. He looked out in the distance, quiet.

"You knew, didn't you?" Steve asked, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "That I had drawn Natasha and not Natalie."

He replayed that conversation they had in the kitchen the morning Bucky had mentioned the finding the sketch and deliberately trailed off to let him say the name of the person he had drawn. Steve had taken it as a teasing remark about owning having drawn Natalie again; now he realized James wanted to hear if he would admit it was actually Natasha. A test he had failed at the moment, James remained quiet and Steve nodded to himself, slightly hardening his grip on the metal bar.

"You know," Bucky started. "It's alright to love two women at the same time."

The corner of his mouth rose and he snorted humorlessly. Did he love Natasha? He had forbidden himself to love so strongly it had become a foreign feeling. Of course what he felt for Natasha was stronger than what he would normally feel for a friend - let alone a colleague- but none of this situation was normal. Natasha looked uncannily identical to Natalie so it would make sense that he would project or transfer at least a tiny piece of his feelings for her to Romanoff. But even then, it was not something he had done consciously. Furthermore, he had gotten to know her and overall appreciate the kind of person she was which meant he liked Natasha for every little thing that reminded him of Natalie and for every little thing that made her different from her. Natasha was the extension of Natalie, the other face of the mirror she hadn't let him explore. Natasha had Natalie’s boldness except bolder, her tenacity except tougher, her resilience except more resilient. And Natalie was the extension of Natasha, the other face of the mirror Natasha could explore if she weren't so afraid of unlocking it, Natalie had Natasha’s kindness except warmer, she had Natasha's insight except wiser, she had Natasha's gentleness except softer,

He cared for Natasha in a deeper way that was expected of him but he was not ready to define it yet.

"But what would that say about me?" he mused outloud bitterly. He had deviated from Peggy's path for Natalie once, what kind of man would that make him if he did it again for Natasha?

"That you have a great heart and a brave soul," Bucky answered simply. "It takes courage to let yourself fall for just one person so..."

"But why her?"

Bucky pouted. "You cannot always explain everything. Maybe it's fate."

Steve took his eyes off the urban landscape and looked at his friend.

"You've never been the type to believe in fate," he sneered, quite amused.

Bucky leaned closer to the rails, prepping his forearms on the bar and entwined the fingers of his two hands together.

"I just told Maria I love her," he said.

Steve grinned at him contently. It was the first time he heard these words coming from his best friend.

"And I think, - I know -, she's the one," he continued. "I can't imagine myself being with anyone else. And if I had to be the nazis' guinea pig, crash in the ocean and be in a coma for seventy years to
find her, if I had to literally travel across time to be with her, that's gotta be fate, right?"

Bucky was smiling and he realized how truly happy his best friend.

He nodded. "Right."

"You don't have to figure it out now," Bucky said. "But don't pretend there's nothing to figure out."

Steve didn't say a word and looked back at the view before them. They remained quiet for long seconds afterward.

"Do you...still miss her?" His friend asked eventually. "Natalie."

Steve kept gazing at the skyline and he took on the neverending sight in front of him and what it had to offer.

"I'll always miss her," he murmured without turning his attention away from it. "But now I know she's gone."

And even though this statement should have hurt, it didn't. It was only serene acceptance. His time of grieving had come to an end somewhere along the line without him realizing.

They watched the sun go down in the distance, plunging Manhattan in a copper light streaked with subtle shades of pink.

When the sky eventually turned darker, Steve spoke again, breaking the solemnity of the moment that had just passed.

"So...did Maria answer something or did just an awkward silence ensue?" he teased with a grave voice before cracking a smile.

Bucky huffed then they laughed together. They walked back into the tower and sat in the lounge with the rest of the team.

Clint challenged Thor to a drinking contest; he capitulated within an hour. He laid down on the couh, his mouth agape and everybody pulled a bill out of their pockets to give Thor.

"You all bet against me you bunch of a-holes," Barton groaned into the leather of the couch with a disgust although it was hard to determine if it was toward his teammates or just physical.

"You fought courageously," Thor reassured him while counting his money. Barton glared at him.

"Never again...for at least a week until I sober up completely."

"Why do you insist on having those drinking contests?" Natasha asked. "You couldn't even beat me last time you tried."

Clint opened his eyes wide. "Excuse you? I can take you right now."

"Shh," Natasha murmured as she laid her palm over his forehead. His lids closed under her touch and he dozed off almost immediately.

At the end of the night, they all got up. Natasha helped Barton up and took him to his apartment, Bucky and Maria walking close behind them. They got in the elevator together.

A few minutes later, as Steve made his way to the elevator, the doors opened and he found Natasha
in it. She stepped out while he got in.

"You're not going to sleep?" he asked.

"I will in a few minutes," she said. "I just need to do something quick, first."

"You want me to hold it for you until you come back?"

She smiled. "That'll be alright but thanks."

He nodded and cleared his throat before reaching for the panel control.

"Steve," she called and she pressed her hand against the frame to keep the doors from closing. He looked at her.

She paused; gathering her words carefully.

"I'm glad we got to talk," she said and he understood what conversation she was referring to.

He smiled. "Me too."

Her hand gently slid down the frame back back to her side.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

He nodded. "See you, tomorrow."

And then the doors of the elevator closed.

Everything was just a blur and uncertain, even the sounds. Steve raised his two arms up to block the violent punch coming his way and immediately kicked the knee of his assailant to make him fall. He was stalling. But the other man was strong, cold. He hit back even more ferociously and yet it seemed Steve couldn't really fight back - or wouldn't. Not really. It was hard to define how he felt but it was as if he wasn't really here to fight. He deliberately didn't use his full strength against whoever was that person brawling with him. It seemed like he was trying to talk to him and reason with him but he couldn't hear the words coming out of his own mouth.

The figure suddenly hit his chest with his knee and he stumbled backwards, hitting the wall behind him. Steve groaned in pain and looked up to see his attacker but there was nothing to see, just the blur. Something shone in the strange mist, something made of metal. He focused on it as hard as he could and soon saw its round shape that, as the vision became clearer, took the shape of a barrel. The barrel of a gun aimed straight at him. All his body froze then a deafening sound went off, echoing loudly into his ears and he blinked. His eyes shifted down and he stared at the red that was spreading over his suit. His own blood. His hand reached for his abdomen and his fingertips touched the hole in the fabric.

His feet got weak, then his legs mellowed and shook under him. He staggered before falling hardly to the floor and his first instinct was to look up at the person responsible for it. A faceless man who barely had any shape or form. The barrel of the gun went down and he caught glimpse of a shiny metal wrapped all over the arm of this unknown figure. Then a red star painted at the top of it.

Steve panted and a groan slipped out of his lips. His head bowed down, his chin buried into his throat as he looked at the gun wound in his abdomen. The featureless entity walked out without a sound.
But soon another figure came running to him and fell to its knees. He clearly saw and recognized Natasha. She stroked his face. He looked up at her and saw the distress in her eyes.

"Cap is down! I repeat - Cap is down!" he heard her cry out in the transmitter. "Requesting medical support urgently and immediate extraction."

The fierce determination in her voice made no doubt she strongly believed she had a chance of saving him. He shook his head at her as a way to tell her not to.

She gently slipped her arm under his neck, pulled him up close in her safe embrace and pressed her palm against his wound to slow down the bleeding. It sent a rush of acute pain along his spine and his body slightly jerked up in response.

"Hold on, Steve." Her voice was hard, trying to conceal her anguish. "Help is coming."

He shook his head again, well aware his body wouldn't cope until anyone arrived. He could feel himself going, progressively losing touch with his surroundings.

"I never thought it would end like this," he stuttered painfully.

She squeezed him tighter.

"It's not the end yet, Steve. I won't let you go."

The tragic part was she really believed it. The end looked so close and he realized a lot would be left unfinished.

"There are so many things I now wish I had said sooner," he spoke.

And she was one of them. Everything was so clear now, so obvious.

He looked at her and realized he was glad he had this last moment with her and nobody else. A smile rose to his lips.

The grip on his collar tightened and she shook her head. "No. Don't you die on me, Rogers."

She only used his last name when she wanted him to know she was angry. Somehow, she had always been aware of how much he disliked displeasing her. And yet this time he knew there was nothing he could do to make it up to her. Not this time.

Part of him was stunned to see her so distressed for him. Natasha had always been the member of the team who kept her cool in any situation. She was imperturbable and it was her way of keeping the upper hand on whatever emergency situation. And yet, here and now, she looked so distraught, and for the first time ever since he'd known her, powerless. All that for him.

Until the very end, she never would have ceased astonishing him. And if any piece or cell of him were to live on even after he had gone, it would miss her. It would miss all of her.

"You," he began.

Natasha shut her eyes tight and shook her head.

"Steve,' she begged and her voice cracked, revealing the plight she was in. He watched, astounded, as her eyes filled with tears. "Please don't give up."

