Bombs In Our Pockets

by Cosmic Joke

Summary

No discussion of Steve Rogers would be complete without the anecdote about him jumping on a grenade at training camp. What popular memory seems to have forgotten is that both of the Brooklyn Boys had a penchant for jumping on grenades. Bucky's bombs just happened to be of the more metaphorical variety.

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A Bucky-centric attempt to fill in the “deleted scenes” from Captain America: The First Avenger - what actually happened at Azzano, the rest of the bar scene, and life in the Howling Commandos.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my beta, actuarialturtle

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Allies had ruined Italy, Bucky could see that the moment he arrived.

He’d been sheltered, back in Basic. Wisconsin didn’t feel like a battlefield, too close to home. He’d even gotten to go back to Brooklyn afterwards. It wasn’t until he shipped out to London that the war began to feel real. The first time the air sirens sounded, Bucky felt it in his bones. The ensuing hour, spent huddled in a raid shelter, constituted his first taste of war. The terror of it never disappeared - it simply became background noise. After a month, the haunting siren failed to stir more than annoyance. The occasional boom of explosions ceased to wake him up at night. When Bucky received notice he would be shipped to the Italian Front, he thought he was prepared. Hardened and ready.

He was very wrong.

The Italian coastline, a marvel Bucky had heard whispers of among the immigrant communities, was a thing of legend and longing. The transport ship’s decks were packed as the coastline came into view, overflowing with men eager to get their first glimpse of foreign paradise. Bucky, fortunate enough to be towards the front, was one of the first to notice.

Guard towers had been erected along the sandy beaches. The foliage had been cleared too, leaving the beaches barren. In place of trees, fences crisscrossed the landscape. There was no gleam beyond the sea, just the dull face of concrete. Even the sea breeze didn’t quite smell right, tainted with something sharper. Floating on the cloudless azure horizon, a smudge of gray smoke crawled into the air, a warning.

Discontent rumbled across the decks as the coastline came into sharp relief. Bucky headed back beneath the decks with a vague sense of dread. Everything after the landing passed by in a dizzying blur. Bucky barely had time to adjust to his new barracks before the regiment moved out again, marching steadily up the coastline.

To Bucky, combat was like a storm. They chased after it, closing in on its heels for days, able to make out the distant rumbles on the horizon. They sloughed through its wake: pitted valleys furrowed with trenches, abandoned guard towers, and ghost towns.

Emptiness was an illusion. Bucky soon learned to brace himself whenever he spotted the crows. The 107th passed through the towns with their collars pulled over their faces to filter out the stench. Man, woman, child, animal. Neither side bothered to bury the citizens. The Americans passed
through as fast as they could, eyes down, ignoring the strange shadows that enticed them to look up and around. Bucky quickly learned to ignore his curiosity.

The first time Bucky entered battle, he thought he would soon join the tide of corpses. The 107th had been routed to reinforce a handful of other regiments already engaging the Germans. The no-man’s land was filled with landmines and barbed wire tilted at indiscriminate angles. Bucky thought he would go deaf, the way the artillery boomed. Wished he would go deaf. There was no use for a sniper in this fight, so Bucky fought on the line, tooth and nail like the other men.

Bucky hardly noticed his companions, his awareness collapsing into tunnel vision. Hands, guns, bullets, and enemies. His fumbling hands made even reloading his gun a struggle. After more than an hour of sitting panicked in the trench, Bucky dared himself to stand and raise the barrel of his rifle over the edge. Two more breaths and he found the courage to look over and out at the battlefield. Spotting anyone was nearly impossible with the dust and smoke kicked up by the explosions. Picking out uniforms was even harder. Bucky found his target by the glint of his gun, the metal of the other man’s barrel catching a ray of light filtering down through the smoke. Bucky focused on the flash of light, latching on to it like a drowning man. Leveling his own barrel, Bucky fired a short burst and ducked back down to safety. He hugged the gun to his chest and leaned into the solid earth, drawing shaky self-congratulatory breaths. Another explosion rocked the earth, sending a spray of dirt down on Bucky’s head. He poked his head back up, looking for the glint of the enemy bayonet.

“Get your head down!”

A rough hand yanked Bucky back down into the trench. Bucky tumbled back down, landing face to face with another man. The man’s face was smudged with dirt and helmet askew. The stripes on his shoulder suggested this wasn’t his first time in a firefight. Bucky imprinted on the officer like a lost bird.

“If there’s an explosion, don’t stick your damned head up,” the man yelled, struggling to be made out over the din, “You’ll give away the rest of us.”

Bucky nodded dumbly. The man studied Bucky a moment, expression softening slightly, apologetic.

“You want to kill Nazis?” The officer asked, pointing at the gun in Bucky’s hands.

“I’d rather they didn't kill me.”

Not the correct answer.

“Do you want to kill Nazis?” The man asked again, as if Bucky hadn’t understood the first time.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then follow me. We’re going over.”

Bucky stood before the words sunk in.

“Wait, what?”

“Going over,” the man replied, tagging the other men in the trench and motioning for them to follow. They leaped over bodies, slipping and sliding in the trenches slick with day-old rainwater and blood.
“Follow the tanks, do you understand?” The officer yelled, gesturing for the men to huddle around him. “Throw a grenade once you get within range. You don’t want anything waiting for you when you reach the other side. Bayonets, now.”

The order launched the assembled men into action, affixing bayonets and pulling out grenades. Bucky loaded a few more rounds into his rifle and steeled himself.

A strange calm fell over him as he hauled himself over the edge of the trench, racing to the tank’s side. The uproar seemed to fade away in an instant. Bucky moved automatically, the weight of his gear disappearing. He hugged the side of the tank, close enough to run a hand along its treads. The explosions intensified, bullets racing past his ears. Hearing the rattle of machine gun fire, Bucky glued himself to the tank, eyes squeezed half shut as he willed himself to keep running towards the oncoming fire. All around him, the bullets found their marks with sickening cracks. Bucky didn’t hear the screams - just plunged forward, forced to keep moving.

Once he was a few yards from the first row of trenches - close enough to make out the muzzle flashes from the machine gun posts - Bucky grabbed his grenade. He scanned the edge of the trench, unsure what he was supposed to be looking for. Spotting the bob of a helmet on the approaching horizon, Bucky pulled the pin and lobbed his grenade. He watched it fly, almost in slow motion, before sending up a spray of soil and debris. Wasting no time, Bucky charged forward and leapt into the trench. He landed hard but got his bearings quickly, frantically scanning for signs of life. One man was down, fallen near Bucky’s feet. Another huddled with his head toward the blast. Bucky recognized the posture from his training at Basic - helmet and shoulder pads angled at the grenade, the rest of the body tucked in. The man uncurled and looked up to see Bucky. His eyes widened, taking in the enemy uniform. The two of them froze for a moment, as if they’d forgotten what they were supposed to do next. It dawned on the other man first, and he started searching desperately for his gun among the shrapnel-studded wreckage. Yanked back to his senses by the sudden movement, Bucky instinctively raised his rifle and leveled a shot.

The man collapsed with hardly a sound, the bullet aimed perfectly through the center of his forehead. It was not a clean kill - Bucky had been far too close to be using a rifle. He looked away at the moment of impact, but still felt a hot shard of bone glance off his cheek. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked at the corpse, already surrounded by a growing pool of blood, and spun around to face away, fighting the urge to vomit. He took a steadying breath, trying to stop the tremble that had gripped his whole body. He would have killed you, he whispered to himself, repeating it until the taste of bile in his mouth subsided. Bucky shook himself and moved on, gun raised and finger glued to the trigger. He dropped into a hunter’s crouch, padding down the trench as if the enemy might pick out the sound of his footfalls under the cacophony of artillery fire. Bucky’s veins blazed. He felt like he was flying around the trench corridors. The world had sped up around him, blurred beyond recognition. His limbs moved of their own accord, raising, firing, and running as if Bucky had been fighting his whole life.

Bucky ran upon three of the other men who had come over with him in the tanks’ shadows. As a unit, they ran with Bucky in the lead. He charged onwards, fear melting away as he grew more and more cavalier. The four stumbled upon a machine gun post, coming up on it from behind. Bucky signaled the men to cover his back and knelt, lining up the shots. In rapid succession, he dispatched the three men huddled inside the makeshift post. Only the third man had time to look back, gaze drifting somewhere above Bucky’s hiding spot. Bucky waited and, seeing no signs of life inside the little shelter, waved the men onward. On to the next. Without orders, the four wove through the maze of trenches half-crazed, too afraid to stay in one place. The tremble vanished from Bucky’s hands as long as kept moving.

Eventually, they found a few other American men huddled down. One was nursing a bullet
graze, grasping his bloody arm with a clenched jaw. Another man sat fiddling with a field radio, listening intently. The remainder of the men stood guard, rifles at the ready.

“What's going on?” Bucky asked once they had drawn near the group.

“The Germans are on their heels. Appears they're retreating. The last holdout is about a mile northeast of here.”

“What do we do then?”

“Sit tight and wait. Make sure the Germans can’t come running back here.”

Bucky breathed a sigh of relief. His limbs suddenly started to feel heavy. How long had he been running around? Looking up at the sky, he noticed the sun starting to sink down towards the horizon.

“They probably want the dark to cover their retreat,” he remarked to no one in particular.

The men stood guard, buzzing with nervous energy. Bucky stalked back and forth anxiously, only relaxing as he heard the explosions slowly move further away, growing less and less frequent. He grew braver then, wandering farther and farther from the group. The trenches were utterly abandoned now, save the ragtag group that had charged over with the tanks. The officer who had led the charge was nowhere to be found. Pacing the earthen corridors, Bucky walked past the occasional prone body, suddenly morbidly magnetized now that the threat had passed.

He wasn’t sure how to feel. The fact finally started to sink in that he’d killed a man. Several, actually. Bucky supposed he should feel some sort of guilt, to think about the families left behind, supposed to consider some common humanity. Those were the thoughts that had run through his mind when he locked eyes with the first man in the trench. Idealism like that was paralytic, would get him killed. Bucky shunted his guilt to the back of his mind. Shame was a luxury for survivors. Today, Bucky was proud. He’d survived.

After his first battle, the skirmishes came with greater frequency. The fighting gravitated towards barren cityscapes. Without the clear-cut battlelines of the trenches, the cities were chaotic and unpredictable. The enemy could be next door and you wouldn’t know until you were close enough to touch. The Germans capitalized on this fact and had a habit of making “mouseholes” and rolling grenades through the walls. Bucky heard the blasts and saw the houses collapse from a distance. In the urban battles, he preferred to haunt towers with a sniper rifle, safe from the explosive anarchy below. He’d been nervous the first time, perched in a church bell tower, glancing over his shoulder and flinching every time the wind whistled through the walls. From up above, the crippling confusion of fighting disappeared, the whole battle unfolding out before him. He watched the fight play out through his rifle scope, one snapshot at a time. He shot enemies indiscriminately, not allowing himself to linger too long on their faces.

The sniper jobs never gave him nightmares. His targets were remote, separated by the rifle scope. There was no stench of death on him at the end of the day, just the faint smell of burnt gunpowder and mildew. It was the hand-to-hand fighting, trapped in the skeleton of someone’s home or pinned inside the trenches, that haunted Bucky’s sleep.

He’d never forget the sensation of plunging a bayonet into flesh. Nor would he forget the terror flashing in a certain private’s eyes when he heard the pin of a grenade drop. The private had spotted the mousehole first, using his last seconds to scream “Run!” from the top of the staircase. He’d bled out on the stairs. They might have been able to save him, but no one dared approach, knowing the Germans were upstairs. They all simply waited with guns ready, prepared to finish painting the staircase red as the boy’s life flowed away. The trenches, with the wretched intimacy of crouching
beside your partner’s corpse for hours, had a special grip on Bucky. He dared not dwell on any of it.

Solace was scarcer than peace. Bucky’s bloody terror was broken up by anxious boredom, long marches and time spent crouched in waiting. The sun could shine on Italy’s beaches for all it wanted, Bucky had ceased to notice. He had some friends and spent what moments he could drinking and singing with them. But, despite it all, Bucky couldn’t turn an eye to any of the men without wondering which one would be next to fall. The group was in constant flux, and Bucky cautioned himself to stay remote. He’d destroy himself otherwise.

The one person the war couldn’t touch was Steve, and so it was in Steve that Bucky found comfort. He received a letter every other week or so, the gaps in between varying with the consistency of the mail. Bucky had the sinking suspicion Steve sent as many as he could, just to make sure a few got through. He read every letter, almost able to hear Steve’s voice in the lines. The minitlua of life back home filled him with aching nostalgia. Bucky submerged himself in the letters and sketches, cherishing every sheaf of cheap paper. He never took the letters into battle, leaving them behind in hidey-holes for safe-keeping. Some part of Bucky wanted to keep the two things separate. It was a superstition of sorts; perhaps as long as the letters were never witness to the bloodshed, Bucky could go home and deny it ever happened. His letters back to Steve were forcibly cheery, mindful of the State censors and their thick black pens. He slipped in jokes, checked on Steve’s health, told Steve about the antics of this colonel or that private. He scribbled caricatures in the margins. They weren’t nearly as good as Steve’s drawings, but they would be enough to make Steve laugh.

Bucky had almost found a rhythm when the 107th reached Azzano. The letters from Steve had tapered off and dried up, but Bucky attributed Steve’s silence to the stalemate gripping Northern Italy. The mail wouldn’t reach him in an active war zone. He’d been fighting for two days with no sign of an end, holed up in a trench beside Dum Dum. Bucky had taken a shining to Dugan almost immediately. He was initially drawn to the bravado, but stayed for the company. Dum Dum was one of the few men who would charge into any battle right alongside Bucky, equally reckless but with a knack for scraping by. They were a scrappy duo, always to be found at the thick of it. If not, Dum Dum charged alone, Bucky’s crosshairs on his back, an unseen guardian. It felt good to have someone to protect, kept Bucky sane when the men around him seemed to be slowly migrating underground en masse.

The battle at Azzano did not begin unusually. Bucky dug himself in for a protracted fight. The third night, he finally got the order to go over. He and Dum Dum scrambled out of the trench together, leading the surge of men. Among the explosions, they scattered like roaches, diving for the nearest hiding place. Bucky could hear his heart beating in his ears, but he was calm. He’d finally developed the nerves for fighting, unflinching even as the rockets screamed overhead and the ground beneath his feet shook with every passing tank. He was dimly worried about the progress the Germans were making up the hill. The regiment’s numbers were dwindling - there were other companies with the 107th, but Bucky’s peripheral vision was worryingly empty. He settled down into the crater he and Dum Dum had occupied, bantering as he picked off men from the oncoming tide.

Suddenly, a bright bolt of blue streaked across Bucky’s field of view. Thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him, Bucky drew away from the scope. The other men had seen it now too, watching in mute fascination. Electric blue ripped across the dark battlefield, falling upon the advancing Germans like divine destruction. The men hit by the rays disappeared in a flash of light, vaporized before Bucky’s eyes. In a minute, the battlefield was eerily silent. When Bucky scanned the field, it was utterly empty. Bucky’s stomach turned uneasily. Something was off. The others rose uncertainly, a cheer going up from the Allied side. The German side was suspiciously quiet, as if the enemy had vanished, an army of ghosts.
Dum Dum was the first to hear the tank.

“That looks...new.”

Bucky picked out the low rumble - almost too quiet to be a tank - just as the tank crept into view from the next hill over. Playing back the angle of the mysterious blasts in his mind, Bucky recognized the tank as the source of the onslaught. He peered back into the glare of the tank’s headlights, trying to make out markings. Friend or foe? The barrel swiveled, as if inspecting Bucky in turn. Blue light swelled from the interior of the barrel, and the air seemed to suddenly change, charged like the moment before a lightning strike.

Foe.

“Down!” Bucky shouted, voice rising before he was even aware of it. He’d only had three seconds to think that he was going to somehow survive this, and now a tank had rolled in to seal his doom at the last possible second. It really didn't seem fair. Bucky’s mind whirred with absurd thoughts trying to fill his last seconds. There was someone he still needed to say goodbye to. Someone who was waiting for him at home, someone he couldn't leave behind. There was a flash and a deafening boom. Heat seared Bucky’s back as he dove forward. His mind reeled searching for the name, the person he was surviving for, but the word slipped away from him in sheer terror. The last thing Bucky knew was the taste of raw earth.

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“Steve!” Bucky yelled, jolting forward and gasping for air. The warehouse echoed with the scream and Bucky’s head echoed it with a ringing in his ears. He couldn’t remember why he had been thinking about Steve.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is pretty summative, but the story will get more detailed starting next chapter. Thanks for reading!!

The end of the chapter is based on a deleted scene from the Captain America: The First Avenger. (Here, if you haven’t seen it: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtPluhF5MvU )

Some of my historical references, for those of you who like history:
Ground fighting in Italy during WW2: https://ww2resource.wordpress.com/tag/invasion-of-italy/
Urban fighting and mouse holes based on the Battle of Anzio:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Anzio
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Bucky woke up still smelling smoke. For a moment, he thought he was still somewhere on the forest floor. He didn’t need to open his eyes to know otherwise. The humid air reeked of sweat and urine, of bodies piled on and around his. The heat was stifling, but no matter how deeply he breathed the air was sour and hot, merciless on his ash-caked lungs. His ears quickly filled with the sound of quiet moaning. He opened his eyes to a dimly lit room, just bright enough to see the outlines of the men piled around him and the dull gleam of rusting iron. Bars, he noted, the pieces slowly coming together until they finally settled all at once on his chest, a heavy stone of fear settling in his gut. He was a prisoner. That much was painfully clear. How he got there - or where there was exactly - was a mystery.

Bucky untangled himself from the pile of sprawling limbs and moved to the edge of the cell. His head throbbed and the little motion sent him reeling, dizzy. He leaned against the bars and sat back and watched, like a sniper through a scope, counted heads and injuries, counted seconds and minutes and hours. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, the details of the room came into focus. The cells were round, almost like bird cages, and set into the ground. Rather than a ceiling, the cells were topped with criss-crossed bars. Every now and then, boots passed over the cells, echoing in the subterranean room. Bucky could faintly make out the muffled clanging of machinery overhead. He was underneath some sort of factory then. The warehouse with the cells was unlit, but light filtered in from the factory above. Bucky could make out the glint of other cages, illuminated in the stark black of the room. Bucky made out about 15 other cells, all filled with men packed closely to each other. Bucky’s own cell held roughly a dozen men with only enough room to stand and sit. Bucky squinted at the faces, recognizing a few from his regiment. In the cell across from his, Bucky swore he could make out the outline of a familiar bowler hat. His heart fluttered with relief, recognizing Dugan’s trademark mustache.

As the hours passed and the other men awoke, fear began to set in. The new men awoke in a panic, taking in their alien surroundings. The old men, recognizable by the state of their tattered uniforms and resigned expressions, offered brief sympathies and lulled them back to sleep… to save their strength. What for, Bucky eventually asked a worn down man in his own cell. The man stared back at him with eyes like river stone. Factory work, he said. Making weapons. Glowing blue ones unlike anything they’d ever seen. The weapons were dangerous, overflowing with a volatile energy that would explode in your face if you handled them the wrong way, he explained, raising a hand missing a few fingers. The men muttered quietly amongst themselves. Bucky withdrew from the hysteria, annoyed by the way their tinny reverberating voices sent spikes of pain through his head. He pressed his palms to his temples, his head feeling like it might split open. Concussion,
probably. Detaching himself from the claustrophobic cage and impending dread, Bucky waited with a single thought running through his head, *How the fuck am I gonna survive this?*

In about three hours, by Bucky’s estimation, a door opened at the end of the room. Fluorescent lights suddenly flickered to life above, burning Bucky’s eyes after the hours of darkness. He shaded his eyes with his hand, the ache in his head intensifying in response. The noise and light roused the men around him, all of whom fell deadly quiet. Men in charcoal gray uniforms flooded into the room, shouting something angrily in German and banging the bars to stir the men inside.

“Aufstehen! Aufstehen!”

Something registered in the back of Bucky’s head that they were being told to stand, and he clambered to his feet, leaning against the other inmates.

The Germans stopped in front of each cell and looked hungrily at the frightened prisoners within. Sometimes they pulled a man out, sometimes they didn’t.

“What’s Jerry doing?” a thick British voice asked nervously from the corner of Bucky’s cell.

“No idea. But those men don’t come back,” a weedy voice replied from just behind Bucky’s ear.

“And neither’ll we!” a third voice, British again, chuckled darkly. Bucky listened raptly, fists clenched anxiously. The band of finally approached Bucky’s cage and the prisoners quickly fell silent again, staring out at the men sullenly. Bucky studied their captors, his eyes falling on one in particular, a short bald man with round glasses that made him look like he had insect eyes.

Something in his expression struck Bucky as somehow off-kilter and he recoiled from the man’s gaze, glaring instead at the stocky men behind him. The group of men accompanying the bald man - guards, most likely - looked as if they had been lifted straight out of the hiss and boo films, complete with the stocky shoulders, swastikas, and buzz cuts.

The short man, who Bucky determined must be in charge, gave a terse order and one of the men unlocked the cell door. The cell’s occupants shrunk back and away, crushing Bucky up against the side of the cage. With the door wide open and the other prisoners moving out of the way, Bucky hungrily eyed the open exit. In the back of his mind he calculated his odds of breaking out through the open door. Where could he go? Nowhere. He knew that, but the fantasy had already played through his head. He was jarred back to reality as the crush of men parted in front of him. A beefy hand reached out and seized his shoulder, pulling him quickly forward and out of the cell.

Panic lodged in Bucky’s throat and he stumbled on the way out, partially from surprise and part from the horrible spinning in his head. He was directed to stand next to a handful of other men. He latched onto the man next to him, trying to steady himself. The man quickly obliged, bending his knees so Bucky could sling an arm around his shoulders.

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbled into the shoulder pressed against his cheek. The man just grunted back, his fingers curled in the back of Bucky’s uniform, holding him up. Bucky spied a few frayed red threads in the man’s collar. Soviet, probably. Casting his eyes down the line of assembled men, Bucky found a motley assortment of Allied uniforms. His cell had been almost entirely American and British, but here he saw French, Soviet, Irish, and Polish. Towards the end of the line he thought he saw a handful of Belgian men. One soldier looked possibly Chinese. To his right, the short bespectacled man had moved past another cell and was pulling out someone new.

“Name?” The Russian man asked in Bucky’s ear, eyes glancing sideways at the stocky guards posted around them. His accent was thick and nothing like the accent from that “Mission to
“Moscow” movie.

“Bucky. Your name?”

“Kolya.”

The silence dragged on as more prisoners joined their ranks outside the bars. Just as abruptly as they had come in, the captors whisked off the assorted inmates, herding them down hall after winding hall. Bucky and Kolya quickly fell to the back, Kolya half-carrying Bucky, whose legs swayed underneath him.

After enough turns to make Bucky dizzy, the Germans lined the men up against a wall, hands on their truncheons. A man in a lab coat strode forward, addressing the crowd of prisoners down the bridge of his nose.

“Remove your belts, empty your pockets, and take out the laces in your boots. Now.”

His accent was thick to the point of being nearly unintelligible, but he spoke slowly enough for Bucky to catch on. Bucky flipped his pockets inside out and leaned down towards his boots. Mistaking the lean for falling, Kolya shoved Bucky upright.

“<We have to take our laces out. Belts too. And empty your pockets,>” Bucky explained in Russian, the words coming automatically. Kolya looked at him with surprise before letting go of Bucky to loosen his own boots. Bucky carefully undid his laces, hands fumbling and his vision spinning a little from leaning over.

“Beeile dich!” One of the guards yelled over Bucky’s head, noticing that Bucky was struggling to undo his laces. Kolya, belt already cast off and shoes unlaced, leaned over to help Bucky, hands steady. As soon as they were done, Kolya pulled Bucky upright again, rejoining the line of men against the wall. An odd assortment of piles sat in front of the men, mostly grimy boot laces and belts. Littered in the piles were the small things men had been carrying in their pockets - crumpled papers, tarnished badges, photographs of smiling women and kids. Bucky grimaced as booted feet kicked the piles together like so much trash. Bucky and Kolya shuffled back down the hall at the end of the line, dodging the half-hearted blows aimed at the dawdlers.

The group was shoved into a new cell, but with only a dozen men to fill it, each man had room to stretch his legs a little. Unlike the odd cages they’d just come from, this cell was set into the wall, solid concrete on all sides except for a steel door with a small, barred window.

Kolya gently set Bucky down in one of the back corners, swiveling to take in their new surroundings. Kolya had a severe face and jutting cheekbones, the picture of Siberian winter. Between his thick eyebrows and slightly inset eyes, he appeared perpetually angry. His dark blonde hair was buzzed short, stopping just above his ears. Yet underneath the frost-weathered cracked skin, he appeared to only be in his late twenties. His first wrinkles were forming, laugh lines around his eyes and creases in his forehead. Even hunched in the cell and buried beneath a thick winter coat, Bucky could see he had a body like an ox. His neck and shoulders made tight angular lines, solid. He seemed a little at odds with his body, lips quirking sheepishly in thought and his legs tucked carefully underneath himself to make room. Despite his bulk, he managed to make himself look small. His knotted hands, tanned and scarred, kneaded nervously in his lap.

“<You speak Russian?>” Kolya asked, making light conversation.

“<A little,>” Bucky replied, suddenly mindful of his accent, “<my mom was Polish and I had some family from Russia. We used to speak it around the house when I was little. It’s been a while
Kolya nodded, content. Bucky could understand. It was always nice to run into someone who spoke the same language as you. Even in the middle of a war. Maybe especially then.

"<Your head, is it hurt?>" Kolya asked.

"<Yeah. But it'll wear off soon enough.>"

Bucky let his head fall over onto his shoulder and peered out past the cell door at the men outside. The short one was talking in a low voice to his colleagues. Upon further inspection, these were different men from before - wiry, nervous looking men in lab jackets. Kolya glanced over Bucky’s shoulder, following Bucky’s line of sight.

"<It’s not looking good, yes?>” he asked, looking back down at Bucky with a ghost of a smile on his lips. Bucky idly shrugged his shoulders. Nothing about this looked good. Removing their boots and laces had left Bucky with a bad taste in his mouth. That was the sort of thing you do when you expect your prisoners to try to kill themselves. There would always be ways, Bucky figured, if you were imaginative, but the precaution left Bucky with an ominous feeling.

Resigned, Kolya sat down next to Bucky, leaning back against the wall. His posture suggested he was relaxed, but Bucky saw the tension in the straight angry lines of his neck, a single tendon jutting out. Around them, some of the other men weren’t faring so well. Most were whispering urgently to each other, eyes glued on the men outside. Still others just stared down into their laps, shaking hands kneading as they uttered quick, stuttering prayers. Despite his upbringing, Bucky didn’t have a pious bone in his body. The buzz just made his head hurt more. All he wanted to do was lie down and sleep for a very long time. Ignoring dire straights, Bucky nodded off in the corner of the cell.

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"<Bucky. Food. Bucky.>"

Bucky blinked awake to Kolya shoving a plate and tin cup in his face. The plate was stacked with a soot-black burnt roll of bread, half submerged in an unidentifiable stew. Bucky squinted at the chunks, determining they were probably potato. Ignoring the heavy sweet smell of rancid meat, Bucky shoveled the stew in his mouth, scooping the sludge up with his fingers. He was hungry enough not to mind the taste or the way the tepid paste stuck as it went down his throat.

"<It’s morning.>” Kolya clarified, turning away to swill his cup, plate already clear. Bucky glared down into his own cup. It was probably coffee, but it could just as well be mud. Tasting it didn’t clarify which. The pain in his head had subsided to a dull ache, but as he stared down at his breakfast, he became acutely aware of how hungry he was. Shoving tasteless bread and god-knows-what-else into his mouth, he took his first good look at the new cell. The cell was set into the wall, the door side facing out into an expansive room. In the morning light he could make the room out as a laboratory of sorts. Wires hung haphazardly from the rafters, but the room was otherwise empty. In the very back, Bucky made out a desk and a lamp. The sight was almost cozy, spoiled by the swastika insignia dotted map behind it.

Bucky turned to Kolya, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"<Tastes like shit.>"

Kolya nodded emphatically.
“<All the same, it is still food.>”

Bucky shrugged.

“<They will come back again soon, I think.>” Kolya said suddenly, nodding in the direction of the door. Bucky frowned in response, but said nothing. The sight of the lab chilled him. He didn’t know much about the Nazis, nothing you didn’t see in the newsreels back home. His ruminations were interrupted by the door clanging open, but something told him this went a lot deeper than just the Nazis.

“Aufstehen! Aufstehen!”

Kolya hoisted Bucky to his feet before he could process what was going on. Luckily, this morning he felt far steadier on his feet. He discretely brushed off Kolya’s hand, staring ahead into the middle distance to fix his balance. Kolya glanced at him with what might have been concern before fixing his own gaze back on the doorway. Bucky sensed the same hunger for freedom in Kolya next to him. The way he clenched his jaw in barely restrained determination felt familiar, like the expression he saw on Steve right before he dashed off into another fight he couldn’t win. Bucky smiled to himself, before turning to Kolya.

“<Careful,>” he whispered. Kolya started in surprise, but nodded solemnly, relaxing his jaw.

The door swung out and open quickly. Soldiers stepped briskly into the cells, grabbing the nearest man and pulling him out without a word. Bucky too was yanked off his feet by a burly man in uniform, who dragged him out of the cell and, to Bucky’s surprise, down the adjacent hallway. He pushed Bucky into a non-descript room barely bigger than the cell. The man locked the door behind him, but did nothing more than tower in the threshold.

A single man stood in the room, facing Bucky. Behind him, Bucky made out a bulky metal chair, seemingly bolted into the ground. There was a small cot and a desk in the corner too, but otherwise the room was barren. Bucky picked up the faint scent of ammonia and something else he couldn’t identify. The man in the room studied Bucky, his face perfectly neutral. He gestured with his head towards the chair.

“Sit.”

Bucky stayed rooted to the spot, pulse racing. He eyed the chair and spotted restraints - thick leather affixed to the chair with bolts the size of his thumbnail. Thin wires hung off the back of the chair, ending in small pads. The man in the doorway approached from behind, seizing Bucky’s shoulders as he stared at the chair, paralyzed with terror. Bucky struggled against the hands feebly, still recovering from the concussion. He was dragged briskly over to the chair, vision spinning. He managed to break free of the grip, crashing into the chair as his support unexpectedly vanished. He stumbled to his feet, taking a sloppy wide swing at the guard. The guard didn’t even dodge, letting Bucky’s swing swish uselessly in front of his face. Bucky lost his balance, pitching forward after his fist and into the man’s counter-strike. The blow knocked him back on his heels, reeling. It wasn’t a very strong hit - purposely so, Bucky realized - but it gave the guard an opening to seize Bucky by the front of his shirt and stuff him into the chair. Bucky let himself be ragdolled, blinking spots from his eyes, as he lay akimbo in the chair. At a loss for words in his panicked haze, Bucky growled and clawed at the man. The guard ignored him and deftly cinched him into the chair. First at the waist, then across the chest. Bucky tried to kick and swipe, but the guard patiently caught his flailing limbs, pinning them against the hard edges of the chair and pulling the tough leather over to tie him down. Eventually the man finished, leaving all but Bucky’s head immobilized. Bucky felt the distinct sensation of a fly caught in a web, unable to move as the spider moved in.
His head spun with possible scenarios, each torture more terrifying than the last. The presence of the scientist, or at least a man who appeared to be one, threw off his calculations. Clearly this was to be an experiment, but what kind? The man slowly answered his unspoken question, approaching and pulling the wires over Bucky’s shoulder and to the front of the chair. Struck with terror and confusion, Bucky watched mutely as the man undid his shirt, affixing the wires to his chest and temples. Bucky was dimly reminded of the movie Frankenstein, which he’d watched as a boy. He remembered the patchwork corpse tied to a table, the tension in the movie theater as they waited for lightning to strike, and a crazed man in a lab coat. *All the pieces were here*, Bucky thought, *except the electricity*.

The man in the lab coat looked him over coolly, his gaze distant as if he were running calculations in his head. He stepped over to the desk and scrawled a few notes, glancing up occasionally at Bucky. Bucky braced himself for the inevitable, shutting his eyes and splaying his fingers. He forced himself to relax and sink into the chair, taking deep breaths as his pulse pounded in his temple. Sweat rolled down his temple, making a small clean track on his sooty face. Once he felt back in control of his nerves, Bucky opened his eyes again and locked his gaze on the far wall, keeping the man in the lab coat on the edge of his vision. He was a child again, getting his first shot and too scared to look at the needle, crying before it even broke skin. Childish as he felt, his terror had reduced him to base instinct.

From the corner of his eye Bucky watched the scientist shuffle around a little longer, look at his watch, and reach for something Bucky couldn’t see. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered warningly and Bucky felt the air change, growing suddenly sharp. There was a buzz, a faint crackle in his ears, and a second of tension-filled anticipation. Suddenly, Bucky felt his body stiffen, limbs struggling against the restraints. Bucky’s head whipped back, as if he’d been yanked. The skin where the wires were attached burned, hot knives burrowing down into his chest and temples. He lost sensation in his hands and feet. The pain grew, pulsing in waves that grew stronger. Bucky was faintly aware that he was screaming, mouth hanging open at an odd angle. He’d bitten his tongue, probably in the initial throes of the shock, and the blood filled his mouth, dribbling out the corner of his lips. His vision went white, but he didn’t slip immediately into unconsciousness, caught in limbo. The electric pulse enveloped his body, hot and buzzing as the electricity danced in arcs between him and the chair. The pressure built up under his skin, his heart pounding frantically as the white consumed him.

From behind his desk, the scientist watched carefully, glancing between his subject and the dials. The screams stopped but the current continued, the subject’s fingers spasming. Bucky lie unconscious, body jerking as if pulled by marionette strings. The scientist watched idly from the corner of the room, studying dials out of Bucky’s view. With each passing minute, the man adjusted his dials, slowly bringing the voltage down until Bucky stopped twitching at all, draped across the chair like a discarded winter coat. The scientist quickly checked his subject’s pulse, finding the frenzied but rhythmic beat. Content, he withdrew, marking the time and waiting for Bucky to stir. He kept one eye on Bucky’s chest, making it sure it continued to rise and fall.

Ten minutes later, Bucky’s eyes fluttered open. His chest ached as if someone were slowly pushing a blade into his sternum. His limbs tingled, almost numb. He sucked in rattling breaths, tremors still running through his body. He felt loose and weak, struggling to make his fingers and toes move. Bucky’s terror changed, fear of the unknown warping into weary dread. He struggled to form a coherent train of thought, but as the scientist started to glance at his desk again, Bucky began to squirm. The man shot him a glance, expression vaguely annoyed as if Bucky were inconveniencing him.

As soon as Bucky’s breathing returned to normal, the man flipped the switch again and Bucky was plunged back into the fiery white.
An hour later, Bucky hardly remembered entering the room.

Chapter End Notes

History Notes:
1) The Mission to Moscow movie that Bucky references here was a popular propaganda film from 1943, released just before Bucky ships out (canonically). It was one of the rare films that had a softer stance towards the Soviet Union. It's based off a book published in 1941. I headcanon Bucky as an avid reader, so I imagined he probably read it as a spy book first and then caught the movie shortly before shipping out because he recognized the title.
2) The Frankenstein movie referenced here is the 1931 Frankenstein movie. So Bucky would have been about 14 years old when the movie came out.

When I saw it, I at first laughed because he is so over-dressed and over-armed. When I got a better look at the picture, it struck me how young he might actually be, and the idea behind the character developed from there.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to the amazing actuarialturtle

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cell’s silence drove Bucky mad. He’d never been fond of quiet unless he was reading, in which case he needed absolute silence so he could immerse himself in the pages. But even when he slept, he needed white noise. Maybe it was trained into him after so many sleepless nights caring for Steve; silence meant Steve had stopped breathing. Bucky had suffered a thousand heart attacks that way, shuffling around in another room only to realize that all had fallen quiet, that the rattle next door had stopped. He’d panic, wondering how long it had taken him to notice, and sprint into Steve’s room to yank him upright and force air back into his lungs. Often it was a false alarm, but sleeping beside Steve during those fever-filled nights Bucky had been wound tight, jolting from his sleep if he stopped hearing the faint wheeze on the bed beside him. Silence was synonymous with death, so Bucky had always liked noise. He played records when he was alone in the house, found comfort in the clanging clamor of the docks, felt at ease in the too loud dance halls. Steve hated the noise Bucky cloaked himself in, preferring to sketch in silence, losing himself. Bucky obliged when he could, listening to the quiet scuff and scratch of pencil on paper. Even that soft noise allayed his anxiety, but Bucky stayed nearby, poised.

Now, the cell wasn’t exactly quiet. Bucky’s ears picked up the faint inhale and exhale of sleeping men and the whisper of shifting limbs. Sometimes the men themselves made noise, talking to each other in hushed tones or crying out in their sleep. Others prayed. But this noise did nothing for Bucky’s unease. The air reeked of hysteria. The chatter suggested nothing of life. There was no energy, no vitality.

Restless, Bucky turned to Kolya. He started talking, not about anything much. Just talking for the sake of making noise. It did his nerves some good and seemed to amuse Kolya, so Bucky kept at it. His Russian, it turned out, had become rusty with disuse. Now and then, he’d say something that made Kolya break down with laughter. Kolya always apologized, of course, before softly correcting him. As it turned out - in Kolya’s words - Bucky spoke like an old woman. Bucky cursed his mother’s family, all the little old aunts who had spoiled him and had apparently never bothered to correct his Russian.

Bucky and Kolya’s conversations grew in frequency. The Russian kept Bucky’s mind sharp, even though they never spoke of anything of consequence. It was amazing how much had stuck with him, given how long it’d been since Bucky held a real conversation in Russian.

On the third day, they spoke of the army. Bucky told his story - the draft, Basic, London, Italy. He spoke in clipped terms, skimming over the details. Kolya never interrupted, just listened and nodded. Bucky found himself retelling the strangest stories, ones that had quietly lodged in his memory. He recalled the group of Italian boys that had fled from behind German lines, offering to trade knowledge of the German encampments for a few meals and a bed. The eerie beauty of the empty Italian coastline. The time Lieutenant Harris cheated at cards and Bucky (and a friend) had
stuck a page from a dirty magazine in Harris’s papers. The way the two of them had howled at the expression on their CO’s face when Harris handed him a centerfold girl. The night Private Malley had scrounged up a guitar and played for them in the dead of night. Malley’s friend picked up the guitar later, after Malley had died, and some of the men tried to learn how to play.

When Bucky’s voice grew hoarse, he passed the torch to Kolya. “<What about you? How’d you end up in the army?>”

“<I joined the army three years ago. The war began around my hometown, actually. We live close to the Polish border.>”

“<We?>”

“<Yes, my family.>” Something darkened in Kolya’s eyes and Bucky didn’t push the subject further.

“<Where were you stationed?>”

“<Nowhere in particular. We just moved south. Eventually my unit ended up here in Italy. But I liked the travel, in between the fighting.>”

“<How so?>”

“<I come from a family of farmers. I’d never left my village before. So seeing such large buildings and cities was a surprise. I’d never seen anything like it. And we went places so warm, the winters felt like summers. But the best place was the beach.>”

Kolya suppressed a grin, remembering the beach. Bucky paused, incredulous, letting him savor the moment. God knows they needed whatever good memories they could find. Bucky could almost smell the brine of the Atlantic, could hear it wash up on the docks beneath his feet.

“<You’d never seen the beach before?>”

Kolya shook his head, still smiling a little.