She cupped his jaw and stroked his face with a soothing tenderness.
Her pleading voice, the vulnerability she let on, he would have cried over the pain he had caused her but his eyes were incapable of complying.

"I-I need to say it to you before -." His lungs ran out of air and he took a new painful breath in for he wanted to finish before time would catch up with him. She leaned forward until her ear was close enough to his mouth. He felt the frantic motion of her speedy breathing against him.

"Nat, I..." The words were so easy to say and he uttered them but somehow they didn't make it out into a proper sound. His chest froze and tightened like a rock and everything went dark forever.

His body jerked upwards and he sat up in the middle of the dark room, desperately panting for the precious air he was deprived of just an instant ago. He saw the city lights outside the large window and recognized the familiar surroundings. He leaned to the side and switched on the lamp on his bedside table. His hand instinctively reached for his abdomen like it had just before. He grazed the fabric of his tank top where the hole was before but did not find any, just as he realized the white of his shirt was not stained with red. It was just a dream. And yet it felt so real. So real he could still feel the skin under his top burn at the memory of the wound that had been there.

When he came to full realization it was indeed just a dream, he leaned back against the headboard and breathed out heavily. His whole body was still shuddering at the physical trauma it had just gone through. Never had he had such a vivid dream that left him questioning the reality of his surroundings upon awakening before.

But Natasha's presence in the dream was another disturbing detail. The way he was feeling about her as he watched her leaning over him. Every emotion was more heightened and raw than what it was in reality. And those words he was close to telling her in the dream and how evident they seemed to say didn't fit his current situation in real life with her.

The whole scene felt both realistic and off-key. Credible but remote to the spectrum of his reality. And yet his body had fully lived it and believed it.

He breathed out again as his heart rate was slowly coming back to normal and he remained sitting like this for long minutes before going to sleep again.

The next morning went on normally with the usual routine and the bad dream had been brushed aside. Steve spent the first half of the day with Tony discussing budget and other aspects of the Avengers project.

Then he had lunch with Bucky and Clint who stuck with a dry meal and coffee to avoid hangover nausea.

"Have you filled out your report for Krumer's case?" he asked Barton. Clint winced. "You haven't."

"I'm nearly done," Clin said. "I'll bring it in to your office right after lunch."

Then they parted to attend to their businesses and Steve spent most of the afternoon alone in his office. A couple of hours had gone by and there was still no sign of Clint or his report.

He got up and made his way to the main room. Walking in the hall, he caught glimpse of Hawkeye standing in the room, looking like he was talking with someone and in no rush to give in the report.

"Barton. I asked for the file two hours ago. What's taking so long?" he asked, entering the room.

He saw the someone Clint was talking to was Natasha. He hadn't seen her since the night before. She flipped around swiftly and looked at him intently.
He paused, unsettled. There was something in the way she was gazing at him, as her eyes filled up with tears. Something different. She had never looked at him this way with such intense tenderness and relief. She was looking at him like she had been desperately waiting for this moment. It was as if her eyes had found relief in finding him.

But although Natasha had never glanced at him this way, this look was very familiar nonetheless. He had seen this look of unallduterated softness years ago, in Natalie's eyes. That was the exact look he had hoped to see in Natasha's eyes the first time he had ever met her on the helicarrier. And here she was doing it years later, even more beautifully than his mind could have fathomed.

"Steve?" she murmured, unsure and hopeful.

It was strange how even now, even after all the time he and Natasha had spent together, he could still be stunned by his likeness to Natalie. Perhaps, it was something he never would fully get used to - and maybe, secretly, he had no wish to get used to it.

He smiled at her, perhaps more fondly than he intended to, at the memory Natasha had just fortuitously roused.

Natasha gazed at him even more yearningly than a moment before.

"Steve," she repeated blankly.

Her behavior began to feel bizarre as it was completely unusual. Steve frowned, quizzical, and turned to look at Clint, hoping her best friend might have answers. Barton looked just as perplexed.

"Don't look at me. She's acting like she's seing us both for the first time, apparently." Barton shrugged.

Natasha's eyes were locked on him like he was the only thing they desired to have in their sights. This time, he found it very disturbing as he realized Natasha no longer looked like the Natasha he had always known.

"Because I am," she said to Clint. "Sort of."

And Natasha requested an emergency meeting.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand it's happening! Natasha is officially back! I promised you we were very close!!
Your patience has finally been rewarded :D
I'd be thrilled if you could leave a comment. I've been waiting for this moment just as badly as you and I would love to read what you have to say about it!
Hey, everyone. Sorry I had to leave you with a cliffie last time. I knew the next chapter would be hella long (and it is, compared to usual).

Everybody soon walked into the lounge and Natasha looked at each of them expectantly first, and then with relief.

They all sat down, Steve across from her, and watched her.

'It better be important, Romanoff,' Tony said as he slumped onto the couch. 'Bruce and I were working on a revolutionary concept."

'I'll give you revolutionary,' she assured with a smirk.

Tony raised an eyebrow at her, tacitly challenging her to give him something spectacular. Natasha glanced down at the floor and cleared her throat.

"What if I told you I just came back from a time jump? A long time jump," she said.

All frowned except Tony.

"I'd be torn between congratulating you and resenting you for the rest of my life for not taking me with you," he answered.

Natasha remained imperturbable, not the least surprised by his response. She slipped a hand into her pocket and pulled out an object hardly bigger than a five-cent coin.

Thor jerked forward to the edge of his seat and furrowed his brows.

"How did you come in possession of an Asgardian device?" he asked.

Steve and the others averted their eyes from the demigod to Natasha.

"You gave it to me," she said simply. "In another timeline."

Thor stared at the object lying in the center of her palm.

"So the legend is true?" he murmured almost inaudibly.

"Oh it is very true," she assured.

The room was silent and everyone was now hanging to her lips. She pinched the chip between two fingers and held it up.

"This is the device Thor gave me to travel through time."
Steve's heart skipped a beat in anticipation and eager to ask the most relevant question possible after hearing such a shocking revelation. But somehow he couldn't ask it himself. Part of him was too afraid of the answer he would get.

"To where?" Clint asked, then frowned to himself. "Or do we say to when?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "1942."

The words rang out like cathedral bells in his ear and he felt himself fall through the couch and the dozens of stories this tower had all the way to the abyss. Natasha's eyes went up to him and she gazed at him with the apologetic expression of a guilty person. They stared silently at each other, fighting off the tears on the verge to rise to their eyes.

This had been an improbable –impossible– idea to consider for the three years he had known Natasha only to be told today that indeed two of the most important women in his life were one and the same.

"In the timeline I come from," Natasha began again, getting back on track, as the tone of her voice hardened. Her eyes swept across to him. "Steve died." A heavy silence filled with long and awkward glances ensued. "Killed by an assassin. That's when Thor got hold of the device and we decided we would use it to prevent all this from happening."

"When did - when would it have happened?" Bruce asked.

"Yesterday," she said. "That's why I only came back today," and she turned to Steve as if she seemed to apologize for having taken so long, for deliberately letting him go through the torture of meeting her future self without her recognizing him. "I had to be sure I had succeeded."

Her eyes screamed sorry and he felt unsettled to look into Natasha's eyes but only find Natalie in them. It was as if that past he had endeavored to put behind for the last three years had jumped all the way over to him again. There was no doubt it was Natalie (or should he say Natasha, now?) who was now sitting in front of him.

"Wait a sec," Tony interrupted. "You just said Cap should have died yesterday. Why did you not just travel two days back?"

"Because -," she trailed off, suddenly uncomfortable. "The Winter Soldier –the man who killed him– was ...James Barnes. Steve's best friend."

Steve's eyes opened wide, startled to hear his friend's name. Once the shock of the revelation had passed, he and the other Avengers subtly frowned at her making such a formal introduction of Bucky as if he was a stranger.

"What?" He exclaimed.

"In my timeline, James was taken by HYDRA during the war, brainwashed into the deadliest assassin we've known in our History. Injected with a replica of the super soldier serum and wearing a metal arm. He was cryogenized then woken up a few years ago for when HYDRA, infiltrated inside S.H.I.E.L.D, would need him. Steve tried everything to save him and make him remember who he really was but...it didn't work. Going to 1942 was the best chance we had at saving them both."

Steve was literally mute with astonishment. It was like watching a puzzle putting itself back together. This was the 'clear picture' as Bucky had called it revealing itself to him. And it looked oh so easy to read. The perfection with which all the pieces were slotting together was absolutely astounding, the easiness in which it was happening before his eyes was almost revolting. He had spent so many
nights pondering –ruminating– on the situation with logic and discernment that finding out the whole truth relied on facts his mind could not comprehend until this moment seemed unfair. This beautiful revelation and yet ugly truth intertwined together in the most bizarre feeling inside.

Watching Natasha watching him, he began to feel feelings he had banished long ago, and his whole body froze at the realization they were so intense and earnest. Actually, they felt heightened, perhaps because his heart was remembering them vividly. Colors never looked brighter than after your eyes had spent days in the darkness. Maybe it was the same, maybe his heart was remembering those forsaken feelings again. It was both a strenuous and wonderful process.

'I have nothing to prove what I'm saying. Nothing but Thor's device and my story,' she said in conclusion to her announcement.

All looks immediately turned to him, his teammates waiting on his reaction first before throwing in their two cents.

He swallowed hard. He had nothing to say –or actually, too much. So many thoughts desperately trying to push themselves out of his lips, but they were all thoughts he wanted to share with her and her only. With no audience. So he decided to remain mute instead.

This was somehow all the permission his friends needed. They took his silence as their cue to jump in with their questions.

Steve only paid half attention to their queries and comments. They sounded all so irrelevant compared to the questions he needed answered, they felt all so indifferent to the flood of emotions tormenting him. He looked coolly to the side at Tony after he joked about using the device to save him. He would have had a thousand comebacks stored in normal times. But none of this happening right now was normal.

"I let you go?" Clint said incredulously, being the first to voice out real care for Natasha. Steve listened more carefully, watching their tender exchange of looks. It was clear both had been just as close in the former timeline as they were in this one.

He began to wonder why she had volunteered for the rescue mission. Was it simply for practical reasons? Had they all agreed that she was the most likely to grow close to him?

He remembered his dream from the night before. In all likelihood, he had experienced what was originally his own death. The man with the metal arm and the red star, the enemy he didn't really mean to fight and who ended up killing him was Bucky, as insane as it sounded. As for Natasha –the one in his dream–, she was actually his Natalie, she was the Natasha sitting across from him and who had just returned. She had seemed to care for him in the dream. A lot. A lot more than a simple teammate would. And the way he felt about her, the way he was looking at her, the words he had meant to tell her before dying and waking up. She and his original timeline self had bonded in a deeper way than colleagues were supposed to. This certainly explained why Natalie had bounded with him so easily. He had always thought she knew him and understood him more than any acquaintance ever could. Now, he realized it hadn't been just a feeling.

Maybe she had volunteered to travel back in time (and taken the risk of never coming back had the device not worked as planned) because she cared for him. Because she loved him. He had always believed he had been the first one to fall for Natalie, now it seemed obvious she had been the one loving him long before he did.

Tony was answering to Natasha's comment with a sarcastic remark when they all heard:
"Come on Stark, we all know and have accepted that you have the hots for Steve. When are you finally going to admit it to yourself?"

Bucky was standing by the door frame, nonchalant and totally unaware of the whole situation. Steve had been so drawn into the revelation, he just now realized it concerned James just as much as him.

Bucky frowned, surprised to see his joke didn't receive as much interest as he thought it would. Natasha was the only one to react to him...in the most unexpected way. Her body and face froze as she watched him enter the room like you would look at a ghost. Bucky didn't notice, obviously. He made his way to one of the couches, teasing Tony further. Her eyes followed every one of his motions.

"Bucky?" she whispered barely audibly. "How are you here?"

Steve's heartbeat quickened as her flabbergasted expression painfully confirmed that the Natasha sitting in the room came from a timeline where Bucky, as he knew him, did not exist.

Natasha told the story again and he kept his eyes on Bucky the whole time, watching and deciphering every emotion flashing across his face, and every emotion he ensured to conceal. He remained calm and composed, maybe even his light-hearted mood. He then proceeded to tell his story—their story—and how they had both woken up here seventy years later.

But Steve felt his chest tighten as his body processed what was once a reality. In no parallel universe could he possibly comprehend (and let alone accept) living in a world where Bucky wasn't by his side. It hurt even more to imagine his best friend turned into a killer. The mere thought of it gave him nausea. It became physically painful to even consider this could have been his reality if it hadn't been for Natasha.

He gazed at her carefully, seeing her from yet another light today. How much more beautiful could she look to him at this moment? Her devotion and commitment seemed to know no bounds. She had done so much, for him sure, but mostly for Bucky and this was worth everything. She could have decided to protect him only and yet she had chosen to save Bucky, as well. A mere stranger to her. His killer, if anything. She had somewhat put all the resentment she might have felt watching The Winter Soldier kill him, all the prejudices, and she had dedicated herself to saving him, too.

This was when it became obvious how she had proceeded. Another piece of the puzzle that slotted back to its place. The woman on the train. His secret agent from the HYDRA train. It explained why he had found her fingerprint on the hairpin. It had been her all along. It became suddenly overwhelming to realize that almost all the most significant women in his life—the woman he had loved and lost, the woman who had soothed her absence and now even the woman whose identity he had endeavored to find—were all one and the same. He almost choked at the memories flooding his mind. That silhouette he had watched fight and be lifted by the neck through the broken window in the wagon was the woman who had given him the most memorable kiss just a few days before. The German agent he had treated like a possible anemy at the time of the investigation was the woman he loved. And she had risked everything for him. He was literally stunned by the many faces of Natasha. She was and would forever be the recipient of his bottomless admiration.

"You're the one who saved us on Zola's train," his words escaped his mouth, musing out loud. Natasha looked at him quietly, almost afraid she had disappointed him with yet another lie. How far from the truth she was. There was nothing not to love about her at this very second.

"It seemed pretty clear to me she rescued Barnes, actually." Stark unwelcomely remarked, interrupting the silent exchange of looks between them. "Am I the only one who paid attention to the bedtime story?"
Clint chimed in with another comment.

Then Bucky, who had been silent for a while, spoke again.

"I knew you had a connection with Natalie Rushman," he said seriously. It was evident Bucky had spent the last few minutes coming to the same conclusions. ‘It was unmissable for the both of us. Steve sort of dropped the idea but I personally concluded you two were related but that you just didn't want to share any information from your personal life…Although, now I understand better why you genuinely seemed to believe your own lie."

"I was not supposed to alter the past more than what I already planned to do. Thor, Bruce and Tony were very clear on that point," she answered.

"What was the time travel like?" Bruce asked.

"Like watching a film moving backwards and in high speed," she said.

"How did you know how to access and move the HYDRA train without leaving any clues behind?" Tony asked.

"Please," she answered with a smirk. The question nearly hurt her ego. 'I studied all the plans and data that I needed to know before traveling to 1942.'

"How did you financially sustain yourself there for two months?" Clint chimed in.

'Fury had given me an address where I would get money and a place to stay in.'

This answer piqued Steve's interest and he stored it for later.

"How come we've got no record of you in the forties?" Thor asked.

"I made sure to stay under radar. I avoided cameras like the plague," she explained. Steve was immediately reminded of his attempt at finding a photograph of her; he still had an envelope filled with a stack of pictures lying in his desk drawer to prove it.

'Was Captain's USO costume as ludicrous as it looked?' Stark smirked.

She snorted. "About that," she started with a playful look.

They all smiled and the conversation continued for a long part of the evening but Steve remained quiet until someone pointed out she probably needed some rest. It was announced that the conversation would resume the next day.

Natasha got up, uncomfortable, almost feeling out of place. She glanced expectantly in his direction, fearful to make the first move, hopeful he would be the one to make it.

Clint stepped in and offered to accompany her to her apartment as it seemed she still hadn't recovered her current self's memories. Steve felt an uncontrollable anguish at the thought the same story might repeat itself but the other way around, with Natalie having to live without the memories of the Natasha he had grown to.

He began to miss her terribly as soon as the doors of the elevator closed on her. As unreasonable as it was, he was anxious he might lose her again.

Bucky was quiet, too quiet, brushing off any uncomfortable question with funny comments –with heavily charged humorous comments. This usually meant he was trying to hide something.
Tony and Bruce ran to their lab to analyze the alien device, closely followed behind by Thor who was already claiming ownership of it on behalf of his people and all the gods.

Soon, it was only him and James in the room.

Bucky brushed his palms over his jeans. "I think I'm gonna go have some rest. I'm feeling a little tired," he said.

Steve watched him closely. "Let me come with you."

Bucky frowned. "Why?"

"Because after what you just heard, I should be with you."

He shook his head. "I'm alright. Maria should be back from D.C. later tonight. I won't be alone."

"Good," Steve said. "So until she comes, I stay with you."

Bucky sighed loudly but gave up fully aware that Steve was more stubborn than he could ever get.

They both went to the elevator, down to his apartment. Upon arrival, Bucky stepped out, gravelly mute, and walked to the window. He rubbed his jaw for long seconds then moved over to his room and sat on the bed.

"Bucky," Steve began. "We have to talk about it. You have to talk about it."

James pursed his lips together and closed his eyes. "What can I say?" he eventually uttered, and his voice broke. "That was I destined to become evil?" He turned and looked at him. "That I was supposed to kill you in cold blood?"

His eyes glowed with tears and Steve felt his own mirror them.

"Don't," he said with a slightly shaky voice. "Don't blame yourself for something you didn't do. Whatever the other Bucky became, you're not him."