“<One night, a few of my friends and I snuck off to the beach at night. We swam under the half moon, and I thought ‘this must be heaven.’ No matter where we looked, the water just stretched forever.>”

A pause, then a reluctant, sheepish grin. Almost a blush.

“<Of course, when we got found out…I’ll just say we still have the scars.>”

Bucky settled back for the story.

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The fifth day, neither man said much. Kolya was consumed by fever and Bucky laid on his back trying not to move. The burns on his chest hurt too much. Just sucking in breath pained him. Visions of red hot metal danced in his sleep, the smell of singed flesh burnt into his clothes.

“<Do you have a fever, too?>” Kolya asked, propped up against the wall. His face was pale and drawn. His clothes, Bucky noticed, seemed to be sticking to him. Around them, some of the other men also seemed to be ill. They curled in on themselves and shivered. Those men huddled together for warmth, while Bucky and the handful of unaffected men kept their distance. Disease and open
wounds never mixed well.

Bucky lifted his head to look at Kolya, inspecting the sweat drops gathered on Kolya’s brow.

“No fever.” Bucky answered after a pause. “At least not yet. You?”

“I think so. They gave us an injection of some sort.”

“Are you sweating?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t let yourself sweat. Take your clothes off if you get hot. Just don’t sweat. It’ll chill you too fast. And you’ll lose water.” It was familiar advice. Every doctor that came to see Steve always told Bucky, “Don’t let him sweat.” Here he was again, Bucky thought, playing nurse.

That night, Bucky gulped down half his coffee before pushing the rest of the sludge towards Kolya. Kolya looked at him confused, his own cup drained.

“You need to drink.” Bucky explained. That was something else the doctors had said. Something about getting enough to drink.

Kolya took the coffee mutely and sent Bucky an appreciative glance.

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A schedule started to form; a day in the rooms, then a day in the cell. Without windows, the inmates could only track time by meals. Few dared to mention the time in the rooms, desperately blotting those hours from their memories. So they all just slept and slept. But the nights spoke volumes. Every man cried out, moaned, screamed in his sleep. Some begged for mercy, others forgiveness, and still others just cried bitter curses. The cell took on the feeling of an infirmary. There was no more silence, just the constant background noise of breathing and groaning. Every man had his own ills. One man, Belgian infantry, showed up one day without a foot. Two days later, the scientists took him away in the night and he didn’t come back.

That’s how people disappeared. Every soldier had his injuries. Most had burns, the shiny blistered skin twining around arms and chests. Others developed spasms. Strange rashes. One night, every man was coughing blood. The inmates had similar scarring in their elbows, matching burns on their chests, singed hair. Bucky took in all of this information objectively, but underneath the constant haze of pain and confusion, the details often slipped away from him. He couldn’t remember how many men there were in the first place, but he could tell that the number was slowly shrinking as one by one, men disappeared. He’d never bothered to get to know any of them, aside from Kolya, but he had names for some of them.

There was the Priest, who had prayed non-stop from the first day. Another was the Hyena, who was prone to sudden fits of awful laughter, a deranged hiccupping kind that bordered on infectious in the way it would spread around the cell. There was the Stomach, an unfortunately over-sized man who never seemed to get enough to eat. Bucky watched as he shrank and deteriorated with impossible speed. He knew how starvation ravaged a body, had seen it everyday, but watching it happen before his eyes like a sped-up film was something else entirely. There were a handful of others, but they all blurred together in Bucky’s memory, little more than bundles of writhing skin and bones.

Bucky was slowly wasting away too, his ribs becoming pronounced underneath his yellowing skin. He still had some bulk, but the army had burned through his baby fat. His skin became flaky
and thin, bruising under a feather’s touch, leaving him mottled with miniscule gray-purple bruises. He was always thirsty, the muddy coffee only leaving his mouth drier. The food they received was only enough to survive and Bucky lost the energy to do much else than sleep and stare at the door. He stared off into space, light-headed, boredom inspiring him to philosophy. He drowned himself in remembrances to escape his decaying body.

The first time he forgot, Bucky slammed his head into the wall so hard he nearly blacked out. He had been trying to find a way to pass the time, to escape the pain flickering up and down his spine like lightning bolts. Leaning against the wall was torture, but curling in on himself was worse, so he slumped against the wall and screwed his eyes shut, one hand spasmodically clutching at his pant leg. He tried to summon a memory of happier times, anything to forget that in a few hours rough hands would come to drag him kicking and screaming back to hell. Eventually, his mind wandered back to the small Brooklyn apartment.

In his mind, he was perched in a rickety dining room chair, tilting it back precariously, just enough so that every few seconds his stomach would swoop as he nearly pitched backwards, only to rescue himself at the last second. While he engaged in his childish gymnastics, Steve sat in the other chair, having dragged it closer to the smudged window. The autumn wind left a biting chill in the air, seeping in from under the door and tinting Bucky’s cheeks pink. Sunlight filtered in through the window sluggishly, glancing off Steve’s straw colored bird’s nest of hair. The rosy early evening light cast deep shadows in Steve’s too big coat, losing his form in the darkening multiplying folds. Steve’s knotty little hands sketched with a possessed fury, trying to capture the last rays before they were swallowed up behind the high rises. Bucky studied his pinched face in its casual solemnity, the sight setting something inside him at peace.

“What’re you drawin’ today? Milk bottles in front of Brown’s shop or somethin’?” Bucky asked, breaking the silence. Steve smirked but kept drawing. Steve had strange taste in subjects. Bucky came home some nights to find sketches of alleyway debris strewn about the dining room table, drawings of balcony laundry lines, of cigar smoke, of mothers with infants cradled in their arms, of the long lines outside the draft centers. People, animals, garbage, nothing was spared Steve’s artistic eye, enshrouded in delicate pencil work on some scrap floating around their apartment. He’d never admit it, but Bucky had pilfered a few pieces from the garbage bin, tucking them away for safekeeping.

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“Really, Stevie, what is it?”

Steve grunted in annoyance, waving at Bucky with his free hand and contorting to catch the last of the sunlight from the window. Leaning forward in his chair so that it came to rest on all fours with a plaintive creak, Bucky stood and made his way over to Steve, careful to stay out of his drawing light. He loomed behind Steve, angling himself so that his shadow stayed off the paper. Bucky peered over Steve’s shoulder to glance at the drawing.

He saw nothing. Just blank paper.

With a rush, Bucky was back in his cell, jaw clenched as the pain flooded back to him. He couldn’t remember. He tried desperately to recall a single one of Steve’s drawings, anything, but only dredged up blanks. The hole in his memory - the glaringly white paper - jeered at him. He banged his head against the wall, trying to conjure up details, something, anything. The more his mind scrambled, the less he remembered. What were the neighbor’s names? The movie theater Steve liked to go to? The first dame he’d ever dated? Names and faces slipped through Bucky’s fingers like sand. He became keenly aware of their absence, scrambling after them with growing desperation. In frustration, he continued slamming his head against the wall, as if he could dislodge the memories and shake them back into place. His vision started to swim as he pounded his head
harder, but that too meant getting away from the pain and dread, so he continued on.

A rough hand gripped his shoulder and Bucky spun towards it, one fist raised blindly.

“Stop.” English. Kolya’s syrupy Russian accent broke through the frantic sirens blaring in Bucky’s head.

Kolya shifted Bucky so he was at an angle to the wall, head and neck resting on the man asleep next to him. Bucky blinked his eyes hard, focusing in on Kolya, who eyed Bucky with quiet caution. His face was gaunt and pained. Kolya had been stoically stomaching the pain they all suffered, silently occupying the corner and staring at the door day and night. Every muscle in his body was primed to spring at the first opportunity, energy radiating off him like an overheated engine. Bucky marvelled at his resilience. But to keep hoping for freedom was foolish, a waste of energy. Yet somehow, Kolya found the strength to carry on. Bucky couldn’t understand, but he longed for that sort of optimism. Bucky shut his eyes again, moaning into the throbbing pain. But he didn’t reach for those memories again, didn’t dare to discover just how much had rotted away. To do so felt like walking on an abandoned pier. Every soaked rotting plank creaked under his weight, but he couldn’t know which ones would give way under his weight, sending him falling into the midnight sea. It was better, Bucky reasoned, to stay carefully on dry land. So Bucky thought of nothing and willed himself to fall asleep.

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Bucky had lost track of the days. He could feel himself deteriorating, physically and otherwise. Moving too much, or talking to Kolya, had lost its appeal. The men around him were in a similar state of tired apathy. It was frustrating, this exhaustion. Boredom and hunger. Fear and pain. Amazing how fast he’d become used to all of those things.

Bucky thought about all the things he missed most. Food. A bed. Going out dancing. Nice clothes. His sanity. He found himself singing songs at the strangest times. A melody would worm its way into his mind, appearing like a bone in the mud, the kind that showed up in graveyards the day after a rain storm, gleaming and white. Jimmy Dorsey’s “Green Eyes.” Monroe’s “Racing with the Moon.” Swinging dance hall favorites he’d never learned the names of.

One afternoon, to Kolya:

“<Do you like music?>”

“<Yes.>”

“<Sing me something.>”

Kolya shot Bucky a strange look.

“<Come on, anything.>” Bucky pressed, “<Don’t you Russians have songs in the Army? To pass the time?>”

“<Of course we do.>”

“<Then sing something for me.>”

Silence.

“<Please.>”
Kolya looked at him, almost annoyed, before he softened.

"<You are an odd one.>"

Bucky grinned, but just waited expectantly. Kolya shook his head, running one hand through his hair, embarrassed. He shot Bucky one more look, pleading this time, before caving.

"<Do you know ‘Katyusha’? It’s a soldier’s song, but very popular all the same.>"

"<Haven’t heard it. I’m looking forward to it though.>"

Kolya started quiet and uncertain, voice low and crooning. His voice was rough and hoarse and he had to stop every now and then to cough, but Bucky let himself be drawn into the song. It was light, a folk song probably. Around them, the cell grew quieter, other men listening in. A Russian man a few feet away muttered the song under his breath, two fingers waving like he was conducting an unheard orchestra.

“Rastsvetali iabloni i grushi,          Apple and pear trees were a-blooming,
Poplyli tumany nad rekoj.                Mist was creeping on the river.
Vykhodila na bereg Katyusha,             Katyusha set out on the banks,
Na vysokij bereg na krutoj.              On the steep and lofty bank.
Vykhodila, pesniu zavodila               She was walking, singing a song
Pro stepnogo, sizogo orla,               About a grey steppe eagle,
Pro togo, kotorogo liubila,              About her true love,
Pro togo, chi pisma bereglia.            Whose letters she was keeping.
Oj ty, pesnia, pesenka devichia,          Oh you song! Little song of a maiden,
Ty leti za iasnym solntsem vsled.        Head for the bright sun.
I bojtsu na dalnem pograniche             And reach for the soldier on the far-away

Ot Katyushi peredaj privet.              Bring greetings from Katyusha.
Pust on vspomnit devushku prostuiu       Let him remember an ordinary girl,
Pust uslyshit, kak ona poet,             And hear how she sings,
Pust on zemliu berezhet rodnuiu,         Let him preserve the Motherland,
A liubov Katyusha sberezhet.”            Same as Katyusha preserves their love.

"<You Soviets have an odd idea of love, you know that?>” Bucky remarked when Kolya had finished.
“<I think it is a beautiful song.>”

The other Russian man nodded, humming the song to himself. Bucky pondered the song a moment before he spoke again.

“<It is nice. I don’t suppose you’d sing it again?>”

“<What? Are you sure you want to hear more of our Soviet ‘nonsense’? It doesn’t offend your Capitalist sensibilities?>” Kolya teased, a small smile creeping on to his face.

Bucky laughed. It was the first time Kolya had told a joke.

“<We’re allies these days, aren’t we?>” Bucky shot back, “<Besides, this Katyusha dame doesn’t sound so bad. Bet you she was real pretty. Pretty enough for some love-sick idiot to write a song about her anyway.>”

It was Kolya’s turn to laugh this time.

“<Something like that.>” He exchanged a look with the other Russian and the two started singing together, smiling nostalgically. Bucky mumbled the words along.

Chapter End Notes

Your comments are the best part of my day! Thank you for reading! More to come soon.

History Notes:
1) The dance hall songs Bucky references are Jimmy Dorsey’s “Green Eyes” and Monroe’s “Racing with the Moon.” Both "Green Eyes" and "Racing with the Moon" topped the charts around the time the US entered World War II. "Green Eyes" was a popular love song (what Bucky might have slow-danced to a few times) and "Racing with the Moon" was a catchy jazz piece that first caught on in New York.
2) The song Katyusha was extremely popular in the USSR at the time (and still is to this day). It was an adaptation of an old folk song designed to raise morale and patriotism among the troops. If you want to hear it as I imagine Kolya singing it:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SLvtP6KMUM
Bucky awoke to the familiar commotion of scuffling bodies and feet dragging against the floor as their captors stole the men away to the rooms. The sight of the door opening was no longer a thrilling promise of escape. Now, instead, the creaking of the hinges was like the horn heralding the horsemen of hell. Bucky would fight, maybe land a weak punch or two, but he was spirited off again to the dark little room with the chair and the cot and a horrible man in a lab coat.

The man let Bucky sit fastened in the chair a few minutes, just staring and jotting down notes. Bucky squirmed under his gaze, his breath coming in ragged gasps of anticipation. Somewhere in the back of his head he was ashamed of himself for showing his fear, but his dignity had escaped him with those first shocks. The ordeal changed from day to day, injections, shocks, burning. Today, he was back in the chair. Wires and pads were pasted over his old burns, taped over just healing skin as he struggled, growling curses. When preparations were complete, the doctor stood back and studied him briefly, a glint in his eye. He dared Bucky to make eye contact, which he managed with his last shreds of defiance. He glared back, pretending his hands were not trembling. He flexed them and gripped into the arm of the chair to keep the tremors from spreading to the rest of his body.

“Name.”

It took Bucky a moment to process that the scientist had asked him a question. The man had never spoken to him before. Bucky was momentarily torn between answering and trying to forestall what was coming or staying silent and defiant. His voice was frozen.

“Your name.”

The man came closer and his expression implied a threat as one hand slipped into the deep pockets of the lab coat.

“James. Barnes.” Bucky replied, spitting out each word, eyes glued on the man. He refused to look at the hand in the pocket. He didn’t want to know.

“Rank.”

Bucky blinked hard in confusion. Why now? Why these questions now? An image formed in the back of his mind, a page from his army handbook. Typed in emotionless font was the header “INTERROGATION.” The passage was terse and unsparing. There were three permissible allowances: to give name, rank, and number. These, the handbook explained, would allow the army to confirm identity in hostage exchange situations. Bucky clung to the inky print in his head, reveling in the clarity of the memory. A sharp backhand broke the smile that had begun to form on his lips, snapping his head and neck hard to the side.
“Rank.”

Shaking off the sudden strike, Bucky painstakingly lifted his head, returning the cold burning glare leveled at him.

“Sergeant.”

“Number.”

“32557038.” Bucky replied without missing a beat, cheek still stinging. He thought he could feel a single drop of hot blood tracing down his face.

The scientist stepped back, scribbled a note without looking, and withdrew an empty hand from his pocket. He fixed a new kind of stare on Bucky, something almost curious. It took every ounce of Bucky’s self-control to keep his eyes open, to not close his eyes and wish the world away. The man walked - almost strolled - to where Bucky knew the cursed switch was hidden. There, he lingered, one finger poised so Bucky could count the seconds until his nightmares began. This was a new game to Bucky, who steeled himself as the precious seconds stretched into a baited eternity. Finally, and to Bucky’s near relief, the man flipped the switch. The lights made their telltale flicker, and Bucky was plunged back into the searing white void.

Time was indeterminable in the room. He could feel his throat torn raw by primal yelling, screams he couldn’t remember. How he wished he could choke down those noises, but even the whimpers of awakening pushed their way from his bloody lips with unstoppable force. He swung his head back, staring blindly at the ceiling as his vision slowly returned. His hands spasmed occasionally, as if releasing a few last bolts of electricity into the metal grounding of the chair.

Before he saw him, Bucky felt the presence of the other man in the room. Someone else had joined the scientist.

Bucky pitched his head forward, letting it hang loose and tired between his shoulders. From the top of his vision, he was able to make out the other man. In an instant Bucky recognized him. The man who chose. The short little man with compound eyes and a twisted little face. His smallness, the physical weakness of the academic, was incongruous with the soldier’s eyes that burned from underneath the delicate glasses frames. Bucky recognized the spark as bloodlust, cold as steel.

The man turned from his companion to face Bucky, drawing a step closer. He did not intimidate, merely stood there like a child peering down at his own reflection in a puddle. Bucky was unnerved by the strange sensation of being studied without being seen and averted his eyes, choosing instead to flex his hands, forcing blood back into the clenched fists.

“What is your name, soldier?” The nasal voice brought Bucky’s attention back to the man. He was fairly certain he had answered this question, though it felt like ages ago.

“James Barnes,” he replied, able to manage just above a whisper. The effort brought the taste of something bitter and acidic to his mouth.

“Your rank?”

“Sergeant.”

“Your number, Sergeant Barnes?”

“32557038.”
The man stepped aside briefly to confer with his colleague, glancing at the notes the other man had taken before. Seeing the answers matched, he returned to study Bucky closely.

“Very good, soldier,” he cooed, hand resting briefly on top of Bucky’s head. The gesture was patronizing in every conceivable way, like a parent absentmindedly praising an annoying child. Bucky was repulsed by the touch. He jerked his head away, sparking pain that rippled like a firecracker down his neck and spine. The short man withdrew at Bucky’s sharp intake of breath and turned his back to Bucky in favor of a rapid conversation in German. Before Bucky could focus in on what was being said, the lights began to flicker. With a mangled scream, Bucky once again lost his grip on reality.

The next hour - or maybe hours - fell into a predictable rhythm. Bucky would wake, his ribs licked by fire and spine fractured by sporadic knives of pain. With each round, his head grew heavier, his thoughts muddier, his speech more slurred. One hand refused to release the arm of the chair, as if fused to the spot. Each time, the short little man would wait patiently for Bucky to regain consciousness, would note to his companion the time, and would ask the same three questions. Again and again, Bucky answered, unable to comprehend the point of the exercise. And every time he listed name, rank, and number, the man would smile and the cycle began all over again, just like clockwork.

The eighth time, perhaps the ninth, Bucky didn’t answer the question. Maybe, he reasoned, if he refused to play the game, it might finally end.

“Tell me your name, soldier.”

Silence. The other man stepped forward menacingly, hand returning to his pocket. Bucky shook his head ever so slightly, swaying back and forth.

“Your name, soldier.”

Bucky had expected the man’s voice to grow agitated, for him to be upset at Bucky’s resistance. Instead, his voice rose as if excited, rounding off at the end like a question.

“What is your name, soldier?” A hand seized his jaw, forced his face upwards, making him look up into those demented eyes. Bucky licked his lips nervously, eyes shifting sideways to keep focused on the scientist in the back, keeping his attention on the threat. The little man dropped Bucky’s head, letting his chin droop back to his chest. Bucky heard the other man draw forward. From nowhere, great force came down on Bucky’s clenched hand. Bucky could almost hear the little bones shatter, feeling them break and pierce skin as his hand splayed open. His cry came out like a hiccup, suddenly torn from his lungs without warning.

“Name.”

Bucky lolled his head to the side to glare up at his tormentors, one with the club still in hand. The man brought the tip of the club to rest lightly on the back of Bucky’s shattered hand. The threat registered clearly through the haze of Bucky’s thoughts. As the man slowly raised the club for a new blow, Bucky opened his mouth, working desperately to form words. The club stilled and two pairs of eyes bored into his skull.

“James…Buchanan…Barnes,” he choked out, leaning into the side of the chair. He began shaking violently. This was the moment he broke, Bucky thought. He was beaten. His throat closed in, choking on despair. His ragged breath was torn with shredded sobs and Bucky screwed his eyes closed in defeat. He didn’t dare look up, not at the two men, not at his hand, not at the little switch in the corner. Before the man could ask, Bucky opened his mouth again before he lost his
courage to do so.

“Sergeant. Number 32557038.”

“Very good, Sergeant Barnes.” Two fingers patted his cheek, almost affectionately. The shadows moved away. He didn’t feel the next round - just knew in the deep corners of his consciousness - that his body had begun to convulse and another round had begun.

He gave his name, rank, and number two more times before waking up on the little cot in the room. He awoke to the familiar leather restraints with perverse joy. His mouth was dry and every bone of his body creaked as he wheezed, trying to laugh but only beginning a bout of coughing that wracked his body. His body felt hollow and carved out, the coughs seeming to echo around his gutted rib cage. His hand throbbed dully beside him, shooting occasional flares of pain up his arm. Too tired to care, Bucky breathed out a stuttering sigh and let himself sink back into a dreamless oblivion. Today was finally over.

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Bucky awoke in the cell, not remembering the trip back from the room. It was late at night. The pain hit him a second later like a blow to the stomach. He caught his breath against the cell wall and used his good hand to pull the mangled hand into his lap. Stifling groans of pain, he tilted his head against the wall and counted breaths, trying to drain the dregs of adrenaline out of his system. As he calmed, eyes squeezed shut, he began to hear the cell’s occupants. All seemed to be in deep sleep, breath slow and rhythmic, except for one.

From the corner of the cell Bucky could make out hysteric muttering, like the buzz of a fly trapped against glass. Opening an eye to look, Bucky identified the source of the noise to be the Hyena. The Hyena had given up his usual wheezing laughter. Now, he sat fiddling obsessively with the scraps of his uniform - American - and murmuring with the same manic lilt. Upon closer inspection, the man looked younger, perhaps even younger than Bucky. But his young face was warped with anguish and fatigue, deep etched wrinkles in a stony face. One cheekbone was sliced and bruised a deep purple color, stretching up to his eye. The boy stared out into the middle distance, a space just above Bucky’s left ear. He didn’t notice Bucky staring.

Bucky strained to make out the words whispering from between the boy’s lips. Despite the slurring and stumbling, Bucky made out the same phrase over and over. The two words sent ice into his blood. At the same time though, it was the most human thing Bucky had heard for days. The words resonated, and Bucky found himself repeating them like a prayer.

“Kill me.”

This the Hyena heard, his head snapping up at hearing his own chant echoed back across the cell. Without stopping, he looked up at Bucky, looking him dead in the eye. Despite the shadows, Bucky made out the glimmer of lucidity in the boy’s eyes. A dark fire suddenly rekindled. Unflinchingly, the boy locked Bucky’s eyes and whispered a resolute challenge.

“Kill me.”

Bucky looked away. The boy kept up his chant, just as quietly, but it echoed in Bucky’s ears like a war cry. Like tank treads rumbling on the horizon. Like bombshells breaking over the sea. The words took on a fury, a defiance. The realization dawned on Bucky - the only reason they were being held captive was because they were alive. He knew there was only one way the torture was ever going to end… but maybe it didn’t have to be at the hands of the enemy. Bucky’s heart quickened. This was the revolt he was looking for, his escape and final stand against his captors.
When all that made them valuable was the blood in their veins, then why not spill it? Perhaps, he was not yet beaten.

With energy he didn't know he possessed, Bucky stood and crossed the cell, limping over prone bodies and sleeping forms. The boy quieted as he approached, simply watched with wide owlish eyes. He bared his neck in invitation, his eyes vacant. Before Bucky could think twice, he knelt silently behind the boy, wrapping his good arm around the boy’s throat in a rear choke. The boy tensed but didn’t resist, just sank into the choke without a word. Bucky counted to himself. How long would it take? He felt the boy slump unconscious into his arms, but he could still feel the frantic heartbeat against chest. He waited and waited, arm growing tired, fingers curled into his own shirt for support. The heartbeat grew fainter and Bucky counted to thirty, just to be sure. At thirty, he lowered the boy’s body to the floor and placed his cheek over the boy’s mouth. No hot breath. Nothing at all. The boy, it seemed, was dead. Bucky gently closed the boy’s eyes and posed him as if he had died in his sleep.

He'd done it, struck back. He scrambled back to his spot across the room, heart racing. For a few minutes he simply stared at the corpse, his head a mess of chaotic emotions. Slowly, a strange sort of satisfaction took root. He wasn’t broken, not yet. Bucky clung to this wretched euphoria, relief, the exhilaration slowly draining out of him. Slowly, his heart stopped hammering, the sight of the corpse rendered meaningless in its familiarity.

Still staring at the body, Bucky fell into a restless sleep. In his dreams, the frontlines were stacked on top of the Bronx, bleeding together incoherently. The milkman made his route in uniform and the dance halls smelled of scorched earth. Windows broke under stray baseballs and bullets, and the chiming of the bells reminded Bucky of raid sirens. The sound of drunken sprawling laughter, echoing in his ears, was simultaneously haunting and calming. Bucky passed boys playing in the schoolyard, but moved on quickly as his eyes fell on a small, suspicious mound of earth at the edge of the field, ringed with flowers and white pebbles. Bucky felt an odd rush of terror and nostalgia, the neighborhoods he’d grown up in twisted upon their heads. Yet, when the dream ended, he wished it could have gone on just a little bit longer. Wretched or not, it was a taste of home.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Hearing from you makes my day!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you to actuarialturtle, who put so much time into making this chapter better

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning was quietly terrifying. The boy was indeed dead. The guards distributed breakfast as usual and were slow to notice the corpse. In this cell, men were always slow to respond, each cocooned in his own world. The boy’s food was quickly stolen by knowing inmates. The pangs in Bucky’s stomach resented missing out on the extra rations. Eventually, the guards noticed that the boy was particularly unresponsive and after checking his pulse dragged him unceremoniously from the cell. Bucky tried to forget the sound of his too light body dragging across the floor. His own callousness surprised him, empty gut twisting in disgust.

In the light of dawn Bucky wondered if there had been bruises on the boy’s neck, traces of foul play. If there were, would they notice? Would they care? If he were found out, what new hell awaited him? Bucky swallowed these fears along with his meager rations. He did not contemplate killing the boy for too long. The boy had begged Bucky to kill him. He had sat quietly as Bucky choked him, had leaned into the fatal embrace. Was it still murder? Perhaps. Because Bucky wasn’t so sure he had killed the boy out of mercy. It was mercy, sure, but it was revenge too. Revenge against the men in the room, destruction of what they claimed as their property. Mercy could be forgiven at the pearly gates, but revenge? Bucky doubted it. Then again, Bucky also had very strong doubts God, or heaven for that matter, existed, so perhaps it didn’t matter. He had bigger things to worry about than his immortal soul.

He wondered what Steve would have done. Could Steve have looked into those eyes and denied them? Could he have followed through, waited for the flesh beneath his hands to cool? For once, Bucky didn’t know. He knew Steve would have done what was right...whatever that was. Steve was born with a perfect moral compass and the cursed fate to always follow it. Here in this gray area, Bucky was floundering, lost at sea.

Unbidden, a memory rose to the surface of Bucky’s mind. Bucky probably had a hundred memories like it. This one started with bloody knuckles in an alleyway and shoes scuffed on bullies’ ribcages. As the the culprit rounded the corner, Bucky turned to Steve and extended a hand. He yanked Steve to his feet a little more roughly than necessary and took his jaw in hand, studying Steve’s split lip and the bruise blossoming on his cheek. Steve shook off the examination, straightening his coat and dusting himself off. Bucky could detect his dizziness, saw the way that he swayed in place. Not wanting to damage Steve’s ridiculous pride, he slung an arm around Steve’s tiny frame, hugging him in tight and anchoring him. Bucky guided him from the alleyway, one eye peeled for Steve’s assailant should he come back.

They meandered back to the apartment in comfortable silence. Once inside, Steve leapt for the little box under the bed, pulling out a needle and thread.

“Let me get your forehead,” he offered, eyeing the scratch. It stung a little but hardly merited stitches.

“Nah, I’m fine. Save that for the next time I rescue your sorry ass.” The words were sharp but
there was no particular venom behind them, only enough force to persuade Steve to abandon the needle and thread.

As Steve sulked around the apartment sheepishly, Bucky tried again.

“So, what was it this time, huh?”

Steve flopped on the bed before propping himself on his elbows to look back at Bucky.

“The guy was pestering Mrs. O’Malley, trying to get a ‘discount.’ She wouldn’t let him, so he just walked out without paying at all. She couldn’t do nothing about it, so I stopped him.”

“And that’s how you ended up getting beat up on the corner? Lucky Mrs. O’Malley’s got herself a little guardian angel.” Steve huffed at Bucky but didn’t defend himself.

“So tell me, Stevie, what’s wrong with ya that you gotta chase down every petty crook that crosses your path, huh? ‘Cause I’m starting to think you enjoy getting your face kicked in. You do know that it’s okay to just sit by and think about yourself for once, right?”

“I can’t just sit by, alright? Not when I can do something. Sometimes the only way you know you’re doing the right thing is ‘cause it hurts. Ma always said, being selfish doesn’t hurt.”

“You’ve got a masochistic sense of justice, you know that? Modern day martyr, you are.”

“Piss off.”

Bucky laughed. Something about the complete mismatch between Steve and his body, the impotent fury in Steve’s eyes as he flung his tiny fists, made Bucky laugh. It was sad, in reality, so Bucky chose to laugh instead. That’s why he and Steve got along. Bucky showed him no pity, teased him mercilessly but always stepped in to save his hide. Together, they were the perfect duo: the heart and the muscles. Brain and brawn - though Steve’s brains might have been scrambled from the number of beatings he’d taken.

The reverie tapered off and Bucky drifted back to reality. You’ll know you’re doing the right thing because it hurts. Then, shit, by that logic Bucky had been a veritable saint the last few days.

Bucky let Steve’s words simmer, rolling ideas around in his head. He focused on the facts. Men were going to die anyway. Many had died already. They had all been here at least two weeks with no sign of an end. It could then be assumed that the experiments would continue until they died. The hostage information had been taken, which suggested maybe there were negotiations going on, but Bucky doubted it. He debated the likelihood of rescue. Most of the 107th had died or been captured. The regiment was shattered and the war was only getting bloodier. In the scale of modern war, Bucky realized, his regiment amounted to nothing. Canon fodder. Risking valuable lives to recapture them? Out of the question.

There would be no rescue. No hostage exchange. In here, so deep behind enemy lines, there was no chance of escape. They were here to die, or worse. And it was going to hurt. All of this, Bucky considered, was fact.

Now he turned to the hypotheticals. If he were to kill the others, release them from this hell, how long would it take before someone noticed? How many could die before he was suspected? He could, potentially, kill them all. That’d leave only him and the scientists would know that he’d been the one destroying their work. The thought of the punishment they might inflict for such a crime was enough to make Bucky break out in cold sweat. The Germans certainly wouldn’t let him die kindly. Absolutely not slowly.
And perhaps that made this the right thing. The consequences terrified him. What was a better indicator of selflessness? And if there was a part of Bucky that got satisfaction out of frustrating the Nazi’s designs, then maybe he’d be able to sleep at night.

To his surprise, it wasn’t the killing that bothered him. He knew this hell as intimately as every other man here. He knew that if he had to choose between dying now and dying on the operating table or in the chair, he’d choose now without a second thought. Chances were, the other prisoners felt the same. In this, Bucky felt horrifically certain. Wasn’t that the golden rule, after all? *Do unto others as you’d have them do unto you.* Because Bucky would take any escape. Any.

It took a moment for him to mull over what he’d just thought. He’d finally admitted that he wanted to die. Or, more specifically, he’d rather die than keep living like this. Bucky faced this epiphany with nauseated resignation. The pieces finally slotted together, spelling out Bucky’s answer in grim terms. There was no other option - no rescue, no escape, no conceivable end - only death, either by his hand or theirs. He would save them all, then himself. Even in his mind, “save” had become a euphemism. He was going to kill them, then himself. He forced himself to think the word “kill,” to come to terms with it. His stomach turned, but his resolve remained.

He’d do it tonight. Bucky looked at the crumpled figures around him and swallowed down his uncertainty. Tonight.

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Bucky couldn’t remember a longer day in his life. Granted, Bucky was having trouble remembering much of anything anymore. Sometimes, memories would surface, only to disappear seconds later. Trying to hold onto them was pointless, they would disintegrate like old newspapers, crumbling and tearing as he tried to grasp them. He continued this maddening exercise, fought desperately to remember. He conjured faces but couldn’t recall names. He struggled to remember the first girl he’d ever kissed, the way her voice had sounded, the feel of her lips. He vaguely remembered the flash of Coney Island lights in the background, but the girl herself was hard to pin down. She had blonde hair, he remembered that. Bucky tried to remember the apartment Steve and he shared. He remembered the floor plan: the cramped kitchen, the living room that bled into the bedroom separated by a cheap folding panel balanced on the wardrobe, the creaky bed he and Steve shared on cold nights, the little dining table and decrepit chairs, their tiny bathroom with a dusty mirror. Bucky remembered those things, but he couldn’t quite place the colors of the wall, couldn’t remember the view from the half papered window or the name of the man next door.

Things beyond Brooklyn were fuzzier still. He knew that he’d vacationed as a kid out in the countryside. Tennessee? Or was it Ohio? He had an image of a small estate painted eggshell white, of his mother’s face lighting up as they went up the drive, but he couldn’t remember why they went. Family, probably. Did his grandparents live there? He couldn’t be sure. Bucky remembered why they’d stopped visiting though. They’d sold the family car just a year after the market crash - had sold it for close to nothing. His family was well enough off, enough so that Bucky escaped the bread lines, but he remembered crying the day they’d sold the car. He was young then. Maybe they’d sold it in ’30? Bucky struggled to fill in the gaps, his brain skipping over blanks like a cheap record.

The war was further from his grasp still. He could picture faces in uniform, could name a few even, but details escaped him. Who was his CO? The man next to him on that march to… somewhere cold… had kept singing this one song. It was a blues piece, something melancholy, but Bucky couldn’t recall the lyrics. He’d become a sniper during basic, he remembered that. He’d blown away every target on the range. Or did he miss one? No, he hit them all. Probably.

He’d gotten a nickname in the army after a particularly brutal battle. The swoop of his stomach
as he fell, blown from his sniper’s nest by a stray artillery slug, remained with him in vivid clarity. He’d escaped at the last second, diving from his post and making a twenty-foot drop. He limped his way back to safety under heavy fire. Bucky remembered the booming, the way the ground had pitched beneath his feet as bombs exploded and rocked the earth. He’d stumbled out of the crossfire to safety, scaring the hell out of a group of privates huddled behind a barricade, fumbling with their ammo. Bucky was covered in something black, probably soot. He took over their position, taking down a dozen men at close range. The greenhorns had just sat back and watched, firing off a pot shot every now and then. Ever since then they’d called him “Crow.” Something about swooping down from the trees heralding death. Something poetic like that. The nickname always made him feel a little sick. He’d seen crows perched on corpses, seen their innocuous beaks rip apart the dead. Bloody flying maggots with soulless inky eyes.

Why couldn’t he have forgotten the crows? Why hadn’t he lost the faces of the too young dying in the mud, their final moments printed like lithographs on the insides of Bucky’s eyelids when he tried to sleep? Their names were now long lost to the sands of memory, but, God, why did their images linger?

Bucky’s memory teased him with ghosts of fire, of camping in the forest, of staring up into cloudless skies like an ageless sentry. There were snapshots of serenity littered among the debris of destruction and war and he sifted through these like shards of a looking glass, cutting his fingers in search of some piece that could reflect a kinder place. He lost himself in hazy recollection, numbed to both the cruel and the kind, drunkenly reveling in remembering anything at all. He tried to ground the good memories, replaying them until they became threadbare.

So many memories of Steve. Steve lit up those snapshots, a rare streak of color in the monochrome reels. He provided a precious backbone, the binding behind the strewn moth-eaten chapters. When all other details blurred, when Bucky couldn’t quite remember a voice’s lilt, or when a face became indistinct, blurred like the scowl of a gargoyle weathered by storms above cathedral eaves, Steve remained as the anchor. He stood out in sharp relief - the angles of his inward sloping chest, the hollows of his cheeks, the ground glass blue of his eyes, the horrible sound of his wracking coughs, the way he pulled himself to his feet. These things were Bucky’s center. If he was going to remember anything, it was going to be Steve. He could forget his own name, but he’d never shake that little punk’s face. Steve, even in memory, was too stubborn for that. In quiet relief, Bucky stopped dredging through memory, firm that at least one thing remained etched in stone.

His stupor ended in late noon. Half the men around him slept restlessly, jutting limbs helplessly entangled with their neighbors, the way dogs sleep in cold winter. Bucky laughed out loud, surprising himself with the sound of his own voice. The sound drew the curious eyes of his neighbor. Kolya sat up, eyes focusing on Bucky. His skin had shriveled in on chiseled muscle, pulling gaunt shadows over his shoulders like drapes. Bucky shot him a sidelong glance.

“<Tell me about your family.>”

Bucky spoke without thinking, his voice echoing dangerously around the silent cell. It felt like a challenge, but Bucky refused to lower his voice to a whisper. All the same, his throat and chest burned with the effort. Kolya studied him curiously for a moment before drawing his body closer, sitting next to Bucky. He stared out at the door, facing the same way, not making eye contact.

“<I have a wife and a daughter. My daughter will be three soon.>” Kolya nodded solemnly to himself, assuring himself of the facts.


“<Yes.>” The response came quickly and emphatically. “<Yes>,” he repeated, “<very pretty.
Brown hair, brown eyes. But her *smile*. Her smile is perfect. And she only smiles for me.” Kolya’s eyes closed wistfully, a faint smile on his lips.

“<Do you remember her well?>” There was more to that question, and Kolya recognized it too, shooting Bucky a look that spoke volumes. *So you can’t remember either?*

“<Her? Always. But, the other things… my memory is…>” Kolya trailed off, shaking his head and gesturing vaguely. The silence stretched.

“<Is she waiting for you back home?>” Bucky asked, voice dropping to a whisper. He could imagine Kolya - somewhere in Soviet Russia, whatever that looked like - cradling a baby girl in his arms and smiling dopily at a pretty farm girl. The picture brought a hard lump to his throat. She’d be alone, Bucky thought. Would she know? Did the Soviets write letters back home, too? Bucky had seen the Colonel signing letters, knew what his own would look like.

THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR SON SERGEANT JAMES BARNES HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE…

Except Bucky hadn’t listed his family, per se. The draft notice had caught him off guard. The address of their Brooklyn apartment had been the first to come to mind, staring at the papers with dread in his gut. In his rush, he had listed Steve as next of kin when he dashed out his forms.

…YOUR NEIGHBOR SERGEANT JAMES BARNES…
…YOUR FRIEND SERGEANT JAMES BARNES…
…YOUR SERGEANT JAMES BARNES…

No matter what way he pictured it, the stale letter looked odd, surreal even. He tried not to imagine Steve receiving that letter. In a way, he hoped it would get lost in the mail. That way Steve might get a few more years of thinking Bucky was coming home.

Kolya considered Bucky’s question, grinding his jaw. He opened his mouth a few times, as if to say something, before closing it again, considering. Finally:

“<Is she still…waiting? I do not think so. You may know already, but where I lived things are not so good now. I have not heard from her in very long time. I hope she is well, but…>” Kolya shot Bucky a sidelong glance. Bucky could only hear the hope in his voice as he trailed off. In a way though - and Bucky hated the part of him that thought it - not having someone back home might be better. It would make dying a little less scary.

“<I am sure she will be there when you get home.>” The words fell dryly from Bucky’s lips. He couldn’t force himself to try to mean it. There was an understanding in war; you say what has to be said, things like “We’ll win this war” or “Hang on, you’re going to make it,” but after a while you stopped believing them. “She’s waiting for you,” had been the kind of thing you said when the letters stopped coming, or “Must be a delay in the mail.” But America wasn’t being bombed. New
York wasn’t on the frontlines. His mother, Becky, Steve, every Brooklyn dame waiting for their man back home, they were all safe. Odds are, Bucky knew, Kolya’s girl was long gone. Their daughter too. Bucky scowled, shaking off his imagination, which threatened to illustrate the story playing out in his head.