"Because Natasha made sure it wouldn't happen" James retorted. "She cheated with my fate by changing it."

Steve shook his head. "No. She fixed a mistake, something that never should have happened. She came to our time and she saw you for what you truly are. Not this...Winter Soldier. But you, just Bucky. And she made sure it would remain that way."

James slightly turned his head and looked at him. "That's still a big thing to swallow. I need time."

Steve patted his shoulder and nodded. "And this is exactly what we have thanks to her: all the time in the world."

As much as he wanted to be with Natalie -Natasha-, he needed to stay with Bucky right now.

His best friend nodded back. He then prepped his elbows over his lap and brushed his hand over his mouth.

"When I think that I –, " he trailed off. He swallowed hardly and looked back at his friend. "I questioned her intentions back in 1942. I suspected she wasn't who she said she was. And I had absolutely no idea all she was doing for me."
Steve grinned slightly. "It's alright. I doubted her, too. Actually, I haven't stopped doubting her since we got here."

He thought of all those times he resented her for lying about her identity. From there, he began to question everything she had ever told him.

"Steve," Bucky spoke again. "Don't waste any more time on old regrets, and certainly not on making new ones. You got a second chance with her. Don't wait too long."

His breathing halted. The mere thought of it filled him both with indescribable bliss and utter fear.

"I...," he began hesitantly. "What if things feel different to her, now?"

"Now?" Bucky snorted softly. "As far as she's concerned, she said goodbye to you outside that cinema only a few days ago."

Steve didn't say a word, quietly hoping with all his soul his friend was right. They remained sitting like this on the edge of the bed, pensive, for some time.

Eventually, the doors of the elevator opened and Steve caught sight of Maria standing with a worried frown across her forehead. She put her travel bag on the floor and came up to them in quick pace.

Steve got up, passed the bedroom door and walked over to her while Bucky remained motionless, his back arched and his head bowed down.

"Stark just told me," she murmured as they met halfway in the lounge room. She glanced over his shoulder to have a look at Bucky through the door frame behind him.

"I think you're the company he needs tonight," Steve said.

Maria softly pressed her hand on his shoulder and nodded. She then stepped past him and walked over to the bedroom. Steve watched as she entered the room and stood in front of Bucky who looked up at her in relief. She didn't have to speak nor to listen, just to be here. Bucky folded his arms around her waist and buried his face against her stomach while she held him tight in her reassuring embrace, stroking the back of his bare neck. Steve grinned and found himself envying them then he realized he might finally get it too if he took the chance for once.

He quietly made his way to the elevator and pressed the button to Natasha's level.

His heart pounded harder and harder in his chest as he watched the story numbers get dangerously close to its destination.

The doors slid open and he froze, holding his breath in. The lounge room was unoccupied and dark. The door to her bedroom standing across was closed and he slowly stepped toward it. He hesitantly rose his arm and knocked on the door.

"Come in," she said softly and all his body quivered at the sound of her voice and the upcoming encounter awaiting.

He turned the knob and walked in. Natasha was standing, her back on him, looking out the large windows. It seemed she was taking in the landscape she was finally reunited with.

"I thought you would be asleep," he murmured hardly. The coward part of him hoped she would be.

"I couldn't sleep," she answered, still gazing at the city lights.
It was obvious none of them knew how to start a conversation they were both eager to have.

"You were so quiet there," she spoke again and she turned to face him.

The sight of her standing in the dim light of the room, looking more stunning than ever before, froze him to the core. He looked apologetically at her when he realized his silence up there had hurt her.

'All the pieces were coming back together,' he justified with a gentle voice, stepping up toward her. 'And to be honest, all the things that came to mind were things that had to wait until we were alone.'

Her face slightly lit up with hope. It was still so crazy to believe that the woman he had been looking for since he woke up was standing right in front of him at last.

He walked up to her, reducing the terrible distance between them as much as possible. All of him yearned to be physically close to her again. It was a biological need he could no longer control. He found peace when he finally felt the warmth radiating from her body.

He looked at her but all his mind could see was the Natasha he had known until now; his eyes shifted to look into hers and immediately recognized Natalie. He was overwhelmed by old memories (not so dated technically, but still older than hers as Bucky had rightly pointed out). He smiled fondly as he noticed the stray of her hair falling over the side of her face. He recalled how he would brush it back behind her ear. He did it again without really being aware. The old and yet familiar gesture felt natural and blissful.

A lump rose to his throat as he voiced out the following words.

"Is it really you?" he asked eagerly. Even if there was absolutely no doubt left that the woman standing before him was Natalie, Natasha and even the spy on the train all at once, he still needed to hear her confirm it one more time to allow himself to believe it completely.

She nodded with her lids closed. A feeling of overpowering happiness took hold of all of him.

He thought of how he had Bucky with him because of her.

"And you did all this to save Bucky?" he said, euphoric.

Her stunning green eyes dove into his. "I did all this for you," she murmured back with a devotion so great he could never repay her for it.

She did love him. With all her heart. She had shown and proved it in every possible way. He felt lucky to be the recipient of so much love. He felt blessed to be the recipient of Natasha Romanoff's love.

The most earnest smile came to his lips, enjoying the delectable joy of having her back.

"I thought I would never see you again," he whispered, stroking her cheek. He recollected all the sour memories of his strenuous journey until tonight. "When they told me they had lost the drawing, I thought I had lost you forever. No photograph, no portrait, no data, you only existed in my memory. It crushed me. And then I met Natasha," he continued. "She looked just like you: the same features, the same laugh, the same humor and determination, the same strength. Every time I looked at her, I saw you. It was both a gift and a curse."

He smiled again, recollecting all the fond memories he had shared with her the past three years, and in the process embracing all the feelings he had for her but were too afraid to own or claim. It was undeniable he had fallen in love with Natasha, too. How else could he explain he had drawn her?
That she had been enough to fill the void left by Natalie? Love can only be replaced with love. "And now I realize I never lost you. You've been here all along. You were here for me in the moments of my life I needed someone the most."

Natasha held back a whimper. "It was not supposed to happen that way, though. I was supposed to remain a replaceable acquaintance…' she whispered. "Just a blast from the past you would have forgotten about quickly."

He laughed, amused that she could think she was the kind of person you could forget so easily. He never had. He hadn't forgotten Natalie, he never would have forgotten Natasha had she never returned from finding herself a new cover, heck, he hadn't even been able to move past the spy on the train, too eager to put a face and a name on the mysterious agent.

"Well, good luck with that," he said with a smirk. "You turned my world upside down the minute you walked in it." And by you, he meant all the women she had been: the intriguing journalist, the mysterious German spy, and the bold S.H.I.E.L.D agent.

Natasha smiled then she moved herself closer to him, erasing the last bit of space remaining between them. He heard his heart thud wildly in his chest. They hadn't been this close since that afternoon of 1943 outside the cinema when she kissed him. His lips tingled at the delectable longing of reenacting it.

"I told you I would find my way back to you," she whispered and stroked his face with her hand.

She had kept her promise. She had come back like she had sworn she would.

"It was so long ago." So long he had lost hope of seeing her again.

Counting the years after she had left and the years he had spent in this new century, nearly five years.

"For me, it was barely five days ago," she murmured.

He thought of Bucky and his wise advice. Five years. Five days. No matter the measure of time, it still felt too long ago. The moment to reduce the gap between them was long overdue.

He leaned in, gazed into her eyes and kissed her lips. First simply, as he gave time for every part of him to synchronize together and process the reality of the moment. He kissed both Natalie and Natasha as he realized this is what all he had ever wanted. Once it felt very much real on every level, the kiss became more eager, yearning. All of him wanted all of her. It longed for the taste of her mouth and the softness of her skin. Every second passing filled the void of his past sorrow with sheer bliss and satisfaction.

Natasha kissed him back with the same passion, both yearning for each other. His arms wrapped around her waist and he scooped her up while she clutched her legs around him and he groaned with lust against her mouth. He carried her over to the bed, thankfully close enough before he would run out of patience and lay her down on whatever spot would present itself.

He put her down on the bed and lay above her, prepping his palms on each side of the mattress.

She chuckled sweetly against his lips and broke the kiss. He smiled down at her; she looked so beautiful.

"What happened to the Steve I knew?" she asked, alluding to the young man from 1942 and the teammate from her former timeline.
He eyed her quietly, increasingly lusting for her. The Steve she knew had changed and learned to value time. He had repeatedly let things linger on until he risked losing it all. Like he once lost her, then nearly lost Natasha because he didn't dare to claim what he wanted.

"He met you," he answered with a hoarse tone of voice betraying his underlying wanting. Then he leaned down and caught her lips again. Next his mouth moved down her neck, to her collarbone. He heard her quiet moans vibrate inside her chest and he kissed her more ardently.

Hours later into the night, after their passionate embrace made way for pillow talks, he gazed at Natasha lying on the pillow across, smiling blissfully.

Since she hadn't clear memories of her new self yet, she had began to ask many questions about the new timeline. He tried to answer all of them. She asked about their relationship, here. She seemed surprised but pleased to find out they were closer than they had been in her original timeline.

She bit her bottom lip. "Did you tap that?" she asked cheekily.

He chuckled. "I didn't. I kept thinking of you."

Her playful smirk turned into an earnest smile. She reached to cup his face.

"That's adorable,' she whispered. He savored her touch on his face. "And good, " she said suavely. She leaned and her mouth grazed his lips lightly so it left them tickling for more. "It means we have a lot to catch up on."

He smirked mischievously. "I look forward to it."

He asked next about the mission on the train. She laughed uncontrollably when she heard he and Natasha had spent weeks investigating it together. She looked smug to find out both had struggled to figure it out but funnily also disappointed in herself for having left that pin behind. She called it highly unprofessional. She proceeded to explain how she had done it all, describing it step by step so there would be hole left,

He winced at the memory of her groaning in pain while she was fighting in the other carriage.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked softly and his fingers traced over the skin of her throat where he had seen through the cracked window the silhouette of the HYDRA agent choke her with his hand and lift her up in the air. Now he wished nothing more but to have had the opportunity to crush his head onto the floor for hurting her.

"Not as much as I hurt him," she exclaimed smugly then her voice went soft again, wanting to sound more reassuring as she read right through him that he needed to hear her say it. "It's over, now."

It was the best night of his life and he owed it all to her. And it was worth all the pain he had gone through losing her and meeting her doppelganger until she returned. He would go through it ten times over if it meant winding up in this room in the end. There was nowhere else he wished to be at this moment. Not even back in the 1940s.

"You made the right choice," he said softly, looking her deep in the eye. "Waking up in this new century was the right thing to do for everyone."

She gazed at him with trembling pupils.

"Do you mean that?" she asked. "It was one of the hardest decisions I ever had to make."
She had told him how she had for a while considered saving him from the plane crash so he could live on his life, even if it meant losing him.

He ran his fingertips up her naked arm to her face.

"It was a rough transition but now I understand why it was worth it,' he said and paused. He was truly happy in this new decade and had learned to enjoy what it had to offer. Also his life as an Avenger gave him an honorable purpose. He thought of what she had told him when saying goodbye. He smiled. 'And somebody once said that the price of freedom was high"

Natasha smiled with a guilty look.

"Actually, you said that."

They laughed, then as he realized he missed her close to him, he shifted over to her, folded his arms around her and kissed her.

She slipped her arm out from under the sheet to hold the back of his neck but stopped midway and pushed the sheet away. She looked at her stomach in surprise.

He furrowed his brows in concern. "What is it?" he asked.

He watched as she brushed her fingertips over the skin above her hipbone, seeming to be looking for something.

"I used to have a scar here," she whispered barely audibly.

He was curious to hear about it. It looked like this scar was significant to her. "Tell me about it."

"A bullet wound I got during one of my missions. The shooter’s job was to eliminate the man I was protecting. He shot him right through me.

Her story sent shivers down his spine. He stared blankly at her soft, immaculate skin, unable to imagine the scar that was supposed to be there.

"I had it for so long. It became part of me," she said.

He couldn't quite understand why everything about her and her past had remained unchanged except for this scar. Soon, he came to the conclusion it was no random hitman.

"Who was the shooter?" he asked.

She took her eyes off her stomach and looked up at to him.

"The Winter Soldier," she answered and he acknowledged her answer. Neither of them wanted to call him Bucky. 'It's officially a ghost story, now.' She brushed it off, anxious not to make him comfortable.

He looked at her skin, trying to picture what the scar might have looked like. Although he had no reason to, he felt responsible that she had ended up having one in the first place. Then as he realized it would never happen, he felt grateful to her.

He looked her into the eyes and upheld his gaze as he slowly moved down the bed until he reached the level of her waist. He then averted his eyes down to her belly. He looked at the soft, white spot where the scar once was, leaned down and planted a kiss on it, deliberately letting the tip of his lips tickle her skin. He felt her body arch below him and her arm jerked up to his head as she squeezed a
piece of his hair in a heated grip. He smiled and slightly parted his lips to let his warm breath brush against the spot on her stomach. Her body tensed again and he saw goosebumps rise along her skin. He lifted his head up and laid his chin on her stomach, watching her beautiful face from down there.

"Now I have all the time in the world to thank you for it," he said.

And he had all the time to figure out all the possible ways he could proceed to do so.

"Steve Rogers, you're too dramatic," she answered with a playful smirk and a sparkle in the eye, eager to find out each and everyone of them.

He laughed along with her then went on to express all his gratitude and the whole of his adamant admiration for her for the rest of the night.

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Chapter End Notes

I had first decided that the story would end here, just like JaBftP but then I thought I should give you a little bit more of romanogers as a couple. So, see you soon for the next chapter ;)
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hi! Thank you so so much for all the wonderful feedback. Each and every one of your comments warmed my heart!
Here's the new chapter! I'll try to be quick for the next update! :D

The rays of sunshine entered through the glass panels and Steve cracked his eyes open. As his pupils were adjusting to the light and his dizzy mind was recalibrating with reality, he felt a warm figure in his arms, sleeping peacefully against his chest. His eyes found bright red hair under his chin.

He smiled contentedly to himself as the beautiful memories from the night before came back to the surface. He slowly raised his head, gentle not to wake her up, and looked down at Natasha's sleeping face.

It was the first time in over seventy years that he was seeing her in the morning and it was indisputable she was the most mesmerizing sight anyone could have upon awakening.

They had hardly slept the night before, either talking or giving way to their bodies' yearnings to meet, and yet it had seemed that no matter how hard they had tried to resist, no matter how long they had fought it off, sleep had sneakily slipped in and captured them both.

He didn't know -and let alone cared- what time it was. Nothing mattered more than this moment.

Biting his bottom lip in hesitation, eagerness took the best of him as he didn't want to lose any more second craving for her. He would take the risk waking her up. His fingers gently grazed the bare skin of her shoulder, down to her arm. He then gently buried his head into her enticingly exposed neck and breathed in her scent. He pressed one hand against her stomach to feel the harmonious pace of her breathing.

Lying in Natasha's bed, with Natasha in his arms, Steve began to wonder if it was what happiness felt like. Happiness was such a hard concept to grasp or define. It varied from one person to another. It was often mistaken with a temporary joy for some, or considered like the absence of sorrow by others. For him, happiness was an embrace. The softest embrace with a hint of vanilla perfume (the smell of Natasha's hair this morning), the certainty that no other moment will ever equal the one he was living this morning. To Steve Rogers, happiness was waking up next to Natasha Romanoff.

"Hey," he heard her husky voice say and he felt her body shift a little.

He smiled into her neck. "Hi. I'm sorry if I woke you up."

Natasha moaned. "I honestly don't care."

He chuckled and began to plant kisses into her throat.

"It's probably time to go upstairs, isn't it?" Natasha asked.

He sighed. "Yeah," he answered, kissing her skin harder in anticipation of the upcoming, reluctant separation.
Natasha rolled around to face him. She held his face between her two hands. She paused and gazed at him intently, smiling serenely as if she was enjoying the sight of him. He realized he was holding his breath in, enthralled and mesmerized by the intensity and the beauty of her gaze. Then her smile turned into a mischievous smirk.

"I'm sure they can handle themselves without us for the next few hours," she purred. He watched closely as she bit her bottom lip seductively. A short silence ensued, during which they both seemed to ponder whether they could let this fantasy become reality.

They decided it could. They both came at each other, capturing the other's lips eagerly.

Natasha wrapped her arm around his neck and pressed all of herself against him.

Her lips tasted a flavor he knew he would never cease to be hungry for.

He broke the kiss and breathed heavily.

He stared at her intently. "I want you," he grunted huskily into her neck. He slightly frowned at the sound of his own words. "Again."

Natasha cocked an eyebrow and he looked at her apologetically. They had barely slept last night and he didn't exactly know how tired she was from their nocturnal "activities" in addition of her time-travel.

"Pretty sure you missed out one or two extra 'again', here." Natasha teased, biting her lip again.

He shook his head and laughed then leaned in to trail heated kisses along her collarbone.

"Oh God," he heard Natasha murmur as she ran her fingers into his hair. It fueled the fire of his rousing desire for her. She suddenly jerked herself up, pushing him along. His back pressed against the headboard while she came on top and straddled him. She looked at him and stroked his face.

"I knew this super soldier serum would come in handy eventually," she said with the most impudent smirk. They both laughed.

He kissed her again then leaned his upper body forward to be as close to her as possible. She dropped her head backward as an invitation for his lips to come there and he gently started pulling the sheet wrapped around her down her back while her fingers grasped around the muscles of his strong back.

"Agent Romanoff, Mr Stark is asking where - oh I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be intrusive," JARVIS called out in the room.

Steve halted but kept his face buried into her neck, catching his breath.