“Fuck.” The word felt horribly insufficient, but it was all Bucky had. Kolya smiled sadly, but his eyes fixed on Bucky with a new expression on his face. Casting his eyes over the door and around the room, he leaned in close to Bucky.

“I know.” Kolya’s sudden transition to English caught Bucky off guard.

“Huh?”

Kolya shifted in place, glancing around before drawing closer to Bucky.

“I know. About last night.”

Bucky’s blood ran cold. He whipped his head around to face Kolya, shifting his gaze back and forth between Kolya and the door. He tried to say something, to feign ignorance, to defend himself, to…do anything. Kolya beat him to it.

“<You think we will not leave here then?>”

Bucky paused, then nodded.

“<No one is coming. Not for me, at least.>” Bucky laughed. He had a habit of that, of laughing when he wanted to cry. He’d laughed as he fell out of the sniper’s nest. Had laughed when he received his draft card. Had laughed as Steve tried to enlist for the fourth time. Had laughed as he said goodbye.

His laughter was rough now, sounded more like a cough. He winced at the way his gut seized. He was suddenly gripped by the urge to vomit. The emotional pivot left his head swimming and he stared ahead, blinking black spots from his vision and still laughing. The sound echoed familiar in his ears. The hysteria was a disease, and he’d picked it up from the corpse the second his fingers touched the boy’s throat.

Kolya looked at him carefully, unshaken by Bucky’s display. Kolya turned his eyes to the men around them, studying each.

After a long moment, he looked back at Bucky. His eyes, Bucky noticed, were a flinty blue. Sharp and dangerous. He met Bucky’s gaze with a furrowed brow.

“<Okay.>” Kolya nodded and moved back to his corner, eyes scanning the room like a sentry.

“<Okay what?>” Bucky spluttered, feeling as if he’d missed something. His mind rewound through the terse conversation, parsing Kolya’s Russian for something he’d misunderstood. Was he forgetting Russian now too? English?

Kolya just nodded solemnly at Bucky.

“<Tonight.>”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading!! Things are getting a little darker from here on out (relatively speaking, I suppose). But there is light at the end of the tunnel! (After all, I've stuck as close to the MCU canon as humanly possible, so you know what has to eventually happen.)

Thank you so much to the kind people who've left comments. You really make my day 1000 times better.

Historical/Cultural Note Time:
1) The MIA letter that Bucky is imagines is based on the one we overhear Colonel Phillips dictating in the movie, but I also referenced a few similar ones. This one was my template and was pretty much identical to the one in the movie (so props to whoever did their research).
http://freepages.family.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~webermd1/19441116%20MIA%20Notice%20Weber
2) A Russian cultural note about smiling. I am not Russian, so this is based purely on what I've been told by Russian teachers and friends. In Russian culture, smiling is seen as a far more intimate act than in America. For example, most Russians do not smile at people in stores or walking down the street. This is also why a lot of Russians (especially in the Soviet era) don't smile in pictures. A smile is considered a beautiful thing that becomes cheapened if you share it with too many people. I incorporated this into Kolya's character, who doesn't smile until much later into his friendship with Bucky. I also couldn't resist including it in his description of his wife.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for waiting! (I know it's been a little while.) The events of this chapter were what gave me the idea to start this fic in the first place, so I wanted to get it just right. That said, a million thanks to my beta, ActuarialTurtle, who kept me grounded in reality. (Something I can't thank her for enough.)

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky slept uneasily through the afternoon, immune to the stirrings around him. Beside him, Kolya sat unmoving in the corner, as if he had been carved out of the wall - one of DaVinci’s angels freed from the marble. His face - caked with dirt and god knows what - was somber, his skin tinted the color of iron in the gloom. Bucky avoided looking at him, as if it might give away their conspiracy. Not that anyone would have noticed. Bucky felt generally nauseated, feverish even. He was anxious and sweaty, palms damp as he clasped them in his lap. The waiting was slowly killing him, but he half-hoped the sun would never set.

With agonizing slowness, darkness fell inside the cell, lights dimming in the hall outside. Bucky rose quietly, positioned himself closer to the door, and glanced out of the bars. The guard was bored and sleepy, pacing ever farther from the door. Perhaps he meant to sneak out in a while. It was late at night and the soldier was guarding probably the easiest charge in the entire compound. It wouldn’t be hard to subdue a dozen men who could barely move, much less dare to start a fight in the first place. Bucky was counting on that. Bucky turned back to survey the cell’s sleeping occupants. In their midst, Kolya crouched, anxiously stretching his arms. Something in his manner reminded Bucky of a swimmer about to dive.

Catching Bucky’s eye, Kolya took off his shirt and indicated for Bucky to do the same. Uncomprehending but compliant, Bucky raised the hem over his head. His dog tags clanged faintly against each other as they fell against his chest. Without his shirt, Bucky keenly felt the cold night air that drafted in from the guard’s window. The brush of night air made the hair on the back of Bucky’s neck stand on end. The shirt in his hands was unrecognizable, caked with dirt and dried stiff with sweat and blood. He folded it a few times, loosening the brittle fabric.

When Bucky looked up, Kolya was waiting expectantly, squatting with his shirt twisted in one hand. Bucky studied him distantly: the striped burn patterns on his chest, the Grecian muscle, the way his chest wavered as he drew breath, the only indication of his nerves. Bucky didn’t look down at himself. He knew he’d be able to see his ribs, the burns, and scars. He didn’t want to know how pitiful he looked, some half-dead animal. If he didn’t look, he could maybe preserve some last shred of dignity.

Once Bucky made eye contact, Kolya knelt all the way to the ground, gently scooping the head of the man next to him into his lap. He waited a few seconds, and, getting no response from the sleeper, placed the shirt over the man’s mouth. Kolya waited another few seconds, saw that the man didn’t stir, and then wrapped an arm around the man’s throat, his other hand holding the shirt to the man’s lips.
Blood chokes don’t really hurt, not the way normal chokes do. Press on a man’s trachea and he will find strength he didn’t know he possessed. Primal instincts protect the sacred airway. Asphyxiation is a messy and uncomfortable way to die. But not so with blood chokes. Block the artery to a man’s brain and he’ll look at you funny before he passes out, not realizing a thing. Bucky had firsthand experience on that account, having woken up with a facefull of the reeking mats at Goldie’s Gym more than a few times, unable to remember how he got there.

Kolya’s target squirmed awake in a few seconds. The man blinked away sleep and peered curiously at Bucky before trying to twist his head to see whose arms were wrapped a little too tightly around his neck. Before he could utter a syllable, Kolya stuffed the shirt in the man’s mouth, gagging him. Kolya shot his legs out from underneath himself, hooking them around the confused man’s flailing legs. He muffled the man’s struggles, but from the doorway Bucky could still hear the dull thud of the man’s foot as he tried to push off the floor to disentangle himself. The man tried to shout around the foul cloth in his mouth, but Bucky couldn’t make out the words. Bucky looked away, something heavy in his stomach, and looked out the barred window to see if the guard had heard anything. He watched the guard pace the length of the hall, unaware of the struggle inside the cell. As Bucky played sentinel, the sounds from Kolya’s corner of the room quieted. There were fewer muffled thuds, then the little whimpers and mumbling grew quieter until the room fell silent again. A few men stirred in their dreams, but no one awoke.

The quiet stretched until Bucky dared to turn back to Kolya. With one last glance at the unwitting guard, Bucky tiptoed back over comatose bodies to where Kolya sat, cradling the man in his arms, ankles and knees still hooked intertwined. Bucky pressed his ear to the sleeper’s chest, listening for the dull thud of a heartbeat. To his dismay, a faint flutter reached his ears. He shook his head at Kolya, who adjusted his grip, staring off into the middle distance as he waited. After a pause, Bucky knelt again and listened. This time, the only sound was his own pulse rushing in his ears. He nodded to Kolya. Kolya released his grip and the man’s body slumped against Kolya’s chest, one boot clunking against the floor. Kolya climbed out from underneath the body and pulled his shirt from the dead man’s mouth. Bucky helped him quietly move the corpse up against the wall. He winced at the fading warmth beneath his hands.

The deed done, Bucky and Kolya locked eyes. Neither dared look away, the look sealing their unspoken pact. They were both traitors. Traitors to what, Bucky was not entirely sure, but he felt repulsed by himself, by what he had witnessed, more so by the fact he had chosen not to watch. Now, though, it was too late to turn back.

Kolya looked at Bucky’s mangled hand, still raw where tiny shards of bone had pierced the skin. Bucky’s hand hung frozen grotesquely by his side. Kolya raised an eyebrow pointedly.

Can you still do this?

Bucky read the question in his eyes, nodded a response.

I’ll manage.

Kolya didn’t answer, his face remaining stony as he turned, scanning the crowd for signs of consciousness. The two of them listened intently, for someone breathing too fast, for someone shifting in their sleep, or for the returning footsteps of the guard. All remained quiet.

As if moving on the same unheard signal, the two faced away from each other and returned to their task. Bucky sat gingerly beside a man in the corner. Imitating Kolya, Bucky took the man’s head, rested it on his thigh, and waited for a response. He wanted desperately to look away from the man’s peaceful face. Instead, he studied the man’s collar, inspecting his uniform for telltale colors. French. The man sighed in his sleep, falling deeper into his dreams. The sound spooked Bucky, his
heart leaping into his throat. He gathered his courage as he slid behind the man so that his target rested against Bucky’s bare chest. It was strangely intimate, feeling the man’s sleepy heartbeat thumping against his chest. So vulnerable. Familiar even, inviting parallels that made Bucky’s stomach twist. Bucky forced himself to wait another ten seconds, raising his wadded shirt to the man’s mouth with his mangled hand. He could barely hold the light fabric and his whole arm trembled with pain and exertion, but Bucky swallowed it back. Ten. Bucky slid his good arm around the sleeping man’s neck, tucking the man’s head against his bare shoulder. He waited. Another five seconds. Bucky took a deep breath, and tightened the grip.

No response from the sleeping man. For a moment, Bucky feared that his choke was too weak, but he felt the man’s pulse against his forearm. He’d done chokes before, knew that this was how it felt. But he’d never done it to kill, not until the other night. He’d always waited for the other man to slump, to stop fighting and cursing. Then it was drop the guy and run, usually half dragging Steve behind him.

The sleeper’s pulse began to slow. His body twitched and convulsed every few seconds, but he never awoke. Bucky counted to fifty, uncertain. He just stared at the doorway, trying not to feel the second heartbeat slowing. It slowed then disappeared, too faint for Bucky to feel. Another twenty seconds and the man would be dead. Bucky took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. No turning back. He counted breaths, forcing himself to stay calm. Finally, he let go, lowering the man’s torso to the ground. Quickly, he put his ear on the man’s chest, listening for the telltale rhythm. Finding none, he held his shredded hand over the man’s face. When the sensitive flesh detected no faint breath, Bucky sunk back against the wall. He shuddered, the last minutes’ events sinking in. That made it two now. How many more times would he have to do this? His nerves shot, Bucky shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. He was sweaty, clammy in the cold night air.

Kolya finished and glanced over at Bucky. Wordlessly, he sat beside another man, facing away from Bucky, and began all over again. But Bucky saw the tension in his stoic shoulders. It was enough to force Bucky to his feet, to his next victim.

This one woke up, in his last seconds. Bucky felt him stir before his eyes shot open, arms clawing at the arm snaked around his neck. Bucky stuffed the shirt his mouth, forcing the man’s jaw open, and held it in place. Pain shot up his mangled hand and Bucky inhaled sharply, gasping at the pain like he was searching for air. He set his jaw and hooked the man’s legs as he’d seen Kolya do, frustrating the man’s attempts to turn and face Bucky. The man’s nails left bloody gashes in Bucky’s arms where they dug in. The flailing man’s grip quickly lost strength and his arms slid resolutely back to his sides. Bucky felt the tension flood out of the man’s body as he fell unconscious. Counting the seconds, Bucky waited, his hand sending flares of pain shooting up his arm. When he reached thirty, Bucky dropped his arms, cradling the mauled arm to his chest. Leaning against the wall he muttered quiet but fiery curses until the agony subsided into a persistent throb. Remembering his job, he checked the man’s pulse, then pulled his shirt out of the man’s mouth. No heartbeat, no breathing. That made three.

Chest heaving from the struggle, Bucky looked over to Kolya, who was holding a hand over his target’s mouth. Kolya sent him a concerned look, eyeing the maimed hand. He was breathing hard too. In the dim light, Bucky made out bloody rivulets on Kolya’s arms, angry red crescent moons. Bucky made his way to the door and crouched to watch. The guard was down the hall, having a smoke. As he watched the puff of smoke dissipate in the grainy yellow light, Bucky nodded to Kolya. Bucky chose the man next to him, positioning himself so he could watch the door.

Something about it calmed his nerves.

Bucky’s next target went quietly, to his disgusted relief. Four. Bucky didn’t pause as he moved to the next, letting himself be swept away in the momentum. If he worked mechanically, like on the
docks, he could escape the tightness in his throat. The guilt. If he pretended this was anything else, perhaps he could stomach it. Five.

Number six did not cooperate. Bucky was almost side by side with Kolya, their targets having unfortunately twined in sleep. From the close distance, Bucky could hear Kolya muttering in Russian, counting the seconds. Bucky let himself be lulled by Kolya’s voice, imagined it was the rhythmic clang of hammers at noon. Distracted, he didn’t notice his target wake up until he began to writhe in Bucky’s arms with a lucid fury. Bucky moved to gag him, shoving the damp fabric into the man’s jaws. The sleeper bit down, teeth coming down on Bucky’s destroyed hand. Bucky cried out, involuntarily pulling away. The sleeper began to shout, wrenching free of Bucky’s one-armed grip. Before Bucky could respond, blinded by the white hot pain in his hand, Kolya lurched forward. The movement reminded Bucky of a cobra’s strike, fast and deadly. Kolya’s two hands shot forward, grabbed the screaming man’s jaws, and snapped his neck with fatal efficiency. There was a sickening snap and the man crumpled lifelessly onto Bucky’s chest. The man’s head hung at an unnatural angle over Bucky’s shoulder, lips parted and tongue lolling. Revolted and shocked, Bucky pushed the corpse off of him where it came to rest in a limp pile on the floor. Bucky sucked in a shuddering, shocked breath.

He’d seen worse, he repeated to himself. Had touched worse. Had done worse. How many times had he watched skulls shatter from behind his rifle scope? Had he not skirted the bodies in the trenches, half picked apart my rats and crows? He had not forgotten the smell of singed flesh, of every bodily fluid as it flowed out and soaked into the mud. A snapped neck, Bucky reminded himself, was nothing. It was clean and quick.

Thinking fast, Bucky wrenched his attention to the door, piling a corpse on top of this one, as if they had become entangled in sleep. He dragged the two to a darker part of the cell, hiding their still chests. Ignoring the pain, he pulled his shirt back on and threw himself against the wall in an illuminated section near the door. Kolya withdrew to the other side of the cell, carefully avoiding prone bodies of the sleeping and dead alike.

The guard was coming back. Bucky’s mind raced for ways to pass off the noise. A nightmare.

Thinking fast, Bucky closed his eyes, keeping one eye just open enough that he could peer out from beneath the lid. As soon as he saw the guard’s face come into view, he started to whimper, as if gripped by nightmares. He grew louder, paused a few seconds, then shouted. It was the scream of a trapped animal, wounded in the hunter’s trap. With that, Bucky slumped against the wall, as if dragged back down into the waves of sleep. He twitched a few times, letting his bare feet slap the floor in the throes of a feigned nightmare. With this, the performance ended. The guard moved away unalarmed, if not a little disappointed. Bucky kept his lids low, should his audience return. Once the lone footsteps grew distant, he carefully opened his eyes. Kolya studied him from across the room and nodded once cautiously.

Let’s finish this. Quickly.

Bucky returned the nod and slipped his hand beneath the next man’s neck. With quiet determination, the two men returned to their work. Seven. Number Eight was dead before Bucky reached him, had passed in sleep. Bucky was quietly relieved. He and Kolya checked each man, felt for pulses. In a tense five minutes, they confirmed they were that last two inhabitants. The cell had grown steadily quieter, silent but for Kolya and Bucky’s breathing. The two sat and faced each other uncertainly, regarding the other warily. What came next had been left unspoken.

“What now?” Bucky whispered, staying carefully away from Kolya in the opposite end of the cell.

“I do not wish to die,” Kolya replied, voice low and certain.
“<You realize what will happen tomorrow morning?>” Bucky hissed, "<Just you and a mountain of dead lab rats? I only see that ending one way. They can do worse to you. Things can always get worse. I don’t want to find out what that feels like. Neither do you.>"

“<Are you afraid?>” Kolya asked. There was no malice, no judgment in his voice. It was a simple question, the way a child would ask it.

“<Of them?> Bucky stifled the bitter laughter that threatened to bubble up in his chest. “<Absolutely.>”

“<And you would rather die?>”

“<Rather than let them kill me. Aren’t you afraid?>”

“<Yes.>”

Bucky mulled this over, trying to comprehend.

“<Then why are you going to let them find you tomorrow? We’re dead either way. Just depends how long you want to suffer before your time comes. You get that, right?>” Bucky fought to keep his voice down, suddenly growing anxious.

“<I am a soldier.>” Kolya spoke as if the sentence sufficed for an explanation.

“<What does that even mean? That means nothing in this hellhole. Nothing.>” Bucky hissed back, voice rising dangerously.

“<A soldier must die fighting. This.>” Kolya gestured to the sprawled bodies, “<is our war, yes? Our battle.>” Kolya paused, nodding emphatically. “<I will see it to its end. To kill myself now would be cowardly. As a soldier, it would be shameful.>”

Fury rose in Bucky’s chest from somewhere he didn’t recognize. He was not angry about the veiled insult. He didn’t care about being a soldier. Being a soldier meant blindly taking orders, dying for some abstract cause in another man’s war. Being a soldier, for all Bucky cared, was for idiots with no designs for their futures, no value for their own lives. It was for hopeful, rosy-eyed morons like Steve. Men who were too eager to throw their lives away. Drafted men like Bucky were not soldiers. They were just unlucky.

"<I’m not going to let you take the fall for this. That wasn't the plan.>” Bucky whispered, locking Kolya's eyes, almost pleading. Bucky wasn't sure what the plan had been - they hadn't exactly discussed it - but this wasn't it. Bucky tried to read between the lines. Kolya was scared; underneath the soldier’s mask, he was exhausted and terrified. But he was proud too, and stubborn. With one last glance at the fallen men around them - all soldiers, too - Bucky’s anger distilled into action. He felt numb, automatic even. He had made up his mind to save everyone, no turning back. Kolya was determined to die a soldier's death, fighting. Their objectives, Bucky realized, were compatible.

Kolya sensed the change in Bucky, felt the way his posture changed, saw his eyes brighten. Kolya recognized the look as blind, blunt bloodlust. The two men stood at the same time with a sudden shared understanding. It would be a compassionate conflict, a heatless battle. They ceased to heed the door. The guard would not make it in time, could do nothing to intervene in their two-man war.

Kolya made the first move.

Bucky dodged the hands reaching for his jaw, painfully aware of the power in those fingertips.
He sidestepped and retaliated, aiming a blow at Kolya’s chin. He was too slow though and Kolya saw it coming, blocking the attack and grabbing Bucky’s shoulder. Before Bucky could shake Kolya’s grip, Kolya returned a punch across his cheek. Bucky whirled from the force of the strike, breaking loose of Kolya’s grip and slamming into to the wall. Bucky crumpled, vision fading in and out, face pressed into the cold ground. Kolya wasted no time closing in, aiming a crushing kick at Bucky's spine. Bucky rolled, the blow coming down on his chest. The force emptied his lungs, leaving him gasping and retching. His muscles seized and, almost involuntarily, Bucky clung to the foot as he twisted onto his side. The maneuver was enough to bring Kolya down on top of him.

On the ground, Bucky found his advantage. He was slippery and could land elbow strikes at close range. Standing, his hand was a major liability. He wouldn’t be able to win in a punching game, couldn’t get in close enough to be effective. On the ground though, he had a chance. He didn’t have much experience fighting from the ground, but he’d watched the wrestlers at Goldie’s Gym, had spoken with them, learned his way around a few chokeholds and locks. Picked up some basics. And, right now, he was desperate enough to try anything. His body acted on muscle memory, instinctively countering shifts in weight, finding openings for a strike.

Finally, Bucky got his chance. He sat straddled across Kolya’s chest, his knees pinning Kolya’s biceps to the floor. He didn’t weigh much, particularly after so long in the army, but he managed to keep Kolya down. Kolya squirmed underneath Bucky, trying to throw him off. He didn’t yell or call for help, but his eyes blazed with unspoken ferocity. Maybe even a little desperation.

Before Kolya could roll him off, Bucky leaned forward and seized Kolya’s dog tags. He looped the necklace around his wrists and crossed the chain, making an x across Kolya’s windpipe. The metal dug into Bucky’s wrists, slowly cutting off circulation. He persisted though, praying that the thin chain would hold out. Dog tags were designed to survive what their wearers could not; surely the chain could withstand this.

Kolya’s face contorted in pain and panic, becoming grotesque as it slowly lost color, pink becoming purple. Kolya’s struggles only grew stronger as he tried desperately to throw Bucky off. One particularly violent spasm knocked Bucky off balance and sent him pitching forward towards Kolya’s head. At the last moment, Bucky pulled his good hand free and caught himself. Kolya seized the opportunity to gasp for air. Bucky panicked as he felt Kolya start to wriggle out from underneath. Bucky sat back, trying to sink all his weight on Kolya’s chest in a last-ditch attempt to keep Kolya pinned. All the same, Kolya managed to work an arm out from underneath Bucky’s knee and started to prop himself up to sit up. Kolya’s shoulder was already off the ground. In a moment, he’d have enough leverage to roll Bucky off completely. Bucky’s mind whirred, desperate.

His mangled hand still tangled in Kolya’s dog tags, Bucky aimed an elbow strike at Kolya’s jaw, throwing all of his body weight behind the blow. Kolya’s head snapped to the side, slamming back to the floor. Bucky didn’t see it, but he heard the twin cracks - a neck breaking, a skull shattering against concrete. Bucky lay there frozen a moment in shock. Warm blood pooled beneath Bucky’s fingertips, reassuring him of the reality beneath him. Gingerly, Bucky sat up and disentangled his left hand from the dog tags. Kolya’s face had frozen in his death mask, brow furrowed with effort and mouth quirked in a small expression of surprise. The blood from the back of his skull oozed onto the concrete floor, a scarlet halo.

Carefully, Bucky stood and stepped away from the body. He found his shirt and put it back on with trembling hands, a sudden wave of exhaustion washing over him. Bucky stole one last look at Kolya and the innocently gleaming dog tags.

“Do svidaniya.”
Bucky scoured the room, scanning the tangled bodies. All that betrayed that they weren’t sleeping was the suffocating silence of the cell, finally free of midnight moaning and crying and restless dreaming. Bucky alone broke the silence. He picked up Kolya’s discarded shirt and numbly ripped it into long strips. He knotted the strips together and tied the pieced-together rope into something resembling a noose. There was nowhere to hang himself, but Bucky figured he’d find a way. He’d choke himself, didn’t need anything fancy to do that.

A new sound cut through the silence. Boots. Three or four pairs of boots moving quickly. They were coming. Belatedly, Bucky realized the guard must have heard the fight and gone for backup. Bucky cursed aloud and hurriedly slipped the knot over his head with fumbling fingers. He prayed for enough time and yanked hard on the end, feeling the knot cinch quickly. He pulled, hoping desperately his slipshod plan would work. The rope tightened around his windpipe and Bucky fought the urge to gag. He staggered, struggling to keep his grip on the noose tight. He focused on pulling, keeping the rope taut, even as the pain and panic mounted. The edges of his vision started to blur and Bucky suddenly felt heavy, too heavy to stand. The voices grew nearer and Bucky heard the cell door slam open. Rough hands grabbed him and dragged him to his feet. When had he ended up on the floor? Another set of hands tugged at the noose, working it loose. Bucky sucked in breath automatically. Immediately, he heaved and retched. Little came forth but bile, but he was left sucking air helplessly as he was manhandled out of the cell. Twisting to look behind him, Bucky saw two men kneel by the prone forms on the floor.

Cursing is the universal language. Amidst the angry muttering, Bucky had a good idea what was being said behind him. He smiled to himself. He’d won, but he was going to pay for it. By God, he was going to pay for it. The two men dragging Bucky away flung open the door of the nearest room. Bucky’s stomach dropped as he was brought through the threshold. To his relief, no scientist awaited him in the room and the guards dropped him unceremoniously on the cot, strapping him down. Bucky had lost all strength to struggle, just stared woozily at the concrete ceiling and windowless walls. He tried to make out what was being said, but everything sounded as if it were coming from the far end of a tunnel. The two men withdrew a few steps, talking quickly and angrily, sending several glances over at Bucky. Their colleagues appeared in the doorway, something like panic on their faces. Bucky read their conversation on their faces as they deliberated a few feet away.

They’re all dead. All but him.

What do we do now?

Who do we tell?

The words themselves arrived on Bucky’s ears echoed and warped. When the last man exited the room, slamming the door shut and grinding the bolt, Bucky was already quickly on his way back to the black void of sleep. He prayed he wouldn’t wake up.

Chapter End Notes

This is extensively based on my personal experience and newspaper articles/martial arts research, so it's pretty accurate (though take it with a grain of salt). Want the morbid details? Read on.

1) The stuff about blood chokes is 100% realistic based on my personal experience on both the giving and receiving ends. You really don’t feel those coming and they can
work FAST. (What Bucky and Kolya use on the sleepers is called a “rear naked choke.”)

2) The way Bucky tries to kill himself is a little iffy but not totally impossible. I based his experience on the “choking game” (a “game” where tweens choke themselves out with household stuff to get an Oxygen high, kills people every year). It’d be hard to do without tying the other end to something sturdy, but if Bucky tied the end of the rope to his foot, the weight might keep the choke strong enough once he passed out (otherwise, the way he tries to do it, the rope goes slack once he’s unconscious).

3) Kolya’s death was the hardest to get right. It’d be hard to kill someone by just twisting their dog tags really tightly over the windpipe, but people kill themselves in the choking game with shoelaces, so it is possible. Snapping his neck (or at least really messing his neck up) and smashing his head into the ground, of course, is much more likely to work.

On an unrelated note, I headcanon that some of the inmates were, in fact, awake.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you to my wonderful beta, actuarialturtle. And a thousand thanks to the people who’ve left comments and stuck with this despite the giant gaps between chapters. School’s out, so expect faster updates to come.

Bucky has to suffer a little longer, but we’ll be catching up to the canon soon, so stay tuned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Bucky awoke suddenly, panicking at the tight restraints. His whole body ached and he could hardly breathe. Bruising crept across his throat and his head throbbed. A footprint shaped spot on his chest ached fiercely, no doubt also black and blue. Underneath it all, there was an odd sensation in his left hand. The pain had subsided notably and his fingers and his wrist felt stiff and heavy. Bucky flopped his head to the side to inspect it, fearing rot or worse. To his surprise, it had been wrapped and plastered and the fractured bones carefully set back in place. Now that the fog of sleep had disappeared, Bucky noticed the gauze wrapped tightly across his chest. It rustled against the coarse material of his shirt, placed strategically over the striping burns. Someone had also slipped a strange, small belt-like loop around each of his biceps. Bucky’s head swam with confusion and pain. He blinked into the blinding light, trying to orient himself. As his eyes adjusted to the light, Bucky realized he was on a different cot. He was in the laboratory outside the cell, not the small rooms lining the hallway. To his relief, there was no chair in sight.

The events from last night filtered back to Bucky, but the details were hazy from desperation and adrenaline. Some details felt concrete beneath his fingertips - fluttering pulses, the bite of the dog tag chain, the noose around his neck. Drowning out all this was his overwhelming exhaustion, a leaden feeling carved deep in his bones. He was tired in every way known to man. Thinking was a chore. Regret was too much of a burden to muster. Even feeling pain was an effort. His reality was a haze and Bucky was content to remain in a numb limbo.

The vigilant machines, with their shrill beeping, didn’t give him long to rest.

Only minutes after Bucky rose back to consciousness, the scientists entered. A blurry face loomed over Bucky and waved a light over his glazed eyes. Bucky squinted back, annoyed.
“Subject is responsive.”

The face receded and was replaced by another. Bucky’s vision was blotted by afterimages from the light, but he recognized this man. The little man with the pudgy face and sinister eyes. The face that had become a fixture in his nightmares.

“Can you hear me, Sergeant Barnes?” the man crooned, smiling indulgently.

Bucky opened his mouth to reply, to curse the freak, but all that escaped his mouth was spit. He croaked, his windpipe feeling as if it were still pinned under some phantom weight. The man hardly seemed to notice.

“Excellent. I must offer you my deepest congratulations. You have been selected for the beginning of something very exciting, Sergeant Barnes. You will be the first of a new breed of human, greater even than Captain America.”

The man withdrew and Bucky made out the clinking of metal and glass on a tabletop beside him. The man spoke facing away from Bucky, perhaps to one of the other scientists.

“Subject 17, Sergeant James Barnes. Subject will be exposed to Asclepian serum prototype 5. Level 1 dosage. Administered by Arnim Zola.”

Bucky processed the words belatedly as being spoken to a camera somewhere out of his sight. In a moment he attached the name to the face. His nightmare finally had a name. Arnim Zola.

Zola reentered Bucky’s field of vision.

“Admittedly,” Zola paused, tightening the little loop on Bucky’s bicep until Bucky could feel his own pulse shore up against the band - a tourniquet. Zola slid a hypodermic needle into Bucky’s elbow. The move was precise but not gentle and Bucky flinched away.

“Admittedly,” Zola began again, “we had planned to select Private Stasevich. But, you have demonstrated to us a certain...resilient quality. A fighter’s spirit. Perhaps you will be the first to succeed for us then, hm?”

Bucky looked away from Zola, chose to stare off at the wall, drinking in the scene around him. His eyes fell on scientific equipment he had no hopes of naming. Despite popular belief, Bucky had been a literary type, back in the day. Those lazy Brooklyn afternoons felt a lifetime away, the familiar titles and well worn pages just beyond his grasp. He remembered, vaguely, a flying car and turning around to glance at Steve the second it came crashing to the ground. Bucky was no stranger to science fiction. But even by the best stretches of his imagination, he couldn’t fathom half of the machines and tools scattered around the room. Scattered around him, he realized. The other half of the tools, which his brain could provide interpretations for, chilled him. Ignorance, perhaps, was bliss.

A curious feeling started to spread from his elbow. The spot where the needle had slipped beneath his skin began to itch, almost burn. The sensation spread up his arm and down to his fingertips. Another scientist forced an IV into Bucky's other elbow, opening the just healed wounds. Bucky could feel the serum in his veins, felt it course through his body inch by burning inch. Zola’s injection reached his shoulder and spilled over into his chest with increasing speed. The itch spread through his chest before seizing on his heart. Suddenly, Bucky’s heart rate accelerated. He felt a sharp pain in his chest, like something was pushing out against his ribs from the inside. The pressure built like steam in a kettle and Bucky's heart felt like it would explode with effort. The foreign sensation continued to creep through his veins, making his insides seize. Bucky squirmed on the
table, fighting for every inch of give in his restraints. He tried to crawl away from the pain and mounting pressure, to break out of his feverish skin. He was hyperventilating, each breath trying to release the building pressure. He began to seriously fear his heart was going to explode. Instead, the strange serum seemed to be egging his heart on faster and faster. Somewhere behind his head, Bucky made out the frenzied beeping of a heart monitor. The monitor's pitch rose to a screech, the individual beats bleeding together into an eerie semblance of a flat line. By then, the mysterious serum had circulated his whole body. Bucky felt light headed, though he didn't know if it was from the serum, the hyperventilating, or the rushing blood in his head.

Suddenly, just as Bucky was certain he was about to pass out, his heart fluttered then stopped. Bucky was reminded of stories of racehorses dropping dead on the racetrack, hearts giving out after record breaking sprints. He’d imagined the moment his heart exploded to be something more painful, fireworks on the fourth of July. Instead, the sensation was like jumping from a roller coaster on Coney Island. He felt weightless and giddy with the relief as the threatening pressure dissipated. With an equally sudden crash, the ache returned, his chest feeling as if it had been crushed concave. Somewhere in his chest, his heart murmured, beating with a faint, drunken rhythm. Bucky struggled to breathe, drawing in deep shaky breaths. His whole body trembled, unstable and exhausted. The heart monitor beeped sullenly behind him. As the shock wore off, Bucky became acutely aware of an odd prickling sensation beneath his skin. He felt feverish, both cold and hot. His skin burned as it let off the energy from the episode, like an overheated engine. His whole body was coated in a thin sheen of sweat. The occasional draft ghosted across his skin, suddenly chilling him. He shivered.

Bucky became aware of scientists swarming around him, just out of sight.

“Vitals are stabilizing.”

“Incredible. If his body can accept the serum, the rest of the series should be easy.”

An excited murmur passed around the room.

“Let’s not be hasty.” The muttering died down. “I say give it an hour to cycle and let’s monitor for side effects before moving to the next phase. What do you think Dr. Zola?”

All heads swiveled to look at Zola. Zola paused, deep in thought. He glanced at Bucky, scanning.

“This is the first specimen to survive the transition. We must be careful with such a precious resource. Let the serum circulate for another two hours. Take blood work every half hour. If anything changes, call me immediately.”

The scientists scattered, each off to his own task. A man leaned over Bucky to take a blood sample, sliding the needle’s tip a hair’s breadth away from the injection site. It was a miracle, Bucky thought, that they could find his veins at all. He’d had injection after injection in this place, each needle directed so callously that the inside of his elbows had already begun to scar. The flesh was swollen and had never quite healed, rubbed raw every time Bucky moved his arm. The man extracted a vial of blood, wrapped Bucky’s elbow in gauze, and loosened the tourniquet again. In a minute, he was gone.

The whole procedure left Bucky mystified. The rooms had held no semblance of science, just a deranged man with questions and a chair. Here though, everything ran with mechanical efficiency. Bucky had been raised out of squalor onto a sterile operating table. But here, at least, there seemed to be an interest in keeping him alive, healthy even. Bucky wasn’t particularly thankful. He couldn’t ignore a strange buzz beneath his skin, like an electrical current was passing through him. His body was host to some foreign energy and the mismatch left Bucky feeling uneasy.
All the same, he had survival instincts, whether he cared to live much longer or not. Bucky willed himself to fall asleep, hoping his body could burn off the foreign substance. He needed rest more than anything.

Bucky was awoken two hours later by a man prying his eyes open and flashing a light in his face. Bucky jerked his head away, blinking into consciousness. The man retreated, task finished. The thrum of energy under Bucky’s skin lingered, but it was less obtrusive than before. More alert, Bucky strained to overhear the conversation a few feet away.

“I heard Dr. Zola telephoning the station out near Kitzbühel. Sounded like he was pretty happy with this new serum. He wanted to ship out a few samples in the next day or so if we keep getting positive results with this round.” The speaker had a thick British accent.

Why was there a British scientist here, working with the Nazis deep behind enemy lines?

"Vitals are stable and blood work shows nothing unexpected. No reason to wait, in my opinion," the other man responded, his voice also distinctly British. Perhaps there was a faction of them, secretly operating within the Reich. Bucky had heard of spies and traitors in the army, knew there were defectors on either side. Seeing them in front of him, the kind of men he'd have trusted inside a medical tent, was unsettling.

A door opened and a few men walked in. Zola entered Bucky’s field of vision, turning to speak to one of the British men. He issued offhand instructions, calling for serums and chemicals Bucky didn't recognize.

"Subject 17. Phase 2, series...."

Bucky shifted his attention to the man fiddling with his IV. He added something to the solution, turning it a faint brown. The man then turned and began to undo the strap on Bucky's left arm.

"Don’t." The man warned, feeling Bucky's muscle seize at the sudden release. Bucky didn't move. With his hand broken and taped he couldn't have done anything anyway. The man pilfered a pair of scissors from a nearby table and set to the task of cutting away the taping on Bucky’s hand. He moved quickly and methodically and in a minute finished collecting the last scraps of tape. Bucky watched, fascinated. When the last pieces of the splint had been removed, he stared at his hand in shock.

Where the shrapnel of shattered bones had breached skin, new skin had already knitted over the wounds. It was still young and pink in the way newly healed wounds are, but the difference was remarkable. The giant black bruises had begun to fade, assuming a meek purple. The greatest shock was less what he saw and what he felt, or, more accurately, didn’t feel. The pain in his hand had disappeared almost completely. Bucky became aware that the rest of his body seemed to be on the mend too. When he’d woken up he thought he was just numb, but, to his surprise, the pain had actually subsided. Even his head felt clearer. For the first time since he’d been brought to the isolation ward, he felt awake and alert.

The scientist inspected Bucky’s hand, turning it this way and that, measuring the diameter of the bruises, flexing the fingers and joints, and rubbing his thumb over the back of Bucky’s hand to feel where the bones were still broken. Bucky hissed when the man found still mending fractures, but the man ignored him completely. Without a word, the man replaced Bucky’s hand on the cot, strapped him down again, and left.

More scientists approached, each bearing syringes. Most of the shots were small and innocuous. More chemicals were dumped into his IV line, turning the solution muddier. He grew nauseous, but the battery of injections passed without incident. He was left alone again, save one or two men who
milled around, watching the heart monitor and looking bored.

After an hour had passed, spent staring at the ceiling sleepily, his luck changed. It started innocently, a general sense of malaise. The hue of the room seemed to waver, sliding between oversaturated and sepia tone. His mouth grew dry and he started to break out in a sweat again. Bucky licked his lips and tried to settle on the cot. He felt the drops of sweat roll across his skin, couldn’t wipe them away as the salty drops fell stinging into his eyes. His feet and hands grew numb, as if they had fallen asleep. Bucky’s stomach sank. He couldn’t shake an impending sense of doom. Something had changed, but he wasn’t sure what. His heart sped, perhaps from nerves, then continued to accelerate.

He could hear his heart beating in his ears, heard the scientist behind him startle and examine the heart monitor worriedly. The man moved into his vision, scanning Bucky’s face. He turned and shouted across the room to another scientist. The sound fell tinny on Bucky’s ears. His legs began to twitch as if possessed, moving of their own volition. They raged numbly against the tight restraints and the tremors rippled up his body. Bucky panicked, unable to control his jerking, seizing body. The IV tube began to dislodge, shifting out of place and jabbing into his arm. The convulsions continued and Bucky began to lose touch with the world around him. He felt weightless and detached, isolated from his own body, which had become numb and no longer obeyed his command, just writhed on the table top. Sound faded and the world around him seemed to slow down. The scientist returned to his sight, giving commands and reading off of the various machines hooked into him. None of the sound reached Bucky, who watched it like a silent film, transfixed. He absently noted a salty taste in his mouth, the familiar metallic taste of blood. He’d bitten his tongue. His vision faded in and out, peppered with flashing lights, like paparazzi flashbulbs. He quietly enjoyed the firework show, immune to the clamoring storm of white coats around him. Just stared up at the ceiling, lost in his own world.

His heartbeat slowed again, plunging suddenly. His limbs stiffened and fell still, every muscle tensed. The flares in his vision vanished as dark crept in along the edges. His vision became motheaten, spots fading to black before his eyes like an aged photograph. He receded from the world, washed out to sea. His eyes remained open, but he had the distinct feeling of drifting off to sleep. Content, he let himself blackout.