"JARVIS, you can do many things but lying isn't one of them," Natasha answered a bit stiffly. "Stark asked you to come and interrupt."

Jarvis remained quiet a bit too long to claim being innocent.

"My apologies, agent Romanoff. But Mr Stark really insists that you come upstairs and give further information regarding the time travel."

Steve sighed while Natasha briefly ran her tongue along her bottom lip, looking a bit annoyed.

"Tell him that I certainly won't travel back in time for him if he makes me come upstairs to snap his
"I heard that!" Tony's voice suddenly rang into the room through the speakers. "Romanoff. I have no idea what you're doing down here because JARVIS won't give me access to the video cameras but I am sure of one thing, it can't be any better than helping out with what could become the greatest technological advancement in human history. Romanoff, I give you 5 minu-"

"JARVIS," Natasha called, totally ignoring Stark's threats. "Mute."

"No, no, no!" Tony's voice shouted out. "I dare y-"

And the most pleasant silence followed.

"I –I will stall," JARVIS said before disappearing, too.

Natasha put a hand on Steve's chest and pushed him down until his back was totally lying on the bed. She then bent over him and pressed her hands on the mattress while his hands reached out for each side of her waist. The sheet around her slipped out and fell to the side.

He gazed at her with with dark pupils.

"It is way better," she purred before leaning in to kiss him.

Steve and Natasha arrived upstairs slightly before lunch time. Everyone in the lounge was pretty relaxed and chatting except for Tony who looked stiff, impatiently shaking his foot. His mouth slightly fell open when he saw them then he stood up and marched right in their direction. He looked at both of them with deeply furrowed eyebrows and the most critical look.

He pointed a condemning finger at them and lowered his voice.

"I know what you two were doing downstairs, you...horny mammals," Tony grumbled, earning muffled chuckles from them. "I can't say much for you," he said looking at Natasha then glanced over at Steve, "but from you, I expected much better."

Steve and Natasha looked at each other, eyes still sparkling with the memories from this morning, and snorted again.

"I'm sure you'll get over it," he told Stark as he patted his shoulder. Tony gawked with a mix of wonder and indignation as if he seemed to see Steve under a brand new light. Somehow, Stark seemed to be more scandalized about how their bed time was coming in the way of his research than astonished about why and how they had ended in bed in the first place.

"You're coming with me and alone before your raging libidos loom again," he talked to Natasha with some kind of authority he sensed she would allow him this once to have. He then headed off toward his lab and she began to follow.

Steve reached out for her hand. She turned, glanced down to take in the sight of their hands connected in the most simple gesture, then she looked up at him. Their eyes conveyed all the displeasure they felt at having to part so soon after having found each other. She smiled at him, then as she heard Tony calling her name like a scolding parent, she stepped off and her fingers slipped out of his soft grip.

He watched her walk away, already anticipating the moment she would be back. When she eventually turned around the corner and disappeared of his line of sight, he switched his attention
back to the people in the room.

He saw Bucky and Maria, sitting close together in a quiet part of the lounge. Steve immediately recalled the night before and he walked up to them, anxious to check on his best friend.

Bucky seemed alright, engaged into a private conversation with Maria as he was leaning over the armrest and holding her hand, his thumb making small circles on her knuckles. They both looked up when they felt Steve's presence.

"Hi," he said, looking directly at James.

Maria smiled. "Hi."

"How's Natasha?" Bucky asked and Maria seemed to conceal a conniving grin by scratching her upper lip.

"She's alright," he answered, rubbing his neck.

Maria stood up. "I have some things to do," she announced. Bucky looked up at her and she gave his hand a little squeeze before letting it go. Then she smiled at Steve and stepped away.

He took her seat, prepped his elbows over his knees and entwined his fingers together.

"How are you doing?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Bucky pouted. "I'm OK," he assured.

Steve nodded. It seemed he couldn't find the words to make the situation more admissible. Although apparently Maria had done a better job at it the night before.

"I saw you and Natasha arrived together," Bucky observed naturally. "Did you get to talk?"

Steve scoffed at the choice of word. "We did," he answered the most naturally possible.

Bucky looked genuinely curious, and for the first time ever, totally clueless. "When?"

He scratched the back of his ear. "Err, last night."

Bucky's face literally morphed before his eyes into wild interest. A large smirk plastered itself across his face. "Last night?" he repeated, adding a massive chunk of cheekiness and innuendos he considered suitable for the turn this talk was about to take.

He rested his chin over his fist and stared at him expectantly.

"I must say I'm impressed," he said finally, when he felt the pressure of his gaze was becoming unbearable for Steve. "When I advised you not to wait too long, I didn't think you'd go for it on the same night."

He winked cheekily.

"How was it?" he demanded.

"It was..." Steve smiled nervously. "...the best night of my life. Like every bit of my journey had always meant to lead to that very moment."

Bucky smiled. "You've never been the type to believe in fate," he echoed his own words from a
couple of evenings before.

Steve smiled too at the irony of it.

Bucky leaned forward and patted his shoulder. "Welcome to adulthood., by the way."

"Oh, shut up," Steve groaned. Obviously, James would have to ruin the moment with his annoying humor. Bucky laughed wholeheartedly at his joke.

"I've waited 86 years to say it. And it grew funnier by each passing year. Well, it grew exponentially hysterical after the 70-year gap, to be honest."

“Think whatever you want. It's not like I would have run to you and made an announcement the morning after,” Steve said.

“Stahp. Nothing that you can say will devalue my joke.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

"I suppose you're not gonna share any details with me, are you?" Bucky uttered bitterly.

"Glad to see you've kept small room for some common sense."

Bucky dropped his head back on the armchair. He let out a long and dramatic groan of complain.

"I hope you're aware you can be the least fun friend a person can have. What kind of guy doesn't like to talk about sex?"

Steve hushed him with a flap of his back hand, glancing behind at the others.

"Can we try to stay discreet?" he pleaded quietly.

Bucky puffed. "You're kidding, right? Maria and I have been teased for weeks by the group. It's about damn time somebody else replaces us!"

Steve sighed. "And I thought I'd get your support."

"Oh you have it completely,” Bucky assured very vehemently, “...on all the other levels. But not this one. I'd throw you two under a bus in the blink of an eye if it means the others finally let my girlfriend be.”

Steve arched an eyebrow, pensive. "You know your commitment to your relationship is both admirable and questionable."

"I know. It's a talent," Bucky exclaimed with a smug look. "It's not real love until it turns you into a bit of a sociopath."

"Sounds very sane," Steve assessed sarcastically. "Can't wait."

"Where is she?" Bucky asked, looking around the room. "I want to congratulate her on the sex."

"Tony took her to the lab. And I forbid you, anyway."

"He did? So soon? Harsh."

Steve agreed quietly. "I guess that was his revenge for putting him on mute this morning after he
interrupted us."

Bucky's eyes took the shape of two marbles. "As your best friend, I'm begging, you gotta at least share this story."

Steve snorted. Maybe, this anecdote could be the one exception – besides, it was too satisfying not to share. And he proceeded to tell him about it.

Back in his office, Steve has his mood on other things than work. Mostly musing over the past night and his reunion with Natalie. But, as he was sitting at his desk, he caught himself hoping for Natasha to pop in with a teasing comment like she always would. He began to fear that might never happen again. As happy as he were at this moment to have Natalie back, and despite knowing they were both the same woman, part of him missed the Natasha he had gotten to know for the past three years; and he dreaded he might have lost her too, forever.

That following evening, finally together and alone again, she spent the night snuggled against him, her head pressed against his chest, his arm around her with his fingers gently stroking her arm up and down, both quiet, as she seemed to be listening to the steady pace of his breathing. It seemed she found comfort in hearing his heart beat.

It was perfect, or it should have been perfect, if it had not been for that quiet whisper in his head worrying for Natasha’s astray memories.

"I’m sure I’ll eventually recollect everything from this time line," he heard her say as if she read his thoughts.

"I’m not…," he began bashfully.

She smiled faintly. "Steve, I’ve known you for longer than you can remember. I know you could never find your peace of mind if you feel like somebody has been lost on the way, let alone let yourself be happy at the expense of somebody else."

"I am happy," he truly wanted to retort, for he truly was indeed, but he simply couldn’t ignore that dark spot staining the full picture. He just couldn’t; it was in his nature. And it seemed she already knew about it.

"Thor said that I should eventually remember everything because there was no record of side effects in the Asgardian legends. Tony and Bruce think that the merging might have subdued the initial conscience forcing it to retreat for a while to leave space for mine, but that it should come back to the surface at some point. And I’m starting to recollect very old memories…I think. They’re just so identical to the ones I have that it’s hard to tell them apart clearly."

He nodded silently to himself. That sounded like optimistic news, undoubtedly. Hopefully optimistic enough to quiet down the whisper in his head for some time.

"I’m sorry," he murmured hardly with furrowed brows. She lifted her head off his chest to look at him. He gazed at her intently. "I don’t want you to feel like you’re not enough. You are everything to me and beyond."