Bucky was yanked back to the world with a bang. Fire pierced his body, a needle plunged into his chest. Someone had the courage to act, wresting him suddenly from the inky waters of depthless oceans. He started awake with a gasp, all feeling, vision, and sound returning to him within a few seconds’ window. It was almost like being reborn, suddenly thrust back into the world from the encompassing comfort of the womb. Like a newborn, he felt raw and exposed, trying to draw in lungfuls of the too-thin air. Bucky became aware of several hands holding him down, forcing down his panicked limbs. His heart shuddered and spasmed, uncertain of how to recapture its rhythm. Bucky knew what was coming next before he saw it. He felt the air change around him, suddenly charged, filled with the sharp scent of ozone. The shock came down right on his heart. He arched his back, like a marionette pulled by strings, moved by an undeniable force anchored in his chest. The current stopped and Bucky sank back down to the table, mind white hot and empty. His laboring heart continued its lopsided meter, uncertain as a newborn fawn on untested legs. Another shock and his heart finally fell into line, beating out a plodding tempo.

Bucky was gripped by the sudden urge to vomit and whipped his head sideways, emptying what little would come up onto the cot next to him. He became incredibly thirsty, licking his lips despite the acrid taste in his mouth. He felt worn thin, flotsam finally washed up on the beach. His head throbbed mercilessly.

The lab coats swished quietly around him, scribbling notes as they waited anxiously. Zola
entered the room at a quick pace, holding his hat as if he'd been running.

"Report," he barked, swiping the nearest scientist's clipboard.

"The subject seems to have had a seizure. He appears stable now, but we're still picking up electrical flares. There's a definite possibility of recurrence until we identify what triggered the episode."

Zola nodded, distracted. As if obeying an unspoken command, a scientist stepped forward and deftly took a small blood sample, whisking the vial off to the other side of the room. Bucky closed his eyes, exhausted and looking for his escape. His body still buzzed with the strange energy and the feeling made him restless. He couldn't sleep, just stared at the back of his eyelids and tried to shut out the world. The next bout came in an hour. The one after that followed hot on its heels just a few minutes later. Bucky's head spun. How many times today had he been resurrected? Every time he had felt death's keen grasp and sprinted towards the void, only to plummet back to earth.

If he had not proven the contrary with his own hands, Bucky would have thought humans were hard to kill. He couldn't seem to shake free of this world, not in back alley street fights, not in close calls on the towering ship docks, not among the echoing explosions of the trenches, not exposed on cliffsides in a sniper nest, not in a Nazi lab. Time and time again, Bucky was spared death. Until now, he had believed himself to be incredibly lucky.

Finally, the seizures ceased. After a terrific battle between science and scientists, the mad men had won. Bucky felt like the battlefield he was: pitted and blasted to shreds, unrecognizable. He'd survived until the night. Zola, finally, made his exit for the day, leaving Bucky on the table. The men in lab coats filed out, save one who stayed to watch the monitors.

Bucky awoke the next morning, eyes snapping open. In the course of the night, something had changed. He could feel the difference, although he couldn't pinpoint it exactly. He was alive and alert. For the first time in ages, he felt strong. The ever present headache had vanished, fog blown out over the sea. His vision took on a sharpness, every edge defined and defiant.

It was not unlike how he felt up in the sniper's nest, when the wind had died down and the world around him had gone quiet. It was in those moments Bucky believed in the supernatural. There was a spirit to those moments, the exaltation of feeling connected to everything, of consciously feeling everything around you. Underneath his uniform he could feel the ground, how it vibrated as trains passed. He felt the breeze as it wound lazily over the mountain passes. He could hear birdsong in the early morning before battle, knew the sound his own breath made. In the middle of even the fiercest fight, Bucky could hear his own breath whistle in and out, felt the gentle winds graze his cheeks even as hot air burst upward from below, could feel the steady earth below him as he propped up his rifle. Bucky's whole body fell still when he caught a target in the rifle scope, every muscle attuned to the wind and the world. He calculated by instinct, knew the sight's angles deep in his bones, lined up the crosshairs of the scope as easily as he drew breath. Breathe in, breathe out, another body hits the ground. In a heartbeat, he moved to the next, blissfully automatic, thoughtless, and completely detached. He lived for the silent grounding of the sniper's nest. It was power and peace, solitude without loneliness. Perfect, unbreakable focus.

Lying on the table in the early morning, the room silent but for the heart monitor, Bucky grasped at that same fleeting tranquility. His mind finally clear, Bucky took in his surroundings with a new thirst, slipping back into the sniper's mindset. He noted weapons, exits, threats. Windows meant he was on the edge of the building. Surely there was a little distance to the perimeter of the compound, guard posts and barbed wire, but he longed after the nearby promise of freedom. On the edge of the horizon he could make out green, tantalizingly close and only barely distinguishable, like a mirage.
The forest jeered at him from a distance.

Tilting his head to look around, Bucky scanned the room. Empty. They’d trusted him to survive the night. Bucky looked over his healing hand. The bruises were nearly gone, faded to the point his hand was tinged a sickly green-yellow. Cautiously, he tried to make a fist. The joints creaked plaintively, but he could form a loose fist. The bones had healed overnight. Bucky flexed the hand in amazement, loosening the stiff fingers. Experimentally, he tried tugging at his restraints. They allowed for some give, but held firm. He pulled nonetheless, trying to weaken them. Here and there, he heard a thread snap, but ultimately gave up.

More bored than anxious, Bucky settled, watching the morning light change as the sun inched over the horizon. Sunlight glinted off machinery, revealing an office of sorts towards the back of the room. If he craned his neck, Bucky could make out a map on the far wall. He studied it, inspecting the little pins stuck in the corkboard. Straining his eyes, he distinguished borders and countries, honed in on the details of the map. He instinctively committed the layout to memory. The hopeful part of him that believed he might still survive flared up, noting the map as useful information to take back when he returned to camp. If he returned to camp. Bucky scoffed at the old tic, the sudden resurgence of the army-ingrained behavior. He swallowed down the hope, told himself he was here to die, that there was no use getting his hopes up. He had no right to survive this, not anymore. But the view of the window, limited as it may be, was maddening, teasing him with a glimpse of freedom. Back in the cell, when had he stopped staring at the door, stopped biding his time? When had he given up on escaping, not knowing how close he was to egress? Bucky cursed the window in the soft morning light.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea what Zola's serum would have been like, but I figured it'd be a little less complicated (no vita-rays) because it didn't have to change Bucky's body (he doesn't become a 200lb beefcake) nor was it designed to protect the patient. (Because you know that Erksine was going to do everything possible to make sure Steve survived, so the process might have been extra complicated.)

In case it's not clear, Bucky suffers a number of severe seizures (which I chose since many seizures are caused by "electrical storms" in the brain/nervous system and my theory is that the serum is causing some insane, bordering on cancerous metabolism that involves all of this excess energy, which has to be discharged somehow. Again, I figured Zola's model wasn't going to be very elegant or sustainable for the patient.)
Chapter Notes

We're finally about to catch up to canon! (Good news for Bucky!) I always thought the way Bucky was acting right before Steve rescued him was pretty strange. I read the original CATFA script before I started this fic, and one of the biggest differences between the movie and script was of the moment before Steve finds Bucky. In the original script, Bucky is in a giant cage (like the ones in this fic, not a coincidence) and is very beaten up and Steve find him slumped over chanting his name, rank, and number. I kind of mixed the two versions and came up with my best explanation for events. Enjoy.

Thanks to my great beta, actuarialturtle, and all of the kind people who have left me comments. You guys make my day, you really do.

And a special shout out to Himmelreich for fixing my German! Thank you!

Bucky heard the men enter the room, but kept his eyes stubbornly closed.

“You look well,” Zola remarked, suddenly at Bucky’s side. Bucky continued to feign sleep, but he must have reacted to hearing Zola’s voice enough to give himself away.

“Do not insult me. I know you are awake, soldier.”

Bucky refused to open his eyes. Zola clucked his tongue but didn’t threaten, moving a few steps away and engaging one of the other scientists in toneless German.

Suddenly, someone started undoing Bucky’s restraints. Surprised, Bucky opened his eyes. He didn’t move, too startled to act, but his hesitation worked to his advantage. Mistaking Bucky’s passiveness for resignation, the man undoing his restraints grew less cautious as he undid the last few straps, turning his back to Bucky for an instant. As soon as he was free, Bucky sprang into action, legs wobbly from disuse. He ran blindly towards the windows, the shortest way out. The scientists apparently hadn’t accounted for this exit, having stationed the guards by the doors instead.

Suddenly, the click of a gun loading broke through the clamor. Bucky dove to the floor on instinct, his senses catching up a second later. Of course they wouldn’t shoot him. Not yet anyway. By the time he called the bluff, two pairs of strong hands had hoisted him to his feet, dragging him towards the door. Bucky didn’t have to turn around and look to know what was there.

Panicking, he punched one of the men in the chin with his newly healed hand. Something cracked - a bone that had not quite healed all the way - and the man stumbled backwards. Bucky twisted free of the man holding him and made a break for the door. A moment too soon, the door slammed shut. Bucky scrubbed at the handle even as he heard the tumblers fall in place. So close.

Someone seized Bucky by the collar and flung him into the awaiting chair. Bucky fought back tooth and nail, his exhaustion erased by fear. He burned hot with desperation, punching and clawing, kicking and slamming. I’m not going back. I’m not going back, a chant that beat in his head like war drums, in perfect sync with his raging heart. I can’t go back.
Ultimately, he was overwhelmed. They shoved him into the chair, a dozen hands holding him down. The men, breathing heavily and with a collection of split lips, checked and rechecked his restraints, cinching them so tight Bucky thought he might lose circulation. Ice coursed through Bucky’s veins; his fear turned paralytic. *This was it.* He stopped seething and looked around, steeling himself. He knew what was coming next. Perhaps that was the worst part.

In the corner, one of the guards was struggling to get up. As soon as the man got to his knees, Bucky spotted the tell-tale scarlet. *A broken nose, some teeth too probably.* Two of the other guards helped him up, looking him over. With grim satisfaction, Bucky counted blooming black eyes and fucked up kneecaps. *They’d remember him next time it rained.* One of the guards, young and angry, stormed over to the chair, his intent clear. Bucky braced himself for the blows before they landed. *Stomach, stomach, chin.*

“Nicht mehr Gewalt als nötig. Das waren Ihre Befehle.” Something about the voice made Bucky freeze up, still seizing from the beating. He would know the voice of a C.O. anywhere.

The barrage of blows stopped and the reprimanded man slunk away, casting one last dirty look at Bucky. The guards around the room stepped back and straightened themselves out. *Enough was enough.* The guards continued to glare at Bucky, but now from a distance, as if he were something feral.

The damage done and retribution found, the soldiers unlocked the door and waved in the unfazed scientists.

The scientists briskly went to work rigging Bucky up to the machine, pasting on electrodes and wiring him to various monitors that they wheeled in after them. Bucky tried to steady his breathing, resigned. He tested the straps again, pushing off against the chair’s frame. The scientists patiently held him down and went about their work, immune to his struggles and the curses he unleashed on them. Over the scientists’ shoulders, Bucky watched two men set up a camera, confirming his earlier suspicions. The lens stared at him like a dead eye, watching dispassionately. Zola stepped into the room, and, after receiving a signal from the cameraman, addressed the camera once more. The other scientists in the room obligingly grew quiet. Bucky glared at the camera, challenging it. No doubt the video would survive longer than him. But at least they’d know he didn’t go without a fight.

“Fuck you!” Bucky screamed, cutting over Zola’s quiet clinical monologue. Zola turned curiously to look at him, but Bucky averted his gaze, instead keeping his eyes locked on the camera. Zola too turned back to the camera, unruffled, and restarted his sentence. Bucky continued to yell obscenities at the camera, drowning out Zola. Quickly, one of the scientists seized Bucky’s jaw and slammed his head back, forcing a gag into his mouth. The cloth in his mouth triggered a flash of panic, dredging up still fresh memories of shuddering limbs and vanishing pulses. For a moment Bucky went still, paralyzed by sudden terror, his mind screaming *I’m going to die.* Feeling no arm wrap around his throat, Bucky surfaced from the flash of panic, regaining his footing in reality. Unable to make any noise loud enough to be a nuisance, Bucky resumed glaring at the camera, trying to hide his growing terror. Zola had not turned around again, had just waited, unperturbed, for the noise to subside. Satisfied that Bucky would not interrupt again, he resumed his preface. The scientists did not bother to remove the gag, leaving Bucky to fume in silence.

“Commence wiping protocol,” Zola ordered, finally turning away from the camera.

From behind Bucky, one of the scientists snapped a headpiece onto the chair. He pulled Bucky’s head back so that his head rested against it. A padded bar came down across Bucky’s forehead like a clamp. Another metal bar folded up from the contraption, coming to rest on his cheekbone. It sat there heavily, taking up the bottom of Bucky’s vision. Bucky continued to stare
out at the camera, fixated. Years from now, when someone watched this moment again, would they be able to see the way he was shaking? Bucky drew shaky breaths, shoulders rising and falling with the struggle to stay calm. Zola approached, drawing Bucky’s eyes, daring him to look back.

Bucky made eye contact with Zola, trying to growl curses around the gag. Zola regarded him with traces of amusement, moving as if there was no hurry. Everything in his posture telegraphed his ease, his control over the room and the men in it. There was no questioning who was in charge, not to the other lab coats, not to the soldiers standing awkwardly at the perimeter, and certainly not to Bucky. His instincts, the primordial senses of order that honored only power, screamed at Bucky to lower his eyes, not to invoke the wrath of the master. Defiant and terrified, the stupid part of Bucky that rescued Steve from alleyway scraps, chanted Don’t you dare look away.

Bucky looked away.

Steve wouldn’t have given up, the voice in the back of his mind chided. Well, Bucky just wasn’t Steve. He wasn’t that strong. Not that stupid either. Zola drew closer, his shadow falling over Bucky.

“Name, rank, number.”

One of the scientists removed the gag, whipping it off warningly.

Head anchored in place, Bucky looked back at the diminutive man like a beaten dog, tail between his legs. He didn’t dare make eye contact, eyes fixed somewhere next to Zola’s ear. Bucky seethed at his own cowardice, but he didn’t hate himself more than he hated the pain. The morning’s energy had left him, leaving him too exhausted to fight back.

He genuinely didn’t know how much he would tell them if they asked. He hoped maybe he’d have the strength for silence, could muster some sort of passive resistance, maybe a convincing lie. But he wasn’t so sure anymore. He’d come in iron-clad, unyielding, but the constant battery had reforged him, tempered him down. He was left warped and brittle, clinging to the fragments of before. If they asked, he’d spill his guts.

“James Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038.”

The words came easier this time than the last time he was in the chair. Startled, Bucky cast out into his memory. To his astonishment, as he reached into the past, he found purchase. The faded faces returned to him. His past flooded back in breath-taking clarity. His mind sifted through memories of Steve’s drawings, perhaps slightly enhanced by fond recollection, as Bucky marveled at the miracle. Clear-headed, he reveled in rediscovering. He felt just a little more human, a little less broken.

Basking in the sudden euphoria, he smiled at Zola, brashly locking eyes. This time, he detected something new in Zola’s expression. Lurking behind the patronizing facade was something else. Underneath that dangerously honed mania was frustration. Bucky’s words inflicted little wounds, proof of failure. For whatever reason, Bucky’s report annoyed him. Bucky leapt on the information, trying to solve the mystery before he was robbed of his senses.

Zola sensed the change in Bucky and took a step back, almost cautious. Emboldened, Bucky braced himself for what he knew was coming. Zola broke eye contact this time, turning to give one of the men the signal. The lights flickered and the electricity ripped through Bucky again.

This time was different. Bucky felt the change instantly. The agony of before had simply washed over him indiscriminately. Now, the bolts were like fingers, searching methodically through
him, rifling through him on the hunt for...something. The fingers probed his mind, wiping his vision as he stared at the ceiling. They seared the corners of his skull. His mind erupted into chaos, disintegrating, as he watched the phantom hands tear it to shreds. He battled for his consciousness this time, rather than let himself be sucked in. He tried to hoard memories, shielding them from the storm. He latched onto whatever he could, anchoring down snippets: his name, Steve’s laugh, how to weld, the way sunlight feels when it falls across bare skin, the name of the graveyard where his grandmother was interred. Bucky concentrated, tried to detach from the pain and the vortex in his mind, and prayed for the ordeal to end. He’d never been a religious man, so his prayers were directed at whoever was listening, a way of reminding himself that there was still a world outside of the compound. Now, his own thoughts were an anchor to reality. He kept muttering prayers, nonsense, just because he could.

The switch flicked back off and the tendrils of electricity slowly withdrew, leaving Bucky heaving in the chair, eyes screwed shut and fists curled. Bucky felt wetness on his face and realized he’d started crying. He blinked hard and opened his eyes, taking in the too bright room. Zola loomed in front of him, curious.

He’d been thinking about Zola - just a moment ago - what exactly, he couldn’t remember. Bucky knew he’d been on the verge of discovery as they threw the switch, but couldn’t recall what. He was overwhelmed by a nauseating wave of deja vu. He’d done this before, had sat in this chair and searched for memories. He knew the question he was about to be asked, though he couldn’t remember why or how he knew it. Before Zola could ask, Bucky began to answer. The words rolled off his tongue. Muscle memory.

“James Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038.”

A flash of irritation rippled across Zola’s face, his lips twitching for a millisecond into a pinched frown, his brow furrowing as he calculated. Then his eyebrows lifted and he looked Bucky over in surprise. He resumed his confident posture, communicating to the men around him this is all part of the plan. Bucky fixated on that moment of frustration. What had he done to trigger it? The answer to that question was crucial, he knew that much. Zola turned his back, took notes, and the switch was flipped again. The lights flickered like lightning on the horizon. Bucky braced for the storm, battening down the hatches. He repeated the words over and over in his head, Sergeant James Barnes 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes 32557038, Sergeant James Barnes 32557038…

Bucky quickly lost count of the rounds, unable to distinguish one from the other. He had the distinct feeling that he was losing more of his memory. Bucky started to lose track of the rounds in the chair, couldn’t remember how long he’d been in this room answering the question over and over. He withdrew into his own mind, clamping onto the fragments of memory he still had. He protected them instinctively - the way you protect a baby bird on the sidewalk, because it’s there. In the end though, Bucky could only hold onto consciousness for so long. Each round battered him, dragging on longer and longer. The pause between the question and Bucky’s answer drew longer.

At first, Bucky had needed the pause to draw in breath, to register the outside world. Zola gave him his time to emerge, ever patient. But soon, the pauses stretched past when Bucky had recovered his breath. In those instances, his mind raced for an answer. After a moment’s agony, he’d painstakingly retrieve the name and number. The task grew more arduous and the information more meaningless. Bucky became unconsciously aware of a rift forming in his own mind. The name, rank, and number no longer seemed to mean anything, the way a word becomes no more than a sound if you say it enough times. It was his name, or so the question suggested, but he felt no connection to it. The words had lost all shades of meaning, had no more depth than ink on paper. Bucky supplied the flimsy syllables with cold automaticity, even as his subconscious entreated him to treasure the name, to protect it from the destructive force. Bucky heeded the command, although
he no longer understood why. He didn’t understand anything about the situation, why he was in a chair, why a short little man asked him for his “name, rank, number,” or why he felt like he’d done this before.

Ultimately, the subject failed to answer the question. His mouth was filled with the taste of blood and his face was drenched in sweat and tears as he shook off the remnants of another round. Tattered, the subject’s focus slowly returned to the room, taking in the men around him in lab coats. He passively wondered at them but stayed mute, too disoriented to speak. Unsure if he could speak. A man stood in front of him expectantly, hands in his coat pockets. The glint of a lens caught the subject’s attention. He shifted his focus curiously. A camera. The subject looked back at it in a silent staring match, uncertain of what he was supposed to do. He couldn’t turn his head to look around, the bar clamping his forehead to the steel headrest. He shivered in the cold room, clothes soaked in sweat. He could feel the metal still hot beneath him, felt it burn where it touched flesh. His world was reduced to the physical; anything he couldn’t touch didn’t seem real. All he was certain of was the chair, strapped to him like some strange appendage.

“Soldier.” The subject turned towards the sound and the short man it had come from.

“What is your name?” Two eyes bored into him, curious and anxious. The question echoed around his skull, found no purchase, and quietly dissipated into hazy smoke.

“Your name, soldier.”

Subject? Soldier?

The Soldier could produce no response, numbly puzzling over the question. He felt uneasy, like he should know the answer. A word took form in the back of his mind, but it refused to crystallize. The Soldier discarded the question disinterestedly, fixing the man in front of him with an empty stare. The man smiled at the Soldier’s blank expression, at the confusion written across his face. Silence rippled across the room as the other scientists began to comprehend the exchange. They traded meaningful looks over the Soldier’s head, then regarded the man in front of him expectantly.

“Dr. Zola,” one man ventured, causing the man to turn away from the soldier. Zola silenced him with a raised hand.

“Untie him.”

One of the men lining the room, dressed in military uniform, stepped forward. He cautiously undid the Soldier’s restraints, as if expecting the Soldier to lash out. The man released the Soldier’s head and he sat up straight, blood draining out of his head. He regarded the man curiously, wondered why he kept his gaze carefully fixed on the soldier, poised for an attack. As the man undid the straps, the Soldier flexed his hands and feet, working blood back into the tingling limbs. There was a small pain in his left hand and he brought it up to his face, startling the man untying him. Ignoring the man, the Soldier inspected the afflicted hand. One of the knuckles was dark purple and something beneath the skin jutted at a strange angle. Some of the tiny bones were broken. The Soldier lowered the hand gingerly back down to the armrest. Finished, the guard stepped back and returned to the edge of the room, shooting the Soldier a strange glance. Confused. Surprised.

Stretching and soothing his arms and legs where the restraints had dug in too tight, the Soldier regarded Dr. Zola. Zola gave him a bad feeling, unsettled him with his condescending smile and relaxed attitude. Zola was at odds with the rest of the room. The scientists and guards were all tense, focus locked on the stranger in their midst. But Zola didn’t seem to think he was in any danger. The Soldier tried to piece together his surroundings. He was still rigged to the metal chair, connected to
heart monitors and other machines he couldn’t name. So, there was something medical, something scientific. Why was he tied down? Had he not wanted to be part of this? The guards and scientists were wary of him, like they expected him to lash out at any moment. There’d probably been a fight then. So he hadn’t wanted to participate in...this. Clearly Zola was in charge, so that made Zola his enemy. The Soldier took this all in, puzzling together each piece of information. So why did Zola release him? The Soldier’s head throbbed, but he was desperate for information, for some way to orient himself to this strange new world.

“Stand, soldier,” Zola ordered, fixing the Soldier with a commanding stare. The instruction was aimed at him. Uncertain, the Soldier stood, pushing himself out of the chair. His legs collapsed the second he stood and the sudden motion spooked the men around him. From the corner of his vision, the Soldier saw the men on the walls reach for their holsters, saw the scientists lurch backwards away from him. Only Zola did not move.

“On your feet, soldier.” The Soldier got his arms up underneath him. As he got to his knees to stand, his dog tags swung out in front of his chest, chiming faintly. The dull warm metal was imprinted in a blocky font and the Soldier stared at them for a moment, uncomprehending. Suddenly cautious, he pretended to fall again, obscuring the dog tags from Zola’s sight as he read the inscription.

SGT. JAMES B. BARNES
32557038

Underneath that, an address. The engraved words resonated with undeniable familiarity. He whispered them to himself, so quietly he couldn’t even hear the air escape his lips. The words tasted like secrets on his tongue and he hugged the information close, carved the letters and numbers into his mind. He then struggled to his feet, leaning against the chair as he propped himself up. His legs spasmed and shook, but as he stood a little strength returned to him, smoothing out his nerves. He regarded Zola, his secret tucked in the empty space at the back of his mind.

“Do you know your name, soldier?” Zola asked, stepping closer to the Soldier, issuing a challenge. The Soldier took one look around the room and knew he couldn’t win. He restrained himself, even though every instinct urged to him to move away from the man and break for the door. But the Soldier was smart, always had been. So he kept his posture neutral, didn’t look Zola in the eye.

“I… don’t know,” Barnes replied, voice creaking. It wasn’t entirely a lie. He didn’t know, not for sure. But the words engraved on his dog tags registered with too much familiarity to be denied. This was his name, he was almost certain of it, even though he could not produce the words on his own. Another word, a different name, hovered on the horizon of his thoughts, tantalizingly close. He yearned after that name, the one that had stayed with him, somehow, when all else seemed to have been wiped clean. Like runes etched into a weathered castle wall, he traced the shallow indents, tried to piece together the missing letters.

After carefully studying Subject 17’s face, Zola accepted the answer, eyes lighting up gleefully. He glanced quickly at his pocketwatch and spun on his heel to face the camera, confidently turning his back on Barnes.

“Time is 2140. Round 11 of the wiping protocol has produced successful results in Subject 17.
Barnes tuned out, scanning the room. The scientists no longer avoided eye contact, trying to follow Zola’s lead in trusting that the subject had become docile in his oblivion. Barnes’s lips quirked into an almost smile as he reined himself in, fighting the urge to punch the scientist who came over to remove his wiring. Looking at the men tiptoeing around him, beaten and bruised and barely able to stand, Barnes was overcome with disgust. The emotion tapped into memories he couldn’t reach, finding roots deep underground. He needed to get out of here.

Two of the guards approached, flanking him on each side as they grabbed his arms. Barnes didn’t resist, but he noticed the man with a split lip holding him particularly tight. They led him from the room, which opened up into another lab. In the center of the lab was a table, halfway between an operating table and a cot. The men gestured for him to lay down on it, but his attention had already shifted to the windows.

He stared out of the windows, transfixed. Barnes looked down and out over the compound, darkened but for the lights along the barbed wire fence. Men milled about outside, the occasional truck passing through his line of sight. His gaze rose to the horizon where the last crimson streaks of sunset lingered above the treetops. The color was enthralling, stirring something in Barnes. Freedom lay outside the compound, beyond the shadowed forest. His internal compass angled itself towards the dying scarlet in the sky. He would flee West.

The two men followed the subject’s line of sight to the windows and read into his inaction. Hands reached out to grab the subject’s arm just as he darted towards the windows. His weak legs moved with unexpected strength as he ducked under the table, dodging the blind grasps at his clothes, fingers brushing against the back of his neck. He rocketed out from underneath the table, using it as cover. Barnes weaved around the tangled cords and machinery, fixated on the window. He didn’t know what he’d do once he reached the ground, assuming he survived the fall, didn’t know how he’d scale the fence or dodge the guards, had no plan for navigating the unknown forest, but he ran on the fleeting feeling that this was his last chance.

A body tackled his, ramming into him and knocking him to the ground. Barnes writhed on the floor, trying to twist onto his back and face his assailant. Before he could turn, a sharp blow fell on the back of his skull, sending sparks shooting down his spine. He crumpled to the ground, unconscious. The guards, joined by their comrades who had heard the commotion, maneuvered the subject’s emaciated frame onto the cot, tying him down securely, wary once more.

All but one guard left the room, leaving Subject 17 on the cot. The thing unnerved him, just a little. That blank face, hollow but fiercely alive. Like Frankenstein’s monster. It acted wildly, more of a bundle of instincts than a human being. The guard didn’t pretend to understand the science involved, but he couldn’t help but wonder if somehow the scientists had removed the prisoner’s soul. He’d been a religious man once, long ago, but the scriptures said nothing about monsters without souls.

The subject made a sound in its sleep, something small and pained, and the guard wondered if dead men dream.

The guard left the room.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta, actuarialturtle, and the amazing human beings who've been leaving me comments these last few chapters. It really gets the creative engine humming (plus it just makes me all warm and fuzzy inside).

In this chapter, we're finally catching up to the canon. (So poor Bucky finally catches his break.) From this point onwards things are going to be a more balanced mixture of angst and fluff. Stay tuned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barnes stirred just a while later, pulse sounding in his ears. He came to his senses and surveyed the room. He was alone again, though he could hear cheerful voices down the hall, people celebrating. Celebrating what? Barnes recalled Zola’s final words to the camera, “Round 11 of the wiping protocol has produced successful results in Subject 17.” He could only assume that he was meant to be Subject 17. He rejected the name.

The wiping protocol has been a success.

What did that mean? In the echoing hollows of his mind, the answer suddenly felt obvious. They’d wiped him. His memory specifically. He knew he had existed before this. People did not simply spring spontaneously into being. That much he felt certain of. So he must have memories of whatever came before. There was no other explanation for why the words James Barnes felt like a punch in the gut, no other explanation for the existence of that word that sat in the back of his head, so nearly complete. Other things, not even shadows of things, sulked about the edges of his consciousness. Someone lurking.

He rolled the forbidden words around in his mouth, feeling them out. Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038. He repeated them quietly over and over, afraid he might forget them again. They were his only clue at the life that had existed before. He would tattoo them into his mind. The sun sank behind the horizon and men shuffled in and out of the room, oblivious to Sergeant James Barnes. When the men entered he lowered his voice, but he never ceased the chant. Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038.

His eyelids began to fall, growing heavy with exhaustion. He drifted off towards sleep still muttering the precious syllables to the night air. The time passed sluggishly, each moment indistinguishable from the last. Barnes kept meter with the soft-spoken incantation, marking down each second.

From the west, a siren shattered the night. Lights flared outside, breaking the comfortable shroud of darkness that had fallen over the laboratory. Barnes twisted his head to look, squinting against the blinding intrusion of spotlights. The noise below rose and drafted through the windows. Gunshots. Yelling. Barnes heard the dull thud of what he imagined could only be artillery fire. How the sound seemed so familiar, he had no idea. Perhaps it had to do with why they called him “Soldier.”

The fighting was nearby, coming from the south side of the compound. Barnes strained to see
anything out the window, but the men were indistinguishable from one another. Streaks of blue light tore through the night, sending trucks skittering across the concrete courtyards. Hell broke loose in the hallway outside the lab. Like a whirlwind, the men in white lab coats burst into the room, yanking open file cabinets and indiscriminately stuffing documents into open briefcases. The men exited as abruptly as they arrived, leaving with only a few wistful backward glances. Wherever they were fleeing, it was too much of a risk to take him along. The intruders were winning it seemed, and the scientists were evacuating. Fast.

Zola entered the room last, fetching his hat and coat hurriedly. He picked up a briefcase of his own and stuffed a few papers from the desk inside it. He stood at the desk at the far end of the room, shooting one last glance at Subject 17, his prized specimen, before departing.

Another set of footsteps echoed down the hallway. Another scientist fleeing the compound. Barnes closed his eyes, still whispering name, rank, and number. The footsteps drew closer at a light jog, following in the same direction as Zola. Barnes disregarded them, the echoing boom of the firefight making his head ache. He didn’t want to die. Hadn’t he only just started living?

“Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038. Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038. Sergeant…” He raised his voice a little, no longer worried about his secret. The scientists were leaving him behind. He’d die on the table, unable to rescue himself, a man with little but a name to call his own. So he embraced the name and number, repeating them to the night. One last little “fuck you” (certainly it couldn’t be the first).

The footsteps neared his cot. A man’s shadow fell across Barne’s closed eyelids, blocking out the strange blue light.

“Bucky?”

Barnes’s eyes shot open. Bucky? The word triggered an explosion in his head. That was the word, the name that had haunted the back of his mind. Bucky. The realization started an avalanche as his memories cascaded back, following one after another in an unstoppable torrent. Bucky felt as if the breath had been knocked out of him, barely registering the man moving to the end of the table and ripping off his restraints. The man returned to the head of the cot, looking down at Bucky, anguish and relief written on his face.

The words tumbled from the man’s mouth just as Bucky recognized the face in the dim light, the face he’d know anywhere, the voice he would recognize at the end of time. Had recognized.

“It’s me. It’s Steve.”

“Steve,” Bucky repeated, awestruck. Steve looked like a guardian angel, his silhouette outlined by the blaze of the night beyond. Bucky’s mind whirled with questions as Steve pulled him to his feet.

“Steve,” he repeated, the name spilling breathlessly from his lips. Steve’s hands, suddenly too big, squared Bucky’s shoulders, holding him steady. They studied each other a second. Bucky drank in Steve’s face like it was the last thing he was ever going to see. Everything was wrong. Steve shouldn’t be this big, he shouldn’t be in the middle of a Nazi base at midnight, he shouldn’t be the one rescuing Bucky. And yet, here he was, a miracle delivered at Bucky’s feet. The hands holding him up were real and the eyes that were worriedly looking Bucky over were the same
“I thought you were dead,” Steve whispered mournfully, scanning Bucky for injuries. Some things didn’t change.

“I thought you were smaller,” Bucky quipped through the shock, not quite sure he believed that this was really Steve. But every fiber in his body knew that it was, more certain than anything else.

A stray machine crackled loudly in the background, startling Steve. Bucky felt Steve protectively step in front of him, shielding him from danger. It was then that Bucky noticed the shield on Steve’s back, a gaudy red, white, and blue crest. There was something familiar about it, like Bucky had seen it somewhere before.

“Come on.”

Steve urgently swung an arm around Bucky, taking his weight as they stumbled forward together, moving out to the hallway.

“What happened to you?” Bucky asked, the question spilling out of his mouth before he could think. He could feel Steve’s shoulders shift as he laughed to himself.

“I joined the army.”

Bucky pushed himself free, habitually afraid of crushing Steve. He’d be able to walk on his own. He limped after Steve, trying desperately to keep up with his new stride. Since when had Steve walked so tall? Bucky followed after Steve’s too broad shoulders.

“Did it hurt?” Bucky prodded, the questions bubbling up too fast to contain. Had Steve managed to enlist? What idiot had looked at scrawny little Steve and thought he’d survive being turned into a lab rat? What did you have to do a man to change him that much? Had they hurt Steve too?

“A little,” Steve replied, brushing off the question. Bucky could read his posture, saw that his thoughts were elsewhere, reading the terrain ahead. It wasn’t like Steve to admit to pain. Bucky tried not to think about it, focused instead of putting one foot in front of the other.

“Is it permanent?”

“So far.”

Steve shot Bucky a backward glance, hearing Bucky fall farther behind as he struggled to keep pace. Bucky waved him away, forcing his legs to move a little faster. He followed Steve blindly through the maze of corridors, too overwhelmed to say anything more. Steve was here. Really here.

They moved westward, at least according to Bucky’s internal compass. He didn’t suggest jumping from the windows, assuming Steve knew where he was going. They found themselves in the emptied out factory. Around them, the echo of explosions grew nearer and nearer until bursts of flame sprung up underneath their feet. The booms rocked the steel catwalks, making Bucky unsteady on his feet. He grabbed the handrails, lunging after Steve, determined to keep in him in sight. He stayed alert, watching for anything familiar. At least from behind he could cover Steve’s back. They scrambled up another flight of steel stairs, rising above the tongues of flame. The climb was murder on Bucky’s legs, but he pushed Steve forward. Just a little further.

Bucky saw the two men a moment before they saw him. They arose from nowhere on his
"Captain America, how exciting!" a voice called. But Bucky wasn’t looking at the speaker, but rather at the man behind him.

Zola.

Zola didn’t follow his master’s gaze, instead staring back out at Bucky, simultaneously curious and surprised. You shouldn’t be here, he seemed to be saying. Every fiber of Bucky’s being quivered with unadulterated hatred, writhing under Zola’s dissecting gaze. He could feel himself being sized up, felt Zola estimating his strength by how much he leaned on the rail for support. Bucky pushed himself up a bit, showed that he could stand on his own, that Zola couldn’t rob him of that. Out of his chains and far across the exploding chasm, Bucky found the courage for defiance.

To Bucky’s relief, Steve didn’t notice, too intent on his exchange with the other man. Bucky forced himself to look away from Zola for a second, to watch Steve’s back as he approached the other man. Johann Schmidt, if he remembered correctly.

The two men, both unwilling to back down, had walked out onto the catwalk. The particular moment Bucky chose to return his attention to the two of them, Steve hauled back and punched Schmidt across the jaw. Typical. Bucky grappled with the urge to run out onto the bridge and join the fight and pull Steve back to safety. Before Bucky could act, much less think, Schmidt returned a blow, his fist colliding with Steve’s shield. The strike left knuckle-sized dents. Bucky pulled back. No way Bucky could win that fight. All the same, Bucky had the odd feeling Steve could win this one on his own. Bucky held off, watching intently as the two men postured and sized each other up. It was an unusual sight for Bucky, seeing Steve actually winning a fight. Schmidt was actually afraid of Steve, and that had to be the strangest thing Bucky had seen in this hellhole.

Zola must have sensed the way the scales were tipped as well, pulling a lever that separated the two men. Bucky looked back and forth between Schmidt and Zola, not sure who was more dangerous. Schmidt continued to command Steve’s attention, talking about someone named Erksine. Bucky filed away the name to ask about later, assuming there would be a later. Schmidt suddenly reached back to the nape of his neck, tugging at something. He began to pull off his face, apparently a mask, revealing a skull barely coated in fiery red flesh. Schmidt looked like he’d just jumped down from a church frieze, a demon loosed from hell. The sight was as transfixing as it was horrifying.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?” Bucky asked Steve dryly, eyes not moving from the scarlet spectacle before him. He never completely took his attention away from Zola though, not for a moment. Steve and Schmidt exchanged a few words before Zola and Schmidt suddenly turned, stepped into an elevator, and vanished into the night. They’d been stalling.

Realizing their time was almost up, Steve cast about for an exit, spotting a door higher up.

“Come on, let’s go! Up!” Steve urged, ushering Bucky towards the stairs. Bucky shoved Steve forward instead, gathering his strength for the climb. At the top, all that connected them to the exit was a single steel beam, dangerously loose. All the same, Steve urged Bucky forward, as if they were kids again, climbing the rain-rusted fire escape. Bucky climbed cautiously over the handrail and started inching his way across the beam. He was unsteady on his feet even on stable ground, but the adrenaline in his system honed his focus and he managed to move steadily forward. He felt Steve’s eyes glued to his back, hopeful and worried. Just as Bucky reached the halfway point, the beam lurched, suddenly dropping an inch. Bucky swallowed down the urge to scream, one leg suspended mid-air above the bridge. He felt a sudden gut-wrenching wave of vertigo and gathered his wits as he sidled across the beam, gaining speed as he felt the bolts coming looser. Just as the steel gave out,
Bucky gathered his feet beneath him and jumped, pouring every last ounce of energy he could muster into the leap. His mind spun with visions of falling, plunging into the fiery mayhem below, and landing with a sudden crash. Even as the morbid montage played out in front of him, he felt his hands find solid metal and he pulled himself up and over the railing. Safe.

It took half a second for him to realize what that meant. With the bridge gone, Steve was stranded on the other side. Bucky cast his eyes down at the explosions below, calculating their odds of surviving if the building caved in. Not good, not good enough. A lump rose in his throat, choking him as his panic grew.

“There’s gotta be a rope or something!” Bucky yelled across the divide, stumbling on his words in panic. He wanted to look around for that something, for the miracle to save them both, but he knew they’d reached the end. There was nothing. Bucky couldn’t tear his eyes off of Steve, crushed by guilt. If only Steve hadn’t come for him... There was no one else in the Isolation Ward, Steve would have known that. Bucky had no illusions that Steve had been looking for anyone else. Selfish as it may be, undeserving as Bucky knew he was, Bucky clung to the fact that Steve had come for him, him alone. Now though, Bucky felt like a walking curse, dragging Steve down with him into hell.