Her expression remained calm but unfathomable. She nodded. "I know," she said softly. "But you love her."

He looked her in the eye numbly. She was right, undeniably. He could fully see it now after years of having kept it hidden. He had grown to love Natasha. Just not the same way he had fallen for
Natalie. More slowly, less ardently, but just as deeply. She had become his bearing in this new century and he couldn’t imagine his life without her in it. And certainly not without the Natalie he had met the evening of December 11th, 1942. The woman to whom he owed his life. “And I love you,” he said.

She nodded again. “I know.”

Although it didn’t make sense for him to want to tell them apart albeit being the same woman, he still yearned in his heart to look into her eyes and find them both in there.

However, surely he could cope with the situation for now and fully enjoy the return of his great love for now. They had both earned it.

He swiftly flipped them both around so that he was lying on top of her. He gazed down at her adoringly and stroked her face very slowly so that his mind could engrave the memory of it.

"Remember what happened after we spent New Year's Eve together?" he asked.

She frowned and chuckled. "I remember almost breaking that thief's wrist. You turned up right in time, luckily for him."

"Oh, so you did harm him. I knew my eyes didn't lie."


"When I walked you to your apartment, we were talking about many things and you asked: 'Who is that woman who has your heart, Steve Rogers?' I looked at you and for a moment I was no longer sure what the answer was. That's when I began to fall in love with you."

She smiled tenderly. "And when did you begin to fall in love when you woke up here?"

He thought carefully. "Twice. The first time when I met you again on S.H.I.E.L.D's helicarrier. Then when you became the only person who could soothe the grief of your lost..if that makes sense," he snorted lightly. Gazing down at her with intensity again, he added: "Now I understand why. Only you could be enough to fill the void of your own absence."

She smiled the most beautiful he had ever seen. One of adoration and content.

She said the words her quivering pupils had already taken care of conveying. “I love you.”

He stared down at her closely, engrossed into the sight of his own love reflecting into her eyes, and vice versa. His whole chest seemed to warm up with inner bliss. He then slowly leaned down to close the gap between them and sealed their confessed love with a chaste kiss.
Final Chapter

Chapter Summary

As mentioned above, this is it *insert Michael Jackson tour announcement GIF*. This is the final chapter of an extraordinary ride for me — thank you all so much for taking it along with me.

I'm sorry it took so long. Truth be told, I wasn't sure how to conclude it and give it the proper closure. I don't think I managed to but I hope it will still live up to your expectations and will answer some of your questions.

I may come back to it in the future with some drabbles or additional short chapters, but probably not after a little while.

Thank you all again for your amazing comments and to you all committed readers who put up my long gaps between updates.

Merry Christmas (I guess that was the right time for an update — hehe, see what I did there) and happy New Year! Best wishes to you all.

See you around for new adventures and stories ;)

It happened eventually, a few days later. As they were in the elevator, going up for the morning briefing, Natasha interrupted the silence.

“This is where you last spoke to me,” she murmured softly, pensive. He raised an eyebrow and turned to look at her. “It was late in the evening, I was stepping out of the elevator; you were stepping in,” she stated at the same pace than the train of her thoughts. “And I told you ‘See you tomorrow’. That was the last time, wasn’t it?”

He watched her intently, hopeful but afraid to give in to the joy within too early.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Do you…remember?”

Natasha frowned, biting her bottom lip as she seemed to go through some memory scan. “I think I am.” She glanced up at him and smiled, looking as hopeful as him.

From what she said, the full picture was still blurry but some specific memories were beginning to emerge in details, like a wave washing over the shore repeatedly, in slow but consistent motions, leaving a deeper print on the sand each time around. And hearing her refer to Natasha as herself was the greatest step forward the whole situation could take. If she began to identify herself as the modern Natasha, then it meant their two consciences were merging as one.

Soon, Natalie and Natasha would fully become the same and one person.

“Since you’re too noble to ask me then I will tell you,” she murmured one night as they both lay in bed, looking at each other. Days were hardly long enough to quench their satiability of each other — most nights they would talk until slumber got the best of them.

“Tell me what?” he said softly as he brushed a lock of her hair to the side of her face.

“What I- what Natasha felt for you before we merged,” she said. His heart skipped a beat. He had been afraid to get an answer he could not bear to hear. And, with the days going by since Natasha
had fully recovered her current self’s memories and yet not answered his burning question, the
certitude that she might have not felt anything more than friendship for him had grown too.

She smiled. “She loved you,” she said simply but with a slightly shaky voice. Her pupils quivered as
she seemed to look into his eyes and be overflooded with a wave a memories. “So vividly. Much more
clearly than it was from me before I used Thor’s device.”

A deaf sound slipped out of his lips and he reached over to cup her face gazing at the Natasha he had
known until a couple of weeks before. She rested her hand on top of his.

“She was only afraid to forever remain the second woman, the one whom whatever love or affection
you could feel for her would always be doomed to be less. But yes, she loved you.”

She smiled to herself and went on. “It’s funny. I thought I could never love you more than I already
do. But now, adding hers, it’s more than I knew humanly possible.”

He smiled back. “I know the feeling,” he said gently.

As indescribable bliss and sheer relief took hold of all of him, he leaned over to her and for the first
time since that one moment on the escalator a year before when they were on the run from HYDRA,
he kissed his Natasha. And his Natasha kissed him back.

And after sealing their mutual love in his kiss, he never dissociated the two women he loved ever
again.

Standing alone on the terrace looking over Manhattan, Steve and Natasha heard the footsteps of a
person approaching. Bucky walked up to them with the most bizarre mix of self-confidence and
unfamiliar reserve.

So far Bucky and Natasha’s interactions had been brief and cordial in the way you would converse
with a stranger. Mostly, the awkwardness seemed to come from James, Steve had noticed.

“I’m here to…,” he began hesitantly, shaking his thumb above his shoulder to point at something
behind him.

“…congratulate me on the sex?” Natasha finished with a smug smirk.

Bucky froze and his mouth slightly fell open. He glanced at Steve. “You told her?!?” Steve muffled a
chuckle and pressed the side of his closed fist against his mouth. “You…traitor,” Bucky grumbled at
him then turned stern again. “Stark wants to review the new equipment with you.”

Steve nodded, threw a glimpse in Natasha’s direction and headed off, leaving together the two
people he loved the most.

Aware of the new unexpected situation, James rubbed his jaw awkwardly and started towards the
sliding doors when Natasha called his name.

“Bucky,” she said and it made him halt. “We used to be friends. Really good friends. How about we
break that ice standing between us?”

He turned around and examined her.

“Are you saying that as Natasha or Natalie?”

She smirked. “Natasha. Mostly.”
She then stepped up closer to him. “And you? You don’t miss me?”

He sighed. “Of course I do.”

Natasha shrugged casually as if she had just finished demonstrating her point.

Bucky’s expression was grave.

“But I can’t deal with you seeing me as a murderer. Let alone as Steve’s killer.”

Her features hardened. “I don’t,” she answered briefly and firmly.

His brows furrowed deep and he shook his head. “Bullshit,” he called out and his voice cracked, then he pointed a finger at her. “This is bullshit!” His eyes filled up with tears and carried distress and self-resentment. “If I can’t forget about it without even having a single memory of it, then you sure as hell can’t when you have witnessed it with your own eyes.”

She watched him closely, seeming to gauge the depth of his emotional distress.

“You’re right,” she said softly. Soothingly. “First, I hated you for it. Even when I knew what you meant to him, and that he had never ceased to see in The Winter Soldier, I still hated you for taking him from me.”

Bucky swallowed the lump in his throat, somehow finding some peace of mind in the harshness of her words.

“So why did you save me on the train?” he asked. “To save Steve?”

She reached out for his arm. “I saw what he saw in you. It took me time to realize, but once I did, I understood that you and The Winter Soldier were nothing alike.” She went on “that day on the train, I saved two lives. Steve’s and yours. I’d do it all again if I had to. You deserved to be saved, Bucky.”

Her voice broke. “And I’m sorry I didn’t see it sooner.”

Looking into her eyes, his pupils quivered and yielded in. He leapt forward and held her tightly with all the length and strength of his arms. Taken aback at first by a move she, for once in her life, had not seen coming; she mellowed into his eager embrace and held him back.

“Thank you so much,” she heard him murmur. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

She felt overwhelmed being the recipient of such profound and genuine gratitude. In this unfathomable moment of grace, it seemed her red ledger toned down a shade.

“Come on, Rogers” she breathed out hopping on the mat. “You’re pulling your punches.”

He leaned sideways to dodge hers then stood back right up, bouncing too.

“I’m not,” he assured her half-heartedly as he noted that Natasha calling him by his last name meant she was not totally fond of him at this very minute.