Was this how Eurydice felt, mutely following Orpheus out from Hades, struggling to keep up? Had she felt the same terror as she watched him turn around, unable to warn him, knowing he had braved hell and high water to retrieve her, only to have it all come crashing down just a few steps from freedom? No. Because Eurydice had not dragged Orpheus back into hell with her. She had been the only one to suffer her shortcomings. Bucky was pulling Steve down into the abyss with him, cursed beyond the reaches of Greek tragedy.

“Just go! Get out of here!” Steve yelled desperately at Bucky, the perfect hero. His words landed deaf on Bucky’s ears.

“No! Not without you!” Bucky screamed, each syllable ripping at the seams. He would not leave, could not leave here without Steve. He had no right to live if Steve did not. Without Steve, Bucky would have died on a table not knowing his own name. He wasn’t about to turn around and watch Steve die. No matter what Steve wanted.

Steve read the stubbornness in Bucky’s expression, saw the way he’d thrown himself over the railing, anchoring himself to the spot. Thinking fast, Steve grabbed the blown apart rail, bending the metal out and away. He made enough room to clear his body and stepped back, studying the jump. Steve’s new body could do all sorts of things, but he’d hardly tested it until today. Holding up showgirls had never really been an exertion. Steve pushed doubt from his mind. To stay put was death, but to leap was to risk living. And if Steve did one thing, it was take risks. He backed up as far as he could and studied Bucky’s face, imprinting it onto his retinas. It wouldn’t be so bad, he thought, if Bucky was the last thing he ever saw. Bucky stared back at him, fear written across his face, white knuckled as he gripped the bars on his side of the chasm, as if he were the one about to jump. Seeing Bucky truly scared for the first time, Steve shoved away the last remnants of his own fear. One, two steps, and then he was flying.

It really did feel like flying. Steve could almost count the seconds as he leapt through the air, somewhere between falling and soaring. He felt the hot air rising up quickly from below, buffering him as he crossed the chasm. As the rails and the far side came closer, Steve’s heart soared. He was going to make it. He crashed into the railing with room to spare, gracelessly doubled over. Bucky’s hands hauled him over before Steve had time to latch onto the bars properly. He landed in a clumsy pile at Bucky’s feet. They both paused a moment, catching their breath, hearts hammering. They shared a moment of trembling, grateful silence.
“Come on, punk. We’re not out yet.”

Steve looked up at Bucky, who had one hand extended to pull Steve to his feet. Steve took Bucky’s hand. He could feel the fragile bones under Bucky’s skin, feared that if he pulled on Bucky at all they’d both come tumbling down. So Steve pulled himself to his feet, Bucky guiding him up, more symbolic than useful. Steve clapped Bucky on the shoulder as he passed, wrenching open the double doors before Bucky could say a word.

The cool night air hit Bucky’s face as the doors burst open. He gulped down grateful lungfuls, the air inside him suddenly feeling musty and stale. As the wind blew through his unkempt hair, high up above the battlefield, Bucky was thrown back to the sniper’s nest, pierced by a sudden calm. Maybe, he thought, it was merely the shock of nearly dying, of nearly watching Steve die, of surviving what no person ever should, but here he was, so close to freedom he could taste it on the wind. Shouts rode the breeze up to his ear. On the horizon, Bucky spotted a tank blasting its way out of the compound. The tank sent bright blue bolts stabbing across the night, the shots echoing across the landscape. Steve took in the scene in an instant, already nimbly climbing down the ladder to the lower platforms. Bucky followed suit, clambering down ladder after ladder until they landed on the roof of a nearby warehouse. They negotiated the haphazard terrain, pitted and scarred by stray fire. Beneath them, the grounds were a swirling sea of men, all armed to the teeth and overflowing with pent up rage. Bucky studied their haggard figures, recognized in them the same fires of revenge.

As they descended into the fray, Steve leapt down first, taking out one of the faceless soldiers as he went. He ripped the man’s gun away and dealt him a stunning blow to the back of the head with the shield. As Bucky landed heavily beside him, Steve absently handed him the gun. Bucky inspected the rifle, calmed by the easy way it settled in his grasp. His exhaustion slipped away with a weapon in hand, tired muscles reanimated by the need for revenge. He rifled through the unconscious soldier’s pockets, stealing spare magazines which he tucked in his waistband. Steve had moved on a few feet ahead, engaging another soldier, garish shield echoing loudly as it connected with the next man’s helmet. Bucky quickly unloaded a bullet in the downed man’s skull and followed after Steve.

Steve didn’t turn around, feeling Bucky’s familiar presence behind him. Steve realized why he’d never felt right after the serum, why he’d always felt strangely vulnerable, why he’d always felt the need to carry the shield. Now, with Bucky covering his back, everything slipped back into place, balanced. The two fell quickly in step, Steve leading the charge with his flimsy shield, Bucky providing cover from the back. Steve heard the staccato laughter of machine gun fire behind him, saw the effects as the masked men swarming around him collapsed, marionettes with clipped strings.

Steve headed towards the haywire tank, which had rolled recklessly through the barbed wire barrier, toppling guard towers in its path. The storm of men poured through the opening, spilling out into the forest. Steve hurried to join the others, urging Bucky onward with a quick wave of the shield. Bucky followed obligingly, breaking out into a trot behind him. Steve leapt over the downed fence before turning back. For an instant he didn’t see Bucky’s face, swept away in the tidal wave of ashen faced men. Then he spotted him towards the back, wrenching his boot free of the tangled wire. He hobbled over to Steve quickly, clutching the freed boot, hopping as he tugged it back on. No laces, Steve noted. He quickly glanced at the shoes on the feet rushing around him. All laced. Steve wondered but made no remark, just jogged over to the slowly rolling tank, running alongside the oversized treads.

“Hey, who’s steering this thing?” He yelled up at the man on top, who had finally paused from his pot shots back at the base. The man peered down at him, face ruddy with half-drunken delight.
“Wouldn’t ya know it. Ol’ Captain America, aren’t you?” The man yelled down, curiously leaning over.

“The one and only,” Steve replied, throwing off a jaunty salute as he kept pace with the tank.

“I take it you’re the one behind this whole rescue operation then?”

Steve put the face and voice together, vaguely recalling the man from the cells below the factory.

“Yeah. But there’s no reinforcements coming. We’re going to have to march,” Steve shouted back up, cursing the useless transmitter in his pocket. He had half a mind to throw it away, but he needed to rub it in Howard’s face first.

“You take the lead, Cap. I’ve got your back,” the man responded, lovingly patting the mounted gun as he angled himself back towards the base, already concealed behind the thick trees.

Steve turned, facing the throng of men following the tank’s wake. No one seemed to notice him, preoccupied with moving forward.

“Hey! Everyone!” Steve yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. A few curious heads shot up, but the rest continued to plod along, sending wary glances back over their shoulders, alert. Bucky, who had caught up to Steve, sniggered.

“What, you think a little yelling’s going to get their attention?” Bucky jibed, smirking up at Steve. Looking up at Steve still set him off balance. How long would it take for him to get used to that?

“What, you got a better idea?” Steve shot back, gesturing helplessly at the horde of men. Bucky just smirked. At least this was still his arena. Bucky took the shield off Steve’s arm and stepped back a few paces, raising the shield over his head and chest. He lifted his gun over his head and sent a brief burst of bullets into the trees behind him. The sudden clamor sent all heads whipping around in Bucky’s direction. A single bullet whizzed past his ear, a few inches off mark. In that same moment, Bucky belatedly realized the shield was just a prop, no way it’d stop a bullet. He’d need to have a few words with Steve about that. Bucky lowered the shield, all eyes on him.

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, but Steve came up beside him, gently taking back the shield. It rested well on his arm, natural. Steve’s shoulders straightened, regal beneath the mess of mismatched (most definitely stolen) gear. Authority settled well on Steve’s new shoulders, every line of muscle resonating with certainty. It would be hard to look at Steve and not trust him.

“We have a long march ahead of us, about thirty miles to base camp. If we don’t want Hitler riding our coattails back to base, we’ve got to step quick. I want all injured men on the tank. If you’ve got a gun, keep it ready. Mind your neighbor. No man gets left behind. Understood?”

A murmur of assent rumbled across the crowd.

“All men behind me! March!”

Chapter End Notes

I probably watched the 5 minute montage for Bucky’s rescue a hundred times, so this
was as true to the canon as possible, with one exception: the bootlaces. If you zoom in on the HD pics, Bucky clearly has bootlaces (although, in my defense, his boots are very loose). A lot of my ideas for what happened in Azzano came from staring at pictures of Bucky after his rescue (for scientific purposes only!) and trying to explain the costume department's choices. So this one infidelity to the canon...call it artistic disagreement. If you spot anything out of line with the original though, let me know. I want to be as accurate as possible!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thanks for waiting! Special thanks to my beta, actuarialturtle, who kept my characterization from going off the rails. (The true unsung hero here) And thanks to the wonderful people who’ve been writing comments; you keep me going!
As promised, there’s a little more balance in this chapter. There’s still angst (of course), but time for a little fluff and h/c!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We have a long march ahead of us, about thirty miles to base camp. If we don’t want Hitler riding our coattails back to base, we’ve got to step quick. I want all injured men on the tank. If you’ve got a gun, keep it ready. Mind your neighbor. Not a single man gets left behind. Understood? All men behind me! March!”

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Bucky watched Steve bark orders, awed. Steve had always been shrewd, tactical even when it wasn’t his own neck on the line.

Bucky found himself smiling as he followed Steve to the front of the motley parade. Steve shot him a shy glance, embarrassed to be caught playing the role. Bucky jostled him with his elbow.

“You’re doing great, Captain,” he whispered in Steve’s ear, not missing the way Steve choked down a laugh before shooting him a dirty look. For a split-second, Bucky caught a glimpse of the Brooklyn boy. He smiled a little longer at Steve before letting the look slip from his face. He turned his attention to the trees, vigilance bordering on paranoia. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

Steve let himself become absorbed in policing the group, pacing up and down the line of men, counting and double counting. He scanned the faces of the men for clues, piecing together life in Azzano. Each man was bone-tired and thin, ragged but unmistakably alive. Steve made brief conversation with some and learned about life in that god-forsaken factory.

Over all, it was dangerous and exhausting work, each day stretching longer than the last. They’d been fed well enough to keep going, but most men didn’t have time to starve. Every soldier seemed to have an account of men dropping on the factory floor, crushed beneath too heavy loads, collapsing with exhaustion over assembly lines, or struck down by foremen never to stand back up. But no matter who he asked, Steve only found blank looks when he asked about the Isolation Ward. No one came back, he was told over and over again. Men went there to die, plucked from the cages. There had been no pattern; not the ill or the strongest, not American or British, chosen - so it seemed - at random by a shrewd little man with glasses.

With Steve gone, Bucky had time to clear his head. The overwhelming euphoria of surviving faded away enough for Bucky’s thoughts to turn elsewhere. Steve. Steve had gone and done it again, thrown himself recklessly into the line of fire, all on the faint notion Bucky needed him. This certainly wasn’t the first time, though it was most definitely the most dangerous time.

Bucky was fondly reminded of the spring he’d nearly broken his foot at the docks and had been
unable to work for two weeks. He’d spent that first week alone in their apartment, wondering how he was going to pay the rent or buy medicine the next time Steve got sick. He wrote out a note to Rebecca, asking to borrow a little, and handed it over to Steve. Steve had taken one look at the letter, gathered up what little money they had saved up, and left. He didn’t return for three days. To Bucky’s credit, it only took an hour for him to realize that his note was never going to reach Becca, or any other Barnes for that matter.

On the first evening after Steve’s disappearance, a boy, maybe 9 years old, appeared at the apartment door. Bucky had been reading a pulp fiction magazine he’d rescued from the gutter, the pages stuck together but still readable. He stashed the book and hobbled to the door to let the street urchin in. The boy was carrying a little flour sack which he handed mutely to Bucky, sticking out his tiny fist. Bucky took the bag and opened it, the grubby little boy still watching. Bucky pulled out a note, crumpled from travel but no worse for the wear.

Give him two cents. Bottom of the bag, card box. - Steve

Bucky reached into the bottom of the bag and pulled out a beat up box of playing cards. He opened it, sending a surreptitious glance out the doorway behind the boy. Folded tightly into the box were a few dollar bills. Bucky tipped the box into his hand, a few coins spilling out into his palm. He picked out two pennies and handed them to the expectant little boy. The boy inspected the coins before eagerly stuffing them in his pocket.

“Where’d Steve send you from?” Bucky asked, putting the card box back into the bag, fighting the urge to sift through the rest of the bag’s contents.

“Uppa’ East Side,” the boy replied, hands in his pockets, waiting to rocket out the door.

Bucky nodded, thinking, and gestured for the boy to leave.

“Steve said you need to send something back so he knows I gave you his stuff,” the kid explained, rocking impatiently on his heels.

“Okay, just a moment.”

Bucky hobbled over to the dresser, trying to figure out what the kid might not just steal. He settled on one of Steve’s drawing pencils, which were actually worth quite a bit of money, but not to the average person. He pulled the box out from under the bed, only to find that the tin of pencils was missing. Perplexed, Bucky quickly put the box back and returned to the dresser. He picked up a little carved bird, one of Steve’s new attempts to make something out of the discarded crates piled up around the docks. He turned back to the little boy, who stood in the doorway staring at the bulky homemade splint on Bucky’s foot. Another home project, courtesy of the discarded crates.

“Tell Steve to get his sorry ass back here soon and to stop playing around with high society,” Bucky told the boy, handing him the bird as he limped over. The boy stared at Bucky blankly.

“He’ll pay you on delivery.”

The boy flashed him a grin and bolted out the door without a word, bird in hand.

Steve sent the boy three more times over his short trip, each time sending money and odd trinkets: oranges, soap (Because I know you haven’t washed, the note said), and a battered tin of shoe polish. Bucky marveled at the second-hand luxuries, imagining Steve wading through the garbage behind the Upper East Side estates. Did they throw money out too?

After three days, Bucky opened the door to find Steve on the threshold rather than the little
“Hey.”

“Hey yourself. You gonna let me in or what?” Steve looked even thinner, if that was possible. He had deep bags beneath his eyes, but those same eyes glittered as they leered back up at Bucky. Tucked under his gangly arms, Steve carried a bulky notebook and a small bag that clattered noisily as he set it down by the bed.

“How’s your foot doing? You haven’t been trying to walk on it, have you?”

“Who do you think I am?”

Bucky waved Steve away and sat down to appease him. Steve settled down on the bed, leaning tiredly against the rickety headboard.

“So,” Bucky drawled, “where’d you get all this, huh? You secretly got rich family you’re not tellin’ me about, or has golden boy Steven Rogers taken to a life of crime?”

Steve’s face flushed as he sat up.

“Neither, actually.”

“What then?”

“I.. I, uh,” Steve stammered, turning pink. Bucky was about to go crazy with curiosity.

“I did some drawing for the rich folks up on East Side,” Steve explained, ducking his head sheepishly.

“Drawing, huh? That’s not so embarrassing. What, were you doing nudes or something?” Bucky prodded, laughing at the way Steve started to splutter out denials.

“No, no, nothing like that! Christ, Bucky, no! I was not drawing nudes!”

“What then? What kind of stuff do you have to draw to get the good old folks up there to send you home with that sort of bounty? And oranges! Oranges! How rich do you have to be to get oranges around here?”

“Well, there’s mostly just a lot of old ladies up there, you know. Living alone and what not, and they’re mostly just looking for company. And if you draw them or their daughters real nice, stuff like that... “ Steve mumbled, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

“So, you drew a bunch of rich old hags? And they gave you oranges.”

“Well, I might have also told them I needed the money for...” Steve’s face was bright red, “...I told them the money was for an orphanage, that it was going to shut down, and...”

Bucky cut off Steve’s stammering.

“You told a lie? You, Steven Grant Rogers, told a lie?” Bucky could hardly get the words out between his laughter, rocking back in the chair. He couldn’t figure out what was more ridiculous, Steve telling a lie - rarer than anyone winning those rigged games at Coney Island - or anyone actually believing one of Steve’s lies.

“It’s only sort of a lie,” Steve shot back defensively, “this is kind of an orphanage. We’re both
orphans, we live together, you know…” He trailed off, gesturing vaguely.

“Relax, Steve. I’ve seen you try to tell a lie. My bet is the little old ladies you tried to ‘con’ saw right through you. Lucky you, they probably figured it was cute or something.” Bucky smirked, still catching his breath from the fit of laughter.

“Piss off, Buck.” The words lacked any force and Steve and Bucky dissolved into laughter. Eyes watering, Bucky softened.

“Thanks.”

Bucky rose and clapped Steve gently on the shoulder, turning away so Steve couldn’t see the look on his face.

“Least I could do,” Steve replied from behind Bucky.

“Yeah,” Bucky turned back and took in the bags under Steve’s eyes, how he looked ready to crumble like so much dust, “just...just don’t go and try to doing anything heroic like that again, alright.”

Steve frowned at him.

“You’re exhausted,” Bucky explained, gesturing at Steve where he lay on the bed. “Besides, carrying around money like that? Thank your lucky stars you didn’t get mugged.”

“I was fine, Buck. I had it all figured out.”

“Right, man with a plan, you are.” Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Damn right.”

Steve was always the man with a plan. Bucky wanted to believe that would carry over here too, that Steve would always be able to wiggle free of trouble at the last moment. But things weren’t as simple as punching Hitler in the face or convincing a few rich people to buy war bonds. HYDRA was a different entity, with weapons like Bucky had never seen, capable of decimating an army in minutes. There was treachery, on both sides. Bucky had witnessed that first hand. And how badly must the Allies be losing the war if anyone thought dropping Steve behind enemy lines to single-handedly take on a HYDRA base was a good idea? Bucky felt a keen sense of chaos, a world about to tip over the edge. Getting back to base only spared them from the obvious enemies. No one here was safe until they were back home or underground. Anxiety gnawed at Bucky’s stomach, a creeping paranoia amplified by the ceaseless thrum under his skin.

Steve eventually returned to the front of the march, falling back into place at Bucky’s side. Bucky stared off into the middle distance, eyes suddenly glancing around every now and then, spooked by unheard sounds. He didn’t seem to notice Steve studying him. To Steve, Bucky’s trauma seemed different from the other men. He stood out, stripped of his uniform, wearing little more than his underclothes. Bucky’s green shirt was torn and singed, silver dog tags gleaming from underneath the open collar. His clothes hung loosely on his frame and Steve could see the bones in his neck when Bucky turned his head. Bucky walked with his head bowed, radiating exhaustion. But his every muscle was tensed, his gait uneven with a small limp. Steve was reminded of a hunted animal in the way Bucky plodded onwards, tired but restless, forever looking over his shoulder. His wounds were different than the other men too: a deep bruise seeping out from his temple underneath his flop of hair, a cut on one cheekbone, a bloodied ear, left hand loose at his side, swollen and angry.
“Hey, Buck,” Steve whispered, trying to gently pull Bucky back to reality. Bucky’s eyes slid back into focus, but the glassy tint lingered.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked quietly, ducking his head to look Bucky in the eyes. Bucky registered the question grimly.

“I’m walking on my own two legs. I’m just dandy.” The space between the two of them suddenly felt claustrophobic. Lies are harder to tell at a hair’s breadth, and Steve knew it.

“Buck.”

“I’m fucking fine,” Bucky growled, right hand tightening on his gun, fingers sliding towards the trigger. It wasn’t a threat, Steve didn’t think Bucky was even aware of the gesture, but he backed off. They walked forward a few more tense steps.

“Can you keep a secret?” Steve tried again, switching strategies. He prepared his words carefully, calculating exactly what would get under Bucky’s skin. Bucky shot him a look, but it wasn’t hostile, so Steve plowed on.

“I’m going to be court-martialed for this. This,” Steve gestured back at the line of men, “was completely against orders.”

Bucky’s face shuttered, half-angry and half-resigned. He’d already guessed what Steve was about to say next.

“Plus,” Steve grinned, “I’m not actually a Captain, per se. It’s more of an honorary title. For morale purposes or something like that. This is my first time actually seeing combat. Technically.”

Bucky continued to stare at Steve. He didn’t look shocked but rather like he’d had some deep suspicion confirmed. Like catching your neighbor’s kid stealing the milk off your back step.

“You goddamn idiot.” Bucky began flatly, unsure where to even start his tirade. Steve smiled, half expecting Bucky to clock him. He wouldn’t have minded. Instead, Bucky leveled him with a stern look, a new lecture brewing behind stormy eyes.

“This isn’t Brooklyn, Steve. I told you a thousand times and I don’t care if you’re suddenly some...super-human. As long as you can still die, you can’t keep doing stupid shit like this. Running 30 miles behind enemy lines, alone, with this crappy shield - which can’t protect you from squat, by the way - that is stupid. And it’s going to get your punk ass killed. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Did you think about me, or anyone else, before you ran off to enlist? Did you think I wanted you to come out here and get shot in the fucking face?”

Bucky had reanimated, completely absorbed in lecturing Steve. Steve held himself back from rising to the bait. They could spend hours yelling at each other about this, had already spent countless hours arguing about it back in Brooklyn. Bucky had lost this argument a long time ago, and they both knew it. The speech now was familiar, if not a little angrier. With Bucky here in front of him, miraculously alive, it was hard for Steve to regret anything. Feeling only marginally guilty, Steve shook off the little barbs and simply shrugged.

Too late now.

Bucky shot Steve a withering, long-suffering look.

“Christ, once we get back I’m going to personally kill the idiot that let you into the army.”
Steve laughed, although he wasn’t totally sure if Bucky was joking or not.

“You’re a little late for that,” Steve replied, smiling wanly. The words stung a little, remnants of a grief not quite healed. Dwelling on the past wouldn’t do him any good though, not when Bucky needed him here and now. And god, Steve realized, Bucky was in bad shape.

Bucky frowned, almost apologetic, reading the loss in Steve’s face. He cursed himself for dredging up something like that. No one ever wants to remember the first time they watch someone die. Though it wasn’t exactly the first time Steve had crossed paths with death.

“So, what did they do to you, to make you like...this.” Bucky casually gestured at Steve with the barrel of his gun, veering away from the sore subject. Steve raised his eyebrows but obligingly switched subjects.

“America’s first super soldier, “ Steve intoned, mocking the melodramatic voice of the propaganda reels, “the height of modern science and technology! Top government scientists transformed sickly child Steven Rogers into a miracle of modern science, faster and stronger than three men combined.” Steve tapered off from his mocking spiel, noticing the way Bucky’s brows had furrowed.

“What? This is a good change, you know? I can be out on the frontlines, doing as much as everyone else. No more asthma, no more pneumonia, no more heart problems. I can be useful for once, goddammit.” Steve lost his temper a little at the end, annoyed by the way Bucky frowned at him.

“Too bad they couldn’t have done anything to make you smarter,” Bucky shot back, looking Steve dead in the eye. Steve opened his mouth to argue, but Bucky cut him off.

“This is war, Steve. People die. And if you don’t die, you never really come back. No one comes back from war the person they were when they left. I’ve been out here just a few months already and I know that. Ask any guy here.” Bucky’s anger faded and he looked at Steve, something mournful in his eyes. His words dripped with heavy implication and it took all of Steve’s willpower not to grab Bucky by the shoulders and demand to know what happened, what they’d done to him.

“You’re a good guy, Steve. Too good to be out here with us. You’ve got nothing to prove. Go home while you still can, win the war from there.”

“Can’t do that, Buck. You know I can’t.” Steve stared down at Bucky. Not without you. The words passed unsaid between the two of them. The tension drained out of Bucky’s shoulders, resigned. He opened his mouth, on the verge of saying something, but decided against it. The silence between the two of them stretched nearly an hour before Bucky spoke up again.

“Do you really want to know?”

Steve’s head snapped around to face Bucky, surprised by the quiet words. Bucky had spoken so softly Steve wasn’t sure he had heard correctly.

“About what happened back there, you mean?” Steve asked, lowering his voice.

Bucky nodded mutely, not looking up.

“Of course I want to know, but…” Steve trailed off. They walked wordlessly a little while, both struggling for the courage to speak first.
“So, how long were you there?” Steve asked, trying to get Bucky talking with an easy question.

“I...I’m not sure. A little more than two weeks, I think. However long it’s been since the 107th got taken in,” Bucky replied, his voice flat.

“Why’d they take you?” Steve prodded, looking out and ahead, rather than at Bucky. A real conversation was too much pressure for both of them.

“No idea. There was a scientist, Zola...” Bucky trailed off. Steve looked over at him quickly only to see that Bucky had a thousand-yard stare, an expression of blank terror on his face. The name Zola had barely escaped his lips, a quiet fearful breath, as if he were too scared to say the name aloud.

“Who’s Zola?” Steve asked. The name made Bucky visibly flinch and Steve cursed himself the instant the word escaped his mouth. But even more, he cursed the man that had hurt his best friend so much, and mentally put his name at the top of his list, right next to Schmidt. His mind went blank at what he’d do after he found Zola, but he’d come up with something. He was creative that way.

“Who was he?” Steve tried again, carefully avoiding the name. To his relief, Bucky didn’t shy away this time, pausing to answer.

“You saw him on the bridge. He was with Schmidt,” Bucky explained, his expression carefully neutral again. Steve had a dim picture of Zola running out of the laboratory, hat clasped to his head, and then again of Zola at Schmidt’s side in the exploding factory. He kicked himself in hindsight. He’d been distracted, remembering little more than a short smug man in spectacles. Steve cast about for another question.

“Were there other men in there with you?” Steve tried to remember, but there had been no sign of other prisoners in the Isolation Ward. As he passed through there had been a series of rooms and a barred door that might have been a cell, but otherwise the only sign of life was the cushy office adjoining the laboratory. Bucky shot Steve an odd sidelong glance. Perhaps Steve was imagining it, but fear flitted across Bucky’s features as he glanced over at Steve.

“Yeah. There were,” Bucky whispered. Steve felt guilt like a punch in the gut. He’d left men behind, too occupied rescuing Bucky to notice anyone else in the ward.

“There were other inmates,” Bucky continued, still not looking at Steve, “but they all died.”

“They died?” Steve wanted to ask how many, how, why, but Bucky had already closed off, clearly signaling for Steve to get off the subject.

“Yeah,” was the only answer Steve got.

They walked in silence, Steve’s uneasiness growing with each footfall. Bucky was first to break the silence.

“Don’t tell the Colonel where you found me.”

“Why?”

Bucky didn’t reply, just fixed Steve with a meaningful look. His face was hard-edged, leaving no room for argument.

“Just don’t.”
“What should I tell him, if he asks?” Bucky saw through the ploy, but gave in.

“I don’t know. Torture. You think of something. But nothing about the lab.” The way Bucky casually tossed off the word torture chilled Steve’s blood. If it wasn’t the torture that was bothering Bucky, it meant that there was more, something worse. Steve fought the urge to vomit. He turned to Bucky, who avoided eye contact, pointedly keeping his eyes fixed ahead of him.

“You’re not alright.”

“Of course I’m not, Steve. And I know that’s driving you up the wall, mother hen that you are, but I just can’t talk about it right now, okay. Let’s talk about anything else.” Bucky’s voice was heavy with exhaustion. After a brief pause, he added, “Sorry, I know you mean well, Steve. Really.”

“It’s alright, Buck.” Steve relented, trying to sound soothing. The words came out patronizing, but Bucky didn’t seem to notice, already tuned out to the world.

A tense pause passed between them, measured out in the limping patter of the marching men. They walked together in silence, a new understanding reached. It was too late to change anything. Bucky was going to have to accept Steve as Captain America, would have to get used to seeing him on the front lines. In return, Steve was going to have to learn to ask fewer questions. Neither of them were happy about it.

“When we get back, you’re gonna be Captain America again, right?” Bucky asked quietly.

“Yeah. Assuming I’m not in too much trouble anyway.” Steve laughed a little, uneasy. Bucky nodded, distracted. He huffed a small laugh, as if he’d thought of something funny, before he turned back to Steve.

“Well, I suppose every hero needs his sidekick, huh?”

Bucky straightened his shoulders, adjusted the way the gun was slung over his shoulder. Steve looked askance at Bucky, who winked and continued marching forward. Steve couldn’t help his own small smile, glad to know that Bucky wasn’t completely changed. The rest of the march passed in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes

1) Oranges! They’re a historically expensive fruit in America and were a pretty common Christmas gift during the Great Depression. In the 1940s, getting a dozen oranges in New York cost about 50 cents, equivalent to over $8 today (or $4 a pound). By comparison, today oranges are about a dollar a pound at your local Walmart. Moreover, 50 cents for a dozen oranges starts to seem a little extravagant when you consider that the apartment Steve and Bucky rented was probably about $50 a month (a lower-end or shared apartment in Brooklyn at the time).

2) I don’t know much about NYC (much less historical NYC), but Upper East Side was the place where a lot of old money lived. The perfect place for Steve to go look for some deep-pocketed sympathizers. Assuming the boys lived near the ship docks, Upper
East Side wouldn't have been a very far walk for Steve either.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thanks for waiting! If it helps, this is chapter is twice as long as usual, so...
Beware, fluff and awful tropes up ahead (plus a small dose of angst to keep all things in perspective).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The men grew jittery as they neared camp, the soft morning light stirring hope in their hearts. As the familiar posts and roads came into view, the caravan began to thrum with energy, each man finding the strength to move a little faster. Soldiers adjusted their guns, tugged on uniforms, and prepared for a hero’s reception. As they came into sight of the entrance, shouts rose up from the barracks, half-dressed men surging toward the gate in shock. As the bar lifted to let the men in, throngs of soldiers lined the path to the colonel’s tent, cheering. Men rushed forward and peeling off friends with hysterical laughter and grateful, half-suppressed sobs. A group had already begun to swarm around the captured tank, banging on the sides and raising a commotion as the driver and gunner descended. Nurses swam through the hordes, sweeping men away from the tank, and guided them gently to the white tents.

Bucky and Steve exchanged a look. They’d finally made it - somehow - to safety. All Steve could think was, Thank God. Steve didn’t have long to bask in his relief before he noticed familiar faces pushing their way through the crowd. The men parted before the Colonel, who had Peggy right on his heels.

Colonel Phillips glared at Steve from a distance, stony-faced. Steve straightened as he approached, adopting a soldier’s posture.

“Some of these men need medical attention,” he reported.

Steve had accepted the consequences the second he thought Bucky might be alive. He’d been prepared to die the moment he saw Bucky strapped to the table, if that was what it took to bring him to safety. But now that they were both safe again, the consequences seemed dire. Steve didn’t know if he could suffer to be separated from Bucky, not so soon. Steve was terrified of being separated again, of waiting at home while Bucky stepped back onto the frontlines. Being Captain America was Steve’s only chance to fight in the war, and he’d only just started. Steve tried to read the Colonel’s face for answers, but Phillips was inscrutable.

“I surrender myself for disciplinary action,” Steve added, trying to act professional. He couldn’t ignore the the sea of eyes that had turned on him and the Colonel.

Colonel Philips looked around at the cheering half-dead men. When he returned his gaze to Steve, his expression had softened. If Steve squinted, the Colonel might even be smiling.

“That won’t be necessary,” Philips snapped, the closest Steve would get to an apology, much less praise. The Colonel turned and muttered something to Peggy as he left. Peggy stepped forward, perfectly composed. But underneath the makeup and the facade, Steve saw the redness in her eyes and suspected she had been crying. Steve couldn’t help but notice just how closely she was standing.
“You’re late,” she said calmly, quiet relief hidden between the syllables. Looking to lighten the mood, Steve pulled the fried communicator out of his pocket and waved it for her to see.

“Couldn’t call my ride,” he joked, tilting his head playfully. He was overcome with the sudden urge to kiss her. In the background, Steve heard Bucky’s voice underneath the din, politely deflecting one of the nurses. The sound was enough to break Steve’s reverie, and for a moment his attention wavered briefly between Peggy and Bucky. He could feel Bucky’s eyes on his back, curiously studying Peggy over his shoulder. Steve returned his focus to Peggy, the red of her lips strangely magnetizing.

Bucky felt something like jealousy stir within him as he watched the woman and Steve, their gazes melting into each other. The chemistry between them sang like it does in the movies, the Hollywood starlet stealing a forbidden look at her lover across the dance floor before a night of illicit love. This was purer though, as much as Bucky was loathe to admit it, unsure why their stoic affection annoyed him so much. Any second they were going to have to kiss.

“Hey,” Bucky shouted to the crowd, “let’s hear it for Captain America.”

Bucky turned back to Steve, gloating, relishing the way Steve’s cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink. He could play this part, the loyal sidekick, Bucky thought as he smiled reassuringly at Steve. The way Steve’s face lit up only drove the final nail into the coffin.

Steve looked back to Peggy and the mass of applauding cheering men and Bucky let his face fall, still clapping. They’d never let Steve leave, not now.

The next hour passed in anarchy as men were swept off to abandoned bunks and the overflowing medical tents. Steve steered Bucky to the side, plucking him from the grasp of an insistent nurse. Peggy had left with one last lingering look, off to manage paperwork or something else important, so Steve headed to the Colonel’s tent to debrief. Bucky followed behind him like a shadow, unable to go anywhere else.

There was no way in hell that Bucky was going to Medical. He just might puke if he saw another person in a lab coat. The idea of needles was a little more than he could manage at the moment. Besides, what if they noticed the change, saw something unusual in his blood? What if someone noticed his wounds healing too quickly, the way his broken hand had already nearly stitched back together? Questions about the wounds themselves would be easy enough to answer. Torture, he’d tell them, close enough to the truth. That would open a new can of worms. What had they asked him? What had he told them? Bucky concocted the lies in his head, rewriting dialogues.

Bucky followed Steve to the commanders’ tent, preparing his story and hoping to disappear into the landscape, nothing more than Steve’s shadow. They stepped inside.

“You got a report, Captain Rogers, or are you just here to tell me ‘I told you so’?” Colonel Phillips asked, not bothering to look up from his table. Bucky almost felt bad for him. Almost.

“I have a report, sir.”

“And who is this?” the Colonel asked, gesturing at Bucky standing half-eclipsed behind Steve.

“This is Sergeant Barnes, sir.”

“So you’re the one responsible for this whole headache, hm?” It took Bucky a second to recognize that the comment was directed at him. The Colonel looked back at Steve.
“All respect to your friend, Captain, but why is he here and not in the infirmary with the rest of the boys?” Bucky could see from the little change in Steve’s posture that he had not been prepared for the question, but rather he’d simply brought Bucky along automatically. Before Steve could muck things up, Bucky stepped forward.

“I have intel to report, sir.”

“Go on.” Steve shot Bucky a surprised look and Bucky quickly silenced him. Subtlety had never been Steve’s strong suit, but the Colonel missed the rapid exchange.

“While I was in the factory I got a look at a map of their bases. I only saw it briefly, but I think I can remember their approximate positions. I also managed to overhear some conversations about where the factory shipped components to. If that would be of interest to you, Colonel, sir.” Steve watched Bucky slip into parade rest, hands folded behind his back, shoulders square and feet spread. Even without his uniform, he retained an air of authority, face expressionless as he made his report.

“Alright, son. You’ve got me curious. Barnes, go tell the man over there what you know while I talk to Rogers.” The Colonel left no room for protest, already turning away, shuffling papers and waiting expectantly for Steve to take a seat across from him. Grateful for the dismissal, Bucky turned. He caught Steve’s eye as he passed.

Don’t fuck this up and don’t mention me.

Steve, more careful this time, nodded minutely and passed, sitting down awkwardly in a chair too small to bear his frame.

Steve could hear Bucky voice faintly in the background, listing names as a typewriter obligingly clicked along. Steve turned his attention back to Phillips.

“I didn’t have time to see much, but Azzano was clearly a weapons factory. They were manufacturing stuff I’ve never seen in our armories. Weapons that shoot blue energy so strong it can vaporize a whole man. Some of our men got their hands on the guns and managed to bring them back. I’d recommend letting our scientists take a look at them.”

The Colonel jotted a few notes onto paper, listening. Steve went on.

“The men appear to have been forced to work on the factory floors. According to the men I’ve spoken to, Johan Schmidt was in charge of the operation, working with a man named Zola.”

“Zola, do you mean Arnim Zola?” The Colonel looked up at Steve, recognizing the name.

“I don’t know, sir. I assume.”

“Do you know if they made it out alive?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Do you know for a fact? ‘I believe so’ isn’t the kind of thing I can tell my superiors.”

“Bucky - I mean, Sergeant Barnes - and I ran into them on our way out of the building. They left through the roof. They didn’t appear to be in any hurry, so I assume they had transport waiting.”

“You’re certain it was them?”

“Yes, sir.” The Colonel scratched something short onto his paper before looking back up.
“Anything else you’d like to report?”

“I also got a look at the map Sergeant Barnes referred to. Between the two of us, I believe we can recreate a rather accurate version of it.”

“Where was this map?”

“There was an office in what looked like a laboratory. I passed it while I was looking for men.” Steve carefully omitted what else had been in the laboratory, aware of Bucky carefully listening from across the room. Colonel Philips seemed to accept the statement, squaring his papers against the desk.

“Will that be all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed. And take your friend to medical.”

“Yes, sir.” Steve pivoted and strolled over to Bucky, who was already waiting by the exit. Steve put a hand on his shoulder and led him out of sight of the tent before steering the two of them to the side, wedging the two of them into the tight alley between buildings.

“I don’t want to go to medical,” Bucky told him, unprompted. Steve looked around, saw that no one was in sight or earshot, then turned back to Bucky.

“Why not? You’re in as bad of shape as the rest of them.” The comparison elicited a small, bitter smirk from Bucky.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, the lie so clear even Steve couldn’t miss it.

“Bucky, you gotta tell me what’s wrong. They’re just gonna fix you up, no questions asked.” Steve’s voice was soft and reassuring. He’d been a good choice for selling bonds; Steve had that sort of voice you couldn’t help but trust. Bucky dug in his heels, resisting.

“I don’t need medical. I’ll heal fine on my own.”

“I’m worried about you, Buck. Please just let me take you. I’ll go with, make sure no one asks any questions, whatever you want.”

Bucky didn’t respond, frowning and thinking.

“Please, Buck. Can’t you at least tell me why…” Bucky cut him off, shaking his head tiredly.

“Look, I’ll go. Okay? I’ll go.”

Steve slung his arm over Bucky’s shoulders, pulling him back out from their hiding spot.

“You know, I’m just glad you’re alive.”

Bucky said nothing for a moment.

“Yeah, me too.”

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The infirmary was overflowing when Bucky and Steve arrived. The nurses flitted about,
shadowed by weary doctors. The sight made Bucky flinch and he sunk a little into Steve’s arms. To an outsider, it might have looked like Steve was the only thing keeping Bucky on his feet. Steve squeezed Bucky’s shoulder reassuringly, knowing full well Steve piloted Bucky to the back of the tent, finding the quietest corner among the mayhem. To Bucky’s relief, every cot was full, so he stood, leaning against Steve.

A nurse approached, clearly star struck as she looked over Steve. A ringlet of brown hair caressed the side of her face, springing free of the severe bun tucked underneath her cap. Bucky, almost by muscle memory, felt the urge to reach for the curl and brush it behind her ear. Kisses started that way, quiet murmurings in dance halls as he swayed the night away. The feeling felt foreign to him now and he regarded the woman blankly, carefully watching the dainty hand she kept tucked in her pocket. She withdrew it, harmless, to brush the hair from her eyes, blushing a little as she caught Steve’s attention.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Steve said, all manners and Brooklyn charm. It was no different from the gangly boy from the endless failed double dates, but with a body like a Greek statue the effects were reversed. Bucky suddenly noticed all of the people in the room, not just the nurses, shooting awed glances over at Steve now and then. The woman stepped timidly forward.

“My friend here needs medical attention, if you wouldn’t mind.” As if woken from a trance, the nurse tidied herself, drawing a wooden chair from seemingly nowhere.