“Fine, then. Prove it.” She lifted her leg and kicked him in the chest. He blocked her foot and his fingers wrapped around her bare ankle. Natasha stared at it then back at him. “Are we sparring or not?” she asked, urging him to give her her foot back with a hard look. He sighed. Wrestling wasn’t exactly in the top 5 of things he desperately wanted to do with Natasha after her return.
She let out a slight grunt of disapproval then attacked. She jumped up, prepped her other foot on his slightly bent knee then flipped backwards to release herself from his grip. She landed back on her feet and raised her fists.

“Come on, Steve,” she said again, purring her words. A devious smile played on her lips. “Play with me.”

She charged again and threw multiple, quick hits at him. He blocked or dodged them all then began to retaliate. He threw a punch but Natasha grabbed his hand and twisted it behind his back. He bent in and thrust her forward over his back. He then folded one arm around her chest and pinned her against his chest. It made her laugh. She jerked her leg far up and hit his shoulder hard enough to destabilize him and break free from his grip. She then hung to his neck and threw herself forward as she motioned to wrap herself around his neck. He saw it coming though and took a grip of her leg before it could cloak him; he then held her waist with his other hand and tackled her to the ground.

She panted hard under his body, pinning her head against the mat.

“Tired, yet?” he asked.

He felt her chest vibrate.

“You wish,” she sniggered. She clasped her leg around his waist and spun them both over so that she was the one lying on top of him. “But I appreciate the effort,” she whispered huskily. She then lifted her bust off of him and rose to her feet.

She leapt forward and threw another hit as soon as he got up; he ducked, spun around, catching her wrist in the motion and pulled her towards him, pinning her back against his chest as he securely locked his arms around her, trapping in his firm hold.

“You’ve gotten rusty,” he purred into her ear, both their chests panting at a perfectly synchronized pace. “But I appreciate the effort.”

She groaned. “Or maybe that’s just my body craving to be against yours,” she murmured suavely. He raised an eyebrow, immediately appealed by the thought. She compliantly let herself be spun so she would face him, and her big green eyes locked with his, her soft breath tickling his lips as she cunningly began to wrap him around on her web.

“Don’t tell me the thought didn’t cross your mind,” she said huskily and she slipped her hand under his shirt, nonchalantly brushing her fingertips over his abdomen. Her pupils inquired him boldly. He frowned to himself; as hard as it was to admit, the idea had not crossed his mind until now —and he resented himself for it.

She slipped her arm out his grip and gently wrapped it around his neck. His grip loosened at the prospect of her next move.

The corner of her mouth curled up into a devious smirk; she swiftly flipped her leg around his and hit the back of his knee with her heel. He lost his balance like she had planned and she struck him on the chest to make him fall completely. He landed flat on his back and shut his eyes, sighing. She stood over him, smiling proudly.

Steve reached for her ankle and jerked her forward making her fall. He softened her fall by catching her by the waist before she would touch the floor and flipped them both around so he would be lying on top of her like earlier.

“Cheater,” he whispered.
She sniggered unapologetically. “I’m a spy. By definition, I never play by the rules.”

He shook his head and smiled. “I guess I should have seen it coming.”

She looked up at him and a new kind of tension, akin but stronger than the one she had feigned earlier, ensued. She bit her bottom lip and, in a smooth motion, flipped them over again before hardly pressing her mouth against his. Then she caught his bottom lip between her teeth and smirked.

She slightly pulled away to look him in the eye.

“I wasn’t totally dishonest either,” she purred huskily. She smiled down at him and he relished on her beauty. His hand cupped her face and pulled her in for another kiss. More ardent, their lips wrestling with more passion than their bodies had done earlier. Her hand slid up his chest and she grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him up to her whilst his arms clutched each side of her waist. She then suddenly broke the kiss and jumped up on her feet.

He watched her numbly, quizzical.

“That’s for calling me rusty, by the way.” She said devilishly. His jaw almost detached itself from the rest of his face. Without any second look or sign of remorse, she made he way out of the ring. “But beating you kind of got me horny. Meet me in the shower in five,” she purred and headed out of the gym.

The last thing she heard was his light chuckle.

One morning Steve got prepared for his jog routine, an old habit of his, he often shared with Bucky, or Nat, or Sam (who always complained about the pace). That day it turned out he would be on his own after seeing Natasha was soundly asleep.

After getting dressed, he bent down, gently planted a peck on her lips and headed towards the elevator. As he stepped out on the sidewalk, he took in the sight and the sounds of the buzzing city, watching the few people already awake and ready for the new day to start walking along the street or crossing the roads.

He then got started.

He went at a slow pace, along the streets and round the corners until he reached Central Park and trotted through one of the quiet side entrances.

He sprinted down the paths, then along the lake and soon immersed himself into New York City’s own jungle.

He instinctively turned to gaze at the bench on his right, the place from where his and Bucky’s fates were changed as Natasha had once pointed it out during one of their common jog.

A basic looking wooden bench with a random inscription engraved on the side like you would find anywhere. And yet so significant, now.

He kept jogging up the quiet path when muffled steps emerging from the side caught his attention.

“It’s been a little while, Captain,” a familiar voice called.

Steve halted, took a deep breath in, not exactly taken by surprise. “I never thought you’d come and find me here,” he said then he slightly shook his head as a smirk rose to his lips. “But then I can’t say
I’m surprised you’re spying on my jog routines.”

He turned to look at his interlocutor.

“Not spying. Just keeping a safe eye on my friends. After all I only got one, I might as well make good use of it.”

Fury stepped out of the shadows.

Ever since Natasha had returned from her time travel, he had expected Fury to come out of the underworld to check on his protégée.

“Life has been quite…surprising lately,” Fury commented puzzlingly but referring directly to the reason of his impromptu visit. “Hasn’t it?”

Steve took a few steps forward.

“That’s one way to see it.”

Fury did not seem bothered to glance behind his shoulder, as he had made sure to pick the least frequented zone along Steve’s jogging route.

Steve could not help but wonder what were the motives behind his old boss’ presence. He began to suspect he might have come to get his hands on something valuable.

“If you’re here for the travel device, Thor took it away. Back to Asgard, where it will be safe.”

It had become evident to (almost) everyone that no earthling should get their hands on such a powerful device, much to Tony’s dismay —and to some extent, Bruce’s scientific curiosity.

“I had a chance to speak with Romanoff but I’m here today because I wanted to see you,” Fury retorted sternly —and which Steve knew at least the first part was true since Natasha had told him about the unexpected encounter a couple of days earlier. Surprisingly, it was Nick’s cryptically-worded attempt at expressing care. “How’s Barnes?”

Steve shrugged. “He’s getting there. Time is the best option we’ve both ever been given.”

A faint smile came to Fury’s lips. “That’s one way to see it,” he echoed.

His eyes conveyed satisfaction, though. Satisfaction that the team he had crafted lived on even after his departure. “If you need anything, you know you can count on me.”

He nodded at Steve then stepped away, starting to leave.

A thought suddenly hit Steve. A question that had brewing in his mind. A certainty he could not shake off.

“You knew, didn’t you?” he called as Fury was walking off.

Nick paused and slowly looked over his shoulder, an eyebrow arched.

Steve stepped closer, silently begging for an honest answer from him for once. He could not explain why — it did not make any sense — but he believed that Fury might have somehow known all along what even Natasha was not aware of until the merging happened.

“Back in S.H.I.E.L.D., you blocked me the access to the results of the fingerprints scan on the
hairpin. That's because you knew — isn't it?"

Fury slightly squinted his eyes. He turned around completely but remained where he was standing.

“I had no idea,” he replied matter-of-factly. Steve found it hard to believe. “If there is something I have learned in my career it’s to never leave anything to chance. Agent Romanoff’s fingerprints could not have ended up on that old pin by accident, and even though I could not think of a single rational explanation for it, there is one thing I’ve always known for certain: there is no such thing as coincidence. So I shut it down. Plain and simple.”

That was the most truthful Fury had ever been and Steve found no reason to question it. Fury had acted this way because covering tracks was the thing he was the best at, even if he could not grasp the reasons behind them. Safety over logic.

Steve nodded.” I guess I should say thanks. You played a big part in making the mission a success.”


He then watched as former Director Fury peacefully walked down the path until he disappeared completely. Steve had a feeling he would see him again soon enough.

He stood there for a few seconds, and smiled to himself.

This whole story was illogical indeed, beyond reason and the laws of the Universe, and yet it was the one thing in his life that made the most sense. Natasha had been, at many different times and in many shapes and forms, his bearing. She was the constant that had anchored him to reality at the moments in his life when he was losing touch with himself.

She had soothed him.

She had healed him.

She had loved him.

She had saved him.

All of him.

Steve turned around and resumed jogging back to the Avengers tower, to the woman he loved.

This whole story was illogical indeed, beyond understanding, but then none of his life had ever fallen into the vast prism of coherence. And amongst all of the extraordinary events that had come around and shaped his unconventional journey, Natasha was, beyond a doubt, the greatest marvel.

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