“Please, sit,” she said, gesturing towards the chair. The words shot through Bucky like electricity, but he pushed himself away from Steve, stalking the chair. It was wooden, armless, and totally unadorned. He could do this. He sat down, staying on the edge, ready to spring out at a moment’s notice. Steve moved behind him, looming behind him protectively. He put one hand on Bucky’s shoulder, light, not holding him down. Contact.

The nurse bent over Bucky, placing a stethoscope on his chest. Bucky could feel it cold through the thin fabric of his shirt.

"Breathe deeply please."

Bucky realized he’d been on the verge of hyperventilating. He slowed down, counting breaths, and forced himself to take deep calm breaths. His head spun from the rush of oxygen. The nurse, satisfied, held up her watch, lips moving as she counted heartbeats. After a minute, she stepped back and picked up a clipboard. She made a few notes before looking at Bucky, daring to spare a shy glance at Steve behind him.

"Can I get your name?"

"James Barnes," Bucky replied, struggling to keep his voice even. The nurse shot him a small smile. Bucky returned the smile, forcing himself to play along. There’d been a time when this was easy, when he’d flirted with any girl who turned an eye to him. It’d been a game, harmless to both players, each going their separate ways at the end of a night of dancing. Now, the roguish grin rose to his face but he couldn’t conjure the effort to follow through. To be honest, he hardly noticed her pretty face, fixated on the white coat and the doctors milling about the room.

The nurse set about her work, a slight flush to her cheeks - flashing lights in his eyes, making him balance on one foot, putting ointment on the cut on his cheek, bandaging his ear. She disappeared a moment before returning with gauze and a splint. She carefully bound his hand, her touch impossibly delicate. The gentleness set Bucky at ease a little and he leaned into the back of the chair, challenging himself. He was safe, he told himself, repeating the mantra until he could believe it.
The nurse stood back, looking Bucky over.

"I'm going to write you up for malnourishment. Show this," she handed him a slip of paper, "to the people at mess hall and they'll give you special rations. Anything else I can do for you?"

Bucky thought on it for a moment. The burns on his chest didn’t hurt, the skin simply felt strangely taut, like it was spread a little too thin. He wanted to check under his shirt but decided against it. They’d heal fine on their own. Probably before the end of the night, if the broken hand had been anything to go by. Nothing hurt, not physically. What he needed was to get out of his head.

“Yeah, if you’d do a little something for me.” Bucky raised his eyebrows, delivering the lines in a melodramatic stage whisper. The nurse laughed a little.

“I got a little, uh...” Bucky feigned knocking his head, staggering around drunkenly for effect. Lies are better told when you let someone else fill the words in. Bucky didn’t make a habit of lying, it left a bad taste in his mouth, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t good at it. “Got anything to take the edge off?”

The nurse’s lips twitched in a half smile.

“Hold on a second.”

She fluttered over to one of the doctors, mumbling something about “a concussion.” The doctor waved her off without a second thought, gesturing lazily to one of the cabinets in the back. She opened the cabinet, and, obscured from sight by the door, rifled through the shelves. She closed the doors carefully and returned with a packet for Bucky.

“Take one of these every six hours. And eat before then.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Bucky cooed, tucking the little packet away. She rolled her eyes, flattered nonetheless, but not so much she didn’t shoot Steve one last glance. Bucky felt an inkling of jealousy. Girls hadn’t given Steve the time of day before. The sudden reversal was grating on Bucky’s nerves, even if he would never admit it.

Bucky and Steve pushed out of the overcrowded tent. On second glance, the structure was half-tent, half-building, the semi-permanent style favored by the army. As soon as he was outside, Bucky thought his legs might give out. Inside the infirmary, he hadn’t realized just how tense he’d been. Outside, his muscles relaxed, aching from the exertion. Bucky rolled his shoulders and loosened his neck, feeling a little of the tension ease away. Steve gave him an odd glance.

“You gonna take one of those?”

Bucky smirked, but he quickly redirected. He had other plans, ones Steve would not approve of. Steve might be oblivious, but he’d always been able to read Bucky better than anyone else. So Bucky quickly steered the conversation away and hoped Steve would forget about the painkillers.

“You heard what the good lady said. Food first.”

Steve clapped him on the back, smiling.

“Sounds like a plan. You have no idea how much I eat these days.”

Bucky looked over Steve’s bulky frame. Steve probably had a ridiculous metabolism. Odds were, even triple rations wouldn’t quite fill him up. Not that Bucky could really stand the idea of
eating three army meals. He could only stomach one at a time, which was a lot coming from someone who knew what hunger felt like. Bucky made a mental note to pass off some of his ration to Steve. As if reading Bucky’s mind, Steve looked over, his expression mischievous.

“You know, I’d always heard army food was shit, but…” Steve shook his head despairingly, at a loss for words.

“What, Captain America doesn’t get anything special? No five-course meal for the nation’s number one patriot?” Bucky jibed, elbowing Steve. Steve gently shoved Bucky, laughing.

“Nope, mush and B rations for me too.”

They quickly made their way to the chow line, open early to accommodate the sudden flood of half-starved soldiers. Bucky and Steve were quickly herded to the front of the line by insistent soldiers. The cheering and appreciative pats on the back made Bucky’s cheeks burn. He hadn’t done anything, just tagged along behind Steve. Steve seemed equally embarrassed, but he bore the attention well, politely refusing before sheepishly stepping to the front of the line, keeping Bucky in his peripheral vision.

Steve noticed the way Bucky shrunk back, avoided the touching. He whisked Bucky to the front and handed him a plate, redirecting attention so Bucky could ask for his extra rations in peace. Steve politely fielded questions while his plate was loaded with biscuits, gravy, some vegetable boiled beyond recognition, and a cup of sludgy coffee to wash it all down. The plate overflowed, but Steve was allowed to come back a second time. The scientists had written up his diet at double the normal soldier’s. Steve always waited as long as he could to get the second ration, embarrassed to be getting more than anyone else. He’d pass on it, but after nearly fainting on stage the first week Steve had learned his lesson. He was not one to quarrel with simple biology, equitable or not.

Steve swept Bucky over to a quiet table to eat. Almost immediately, the empty table was swarmed. The ex-prisoners were half-drunk with giddiness as their new freedom sank in. They clambered around Steve and Bucky, recounting tall tales from the firefight.

“....And then I grab the guy’s gun, whip it around, and shoot him in the face…”

“...So I see the tank crash into the fence…..”

“I came so close to one of those bolts that I felt the heat. It even singed my hair a little, look here…”

“I wish I could have seen the look on my face when the ol’ Captain showed up at our cell. We just hear a thud as a body lands on top of the cell. Then there he is, fucking flesh and blood, right on top of us…”

“The weapons team is picking up all the fancy HYDRA guns we took back. Do you think we can haggle for some deal, like a little reward or something? ‘Cause I’d like to keep mine, personally. Best gun I ever had…”

“I swear my feet are gonna fall off. Dunno how I made it all the way back. 50 miles, wasn’t it?”

“Who was it piloting that tank? They nearly ran me over, honest to God. My life flashed before my eyes.”

The storm of voices washed over the table. Steve smiled, nodded, and laughed at the right moments. He’d never been part of this conversation before. He drunk in the feeling of belonging,
relishing the little buzz. He watched Bucky from across the table and tried to get him to laugh along. To Bucky’s credit, he went along with the ritual, throwing in the occasional “Bullshit! I saw you…”

Bucky devoured his food without a sign of disgust, letting his attention diffuse into the squall of conversation around his ears. He portioned off a little of the food, almost by default, cramming scraps onto the corner of his plate.

“You not gonna eat that, Sarge? No offense, but you ain’t got a whole lotta meat on your bones.”

“That’s dessert. I’m just putting it there to make the rest of you hungry.” Uproarious laughter and fingers darting to steal a piece of sausage. Bucky slapped the invading hands, wagging a scolding finger. When the conversation had run away on a tangent, Bucky quietly scraped the extra food onto Steve’s plate. He and Steve had a silent conversation across the table, volleying meaningful and increasingly intense looks.

I know you’re hungry.

Eat. You’re the one who needs it.

Too bad. It’s on your plate now.

Steve eventually ate the food, glaring good-naturedly at Bucky. He politely excused himself to get his second plate. In an instant, the men moved to fill in the gap. Without Steve across from him, the table verged on claustrophobic, too many voices at once.

“Hey, didn’t you get hauled off to the Isolation Ward, Sarge? You’re a seriously lucky bastard, first man to come back from there. You gotta tell us, how’d you swing it?”

Bucky thought he might be able to brush off the question, let it fade away into the vortex of voices unanswered. To his chagrin, the men around him hushed, looking at him curiously. Bucky felt a lump grow in his throat, mind whirring as he searched for an answer. Lies, lies, he was so good at them; where was the right one?

“Never made it to the Ward,” he started, scanning the crowd, “I made a break for it on the way there. I’ve spent the last two weeks hiding behind boilers and running on the rafters at night.” Bucky stole a bite of bread between sentences, forcing himself to act nonchalant.

“I camped out in the attic, the warehouses, all sorts of places. Even ended up sleeping upside down once. I tried to steal food too, but you all can see how well that worked out.”

The men laughed, poking at Bucky’s ribs and saying to their neighbors, “Clever bastard, ain’t he,” and “So that’s what that sound was at night.”

“So you’re telling us you were just running around the whole time? Christ, Barnes, you’re something else,” someone scoffed from the side.

Steve pushed his way back to his seat, having politely hung around the periphery unnoticed. Overhearing the tall tale, Steve entered the conversation, not even looking at Bucky.

“Bucky here near gave me a heart attack,” Steve added, sliding into his seat as all eyes returned to him. “Here I am, running off to the Ward, when he just swings down from the rafters out of nowhere. He damn nearly landed on top of me!”
Steve pantomimed the scene, provoking laughter around the table. Bucky snuck Steve a grateful look as he diverted the conversation, regaling the crowd with his parachute jump over enemy lines. Soon enough, no man had attention for anything but Steve’s harrowing account of free-falling among bursting shells.

Somehow, in spite of a plot fit for the Hollywood propaganda reels, Steve made his story modest. All the same, every man, Bucky included, listened transfixed as Steve described hitching the truck into camp, sneaking through the factory, unexpectedly meeting up with Bucky (Bucky marveled at the smooth delivery of the lie; Steve had learned a few tricks in show business apparently), how he and Bucky had leaped across the exploding building (leaving out their encounter with Schmidt), and then how they had raced across the rooftops with Bucky blasting down enemies right and left while Steve led the charge. Steve’s story fell foreign on Bucky’s ears. From a half-dead prisoner hardly able to stand, Steve’s words magnified Bucky to mythic proportions - a cunning, mad god with faultless aim. Sergeant Barnes, Steve’s humbly human yet incredible sidekick. Had he not known better, Bucky would have been fooled. Hearing the story recounted, even as he knew what came next, Bucky couldn’t help but be entranced. The effect on the other men was obvious; they sat riveted, forklufs of food in hand uneaten.

Steve ended the story with Bucky taking his shield and firing into the air to grab everyone’s attention. The way Steve spun it, Bucky was thinking on his feet, recklessly throwing himself in harm’s way for the sake of the group. Bucky swallowed down a snort. Steve glowed, smiling wickedly at Bucky, fully aware of the truth - Bucky had no idea the shield was useless when he took it. Bucky preened, playing along. The group dissolved into side conversation, leaving Bucky and Steve in the eye of the hurricane. Someone tapped Bucky’s shoulder, posing some ludicrous question. By the time Bucky turned back around, three biscuits had appeared on his plate. Steve chewed quietly at the other side of the table, nearly finished with his second helping, gleefully innocent. Bucky glared at him even as hunger rumbled in his own belly.

Asshole.

Who, me?

Bucky picked at the too-dense biscuits before taking a bite. Steve looked positively triumphant.

Slowly, the group of men finally disintegrated in the noon heat, peeling off with full bellies and bone-deep exhaustion. Bucky eventually rose, thoroughly worn out. Steve took the tray and dishes back, leaving Bucky a few seconds to bask in the sunlight. Bucky only barely resisted taking his shirt off to soak up the precious sunlight. He was content to turn to stone here, absorbed in simple, weary bliss. Steve took his time returning, sitting across from Bucky in comfortable silence. They stayed there like twin statues, enjoying a moment of lucid peace, dimly aware of the other.

Bucky was the first to stir.

“I’m going to sleep a damn long time. Feel free to join me, if you still do that sort of thing.”

Steve looked vaguely affronted.

“Of course I still sleep. Do you have a cot to go back to, or you wanna join me?” Steve asked, getting to his feet. Bucky considered the offer.

“You have your own quarters?” Bucky asked. Steve shrugged.

“Kinda. More like a quiet spot with a couple of bunks. There’s other guys, mostly politicians,
news men, those sorts. There’s spare room, if you want it.”

“I’d fall asleep in a ditch. You tell me there’s a spot on the ground where I won’t get stepped on and I’ll be there.” He paused a moment, considering. “Actually, I’m not that picky.”

“Come back with me. We’ll swing by your bunk, grab your stuff, and you can crash in a spare bed.”

Bucky grunted, shrugging. Under the surface, he itched to be out of these clothes. He seriously considered burning them. He’d do the same to the goddamn dog tags too, but he had mixed feelings about them, afraid he might need them again. Besides, the army would never let him get rid of them anyway.

The common living quarters were unexpectedly quiet, every man spread out exhausted in the lazy afternoon heat. The stragglers, men from other armies with nowhere to go, took up the empty beds or snored in corners. Bucky located his pack under an occupied bed and swung the duffell over his shoulder. He found himself growing more tired as he looked at the beds, the thin mattresses suddenly tempting. Bucky tagged behind Steve wearily, hoping Steve’s quarters weren’t far.

Steve led him to a small building behind the assembly grounds, nestled between command offices. Steve let the two of them in, taking Bucky’s pack and herding him gently to a neatly made bed. Bucky noted the tight hospital corners, registering something vaguely familiar about the tautly pulled sheets.

“In’t this your bunk?” he slurred, already falling into the bed. The faint scent of Steve, so familiar it made his chest ache, greeted his face as it hit the pillow.

“It is mine, so get your boots off it.”

Bucky grinned into the pillow, throwing his legs off the side of the bed petulantly. He almost felt the long-suffering sigh that rolled out of Steve. Steve came over and yanked the loose boots off Bucky’s feet and tossed them at the foot of the bed. Bucky pulled his feet back onto the bed and shoved his arm under Steve’s pillow. He was too tired and comfortable to move another inch. Steve stood expectantly at the side of the bed. The way Bucky laid in the bed, body contorted in near impossible ways, reminded Steve of late nights on the dock after three shifts when Bucky would return home, staggering back to their apartment, and crashed on the bed with little more than a ‘hello.’

“Buck, you gotta change.”

Bucky groaned from the pillow, lazily waving at Steve with the nearest hand.

“Come on, or I’ll kick you out.”

Bucky flopped over sullenly and raised himself out of bed. Already, there was a warm spot in the dip in the sheets, beckoning him back. Steve shoved a change of clothes at him as he stood. Bucky groggily took them and turned away from Steve, pulling off the stiff, putrid garments. As he pulled off the shirt, he glanced at his burns for the first time. The skin had turned pink, the color of newly minted flesh. The edges were lined with curling, peeling skin. The dead skin along the edges was charred black, like an outline. From the silence behind him, Bucky could tell Steve was watching out of the corner of his eye. Bucky hurriedly tugged the clean shirt over his head, relishing the way the clean cloth brushed against his grime-caked skin. He peeled off his socks, pants, underwear; hands fumbling in his haste to shed the fouled reminders. He kicked the offending pile under the bed and quickly clambered back onto the sheets. A contented moan escaped his lips as he
flopped down. Behind him, he listened to Steve putter around, sliding Bucky’s duffell under the bed.

The mattress dipped as Steve climbed onto the lower bunk, shoving Bucky over. The extra body surprised Bucky, who had assumed Steve would go make his own bed. Reading his mind, Steve mumbled, “What? I’m not going to go make a new bed when there’s a perfectly good one right here.” Bucky rolled over to face the wall, stealing the pillow from underneath Steve’s head. He could feel the heat radiating off Steve’s body. Unable to resist, he leaned back against Steve, soaking the heat into his weary bones.

“Sharing a bed was easier back when you were tiny. You big oaf,” Bucky muttered, even though Steve could see the extra space on the bed. Steve huffed but said nothing. He’d changed clothes too, Bucky noticed, the soft linen of Steve’s undershirt whispering against the back of his neck. Bucky breathed in and shut his eyes, almost able to pretend they were back in Brooklyn on a sleepy Saturday afternoon.

Steve felt Bucky drift off to sleep buried against his chest. Bucky felt frail against him, heart fluttering until it evened out in a calm rhythm. As his face slackened, Steve noticed the creases in Bucky’s forehead, realized that Bucky had aged years in the months since he’d left. Steve watched, pained. He absenthly brushed the hair out of Bucky’s face, careful not to touch the bruise on his temple. The bruise had receded significantly already, now a light purple easily mistakable for a shadow. Steve watched Bucky a few minutes longer, letting himself believe that Bucky really was back, safe. Steve found his breath falling in sync with Bucky’s quiet breathing. In minutes, his eyes fluttered closed and he drifted off to sleep in the overcrowded bunk.

Steve stirred first. Naps, when he only needed a few hours of sleep, were a luxury. Still, Steve kept his eyes closed, nestled in the closest thing to paradise he’d felt in months. Bucky was pressed against his chest, limbs curled in on himself. Their roles were reversed in some strange parody, but Steve was happy to play his new role. Steve’s world was reduced to the bunk, conscious of little more than the knobs of Bucky’s spine, the calm warmth of their bodies, Bucky’s soft inhale and exhale, and the dim light seeping in from behind the curtain on the opposite end of the room. Steve stayed there awake for an hour, motionless.

He was no stranger to stillness. Steve had spent half of his childhood in bed trying not to move a single aching muscle. Sketching birds in the park, he’d crouched for hours, only his fingertips moving. If he so much as breathed too loudly or shifted to return circulation to his tingling legs, the skittish songbirds would take flight, leaving him with a half-finished sketch, an afterimage. Steve didn’t move now either, content to simply be there for Bucky.

Bucky slowly roused, unconsciously turning towards the warmth at his back. He flipped over, curling his fingers into soft fabric and burying his head. Bucky breathed in the faint smell of soap and sweat - sweet, sharp, and not entirely unpleasant.

“Hey, uh, Bucky.”

The words, filtering through Bucky’s consciousness like sunlight through dusty window panes, reverberated in Steve’s chest. Bucky felt the rumbling words more than he heard them. Slowly, he raised his head and pushed back, ramming his back against the wall. He blinked his eyes open and blearily took in Steve on the bed with him, laying on his side. In the soft-edged world between sleep and waking, Bucky realized he’d been nestled into Steve’s absurdly large chest, that his fingers were still tangled in Steve’s shirt. He let go, quickly rising back into reality. His cheeks burned and he sat up, pretending nothing happened. Steve seemed unalarmed, his face soft but alert, as if he’d been awake for a while.
“Shit, what time is it?” Bucky asked, sitting up and narrowly avoiding bumping his head. If he laid back down he’d be asleep in an instant. Bucky wanted desperately to go back to sleep, to return to the black numbness. He forced himself to stay awake, swinging his feet over the edge of the bed.

“I’m going to guess around 6,” Steve replied, getting up to find a watch.

“1830” Steve said from out of sight. Bucky groaned but got up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He did feel better, between the sleep and new clothes. Steve smiled at him, pulling Bucky’s discarded clothes from under the bed and rearranging them in a small pile by the boots. He dug through the pockets and tossed a small packet at Bucky, the painkillers.

“You probably still want those, yeah?”

Bucky shrugged and slipped the packet in his pocket.

“How’re you feeling?” Steve asked, straightening up and leaning too casually against the bunk bed.

“Like I need a shower. And real food.”

Steve smirked.

“I can get one of those for you.”

The shower was icy, but Bucky had never been bothered by it. The hot water at the Brooklyn apartment had been far from reliable. He painstakingly washed every inch of his body, watching the muddy brown water swirl away. He felt bad about using so much water, but the men around him were in a similar state, hurriedly scrubbing off weeks of accumulated filth. Finally, Bucky stepped out from under the weak current and grabbed a thin towel. His skin was pink from the scrubbing and cold, but he finally felt clean. He wiped the wet hair out of his face as he grabbed his clothes, too lazy to find any but the ones he’d slept in. A few moments later, he was back in camp, dressed and with dripping hair, on his way to the chow line. He stretched his arms behind his back as he went, working out the knots he’d been unable to reach. Under the sunset, the same hopeful scarlet that had beckoned from the laboratory window, he smiled a little to himself. He’d survived.

Chapter End Notes

My Totally Unsolicited Commentary on CATFA's Original Script
So, Bucky's characterization in the original script is way less Steve-centric, particularly in the scenes I've redone here. Why did it change? Maybe Sebastian Stan interpreted it differently, maybe the writers realized the bond between Steve and Bucky was better than his throw-away lines (which totally ruined the drama of some scenes). The world will never know. For those of you haven't read the original script, here are some interesting tidbits I was thinking too much about when I wrote this chapter.

1) Bucky never says "Let's hear it for Captain America!” Bucky doesn't talk at all, instead he gets peeled off by a nurse (who he is definitely flirting with) while everyone is clapping. There's actually a set picture of this scene (http://vignette1.wikia.nocookie.net/marvelcinematicuniverse/images/e/e7/Bucky_nurse.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20120906174432) but it got cut and replaced with the heart killing version we now love and adore.
2) On a related note, the one thing that was changed most from the original script is Bucky's character. He is way more of a womanizer in the original script. For example, during the "Is it permanent?" "So far." exchange when Bucky is rescued, Bucky originally adds "You are going to get so many girls." Luckily for us, this aspect of Bucky (which mostly felt like "no homo" to me) got cut out from the majority of the film. Bucky's allusions in this chapter to all the girls he's dated are sort of my nod to what the original canon tries to imply. Bisexual Barnes, anyone?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to my beta, actuarialturtle. This was a tricky chapter to write and I needed all the help I could get.

If you've made it this far, thank you so much for sticking with me. Soon to come after this chapter: assembling the Howling Commandos! But for now, one more peek into Bucky's psyche.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Night fell quickly on the camp but the men didn’t sleep, too busy reminding themselves they were alive. Typewriters clacked incessantly, rescinding MIA letters and sending florid messages back home to sweethearts and anxious mothers. Like daisies after a thunderstorm, the men cropped up in every imaginable place with giddy energy. There’d been a celebratory D ration and the chocolate wrappers fluttered across the grounds. Ex-prisoner or not, everyone was in high spirits, swapping stories with anyone who would listen. The infirmary buzzed late into the night, new shifts of white clad nurses pouring in and out. Being the only women for miles, soldiers stumbled into the infirmary tent with combed hair to try their luck with the harried women. They were all politely rejected and, if healthy, promptly evicted.

Bucky joined the men outside for a while before growing tired of the same war stories. The details nettled him, poking holes in his defenses. He swore every now and then that he heard whispers, names of others who had been carted off to the Isolation Ward, never to return. Bucky tried hard not to wonder if he’d been the one to kill those men. Odds were. Suddenly, he was desperate for a drink. There was alcohol to be found among the men, but everyone acted as if they were dying of thirst. Unable to get his hands on more than a few drops, Bucky withdrew, finding himself back at Steve’s bunk. He’d lost Steve in the merriment earlier, swept away by the tide of men.

The flimsy door to the visitors’ quarters did little to muffle the sound of reverie. Steve’s bunk was empty, so Bucky kicked off his boots and laid down. He looked over his left hand. Totally healed. He clenched the fist, simultaneously amazed and repulsed. The cut on his cheek was gone too. The only surviving evidence was a thin layer of dried up ointment. Bucky cautiously unwrapped the bandage around his ear and found a mirror. Bucky scraped off the scabbed and dried blood, brushing the brownish flakes off his lap and onto the floor. Underneath, the tissue was normal, no different from the other ear. Bucky tossed the bloody gauze into the garbage. Even the track marks inside his elbows were healing, the once pulpy mess now shiny with scar tissue. Bucky flopped onto the bed, sorting through the evidence. Whatever it was they’d put in him had definitely changed him, down to his biology. He was healing too fast. To the outside eye, he’d come out of the firefight skinny but unscathed. After all he’d been through, Bucky realized, he should have been dead several times over.

His true wounds ran deeper than could be seen by the naked eye. He laid down on the bunk, picking absently at the little pits in his elbow.

Why had he survived the experiment, when no one else had? The pessimist in him figured it
was his punishment; Bucky would have to survive to live with the guilt. If he’d waited three days - just three more days - those men could have made it out with him. Instead, he’d personally handed down a death sentence and then had the audacity to survive and make it back. That was, of course, assuming the serum didn’t do him in. He might live to one hundred or drop dead in the next hour. He had a sinking suspicion he’d probably outlive everyone. Everyone except for Steve perhaps, who was his mirror image in some strange way. Steve’s transformation had been a blessing, a miracle that finally let him do what he had always dreamed of. Steve could see the world, fight the wars he believed in, could protect himself. Bucky had been turned into a monster, an abomination that shouldn’t still be crawling the world, cursed to survive and to remember. Bucky sighed. The miracle and the monster - what a pair they made.

And what if Steve had never come to Azzano, had never told Bucky his name? Bucky would still be with HYDRA, a body with no name. He worried it could happen again, that one morning he’d wake up with no idea of who he was or where he was. The idea chilled him at the same time that he guiltily longed to forget. Not remembering, he thought, would be so much easier. Instead, every time he closed his eyes - the faces of the dead, the chair, crows soaring over the battlefield, Kolya's waxy death stare - his nightmares flashed before his eyes.

All the same, Bucky couldn’t find it in himself to die. He couldn’t atone for his mistakes in Azzano, not in the way that really counted. Couldn’t give his victims what he owed them. He couldn’t forget either, but he wanted to keep living. For purely selfish reasons. For Steve, mostly, if Bucky was being honest with himself. That didn’t stop his guilt though, merely dulled it.

Frustrated, Bucky pulled out the little packet of painkillers. At the rate he was healing and eating, Bucky figured the serum had skyrocketed his metabolism. Bucky had paid ample attention in school - this was a simple matter of conservation of matter and energy. To heal so quickly, his body had to be working overtime. To keep up he’d need to eat double, maybe triple, as much as normal. At his new metabolism, how many pills would he need to get out of his skin? He poured four of the pills into his palm and swallowed them down before he could change his mind.

It took a few minutes before the painkillers reached his bloodstream. It felt like he was floating out of bed, weight falling off of his shoulders. It wasn’t exactly floating, but like the way he felt after a long march carrying a 40 pound pack. He’d set the pack down and suddenly feel like his feet were an inch off the ground, so accustomed to the weight that each step without the backpack sent him flying. For the first time in ages, Bucky felt light again, slowly growing numb and warm. It wasn’t unlike being pleasantly drunk, but his vision didn’t blur the same way. Neither did his mind, each thought running cleanly and fluidly to the next, but the background noise had vanished. Dread dissipated in the wave of euphoric numbness, a calming balm pasted over his mind. He was untroubled, happy and relaxed even as he knew the memories were there, locked away. It was a paradox, aware of the horrible things at bay but unburdened by them.

Bucky grew restless. He made his own bunk above Steve’s bed and started going through his pack. He indulged in mundane tasks - relacing his boots, folding clothes, cleaning the stolen gun - and relished in the normalcy of it. His world hummed, pleasantly soft at the edges. Bucky pulled the pile of clothes out from under his bed, looking at the filthy, bloody rags dispassionately. Disgust registered faintly in the back of his mind as he balled them up and looked around for a lighter. He pilfered the lighter from an overcoat flung across a nearby bunk.

Bucky ducked outside with the wad of clothes tucked under his arm. He walked a few paces into the shadows between the buildings and dumped the clothes on the ground. He absently scuffed the ground with his boot, turning up the half-dead grass. He nudged the clothes into the barren spot, sprinkling the dry grass on top as an afterthought.
He held up the sleeve of his grimy shirt and brought it to the lighter flame. The flame sputtered, struggling to catch on the grubby fabric. The shirt reluctantly lit, olive green fabric sluggishly glowing as the hole spread across the sleeve, slowly picking up speed as it spread to the rest of the garment. Bucky dropped the sleeve and let the shirt fall back on the pile. He crouched beside the pile of clothes, leaning his back against the wall. In hindsight, starting a fire between buildings had not been a wise decision, but Bucky simply watched as the small flame spread. To Bucky’s chagrin, the shirt didn’t erupt into dramatic flames, so he piled fistfuls of dry grass on top as kindling. The fire ate up the little blades of grass with a satisfying sizzle. Bucky teased the pile into timid flames, and the mound of fabric turned darker, charred. The pile smoldered and he poked at it, more amused than annoyed.

He continued to nurse the fire, ripping up all of the half-dead vegetation in a five foot radius. Slowly - Bucky had no idea how long it took - the clothes burned down to ash. Out of fodder, the infant flames leapt out of the mound, latching onto the surviving vegetation. Bucky caught on with alarm and started hurriedly stamping out the stray sparks. He danced around for a short while with ash-coated boots, quashing the dying embers in the dry grass. Satisfied that the little fire was extinguished, Bucky sifted through the ashes, burning his fingertips as he pulled out the smoky remnants of his uniform. A few scraps remained, buttons and metal fastenings and a few rebellious swaths of fabric too thick to burn through. He piled the pieces next to the ashes, determined to bury them later. The little mound of soot stained his hands, the fine powder leeching into his skin.

Bucky started to feel nauseous, the pills’ first real side effect. He leaned against the wall, tilting his head up for air, and let it pass. He was sweating, he realized, despite the cool night air. The buzz was fading too, although he still felt contentedly warm, cordoned off from his nightmares. He returned to the task at hand with renewed haste, determined to make the best of what was left of his high. He dug a little hole with his hand in the loose-packed dry dirt and dumped the buttons and fastenings inside, burying them quickly.

“Bucky?”

Bucky whipped his head around in surprise, jumping to his feet. He stepped surreptitiously in front of the tiny pile of ash, although his inky hands betrayed him.

Steve looked him over carefully and silently inspected the pile of ash.

Steve worried, seeing the nervous way Bucky hid...whatever he was doing. Bucky’s hands were covered in soot. The knees of his pants were the same color as the dry soil, suggesting he’d been sitting there for some time. Steve could still smell the faint scent of smoke. Something about Bucky seemed off, although Steve struggled to pinpoint the difference. Something in his face was wrong, the way his eyes skittered nervously around, the pupils just a little too large, big as moons. Bucky’s face relaxed as he recognized Steve, and he turned away to scuff at the pile of ash, spreading it out into the ground. His movement was different from before, languid and relaxed. Bucky didn’t quite seem in touch with reality, humming tunelessly to himself as he swept the pile of ash this way and that.

“Buck.”

Bucky pivoted, dusting his hands on his pants. His fingers left smudged stripes on the coarse brown fabric.

“Something I can do for ya, Captain?”

Steve frowned at the strange lilt in Bucky’s voice. Each syllable was articulate, none of the drinker’s slur in it, but the words fell too casually from Bucky’s tongue. Steve studied Bucky’s face
carefully, watched the way Bucky’s attention flickered, his eyes unfocused as if he was looking through Steve. Bucky stood there under Steve’s scrutiny, motionless, a small slack-jawed smile on his face.

“Are you drunk?” Steve took a step closer to Bucky, reaching for his face, trying to see if he could smell alcohol on Bucky’s breath.

“Nope.” The ‘p’ popped on Bucky’s lips, smug and triumphant. A secret as he swayed in place.

“Are you...high?” The word ‘high’ felt clumsy to Steve. He knew what addicts looked like, had seen them in the streets and alleyways. As he spoke the words Steve became more certain, the dilated pupils and the far away stare suddenly familiar.

Bucky raised his eyebrows, cocking his head at Steve, the amused look an answer in itself.

Bucky felt like he should be guilty or embarrassed about letting Steve find him in this sort of state, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care much. The consequences were far removed from him, part of a mysterious entity called the ‘future.’ This encounter, Bucky decided, was entirely uninteresting.

“Come with me.”

Steve’s tone brooked no argument, nor did the arm that came to sweep Bucky’s shoulders, guiding him out from the shadowed alcove between the buildings. Bucky followed passively, trying not to drag his feet. He knew what was coming and resented having to face the demons when he could finally forget them. But, after all, he still had a few pills. He could forget this episode later. Even as Steve steered him into the forest shadows, Bucky did the arithmetic on how many more escapes he had left, provided he could keep the packet hidden. He sorted through hiding places in his mind, running over the nooks and crannies of the little room. He’d have to carry the packet on his person, he concluded. Steve was too observant.

Steve mutely led Bucky into the forest, letting them get lost in the trees. It was a little ways to the border and the sentries’ gaze, so he pulled up short and gestured for Bucky to sit at the base of a pine tree. Bucky sat gracelessly, thudding down onto the forest floor. He sat, bouncing his leg anxiously, and looked up at Steve. Steve crouched next to him, not making eye contact.

“What do you want?” Bucky asked, finally annoyed. He chose not to look at Steve and took in the scenery instead. They were in the midst of an old forest; the thin trees stretched up higher than Bucky could make out in the dark. Eerie, but calm. Bucky knew exactly why Steve had brought him out here, but he stalled, fighting the urge to get up and wander the forest. To run away from this. He could float through the trees, a ghost, unknown and unseen, thinking nothing. He grappled with the urge to just walk off. This was Steve. Running away was pointless and less than Steve deserved. Bucky stayed put, arms petulantly wrapped around himself.

“Why are you high?”

The harsh tone made Bucky flinch. Steve’s voice was stern with none of his usual underlying softness. Steve was hurt, turning a cold outer shell to Bucky.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Bucky snorted back, annoyed by Steve’s callousness. Steve didn’t dignify him with a response, still staring out ahead of them.

“Answer the question.”
“I just…” Bucky faltered, words suddenly escaping him. The world was closing in on him again, losing its rosy warmth in the cold forest shadows. Bucky cursed his new metabolism, itching for another pill to make it through this conversation.

“I just needed to get out of my head a little. Forget for a while.”

“Forget what?” Steve’s tone softened. He shifted closer to Bucky, not quite touching, but close enough Bucky could feel the warmth of his body.

“I don’t wanna play games, Steve. At least ask the goddamn question directly.” Bucky clenched his jaw, pulling his knees to his chest. The dark hadn’t returned yet, but Bucky felt its approach. He could almost count the seconds until the dam burst open again, suppressed memories fighting to resurface. Couldn’t he hold them back just a little longer? He offered obscene bargains to any deity listening in exchange for just one more minute of peace.

“Tell me what they did to you,” Steve said unflinchingly, glancing at Bucky out of the corner of his eye, “what happens in the Isolation Ward.”

Bucky smirked, shaking his head. He curled in on himself, chilly in the night air. No more running away.

“It’s hell, Steve. It’s not torture. Not in the usual sense anyway. Not ‘Tell us where the base is or we’ll cut off your fingers.’ It didn’t make any sense, at first. No questions, just…” Bucky gestured weakly, searching for a description. In words, the whole ordeal fell flat. At best, anything he said would only make Steve pity him. He wanted Steve to know, to know how much it had hurt, to understand how it felt to be hollowed out. He sought justification for his weakness in face of the scientists, for his exhausted complicity. But he couldn’t bring himself to describe the gory details. In the end, it was all just excuses.

Bucky grappled with his words.

Steve watched Bucky sit mutely, clearly conflicted. Every passing silent second scared Steve, the magnitude of the damage beneath Bucky’s skin sinking in. Bucky was scared to tell him. Bucky had told him everything before. When Steve had lost his mother, he had only let Bucky see his grief. He’d cried in Bucky’s arms late into the night and felt his own grief echoed back at him. No tragedy had belonged to one of them alone; they were two halves of the same soul. Bucky’s hesitation in front of Steve was new and unsettling.

“What did they do?” Steve prodded quietly, placing his hand on Bucky’s knee. Bucky let Steve’s hand sit there a moment, staring at it miserably. Bucky was sober again, a tremble in his right hand. Steve almost felt bad about stealing him from his comfortable detachment, watching Bucky sink wretchedly back down to earth.

“All kinds of things, I guess.” Bucky paused, licking his lips, and sorted things out in his head. Clinical was best. A list of things would be easiest.

“Sometimes it was burning. Here, on the chest and the back.” Bucky gestured to where the burns were, now just pink baby skin and painless underneath his shirt.

“There were a lot of injections too. They stuck us full of strange stuff. I got rashes, fevers…vomited a lot. Nausea. Things like that. I think they cut off limbs sometimes. Not mine, obviously. One of the men lost his foot. I think.” Bucky struggled to recall, his memory sloppy at best. He sensed himself rambling, following the rickety track of his memories. He still felt Steve’s eyes on him, but he didn’t meet his gaze, just stared at Steve’s hand on his knee. An anchor.
“There was also..a chair.”

Steve heard the waver in Bucky’s voice, knew that all that came before was nothing. Those things, the fire and the needles, Bucky could live with. But this - this chair - was different.

“The chair, it was electric. They’d tie you down and shock you.” Bucky lapsed. The ghost of the chair passed under his fingertips; the metal arms he’d dug his fingers into until they bled felt almost solid beneath his hands. Bucky flexed his fingers, shaking off the haunting sensation and forced himself to keep talking. He had to get past this.

“It hurt. A lot, actually.” Bucky snorted at the little admission, trying to take the sting off. Before he lost his courage, he continued, “But, the chair, it made you forget.”

“Forget?” The question slipped from Steve’s lips before he could control himself. Bucky smirked mirthlessly, a tortured quirk of the lips.

“Yeah. Just little things, at first. I didn’t notice it the first time or so. Just things like your neighbor’s name or the street you lived on for a year. Then it got worse. I started forgetting bigger things, like faces...family.” A pause.

“You could feel it, your memories, just...rotting away. Like having a word on the tip of your tongue, but all the time, and with everything. And the harder you tried to remember, the more you lost. They’d stick you in the chair and ask name, rank, number. Over and over. Maybe some of the others forgot; I don’t know.”

Steve studied Bucky’s mournful face. He couldn’t imagine, not really. Bucky’s face was haunted, almost blank. Dark emotions flickered beneath his eyes, gaze fixed inwards. He was running away, fleeing somewhere deep inside himself.

“I forgot.”

The admission was so quiet Steve almost missed it.

“Forgot what?” Steve asked. The question was equally quiet, soft as a mouse skirting a minefield.

Bucky shut his eyes. His gut rolled, twisting. If he admitted it, he couldn’t go back. But some part of Bucky needed to put words to the past, push the pain off onto someone else. He drew a little breath.

“My name.” A breath’s hesitation. “Everything.”

The silence after Bucky’s statement echoed, rich with the same tense desperation following a dying man’s last breath, of the split second spent listening for the next exhale before realizing it won’t come. Steve waited for Bucky to say something, to say that he’d remembered, that it hadn’t lasted long. Bucky just looked ahead mutely and Steve feared for a second that Bucky still didn’t remember. But that wasn’t possible. Bucky had known Steve’s name; he had recognized him back in the base. Right? Steve waited for Bucky to speak, his throat tight with pain and the things he couldn’t say. But Bucky just stared at his knees, still as stone.

“How did you remember?”
The real question was implicit, *Do you remember?* Bucky broke out of his reverie, looking at Steve from the corner of his eye. Steve’s shoulders slumped, relieved.

“I sort of remembered. I saw my dog tags,” Bucky pulled out his tags, inspecting them, gleaming dully in his palm. He rubbed his fingers over the engraved text, not really seeing the tags. He didn’t need to look at them; he’d burned the image into his mind.

“I saw my dog tags,” Bucky continued, “and thought ‘*that’s my name.*’ But that was all I knew. My name, rank, number. Our address. But they didn’t mean anything. Not really. I was... *blank.*”

The words echoed.

“What made you remember the rest?” Steve squeezed Bucky’s knee, trying to be comforting but not sure how.

Bucky shot him an odd look, looking Steve in the eyes for the first time since they’d sat down. Bucky wanted to say you. He wanted to say you, *you made me remember,* but the truth was laced with implications he wasn’t sure he understood. The innocent little word, threatening to spill from his lips, dripped with meanings that simultaneously scared and thrilled him. Had he felt stronger, perhaps he’d gamble and see where “*you*” would take him. But not today. Not anymore. He swallowed back the confession (is that what it was?) and started again.

“Your ugly mug.” Bucky smiled humorlessly. “You said my name...and then...it all came back.” Bucky didn’t look away, studying Steve’s face like he was seeing it for the first time. It was the same face from Brooklyn, perched precariously on those bony shoulders. Now, the jaw was different, stronger. Bucky picked at the little differences, committing them to memory.

Bucky stared at Steve, just looking him over. His gaze wasn’t intrusive, just curious, so Steve said nothing, taking the chance to consider everything Bucky had said. To be blank, unsure of even your own name, Steve couldn’t begin to comprehend what that was like. He looked at Bucky in admiration. To think that after all Bucky had gone through, he’d followed after Steve, covering his back, never complaining. Steve marveled at Bucky’s strength, even as he watched him crumble before his eyes.

Bucky’s eyes eventually veered away from Steve, almost embarrassed, and he seemed to be gathering himself to say something.

“You wanted to know what happened to the others.” Not a question.

Bucky wasn’t sure what made him say it, wasn’t sure what he meant to say after. He fought with the idea of telling the whole truth. If he ever told anyone, it would be Steve. He trusted Steve with everything. He would trust Steve with his life without a second thought. Trust was not the issue. He just didn’t want Steve to see that side of him. Bucky knew what Steve thought of him—fiery, with a weakness for fistfights and girls, but good at the core. Bucky might have embraced that description, but how many times in the last few months had he questioned it? Could he really claim to be good? He hid in the trees and shot from the shadows, not a drop of blood on his uniform. He fought on the lines too, hacked and murdered, stepped over the dying as he saved his own hide. He’d certainly killed more men than he’d saved. These last murders, the half-dead sleepers, were by no means his first. The morality of it vexed him. Had he really killed them out of mercy? Or was it spite? It seemed his soul hinged on that question.

He would not tell Steve. Bucky was not brave enough to confront himself so honestly.
He’d survive knowing what he did. But the idea of Steve knowing that Bucky wasn’t the idol he’d made him out to be was more than Bucky could ever handle. He wanted desperately to still be good in Steve’s eyes. It wouldn’t break Steve to lose Bucky. Bucky knew that. But he just might break if he lost Steve. So he kept his secret to himself. Buried it deep. There were some things, he reasoned, he wouldn’t tell Steve. Couldn’t, if he ever wanted to live with himself. He slipped that little bombshell back in his pocket. He let its lethal weight settle as he chose his words.

“The others. The scientists experimented on all of us. Zola,” he spat the name, “injected us with some serum. Trying to create a superhuman.” Bucky raised his eyes to meet Steve’s again. The word “superhuman” felt twisted. Schmidt, Bucky, Steve. All “superhuman.” But, God, what did that word even mean? It was an insult to Steve.

“Zola’s serum was dangerous. It failed a lot. I was the only one to survive. That’s why I can’t go to medical, Steve. This,” Bucky gestured at where the cut on his cheek had been, then at the healed ear, “all heals on its own.”

“This hand,” he held up his left hand and waved it in Steve’s face, “was shattered. It healed in a single day. I don’t know what they did to me - hell, I don’t want to know - but all I know is I’m definitely not human anymore. That’s why you can’t tell anyone. No one. Because if they find out, well.” Bucky huffed darkly. “I’m more expendable than Captain America.”

Bucky paused for a moment. He turned and fixed Steve with a piercing gaze.

“I’d be a lab rat all over again. I’m not going back to that, Steve. You can’t tell anyone. Ever.”

Bucky didn’t mean to end aggressively, but his fear had him in a death grip. At some point in his frenzy he’d grabbed Steve’s lapels. Steve brushed Bucky’s hands away, as thoughtful as Bucky was frantic.

“I understand that, but, Bucky, you need help. Maybe they can-”

Bucky cut him off.

“No. Steve. Don’t trust anyone in there. HYDRA has our scientists too. I saw it with my own two eyes. You can’t trust anyone. Listen to me, Steve, if you hear one thing I say tonight. I’m not going back, and you shouldn’t trust them.”

Steve opened his mouth, gaping. Bucky’s eyes had lit, as if a fire had been struck, reanimating him. His voice was thick with contempt, but Steve heard the paranoia beneath it. Bucky’s point resonated with Steve. HYDRA had been there with everyone else during Erksine’s experiment. It had been foolish for Steve to think that was an isolated incident. Steve’s composure, already strained, cracked just a bit.

“Alright,” Steve said, trying to placate Bucky. “I won’t tell anyone. That’s your choice. And we’ll be careful, alright?”

Bucky nodded, the energy sapped out of him.

“But,” Bucky’s head snapped back up as Steve continued, “if anything happens, if whatever they put in you starts hurting you, you tell me.”

Bucky scowled at Steve, on the verge of a rebuttal.

“That’s an order.” Steve wasn’t letting Bucky risk himself over this. He’d find a way to keep Bucky safe. He’d always be able to find a way, but he couldn’t protect Bucky from himself, from
his own pride or his own demons. Bucky needed to let Steve carry some of that weight. From the
look Bucky was giving him, Steve knew it’d be a long, hard battle to make Bucky give up anything
more.

Bucky glared at Steve. He knew, objectively, Steve was making sense. But there was no way
in hell he’d lean on Steve any more. Steve had his own burdens to shoulder. Bucky’d manage on
his own. His job was to protect Steve, not the other way around. They glared at each other in tense
silence. Bucky relented first.

“Come on. Let’s go back before someone starts worrying where Captain America went.”

Bucky stood, letting Steve’s hand fall from his knee. This was for Steve’s own good. He
offered a hand down to Steve and pulled him to his feet, realizing just how much heavier he was.
Heavy with new muscle and obligation.

As he got to his feet, Steve abruptly swept Bucky into a hug. Bucky staggered in surprise,
falling into Steve’s chest. Steve held him there, not exactly sure what he was doing, just that it felt
right. Bucky didn’t resist, sinking into the embrace. To Steve’s surprise, Bucky draped one arm
loosely around the small of Steve’s back in return.

Bucky breathed into Steve’s shirt, trying to keep his breath from rattling. He wanted to cry, to
break down. He hadn’t cried, not once, back in Azzano. Now, Bucky was more tired than angry.
The energy to fight, to hold himself together, had finally drained out of him. He leaned into the
embrace, let himself be steadied and held. It was pitiful, he scorned himself in the back of his mind.
Guiltily, he let himself be held, supported.

“You don’t have to do this on your own, you know.” A sucker punch guised as an off-hand
remark.

The words rumbled against Bucky’s ears. Steve’s hand steadied the back of Bucky’s head,
fingers loosely tangled into the hair at the nape of his neck. Bucky shook his head against Steve’s
chest, mumbling “I’m fine.” He fumbled with the words, too tired to put any conviction behind
them.

“You know, Buck, I’m with you ‘til the end of the line.”

The words hit Bucky with a stab of guilt. Those were his words. He could almost see Steve’s
face that day, eyes red and his face haggard. Steve had held himself together at the funeral.
Composed. Stoic as a soldier. But back at his house - Bucky had insisted on staying the night to
help him out - Steve had cried. Bucky had woken at night to hear Steve quietly sobbing, hiding in
the next room over where he thought Bucky wouldn’t hear. Bucky found him and took him back to
bed without a word. He had held Steve for hours, rubbing his back and letting him cry and pour out
his grief. He’d made a promise to Steve that afternoon, and he renewed that vow again at night.
He’d promised to always be there. ‘Til the end of the line.

Steve now turned those words back against him. Steve knew full well what he was doing, knew
what would penetrate Bucky’s crumbling defenses.

The sob escaped him before he even knew it. Bucky hiccupsed pathetically into Steve’s chest,
cursing himself as he felt the hot tears soak into Steve’s shirt. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He
was supposed to be stronger than this. He had no reason to cry. He’d survived. And if there was
something strange in his veins, no amount of tears would change that. He didn’t weep for the dead.
In wars like this, there was nothing to mourn. Tears of self-pity were childish. Bucky pulled
himself together, cursing himself, and drew a few last shaky breaths before pushing gently away
“I’m fine.” His voice didn’t shake and Bucky counted the act as a small victory. He could do this. Forget the past. Forget himself. Forget his failures.

Steve nodded and let go of Bucky. He didn’t believe Bucky was fine for a moment, but he’d asked enough of him for one night. So he let Bucky be and started the walk back to camp, Bucky following quietly in his footsteps. The trip back to the bunks was short.

There were other men in the room now, mostly officers, already slung tiredly across the bunks. Bucky padded in behind Steve, taking a circuitous route to their bunk. Steve caught a flash of metal as Bucky slipped something into the pocket of a dark blue jacket. As if nothing had happened, Bucky came over and picked up his pack, rifling through it. Steve noted the newly made bunk above his own, that the pile of clothes he’d shoved under the bed had disappeared. Steve put two and two together. Ash and smoke.

They got ready for bed with few words, little more than “Pass me that” or “Move over, you oaf.” To the outside world, all was well. They were two friends, soldiers, exhausted after a long day of fighting. The silence between them was pleasant, but Steve couldn’t shake the feeling Bucky was holding something back. They crawled back to bed and Steve laid in his bunk, listening to Bucky’s quiet breathing above. He tried to process everything Bucky had said but could form nothing more concrete than a feeling of dread. Mostly, he worried about Bucky.

Minutes passed in the dark room, comfortably shrouded in the white noise of men snoring and tossing in their beds. Bucky floundered on the too soft mattress. Not that military bunks were soft, but after sleeping sitting up or tied to a table or tangled up with three other men, all of the room to himself kept him awake. Bucky was drained, emotionally and physically, but he feared sleeping. Perhaps not tonight - he might yet be too tired to dream - but he knew the nightmares would come back. His own imagination frightened him, able to conjure up all of the things Bucky couldn’t make himself forget. Below him, Steve’s breath had evened out, but it stayed light. Still awake.

“‘Night,” Bucky murmured. There was a faint rustle of sheets as Steve shifted in place.

“Night, Bucky,” came the reply. It was different than Brooklyn. Steve’s voice had taken on a new timbre, leaning towards baritone. The affection underneath was the same however, part of the ritual Bucky missed most from civilian life. Tucking the words against his chest like a treasured photograph, Bucky settled down and let himself drift off.

Chapter End Notes

Confession of Factual/Historical Inaccuracy:
1) I have no idea what getting high is like, so Bucky's experience is based on websites describing opioid highs. I'm hoping his experience is accurate, but I acknowledge it might be way off.

2) My research on addicted soldiers is probably slightly closer to reality. A lot of World War II soldiers on all sides became opioid users due to the abundance of addictive painkillers and the (relatively) loose regulation on the field. At the time, the full addictive nature of the opium variants was not yet well understood. Could Bucky have gotten painkillers as easily as in the last chapter? Hard to say, but probably not. But if the infirmary was sufficiently overwhelmed (which is my excuse), perhaps.
A Historical "Fun" Fact:
Soldiers have been getting high throughout history - whether it be to dull physical/emotional pain, stay awake for long periods of time, or to temporarily gain superhuman abilities. I'll admit, the use of drugs to create super soldiers is where the idea for Bucky to try drugs came from.
Amphetamines (like speed) were introduced in World War 2 to keep soldiers energetic. Germany even tried to engineer an amphetamine cocktail to create "super soldiers" akin to Berserkers. They experimented on concentration camp prisoners and developed a successful product, but the war ended before they could distribute the new pill. If you're curious, look up DI-X.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thanks for waiting!! And thank you for all of the incredible comments on the last chapter. You guys make my heart sing. This was originally two chapters, but I decided to combine them since they fit together. So, sorry if it's a tiny bit long!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following days passed Bucky almost unnoticed. Bucky let himself be swept away by the tide of routine, making himself useful and avoiding talking too much. He kept up appearances, eating with some of the old boys. Mostly Dugan, who didn’t ask too many questions. He tried to kill time at the shooting range, but found himself struggling to focus. He'd developed a small tremor in his hands, maybe from lack of sleep, maybe from nerves, maybe from the pace he was emptying his little packet of pills. Whatever the reason, Bucky abandoned the range after three days.

Bucky saw less and less of Steve, hearing about him more than he saw him. Bucky entertained himself by eavesdropping on the arguments raging outside the private quarters. The bunk above Steve’s, it seemed, was prime real estate for espionage. Every man of importance lived inside the quarter’s walls, or at least often passed them by. After enough digging around, Bucky gathered that Steve had only been in Azzano for a tour, the purely theatrical sort, and was supposed to have left days ago. The brass were arguing over what to do with him: send him back on tour or let him keep playing at being Captain. Phillips, to Bucky’s surprise, seemed to be leaning in favor of letting Steve join the troops.

Bucky was secretly hoping they would court martial Steve and send him back home, or at least keep him in that ridiculous outfit and far away from the front lines. It was for Steve’s own safety. Besides, Bucky could probably get discharged after his little stint in Azzano. If Steve went home, so could Bucky.

A week later, Bucky received notice of relocation. Some of the men, all of them Azzano survivors, were being shipped back to London. At first, Bucky thought he’d finally gotten his ticket back home. Then he read the next line: For morale purposes. The trip stunk of hidden agendas, the blatant kind Steve was prone to, and Bucky confronted Steve with the notice in hand. Steve was just sliding into bed when Bucky swung his feet over, landing next to Steve’s bunk with a thud. Steve pretended not to know what Bucky was holding, but the smug, self-satisfied smile that pulled at his lips gave him away. Bucky shook his head, his suspicions confirmed.

“Tell me, Steve, what’s this really about? Not that I don’t like being off the frontlines as much as the next guy.”

Steve smirked in the dim light, then gestured to their sleeping neighbors with a nod of his head. Bucky slid his boots on without another word and shuffled out into the chill night air. He waited outside expectantly a few moments before Steve joined him, easing the door closed.

“So, what’re you planning, hm?”

That same annoying smirk. Harmlessly plotting, like a kid watching the candy store clerk as he gets ready to pinch a lollipop.
“Phillips gave me clearance yesterday. I’m a real captain now. More or less.” Steve beamed. Bucky stared at Steve in weary disbelief. But the sight of Steve’s smiling face - he was smiling, truly smiling, when was the last time Bucky had seen him smile that widely? - made Bucky smile a little too, his lips moving of their own accord. The response was instinctual.

“You never did know what was good for you. Well, congratulations, Captain,” Bucky jeered, mockingly straightening in a salute. Steve jabbed him good-naturedly in the ribs, making Bucky buckle over, laughing. It felt good to laugh like this, voices hushed and the wind nipping at their cheeks. The cold air tore through his night clothes, but Bucky wasn’t quite ready to go back inside. He tilted his head back, looking up at the night sky, as if searching for his cue. Steve followed his gaze.

“It’s really not so bad. This part.”

Bucky grunted his agreement, though he wasn’t entirely sure what Steve was referring to. Didn’t much care. The sky was pitch black, dotted by dim starlight. The moon stared down at them in their moment of tranquility, unobtrusive. Bucky was content to let the silence stretch on, but a horn sounded somewhere along the perimeter. A signal. Some changing of the guard. With the dying echoes of the horn, the magic was dead and Bucky turned to go back to bed.

Steve clapped Bucky on the shoulder, herding him back inside.

“London’ll be fun. Dancing. Drinking. Girls.” The last word was laced with teasing promise and raised eyebrows.

“Since when did you care for any of that?” Bucky replied, voice lowering as they passed through the threshold.

“Never minded it so much with friends.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t mind it so much if the Nazi’s would stop bombing the city every other night. Not quite far enough from the lines for me.” Bucky clambered up into his bunk, kicking off his boots and diving for the blanket. He heard Steve huff beneath him, quiet laughter.

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The rest of the liberated men didn’t share Bucky’s cynicism, rising at the crack of dawn with idiotic grins, undoubtedly aching for a taste of home. For some, Bucky realized as he looked around at the British uniforms, it was home.

Bucky couldn’t begrudge them, even when the sound of the assembled men woke him up at daybreak. He quietly grabbed his pack and slunk out of the room of snoring generals. Steve had left before Bucky even woke. Bucky slipped in among the mass of men, still blinking the sleep from his eyes.

He hadn’t been sleeping so well, not lately. He got nervous, closing his eyes. He was afraid one morning he’d wake up blank. Or worse, he’d wake up on the table again, or on the cot, or in a cell. His dreams were too real, leaving him disoriented, tangled in his sheets and hyperventilating. The last few nights he woke up in the early morning hours. When he woke, he tried to look at the bunks around him, remind himself that he was safe. Bucky always snuck a glance at the bunk underneath him, checked that Steve was still in the bunk below. He’d count Steve’s breaths, always surprisingly steady. Healthy and alive. Reassured, Bucky would turn on his side and try to match his breathing to Steve’s. In and out. In and out. Sometimes, he even managed to get back to sleep.
Steve said nothing about the bags underneath Bucky’s eyes. He knew Bucky had stopped sleeping well a few days after he got back. The first few days, Bucky had crawled into his bunk and passed out, utterly exhausted. After that, Steve would lay in his bunk and listen to the rustle of sheets above him as Bucky tossed and turned. Steve’s heightened hearing picked up Bucky’s breathing, shallow and restless. It took longer and longer for Bucky to finally fall asleep. Steve, against his better judgement, stayed up waiting for Bucky to drift off. Steve had discovered that his new body barely needed to sleep; he could wake after three or four hours completely refreshed. It meant a lot of lonely hours in the night to fill, just staring at the metal of the bunk above his.

So naturally Steve woke every time he heard the nightmares start. Steve was capable of sleeping through anything, could snore through the blaring horns of the perimeter guard and the thrum of planes overhead. But the moment Bucky’s breath hitched, Steve was yanked back to consciousness. He’d jolt awake, unsure of why he’d woken, until he heard Bucky above him. Perhaps it was instinct after having slept in the same bed with Bucky for so long. In his asthma days, Steve used to measure his breathing against Bucky’s when he slept, mimicking his deep, even breaths. Now, the sudden change in Bucky’s pace, no longer the familiar metronome, woke Steve most nights. Bucky’s breath would speed up, shallow and panicked. Sometimes he muttered, slurring English and Russian together. Some nights, Bucky just quietly mumbled name, rank, and number, over and over again, almost pleading. The whispers made Steve sick to his stomach. He grappled with the urge to climb up into Bucky’s bunk and shake him awake and pull him out of his nightmares. But if he ever did that, Bucky would immediately leave and insist on sleeping in another bunk, back with the soldiers and away from Steve. Bucky would say something about not wanting to wake everyone up or not wanting to bother Steve. He would insist he was fine, that every soldier had nightmares. But Steve couldn’t stand the idea of Bucky sleeping anywhere else and waking up from his nightmares without anyone there to remind him he was safe.

So Steve kept to himself, sitting through Bucky’s nightmares in pained silence. Sometimes, when it got too much for Steve to handle, he’d whisper Bucky’s name, whisper assurances that Bucky was safe, and try to rouse him from his dreams. It usually worked and Bucky woke with an aborted scream or choking on his syllables. The bunk creaked as Bucky sat up, taking shuddering breaths as he grounded himself. The moment Steve knew Bucky was awake, he shut his own eyes and evened out his breathing, feigning sleep. He listened carefully, heard when Bucky leaned over the edge to look down at Steve. Those moments took all of Steve’s willpower as he forced himself to not open his eyes and look at Bucky’s face. Steve contented himself to only open his eyes once he heard Bucky start to drift off again, breathing matching with Steve. Only then did Steve let himself fall back into his own dreams.

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Steve scanned the crowd for Bucky now, surveying the men assembled. Steve was looking forward to London. He could regroup and start planning strategies for burning out HYDRA. Besides, Steve thought, the change of scenery might do Bucky some good. And if Peggy just so happened to be yearning to return to London, then the trip was all the better for everyone involved.

Steve’s feelings about the trip started to change after the eighteenth hour of monotonous travel. On tour, he’d been moved around on planes, zipping around Europe in mere hours. There were too many men to transport everyone by plane, so Steve and the other men were shepherded onto what looked like a converted cruise liner. Most of the ship was crowded with cargo, but other regiments filed onboard, disappearing into the maw of the ship in incredible numbers. A general with a (frankly) ridiculous number of medals directed Steve to an above board cabin.

The room was comfortable enough: a bed, a desk, a window. The rocking wasn’t so bad, not that Steve could get seasick anyway. Steve stowed his handful of possessions and the banged up
shield in the corner before restlessly making the bed, already bored. He waited until the ship had started sailing to leave his cabin and take stock of the ship.

Already, men were milling about the decks, voices loud as they competed with the engines to be heard. Steve caught sight of some men already leaning over the railings, faces drawn and pale, seasick. Steve headed down into the maze of hastily renovated hallways. The elegant wallpaper of the cruiseliner peeked out underneath the standard navy paint job. Peeking into the below deck suites, Steve was assaulted by stuffy air and stench of too many bodies. The air was stale, as if it had been worn out by being breathed too many times. Steve stumbled over the duffel bags littering the floor, alternating between tripping and banging into the steel pipes criss-crossing from the ceiling. Canvas had been stretched across pipe bed frames to form makeshift cots. The bunks, if Steve could call them that, were tiered five high, a narrow few inches between a sleeper’s nose and the dip of the cot above him. The poor saps on top had to constantly mind their heads lest they jerk up in the middle of the night and brain themselves against the pipe meshwork on the ceiling. The men’s grumbling crackled across the packed rooms like fire catching between the too close pillars of cots.

The soldiers quickly flooded out onto the decks and the larger meeting spaces. The liner’s ballroom had been converted too, jammed full of haphazard cots that stretched up to the room’s high ceilings. Here and there, the soldiers found a few places to catch their breath. They congregated at these balconies, breathing in the briny air and gossiping. Steve kept an eye peeled for Bucky, but in the sea of bodies, Steve struggled to distinguish one man from another. Giving up, Steve simply wandered, trying to find something to do to fill the empty hours until the next meal. As it turned out, there were only two meals a day and a lifetime's worth of boring hours to fill between them.

Steve plodded back to his room after scrounging up some paper and pencils. He dodged invitations to card games, not carrying enough money to interest even the most bored gambler, and settled in his cabin to be alone. Steve quickly discovered that drawing on a boat was trickier than he had anticipated, between the rocking and the way the light changed, glancing off the water in strange patterns. Steve lost himself in the waves, sketching furiously to try to capture their motion. When he’d exhausted the little view out his window and the cabin’s sparse furnishings, he ventured outside. The decks were packed to the point Steve gave up on trying to avoid bumping shoulders. He muscled his way through the throng, eventually finding space near the railings. Sitting criss-cross, he settled the notebook on his thigh and scanned the horizon for a subject.

Soldiers, more cooperative subjects than the sea, passed in and out of view - leaning over the railing for a smoke, singing, writing letters home. Steve chronicled them with a few quick strokes of his worn down pencil. The pencil smeared, but it suited the men themselves - grumpy, unshaven, and a little rough around the edges. Sea spray flecked Steve’s paper, splashing his face and soaking his clothes. The rushing wind made it cold on deck, cold enough that the mist from the ship’s wake threatened to freeze on Steve’s face. His eyes stung from the salty air, but he disappeared into his drawings, letting the time slip by unnoticed.

Someone eventually tapped Steve on the shoulder, telling him he was going to miss dinner if he sat on the deck any longer. Looking around, Steve noticed that the crowd he’d been drawing had thinned out considerably. Bundling away his sketches and stretching out his back, Steve headed back into the ship and followed the tide of men down towards the ship’s mess hall.

The dining room was less crudely converted than the rest of the ship. The commanding officers had the sense to keep some of the old furnishings, including the opulent wooden banquet tables that stretched half the length of the hall. The dining area was an affront to interior designers everywhere, carved mahogany tables topped with tin plates and army posters and signage nailed into elegant pillars and paneling. Steve marveled at the furnishings. It was a shame, he thought, to ruin a good ship this way. He was half afraid it’d capsize simply under the weight of all the men crammed on
board, to say nothing of German torpedoes. Hopefully the Navy had spent more time outfitting the ship in that respect. Steve didn't imagine that the average cruise liner was built to sustain much damage.

Steve waited his turn in line for food, grimacing at his B rations. The army's two certainties: death and dried food, as Bucky was fond of saying. As Steve sat down, he kept an eye out for Bucky.

Three tables down, a group of men had broken out in song, piercingly off tune. After the third round of it or so, Steve started to pick up the lyrics as the song spread around the mess hall, drawing in Brits and American men alike. Soon enough, Steve was humming along too, if only under his breath.

“I don't want to be a soldier,
I don't want to go to war;
I'd rather hang around
Piccadilly underground,
Living on the earnings of a high born lady;

Don't want a bullet up my arsehole,
Don't want my bollocks shot away,
For I'd rather stay in England,
Merry, merry England,
And roger all my bleeding life away,
Gorblimey!”

The men struggled to carry on singing, dissolving into fits of suspiciously drunken laughter. A brave bloke (British, again) got up on a table and started banging his cup against his tray. The tables around him grew silent, although the din continued in the background. The soldier started in on a new song, a lopsided smile on his lips. Steve noted the little medal pinned to his lapel, sparkling quietly. He was older than the young men around him and looked to have served his time. The men around him gave him his due respect, listening expectantly.

“Oh they say there's a troopship just leaving Bombay,
Bound for old Blighty's shore,
Heavily laden with time-expired men,
Bound for the land they adore.”
The man’s voice was weathered and cracked but not entirely unpleasant. As he started in on the new song, other men joined in, cackling in anticipation. The chorus grew louder as men joined in, toasting the man on the table.

“There's many a twat just finishing his time,

There's many a cunt signing on;

You'll get no promotion this side of the ocean,

So cheer up my lads, fuck 'em all!”

Steve spat out his coffee at the last line, snickering. He’d heard enough of soldier’s songs, and certainly knew enough about the Navy, but the song grew only more derisive. Steve could feel his face flushing as the men launched into the chorus at the top of their lungs.

“Fuck 'em all!

Fuck 'em all!

The long and the short and the tall;

Fuck all the Sergeants and W.O.l.'s,

Fuck all the corporals and their bastard sons;

For we're saying goodbye to them all,

As up the C.O.'s arse they crawl;

You'll get no promotion this side of the ocean,

So cheer up my lads, fuck 'em all!”

The man on Steve’s left, one of the first to start singing and possibly the farthest off key, elbowed Steve.

“You gon’ sing along or you got a stick up your ass?”

Steve smirked. “Afraid I don’t know the words.”

“Ain’t that hard or us idiots wouldn’t be able to sing it. If you get lost, just start singing ‘fuck ‘em all’ and you’ll be right half the time. Doesn’t matter what song they’re singing. Just stop looking so grim. Jeez.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Steve turned back to his coffee. He wasn’t as bitter as the rest of the men here. He’d wanted to come fight. Didn’t matter how funny the songs were.
Steve’s neighbor hardly seemed to notice that Steve hadn’t joined in, shouting so loud it would be a miracle if he heard anything. Steve cleared his place and shuffled back onto the deck.

A biting breeze had kicked up, cold enough to drive most of the men off the deck. The sun had already sunk halfway beneath the waves. Not enough light to draw by. Steve ambled back to his room and sunk down on his bed, bored. If he listened hard enough, underneath the roar of the engines and the sea, Steve could hear warbling, echoing refrains floating up out of the mess hall and common areas. He smirked, leaning back onto his bed. Without noticing, he started humming along, mouthing, “fuck ’em all.”

Below decks and in the center of the racket, Bucky had one arm around a man named Falsworth’s shoulders and was bellowing out the lyrics to some new song. The Navy men were spreading the song faster than the plague, infecting every fresh man on board. Bucky was already a little giddy and joined in the song, yelling “Fuck ’em all!” with undisguised glee.

Dinner was long since over, but the men stuck around. Poker games cropped up at the ends of the tables. Elsewhere, men were singing, drinking, dancing. A few somber fellows labored over letters home. The clamor soothed Bucky’s head, undeniably loud and alive. He’d gravitated back to some of the other men from the 107th: Dugan, Smith, Taylor, and Harris. Some of the British men had crowded in too. Falsworth - Major Falsworth, as he kept reminding them in that smug British accent of his - was the first to barge in, ingratiating himself with a pack of cards. No one had much to gamble with however, so they swapped stories and jibed at each other. Soon enough, the subject of conversation turned to girls. Every man was carrying a picture, a little photo tucked in his breast pocket. Every man, that was, except Bucky, who excused himself saying he couldn’t embarrass his woman by showing other men the special picture she sent him off to war with. The group howled, on the verge of ripping his jacket off in search of the lurid picture. He’d been dating a girl before he left Brooklyn, sure, but they’d broken off when he shipped out. It hadn’t been serious anyway. None of Bucky’s girls really had been. To get along with Bucky, you had to get along with Steve. Turns out, that was a strangely difficult trait to find in a gal. Or, at least, before the whole miracle of science that had made Steve the most coveted man on the market. End of the story was, Bucky didn’t have any pictures, of the special variety or not. If he’d had a picture, he would have lost it in Azzano anyway, dumped in the garbage somewhere with his laces. The unwelcome memory surprised him. Suddenly, Bucky remembered all of the dogeared photos littering the hallway. Those men all had families, girls, people waiting for them back home.

Bucky thought he was going to be sick. Excusing himself abruptly, Bucky peeled out of the dining hall. He ran up onto one of the balconies overlooking the sea. He leaned over the railing, but his nausea had already subsided. The briny air did him some good, he thought, though the sea spray quickly chilled him. The darkness outside hid how pale he’d turned. The inky ocean churned in the boat’s wake, filling the half beat between the thrumming pulse of the engine. Bucky closed his eyes, arms wrapped around the rail, and tried to lose himself in the motion of the ship and deafening roar of the sea. He drifted a moment, at peace, before he lost focus. Kolya had loved the ocean. The little reminder leapt out at him, unbidden. It was just one of the thousand little things stuck in the back of his head, netting him now, part of a network of thorns. Little things that tugged him back to Azzano. Reminded him of nails sinking into his arms and the sensation of skin starting to cool.

Bucky kicked the railing in blind frustration. The bars didn’t budge and Bucky swore under his breath, clutching at his shin. The men around him turned, mistook the incident for an accident, and laughed, clapping Bucky on the back. Bucky scowled and leaned over the rail again, hands balled into fists. Too late now. He’d made his choice, hadn’t he? Regret wasn’t going to do him any good now. Better to move on and forget everything he could about Azzano.
He kicked the guardrail again. The sharp pain brought Bucky back out of his head. He considered kicking it again before deciding it’d draw too much attention. The last thing he wanted was anyone asking if he was alright. Bucky was too tired to make something up at this point. Exhausted, he turned back and headed to his bunk. The hallways were almost indistinguishable from each other, but Bucky was content to get lost. He wandered aimlessly. Cigarette smoke. Singing. Snoring. Bucky took it all in numbly.

Finding his bunk at last, he clambered up the ladder, awkwardly sliding into the third bunk. The arrangement was claustrophobic to say the least, but Bucky was more afraid of what might happen if he fell out of his narrow bunk. Slowly, the other men poured in. Somewhere down the hall, a CO was shouting about curfew. Bucky considered getting out of bed and changing clothes or brushing his teeth or taking a last piss before he’d get in trouble for being out and about. But as the others filed in and out, Bucky lost motivation to do much of anything. He just wedged his head into his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut.

For two hours, no matter what he tried, Bucky couldn’t fall asleep. The thought of sleeping left him in a cold sweat. He was exhausted but sleepless, like he wouldn’t be able to sleep until he collapsed. Until then, he was awake. Quietly, Bucky climbed out of bed and rifled through his duffel bag, looking for the little packet of painkillers. He carefully emptied three tablets into his hand before stealing back into bed. He quickly swallowed them down and started counting the minutes until the drugs kicked in.

The pills reached his bloodstream a few minutes later and Bucky breathed a sigh of relief. Calm flooded over him, smoothing out his tensed muscles. All evening he had felt like he was vibrating, shaking apart at his seams with nervous energy. Now, he was pleasantly warm. His mind had fogged over, like frost on a windowpane, clear but muted. He could think about nothing, if he wanted to. The intrusive thoughts, all the memories he wanted to cast out, were held away at an arm’s length, unable to penetrate the euphoric haze. Bucky resettled in his bunk, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Soon, his eyelids started to flutter as the pills dragged him down toward sleep.

It was a waste, Bucky thought, to use his painkillers just to go to sleep, but if there was one thing he needed, it was sleep. Besides, his opportunities would be more limited once they got to London. There’d be more men around and he’d be expected to work again. Plus, Steve would be around all the time, even if it was highly unlikely they’d end up in the same room again, or same facility for that matter. Bucky would miss that. Just a little. Steve’s presence was quietly reassuring, even if he was just asleep under Bucky’s bed. Steve wouldn’t approve though. He’d be able to tell if Bucky was high. Naturally he wouldn’t say anything, not at the risk of getting Bucky court-martialed, but he’d scold Bucky. Whether in the dead of night or just in disappointed glances, it didn’t matter. So Bucky had to seize his chances now.

What Steve didn’t know couldn’t hurt him.

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Steve didn’t see Bucky the entirety of the trip to London. He heard of Bucky through Dum Dum and some of the others, but Steve was unable to pin down the man himself. Steve would turn down a hallway every now and then and spot a familiar haircut, but the next second he would blink and the familiar face disappeared. Like a mirage. With so many men on board, it would be easy to go days without seeing someone, but Steve had the nagging feeling Bucky was avoiding him. Steve was an easy target to spot, attracting attention no matter where he went. And Bucky had never struggled to find him in Brooklyn, seemed to have a sixth sense for finding trouble and Steve. Steve could only conclude that Bucky wasn’t looking for him. And if Bucky didn’t want to be found,
Steve had no hope of finding him in the labyrinth below decks. His absence both irritated and worried Steve.

To take his mind off the missing sergeant (he had gotten on board, right?), Steve scouted the ranks of the men on board. He’d need a team for when he got his mission in London. A diversity of talents. Bucky was an obvious member, so sniper was covered. Someone with mechanical skills would be good. A demolition expert would be useful too. A scout or intelligence specialist? It would depend on the kind of mission he was being deployed on. Someone multilingual would probably be good, if they were working outside London. Steve jotted his ideas down in his notebook, carving out roles for his squadron. Not too many people - for stealth and mobility purposes - but enough for a degree of specialization. Six seemed like a good number. But he couldn’t really know what he needed until the higher ups gave him more details. The secrecy involved (We’ll tell you more when you get to London, Rogers) annoyed him. He’d never been one for secrets; they only gummed up the works - caused problems.

Steve lived in the dining hall, interviewing any man in uniform bearing the 107th Regiment’s insignia, plus a few others just to cover his bases. Really anyone who wanted to talk. His notebook quickly filled up with names and notes, scrawled as Steve hurriedly jotted down memos during conversation.

Thomas Walker - Ex-mechanic, straightforward personality, in good shape (Maybe)

Harold Anderson - Drafted, academic type, speaks Italian (Probably not)

Douglas Collins - Enlisted and from a military family, handy with heavy artillery (Maybe)

Gabe Jones - Speaks French and German, educated, recommended by Dugan (something about a tank??), Field communications experience, might have trouble getting him into a mixed unit (Strong)

Roy Campbell - First year, strong knowledge of geography, drinker, recommended by his CO, four kids (Probably not)

Connor Lewis - No

Needless to say, there were more than six qualified men on board. Steve kept himself busy late into the night, underlining useful skills, crossing out names and circling others. He developed a rough formula. Skills? Previous experience? Education? Languages? All noted. Personality was harder. Sometimes he’d spy on a group before approaching, which was difficult considering the crowds he tended to attract. But sometimes, if he stayed still long enough, he could fade into the background enough to listen in. The most revealing times, it turned out, were the evenings, when the booze came out. Heavy drinker was not a preferred trait on Steve’s list, but among soldiers it was nigh on unavoidable. Things sure to get a man crossed off the list were: age (Steve refused to drag anyone under 20 in with him, no matter their talents), draft (it wasn’t damning, but Steve wanted people who chose to be out in the fight), Jersey (no way on earth Steve and Bucky could get along with anyone from Jersey), and big families. The last one was the cincher, and it took a lot of good men off Steve’s list. But his missions would be dangerous, Steve knew that. He couldn’t be responsible for leaving some woman back home abandoned and without any support. It was better to keep the family men further from the front lines.
By the final night, Steve had narrowed down his list to a single page. A total of 20 men. All vetted by their COs. All interviewed multiple times and observed from a distance. Steve had taken each man’s life story by the end of the trip: where they were from, their jobs, how they got into the army, interests, hobbies, favorite movies, anything they happened to tell him. He even knew favorite cigarette brands for three of the men on the list. Steve arrived in London with a list in hand.

Steve got a private ride to the base of operations, shuttled alongside the big-shot generals, their aides, and Peggy. She stood out in their midst, not just as a woman, but in her attitude. The generals were self-involved, talking over her head. She sat in the back, beautiful and invisible, little more than an ornament. It was a useful skill for an agent, Steve figured, to be able to disappear at will. Same as the way she could command the attention of a room in an instant. Steve looked at her with awe - something he found himself doing whenever he saw her - and worked up the nerve to take the seat beside her. She slid over and made room, legs primly crossed but a warm smile on her lips. As the door closed, the inside of the car sank into near total blackness. Not a single streetlamp lit the dark roads and Steve found himself ill at ease.

“Blackout,” Peggy explained, one hand reassuringly tapping Steve’s knee, “keeps the Luftwaffe from being able to spot the cities.”

“Look.” She gestured and Steve caught the movement of her arm as his eyes adjusted to the dark. Peggy pointed up towards the driver of the car. “We put blinds on the headlights. And there,” she pointed to the curbside, which glowed eerily in the moonlight, “on the curbs we use white paint. Helps the drivers stay in the road.” Steve nodded, then realizing Peggy probably couldn’t see him, grunted thoughtfully in response. Steve’s eyes adjusted quickly to the dim interior of the car. The generals had fallen quiet, still and tense. Steve felt a similar unease. It’d be easy for an undercover operative to slip within their midst. Taking out a car full of important personnel in the dead of night would be all too easy. The uncertainty of the dark, not knowing who you were punching, would make close quarters fighting difficult. Steve gripped his shield, running his fingers over the edge worriedly.

“It’s quite alright, Captain. I can personally vouch for every man on board,” Peggy whispered in his ear. He could hear the small smile in her voice, confident as ever.

“If you say so, Agent.” Steve leaned back. He was reassured, but he wished the car would move along a little faster. The motorcade, and the traffic around them, seemed to crawl along. Outside, the quiet was punctuated by the occasional screech of tires, someone narrowly missing a pedestrian. Steve watched the intermittent passerby on the sidewalk, all of them carrying white handkerchiefs or other white articles. Even with his strengthened eyesight, Steve could only make out silhouettes, spotting the white flags floating in the night before their owners. Like a parade of will-o’-the-wisps.

At long last, the car pulled to a halt. A single spotlight blared out from the building nearby, combing the sky. The sudden glare cut through the dark, making all in attendance raise a hand to shield their eyes. The group trudged along after a man with a flashlight. (Why did they keep calling it a torch? Steve would never understand the British vernacular.) Escorted inside, Steve was greeted by a sudden onslaught of light. The door closed quickly behind him. Inside, the room was lit normally, although the windows were blocked by blackout curtains, giving the room a sealed-in feeling like a tomb or a submarine.

The generals all peeled off, shepherded by their aides down various halls. Peggy tapped Steve’s arm and waved him after her. She spoke as she led him down the hall, heels tapping in perfect sync with her speech.
“Your men will be here in the morning. The trains take a little longer to get here, but they’ll be in soon enough. Until then, I’d advise you rest. You’ve a long day ahead of you tomorrow.”

She stopped in front of a door and spun neatly on her heel, extending a cupped palm. Steve plucked the glittering key from her hand and unlocked the door, turning to face Peggy before he crossed over the threshold. The red of her lips drew his eye and he hastily looked away before she could notice. He felt heat rush to his cheeks and he dropped his gaze to the key in his hands. It looked so small.

“Good night, Steve.”

Steve looked up, embarrassed. He reached up to rub the back of his neck, practically radiating unease. Peggy quirked an eyebrow at him, waiting expectantly.

“Good night, Peggy.” It felt wrong, calling her Peggy now. In the night, just outside his room, such informal terms felt suggestive. He wanted to invite her in (not for those reasons), but he worried she’d misinterpret. On the other hand, to call her Agent would do her a disservice. She was a proper lady, after all. And not just any lady either, although Steve kept that thought to himself.

“Good night. See you tomorrow,” Steve amended, withdrawing into his room. The door, half obscuring Steve’s body, acted as his shield. The tension that had built between them diffused, severed by the barrier.

“Tomorrow then.” With that, Peggy turned away, heels clicking down the hallway. Steve closed his door, but listened for her footsteps until they receded completely. He didn’t know what he was doing exactly. Was he flirting with her? Was she flirting with him? Was that even allowed between two officers? Even if he really did feel that way about Peggy, Steve didn’t have the faintest clue about how to approach her. As he’d told her in the cab, he’d never really spoken to women, much less dated one. That was far more Bucky’s area of expertise. Apparently, courting a dame was a far scarier game than Steve had given Bucky credit for.

Locking the door with a click and giving it a tug to check its sturdiness (it would do), Steve deposited his duffel on the ground and quickly made the bed. As he went through the familiar motions, his sleepiness finally sank in. He was travel-weary. Quickly stripping down, Steve practically flung himself onto the low bed. Flipping off the light, he drifted off in a matter of seconds.

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, there was some Steve/Peggy in there. I ship Stucky, but since this goes along the lines of canon, there’s no ignoring their relationship. But don’t worry, this too is going somewhere. (Besides, Peggy is great.)

History time!!
1) Bucky and Steve travel to London via troop transport ship. (The movie never specifies how they get from Italy to England, so I made up my own solution based on my research.) At this point in the war, a lot of troop transports were just converted cruiseliners.
Bucky’s experience as a typical passenger is heavily based on this American account (though the dining is very different):
http://www.100thww2.org/anecd/TRANSPORT.html
Wanna know just how crowded these ocean liners were? Check this out: http://united-states-lines.org/u-s-s-west-point/
Photos of troopships here:
http://www.warlinks.com/memories/brown/life_on_a_troopship.php
http://worldwar2database.com/gallery/wwii1035
(So maybe I got kinda carried away researching troopships.)

2) Sailing songs are super fun to look up. They're all lewd as hell, but endlessly entertaining. For some reason, all of the best ones come out of Britain. The two songs here are, in order, "Gorblimey" and "Fuck 'Em All." Wanna listen to them? (Of course you do.)
Gorblimey: http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/fishlm/folksongs/les01.htm (lyrics only, but lots of different versions)
Fuck 'Em All: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prSd6DaoSwQ (a slightly different version than the one in this chapter, but it's not like the Navy really standardized these songs)

3) The London Blackout. The Blitz was kind of winding down a bit by the time Steve and Bucky return to London, but the movie very explicitly mentions that they are in the middle of the blitz. Plus, the bar scene appears to be in a Blitz-era bar (windows papered over, etc.). The city really was pitch black: people used black out curtains and papered windows, the curbs were painted white, cars put blinders on their headlights, the speed limit was 20 mph at night, and coroners encouraged people to wear white clothes for visibility. One farmer even painted white stripes on his cows to keep them from getting hit at night.
This is a great little article about night life during the Blitz and the accompanying blackout:
https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/nov/01/blackout-britain-wartime
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for waiting! All my love to the lovely people who've been commenting.

This chapter is very closely interwoven with the canon, but I tried to take a slightly different angle on it and added some stuff of my own. (As always, let me know if you spot any details that don't line up!)

Just as Peggy had promised, the next day was possibly one of the busiest of Steve’s life. Steve was awoken in the morning by someone anxiously rapping on the door. From the moment he stepped outside, clothed in his finest dress attire, he was shuffled around from room to room by various, slightly annoyed aides. Around noontime, they gave him a moment to eat lunch before being whisking him away yet again.

One aide - a man who looked to be constantly teetering on the edge of panic - led Steve to a cavernous room deep in the base. People milled about the room hurriedly, orbiting an enormous table in the center. The room was underground, so all noise seemed to soak into the walls, muffling the flurry of activity. The lights hung down from the ceiling, swaying ever so slightly, and filled the subterranean space with yellow artificial light. Steve could only liken it to the inside of a supremely organized anthill.

Steve spotted Peggy across the room and strode over, tugging at his uniform awkwardly. He watched the other men in the room, all dressed like him, and counted medals and stripes. He suddenly felt hopelessly outranked, his own lapels unadorned. In the back of his mind, he vaguely remembered that he was supposed to receive a medal of valor today. He smirked at the thought, then at the image of Senator Brandt flailing on stage as it became apparent that Steve was, in fact, not going to be making an appearance. With a little bounce in his step, Steve approached Peggy at the table.

“Captain, this is the Colonel’s aide, Wallace,” Peggy said, gesturing to the young man behind her. Steve nodded at the man and started studying the table beside them. A map of Europe sprawled across the tabletop, accompanied by a handful of pencils and compasses. Steve sprung to his assignment before Peggy could elaborate, swinging around the table and aligning the map. He closed his eyes and summoned his memory of the map from the lab. The image of the map pinned on the wall in the dark laboratory appeared on his eyelids almost instantaneously. Other facets of the memory - the weight of Bucky leaning against him, the feeling of the slight tremble of Bucky’s arm across his shoulders, the stench, the clamor of the fighting outside - all returned to Steve with a flood of adrenaline. He remembered the rest of the room with similar detail, the machines and instruments strewn about Bucky’s cot and the small cell by the entryway. Steve forbade himself to dwell on the lab and brushed aside the rest of the memory, honing in on the map.

“Sergeant Barnes also gave you his intel on this map already, didn’t he?” Steve asked. He didn’t look up from the map, just grabbed a pencil and started to mark the bases with little crosshatches.
“Yes, we also have Sergeant Barnes’s account. But we’d like your recollections as well. For accuracy, you understand,” the aide replied from Peggy’s shoulder.

In less diplomatic terms: Dr. Erksine gave you an eidetic memory. Why would we need anyone else’s account?

Steve just grunted in response, picking up a ruler and holding it against the Polish border. He muttered coordinates and estimates aloud (20 miles south of the Baltic, 30-40 miles from the Maginot Line…), painstakingly recreating the HYDRA map. Finished, he handed off the map and sheepishly looked up at Peggy.

“I only got a quick look.”

She raised her eyebrows at him, amused.

“Well, nobody’s perfect.”

*Though we certainly came close with you*, the little crinkles at the corners of her eyes seemed to say.

Steve couldn’t help smiling as she walked behind him, already off to talk with Colonel Phillips. The aide had moved their little map onto the giant table in the center of the room. The table itself was a map, studded with small markers and flags. Steve’s eyes swept the table, making mental note of the factories and bases.

“These are the weapons factories we know about,” Steve explained as Colonel Phillips approached, gesturing to his hurried markings. “Sergeant Barnes said HYDRA shipped all the parts to a facility that isn’t on this map.” Phillips took a brief glance at Steve’s incomplete map before moving off again, agitated. Without even turning around, Phillips addressed Peggy.

“Agent Carter, coordinate with MI6. I want every Allied eyeball looking for that main HYDRA base.”

Steve was taken aback. The MI6 - an organization with all of the force of British enigma behind it - could be launched into action with a single command. Peggy wasn’t nearly so impressed; after all, she apparently had contacts in the MI6.

“What about us?” Peggy asked, already moving on to the next course of action. Steve’s pulse raced. This was what he’d waited the whole trip to London for - his assignment. He straightened involuntarily, trying to look like a soldier.

“We’re going to light a fire under Johann Schmidt’s ass,” Phillips replied, finally turning to face the two of them. He looked to Steve with the closest expression Steve had ever seen to a smile on his face.

“What do you say, Rogers? It’s your map. Think you can wipe HYDRA off it?”

Steve turned to look back at the map, heart in his throat.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, before the Colonel could change his mind.

“I’ll need a team,” Steve added. The Colonel simply flipped through a stack of papers handed to him by his aide.

“We’re already putting together the best men,” Phillips replied, continuing to look at his papers.
Steve read the headings upside down - personnel profiles, most likely the team Phillips’s aides had picked out.

“With all due respect, sir, I already have.”

Phillips looked up, as did his aide, who mostly just pursed her lips in annoyance. Steve dug the list out of his breast pocket.

“I took the liberty of selecting a few men I’d like for my team.”

Peggy shot Steve an impressed look before taking the list from him, already scanning the folded up page. Colonel leaned back, arms folded, and studied Steve.

“Alright, Rogers, I’m listening.”

Steve sorted through the list in his head. He’d be taking out HYDRA bases. He’d need a demolitions expert, a radioman, a medic, a tactician, and a weapons expert. And, of course, Bucky.

“I’d like Sergeant James Barnes, Sergeant Timothy Dugan, Private Gabriel Jones, Private James Morita, Major James Falsworth, and Jacques Dernier.”

Phillips arched his eyebrows and took the list from Peggy, flattening it out against the table. Steve stepped forward and pointed out the men he’d chosen on the list. Phillips paused when he read over Jones, shooting Steve a sidelong glance. When he reached Morita, he turned to Steve and rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. Phillips quickly read over the last two men before crisply folding the list and handing it back to Steve, a hangdog expression on his face.

“You want a mixed regiment? One of these men isn’t even in anyone’s army. You’re scraping the bottom of the barrel here, Captain.”

“Sir, every man on that list is qualified beyond a doubt. Where they served before is just a detail. Please, Colonel.”

Phillips sighed, long-suffering, before snatching the list back out of Steve’s hands. He passed the list to his aide and stepped closer to Steve, shaking his head.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Captain. You get them to sign on, and you can have whatever fool wants to tag along after your ass. Put a donkey in uniform, for all I care.”

Phillips strode past, already storming off to another corner of the room.

“Thank you, sir,” Steve called out after him, but the Colonel plodded on without turning around. Steve turned back to Peggy, who leaned against the nearest table, arms crossed.

“You know you’re taking a risk with some of those men.”

Steve just smiled at her, shrugging.

“If I remember correctly, you took a little bit of a risk on me. And look how well that turned out.” Steve spread his arms, gesturing at the way his uniform clung to his chest. Peggy rolled her eyes.

“C’mom, have a little faith in me here, Peggy.” Steve cajoled, slipping his hands into his pockets and leaning on the table across from her.

“Faith, hm?” Peggy cocked her head at Steve, looking him over appraisingly.
“Fine,” she said at last, standing back up, “I’ll arrange for you and your men to go out this evening. See what you need to do to convince them.”

With that, she passed Steve, gathering up the map from the table as she went.

“Thanks, Peg!” Steve called after her. Not turning, she waved one hand and disappeared around the corner of an arch. The image of her bright red nail polish stuck in Steve’s mind a second too long. He found himself standing awkwardly in the center of the room, hands in his pockets. He suddenly didn’t know where he was supposed to go. Steve dodged the people hustling around him and headed to the stairs. Best to get ready for the evening.

An aide gave him the notice two hours later, along with an envelope with a not and a stack of British pounds. He’d be meeting up with his crew in the “Whip and Fiddle Pub.” Someone had helpfully printed the address at the bottom. Steve tucked the note and money into his pocket. He’d spent the last two hours mulling over every possible argument, and, if he was being honest, Steve was starting to worry. The more he thought about it, the crazier his proposition sounded. All of these men had just barely escaped with their lives a week ago. They all had clearance to stay far away from the frontlines, maybe even to go home. There was no reason for them to want to charge back into the fray. Steve certainly wouldn’t agree to serve under himself; he’d been given this position after one successful but hare-brained mission. Contrary to the fiction of his propaganda movies and burgeoning comic series, Steve didn’t have any combat experience whatsoever. He didn’t have a whole lot of experience with anything except shaking hands and selling bonds.

Restless, Steve paced his room before heading downstairs. He found his way back to the enormous officers’ room, slinking back in with only a few sideways glances. Notebook in hand, he drifted around studying the papers and stray papers. He listened in on conversations, picking up the lingo and whatever tidbit of information was being passed along. Eventually an aide pointed Steve to the far wall and showed him a handful of strategy manuals and assorted military texts. Seeing that they didn’t contain anything sensitive (probably), Steve scooped up as many as he could discreetly carry and spirited the lot back to his room. Back in his room and away from suspicious glances, Steve dove into the books, writing notes in his notepad with a possessed fervor. He meticulously copied over maneuver diagrams, taking particular care to note smaller formations for anything applicable to a seven-man army. He scoured an atlas, scoping out the regions around the HYDRA factories, looking for possible routes for invasion. Steve became utterly absorbed, sprinting through the texts trying to make up for years of experience. The room fell silent aside from the sound of pages flipping and the tick of Steve’s pocket watch (a gift from some Senator), placed on the bed to remind Steve to make his appointment on time. All the same, Steve still nearly forgot. Glancing absently at the watch face, Steve shot out of bed, realizing it was a quarter to eight.

Tidying up the stacks of books and notes and shoving the pile under his bed, Steve flew out the door, slicking back his hair as he ran. Noting the panicked faces as he raced past, Steve slowed down into a brisk walk, straightening his tie and reinspecting the notice, just to make sure he hadn’t somehow misremembered the time. After asking a passing soldier where to find the pub (“Don’t have too much fun now”), Steve stepped out into the London night time.

Prepared for total darkness this time, Steve left the base with confidence. Two blocks right, three blocks straight, and then the third building on the left. Cars, almost all of them military, passed Steve on the roads, inching along cautiously with their headlights blinded so only a thin shaft of light escaped. The dark night echoed with ambient noise, the sound all the keener for the lack of anything else to notice. Tires squealed, men guffawed, bottles shattered, and a piano melody leaked out of the building a block away. Steve followed the sound of the piano and horrible singing, drifting almost invisible down the street. He listening for approaching cars and then dashed across the street. If he squinted, Steve could make out a giant wooden sign hung over the door, supposedly proclaiming
Steve let himself inside, temporarily blinded by the onslaught of light.

"Close the door, man! Don’t you know there’s a war on?"

Steve quickly shut the door behind himself and wandered inside. It was a modest pub, but respectable enough. A lean man stood behind the bar, polishing glasses in front of an array of bottles glittering in the wan light. Steve got the sense that it was well attended.

"What can I get you?" the bartender called out, pulling out a glass expectantly and placing it on the wooden counter.

"I’m here to meet some friends. I’ll have a drink later," Steve responded, looking around for a familiar face. There were several other men in uniform present, but none of his own. Steve chose a large table beside the piano and drew up a chair anxiously. He withdrew the money from his pocket and counted the bills. He had a rough idea of how much a pound was worth, but the amount of money in his hand was just absurd. Either drinks cost a lot more in London or the brass thought Steve was going to need everyone very, very drunk.

To Steve’s relief, the men all arrived almost at once. They spotted Steve immediately, grabbing pints and plopping down at the table. Steve let them revel a bit, buying a small whiskey for himself, and waited for everyone to arrive. He’d never had whiskey before, but it warmed him up pleasantly as it went down his throat.

Bucky was the last to arrive, tailing behind Dernier and Jones, who had arrived together talking in rapid-fire French. Steve stood to greet them all, following Bucky to the bar.

"It's been a while. I almost forgot how ugly you were," Steve said by way of greeting, handing Bucky a couple bills. Bucky promptly bought himself a gin and tonic and sat down at the bar.

"Good to see ya, Steve." Bucky had a hint of a smile, but he mostly looked tired. Steve could see the bags forming under his eyes. Bucky's skin was a little paler than Steve remembered, although that might have been the lighting inside the pub. Bucky downed the glass in one determined go and ordered another, sipping it before turning back to Steve.

"That your team?" he asked, gesturing at the men with his glass.

Steve nodded, leaning against the bar next to Bucky.

"That is HYDRA’s worst nightmare right there," Steve responded sarcastically.

"Got to hand it to you, Steve. I’m amazed you got the brass to give you your own private clown troupe." Bucky smirked at Steve over his glass before nodding at the tour poster in the corner. On the poster, Steve - in all his corny Captain America glory - entreated passerby to enlist and support the war effort. Why Captain America was on a poster in Britain escaped him. Pasted over his red, white, and blue torso, someone had written “Tour Cancelled” in bright red letters. Steve chose not to look at the poster. He looked ridiculous.

"Come on, Buck. Come sit with us," Steve prodded, changing the subject.

“I’ll pass. I don’t need to hear your pitch. You just worry about getting the rest of that sorry group to sell you their souls. Just like selling bonds. You’ll do great.” Steve ignored the blithe sarcasm, jabbing Bucky good-naturedly in the arm before heading back over to the table.
Steve sank into the last chair, pulling it out so he could face all five men at once. They gave him their attention, five pairs of eyes looking out at him over the rims of their glasses.

“So, what can we help you with?” Dugan asked, putting down his half-finished mug with a thunk. Steve’s heart hammered like it had the first time he’d been shoved out on stage. Back in his room, he’d rehearsed his spiel in his head at least a dozen times, but things were always different in person. Steve sent a desperate look back at Bucky at the bar. Bucky, who had of course been watching out of the corner of his eye, snuck Steve a lazy thumbs-up.

“Let me get you another round first,” Steve mumbled, standing up and fumbling his way back to the counter. As he waited for the bartender to fill up the glasses, Bucky leaned over from his bar stool.

“Don’t be so nervous,” Bucky whispered, shooting one look over his shoulder at the group of men at the table. “They’re soldiers. Just give it to them straight. If they say ‘no,’ they weren’t cut out for...whatever you’re doing anyway.”

Steve nodded curtly. Bucky was right. Of course he was right.

“Thanks,” Steve muttered, gathering up the mugs and heading back to the table.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky replied, waving him off impatiently. “Hurry up already.”

Steve set down the mugs and took a quick breath. The men eagerly grabbed the new mugs, sliding them across the table. Steve took a breath and jumped in before he could doubt himself again.

“I’m going back after HYDRA. There’s a half dozen weapons factories like the one back in Azzano and the Scientific Reserve needs someone to take them out. Phillips gave me the assignment, but I need a team behind me.” Steve paused a moment so the group could process the information before adding, a little presumptuously, “Phillips has already approved all of you.”

Dugan raised his eyebrows and took a hearty swig from his mug. The other men reacted similarly, instinctively reaching for their glasses.

“Let me get this straight,” Dugan started.

“We barely got out of there alive and you want us to go back?” Jones finished, cutting Dugan off.

Steve cocked his head in a half-hearted shrug. He smiled, but he felt sick to his stomach. He opened his mouth to try to argue something, but he remembered what Bucky said and promptly shut his mouth.

“Pretty much,” he admitted. The following beat of silence stretched on as the men exchanged looks.

“Sounds a rather good time actually,” Falsworth piped up from Dugan’s right. Steve looked at him gratefully.

Morita leaned back in his chair, tankard emptied. He belched shamelessly before facing Steve and adding, “I’m in.” Steve’s hopes soared and he turned imploringly to Dernier and Jones. They were a package; if he got one of them, he’d have the other.

Dernier nodded stalwartly at Steve as Jones finishing muttering a translation (plus probably some
of his own commentary) in Dernier’s ear. Dernier started spouting angry French, his face impish and frenzied. The tirade caught Steve a little off-guard, unsure who the fury was directed at until Jones laughed, clapping Dernier on the back and joking back in French. Dugan shot the two of them a confused look. Steve was equally baffled.

Seeing the confused faces around the table, Jones sombered up slightly and turned to face Steve.

“We’re in.”

Steve looked to Dugan, praying his face didn’t betray just how hopeful he was. Dugan had been one of the first men on his list - one of Bucky’s friends and one of the ringleaders of the Azzano escape. Steve had to admit that the man had guts. Dugan squared with Steve, wiping foam from his mustache.

“I’ll fight. Hell, I’ll always fight. But you gotta do one thing for me.” Dugan looked around at the rest of the table conspiratorially, a twinkle of mischief in his eye.

“What’s that?” Steve asked, wary but too relieved to care. Dugan could ask for a personal tank and Steve would spend the next day trying to appropriate the resources. Peggy might actually shoot him.

Dugan drained his mug and slid over the empty glass.

“Open a tab.”

The men at the table erupted into laughter and promptly handed over their own mugs. Steve grinned, secretly breathing a sigh of relief, and gathered up the empties. He headed back to the bar and slid over the glasses.

“Another round?” Steve asked, extracting a few bills.

The bartender eyed the mugs incredulously.

“Where are they putting all this stuff?” he asked, whisking the mugs away and starting the next round. Steve simply shrugged, heading over a few seats down to Bucky.

“Well, I told you. They’re all idiots,” Bucky said as Steve approached, his drunken drawl just starting to show. He was on his third glass now, not that Steve would know.

“What about you?” Steve replied wryly, sliding into the seat next to Bucky. “Ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?”

Bucky took a sip of his gin and smirked. Steve still seemed to think this was all about being Captain America. Steve might have the rest of the world fooled, but every time Bucky looked at him, all he saw was the grinning moron who got his ass kicked in every other back alley. This new Steve, still trying to take on enemies a hundred times his size, was exactly the same. If anyone else had tried to convince Bucky to chase HYDRA halfway across Europe, he’d have put them down as either arrogant or plain stupid. But with Steve, in all his earnestness, it was almost endearing. Almost. He didn’t think he had to tell Steve that he’d follow him wherever the hell he went (it was better than taking orders from a general sitting safe miles away any day).

“Hell no,” Bucky replied with a tight smile, “that little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb to run away from a fight? I’m following him.” A lump caught in Bucky’s throat. He was doing this. Going back into the fight. He was scared, so damn scared, but looking at Steve right now there was no way in hell he could ever say no. He took another sip of his gin before he could say something
stupid. Bucky cast about for something to say to fill the silence before Steve saw the fear in his eyes.

He leaned over to Steve mischievously, ducking his head to shadow his face.

“But you’re keeping the outfit, right?” he jeered. Steve’s eyebrows shot up, unsure if Bucky was teasing him or not. They both knew Steve hated that outfit.

Steve leaned back and looked back at the gaudy poster.

“You know what? It’s kinda growing on me.”

Bucky snorted into his drink. Steve laughed, snapping into that absurd salute, his back ramrod straight and a cheesy Hollywood smile plastered onto his face. Bucky couldn’t help laughing too. The alcohol had loosened him up a bit, just starting to make the world blur a little at the edges. The way the smile felt on his face was cathartic, so Bucky let himself melt into the laughter, laughing just a little longer than the joke probably merited. Steve smiled down at him and grabbed Bucky’s shoulder, face soft and just so genuinely happy. For a moment, Bucky forgot that he’d just signed up for a second tour in hell. The devil could learn a thing or two from Steve Rogers about getting people to sell their souls.

The magic ended when the bartender called out, reminding Steve about the beers. Patting Bucky on the shoulder again, Steve headed off again.

“I’ll be right back,” Steve called back to him, pivoting to put the beers down on the group’s table. Steve turned his back completely to Bucky now, talking animatedly with Falsworth. A few minutes later, the group burst into a chorus of off-key singing and Steve left the table rolling his eyes.

“Get ‘em drunk and they just won’t shut up, huh?” Steve remarked, sitting back down next to Bucky.

“That’s what tends to happen. Where’s your drink, hm?” Bucky asked. If he was secretly pleased that Steve had come back to talk to him, he didn’t show it.

“Figured I shouldn’t drink too much. Have to set an example or something like that,” Steve replied, seizing Bucky’s glass. He eyed the last few sips, now watered down a little from the melted ice, and drank the rest in one go. The gin burned going down his throat, leaving him with an aftertaste like rubbing alcohol steeped inside a pine tree. Bucky reached out to take the glass back, cursing Steve good-humoredly.

“I wasn’t finished with that. Get your own,” he growled, tilting the glass to try to get any last drops Steve had missed. Just water. He could still feel the warmth on the chilled glass from where Steve had clasped it.

“I wasn’t finished with that. Get your own,” he growled, tilting the glass to try to get any last drops Steve had missed. Just water. He could still feel the warmth on the chilled glass from where Steve had clasped it.

“I’ll pass. I just wanted to see what you’re drinking. You never let me try any, back in the old days. Said it wasn’t good for my heart or some other crap,” Steve replied, still smiling smugly.

“Bad for your heart? More like bad for our wallet. Couldn’t afford two drinkers, you know,” Bucky scoffed, using the last of the bills Steve had given him to buy a fourth drink. Steve automatically handed him a few more bills, seeing that Bucky had depleted his allotment. Bucky wordlessly tucked the pounds in his pocket.

The door to the bar swung open in the background with a creak barely audible underneath the din. Steve and Bucky both leaned back on their stools curiously. A woman strode in - Agent Carter - dressed in a flirtatious red dress. She had an undeniable magnetism, drawing the eyes around her effortlessly. She approached with practiced ease, stopping and waiting for Steve to come to her. She
was commanding in every sense of the word, the aura of a general barely concealed under her feminine allure. As Bucky stood and followed Steve to greet her, he realized there was more than that concealed on her person. If his eyes were not mistaken, Bucky caught the outline of a handgun tucked innocently into the small clutch at her side.

“Captain,” was all she said in greeting, eyes fixed on Steve. Her tone was clipped but not hostile.

“Agent Carter.”

Bucky continued to scan the woman, trying to see if she was packing anything else. It'd be amazing if she was, considering how tight that dress was. If his eyes happened to slip once or twice from a purely investigative track...well. Agent Carter turned to Bucky, noticing his gaze. Bucky quickly yanked his eyes up to meet her face.

“Ma’am,” he said, trying not to let his gaze slip back to the piece in her handbag. She was dangerous. Of course Steve liked her. She turned back to Steve.

“Howard has some equipment for you to try. Tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

Steve and Carter looked at each other a moment. There was the same chemistry Bucky had seen the day Steve raided the base. Peggy turned away to look over at the piano, her gaze sliding over Bucky. Their eyes met briefly and she caught the direction of his line of sight. A brief moment of understanding flashed between them. This was business, and, for the moment, she was entirely uninterested in Bucky.

With Peggy looking away, Steve allowed his eyes to wander, just a little, taking in her stunning dress. She was gorgeous and so far out of his league. With the music playing and the pleasant clamor, Steve felt bolder, working up the courage to ask her to dance. Before he had a chance, Peggy turned back to Steve, fixing him with that piercing stare.

“I see your top squad is prepping for duty,” she remarked.

They were horrible, both of them, Bucky concluded, dancing around each other like that. He was irritated. By what, he wasn’t sure. Maybe that Steve had attracted such a beautiful woman (and a dangerous one at that). Or maybe that said woman had interrupted one of the first moments of genuine happiness Bucky had experienced in months. All the same, Bucky couldn’t stand to watch them pine after each other, even though the sight of them made something in his gut twist. Sensing that Steve had suddenly lost all courage to pursue Peggy, Bucky stepped in.

“You don’t like music?” Bucky asked. He smiled, mostly out of the automaticity of the line, but his heart wasn’t in it. He didn’t stand a chance with Carter.

“I do, actually,” Peggy replied, eyes locked on Steve, “I might, even when this is all over, go dancing.”

Steve just stared at Peggy, dumbfounded. It was an invitation, even Steve couldn’t miss that.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Bucky prodded, wondering if Steve would stop smiling like an idiot and speak for himself.

“The right partner.”
Seeing that Steve wasn’t going to ask her to dance, Carter added, “0800 Captain.” With that, she walked off, parting the sea of men on her way back out the door.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be there,” Steve called in her wake. A beat of silence passed as Steve watched her leave, looking almost lost, as if he’d forgotten what he’d been doing before she came in.

“I’m invisible,” Bucky remarked, turning back to Steve, “I’m turning into you. This...This is a horrible dream.”

He wasn’t talking about girls. That wasn’t important, never had been. It was this sinking into the background, this futility even in the everyday, that Bucky hated. He was supposed to be the sidekick now, a loyal wingman, but he felt utterly useless. If this was how Steve had felt, all those years as a frail boy, Bucky couldn’t begrudge him his choices now.

He instantly regretted what he’d said - he knew it’d make Steve feel guilty - but he hadn’t been able to resist the barbed outburst of resentment.

“Don’t take it so hard. Maybe she’s got a friend,” Steve said, clapping Bucky on the shoulder. It was their usual banter, but it fell flat. Steve had missed what Bucky meant, and it might be the first time they’d misunderstood each other. Somewhere in the course of the last minute, they had fallen out of step. Bucky suddenly felt just a little bit lonelier.

Steve disappeared back into the fray, headed to the table with his new team. Bucky watched Steve go. Steve still had a sheepish smile, although he sent Bucky one last apologetic glance over his shoulder. Steve drew an empty chair from a nearby table and set it to his right, inviting.

Bucky turned away and returned to the bar, an uncomfortable feeling gnawing at his chest. His gin was waiting for him, a small ring of condensation already forming on the wooden counter. He downed it, coughing a little at the way it stung his throat. Something about Peggy had upset him far more than it should have. The way that she and Steve fawned over each other made his stomach curl, even though Bucky had tried to set Steve up with half of Brooklyn.

It wasn’t simple jealousy. Bucky wasn’t after Carter. She was beautiful, stunning even, but too sharp. Like a knife. Something to be admired from a respectful distance. She had everything Bucky could hope for in a girl for Steve: intelligence, beauty, grace, and a ferocity to match Steve’s own. Bucky couldn’t think of a single reason as to why the sight of them together made him long to be anywhere else.

Because you’re afraid he’ll choose her over you, chided the voice in the back of Bucky’s head. It was the truth and Bucky furiously refuted it, promptly buying another drink. It was an inevitable choice. The war would end, and, if they all made it through, Steve would have to choose. There was no doubt he’d want to live with Peggy. They could marry and spend the rest of their days forgetting the war in domestic bliss. Bucky had no idea how serious things were between Peggy and Steve, but in his gut he knew Steve would marry her. They would get married and Bucky would be on his own again, assuming he even made it back home. The prospect of being alone was as frightening as the notion of leaping back out onto the frontlines.

Bucky wanted desperately for Peggy to disappear. He wanted his life with Steve back, two bachelors scraping by in a dingy apartment. As much as he wanted to return to the old days, he knew it was selfish. Steve was so happy around Peggy; Bucky saw that in an instant. He couldn’t bring himself, in the end, to stand between them. So he sat at the bar, torn between his own happiness and Steve’s. It was a decision he’d made a thousand times before and would probably make a thousand times more.
He hadn’t noticed that he’d finished this drink too, not until it was mysteriously empty.

He wouldn’t get in the way. His mind was made up. Hell, he’d say Steve’s wedding vows for him if he hadn’t gotten his head out of his ass by then. Because God knows Peggy would have the courage to propose far before Steve would. Bucky smirked bitterly at the thought, pulling out a few more bills. Seeing the bartender’s concerned look, he threw in a coin or two of his own as a bribe.

He wasn’t really even very drunk, if Bucky was being honest with himself. (He had the curse, on occasion, of being far too honest with himself. This night had been unfortunately spectacular example of that.) Despite the rate at which he was drinking, he was tipsy at most. Warm and a little cloudy-headed, perhaps, but otherwise fine. When he stood, the room remained stubbornly vertical. His appalling sobriety was just another part of the curse. The nightly pills were working less too; he had maybe one night’s supply left. Maybe he’d built up a resistance, but Bucky knew the root of the problem traced back to Azzano. He burnt through things too quickly now: drugs, alcohol, food. It was cruel, not being able to get drunk, but Bucky’d be damned if he wasn’t at least going to try.

By the time Bucky left the bar - not nearly as drunk as he wanted to be - Steve had long since disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

A little historical issue I have with the MCU: Mixed Regiments

In one of the deleted scenes (the one that this fic starts with), Jones is shown fighting (presumably) with the 107th, but that would have been highly unlikely since the American military wasn't desegregated until after World War II. Maybe the MCU is making the argument that the SSR, as an Allied rather than American force, might exist outside those rules, but I sort of doubt it. Hence the Colonel's comments about including Jones and Morita (as well as Dernier, who was part of the Resistance rather than an actual army). I would definitely recommend checking out info about the segregated regiments in World War II; they're some of the most heavily decorated regiments in military history (partially because they had enormous chips on their shoulders, partially because they were given some of the most dangerous assignments). Morita was quite likely part of the 442nd Infantry Regiment. If you guys love history, absolutely check out the 442nd!
The wikipedia page is comprehensive, but you can find some other good info here: http://www.asian-nation.org/442.shtml

If you guys have any insight into this little historical blip (or just want to talk about the 442nd or the 92nd or other bad ass segregated regiments), drop me a line!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So many people commented on the last chapter?? It's so nice to hear from you guys, and I love hearing your opinions about the canon and places you want the story to go! Please keep it up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two days later, when the paperwork had gone through, Bucky and the rest of the team were reassigned to special training. Bucky rejoiced in getting out of KP and dedicated the bulk of his time to the shooting range. After a stubborn three hours of clenched teeth and clammy sweat, Bucky finally broke through his block. His hands no longer shook and his targets were nothing more than that - paper targets. Something about returning to the shooting range made Bucky feel a little calmer. He was back in control.

Over the following days, Bucky drilled relentlessly with handguns and rifles alike. His sniper abilities turned heads, drawing a small crowd from time to time. Snipers, as it turned out, were a particularly narcissistic breed of soldier, constantly challenging each other to “friendly” competitions. Bucky soon got the hang of shooting cans on strings in the breeze, angling shots through the slats in a fence, and any number of the other trick shots the more veteran soldiers had dreamed up to challenge themselves. He quickly rose through their ranks, his name penciled up higher and higher on the unofficial bracket taped on the armory wall. Gambling on the matches and wasting ammunitions wasn’t exactly SSR protocol, but the COs turned a blind eye to the matter, knowing the competitions were far better motivators than any order. To many of the men, reputations were more important to protect than the country.

When Bucky’s name had climbed high enough on the list, he started getting visits. Most of the interested officers, once they realized Bucky was not inclined to abandon his current assignment, quickly departed with admonitions for Bucky to reconsider. These suit-wearing, smugly self-important men didn’t return. One man, however, introducing himself as Philby and implying he had MI6 connections, continued to pay Bucky visits. Philby insisted that Bucky might have a future with him once the war was over. Bucky scoffed at the idea, but he took Philby’s invitation to lunch, unable to resist a small, boyish thrill and the chance to eat real food.

The next day, Bucky found himself in the kind of restaurant that could only be described as “posh.” The amount of velvet and wood paneling felt like an assault on Bucky’s Brooklyn sensibilities - the place was stuffy with its own pretentiousness. The man at the door took Bucky’s name, triple-checked his identification, and ushered him back to a private room. The man shut the door behind him with a quiet click and the buzz of outside conversation quickly cut off. The small dining room suggested secrecy from every shadowed corner: heavily padded walls, double locks on the door, and stark wooden furnishings where it would be impossible to hide listening devices. Bucky wouldn’t have been surprised if there was a secret exit as well. Philby, already seated leisurely at the small table, rose to greet Bucky and pulled out a chair.

“I’m so pleased you could make it, Sergeant Barnes.”

“The pleasure is mine, sir,” Bucky replied, taking a seat uneasily.
“Come now, James, don’t look so tense. First lunch, then we’ll discuss business.”

Bucky picked up a menu to hide behind while he got his bearings. He weighed the menu in his hand, surprised at its heaviness, before opening it up. He squinted at the menu, written in spidery script, and struggled to find something he recognized. Half of the items on the page seemed to be written in French, naming meats and spices Bucky had never heard of. Philby took Bucky’s confusion in practiced stride, offhandedly remarking, “I’ve heard good things about the charred sole here, if you like fish.”

“Can’t say I took this place for a fish and chips joint,” Bucky quipped, shamelessly straight-faced. Philby just smiled, maybe unsure if Bucky was really joking, and continued to scan his menu. Bucky grunted thoughtfully and continued to pretend to read the menu.

When Philby rung the server, Bucky ordered the sole. He rescued his dignity with the drink order, requesting a local upper-shelf scotch he’d spotted once during a trip to the pub. Once the server had bustled out the room, Philby turned back to Bucky.

“So, James, I heard you spent some time in Azzano. In fact, I believe it was your intel that now has my men looking for some secret HYRDA base. Quite impressive for a rookie like yourself. And you’re a marksman to boot.”

Bucky was taken aback by Philby’s frankness.

“Thank you, sir. But as far as the intel goes, there was far more luck than skill involved. I’m surprised to hear it’s been of any use.”

“Quite the contrary, we’ve deployed a rather large task force to find the base. If we can find it, it might just change the tide of the war,” Philby commented, as if he were discussing the chance of it raining outside.

“I’m...glad to hear that. Sorry, but should we really be discussing this in public? We’re in a restaurant.”

Philby smiled knowingly.

“You’re quite right, discretion is wisest in these matters. But rest assured, Sergeant Barnes, we are currently sitting in one of the most secure locations anywhere in London, perhaps in the entirety of Britain. So, please, relax.” Philby paused, reclining in his chair, before shooting Bucky a entreating grin. “And do stop calling me ’sir.’ No need to be so formal.”

Bucky bit back his army training and reached for some semblance of normal conversation. He didn’t want the job anyway, he reminded himself, might as well try to have some fun.

“Then you won’t be offended by my table manners? The kind of school I went to didn’t teach that sort of thing,” Bucky replied, mirroring Philby’s casual posture and leaning back in his chair.

“Think nothing of it. I once had a recruit put his feet up on the table.”

“Musta been from Jersey,” Bucky snickered, too quiet for Philby to catch.

They fell into idle chatter until the food arrived, Philby asking a handful of shallow questions about Brooklyn and Bucky’s time in the army. Bucky relaxed a little, asking a few questions of his own. (“Have you ever ordered a hit on someone?” was probably a bit impertinent to ask. Philby laughed and waved the question off, but Bucky noticed that he didn’t say no.)
When the meal came, Bucky strategically sipped his drink, watching Philby over the rim. He mimicked the way Philby ate, fork in this hand, knife in that hand, napkin draped across his lap.

The fish was light and lemony, sitting on a bed of asparagus. The freshness was a miracle, a rare respite from the army’s usual dried and canned fare. Bucky ate slowly, partly from awkwardness, partly to savor the dish. Even the greens, Bucky begrudgingly admitted, were appetizing. He ate to the last bite.

“So,” Philby began once Bucky’s plate was clear. “Tell me, James, what are your plans for after the war?”

Bucky smirked, tracing a finger in the ring of condensation around his empty glass.

“I'm mostly focused on surviving at the moment. Can't say I have plans beyond that.”

Philby pressed on.

“Humor me. When you get back home, what will you do?”

*Drink myself stupid. If I can.*

“Probably go back to working in the shipyards.”

“I can't imagine there's too much money in that. Especially once the demand for new ships drops without the u-boats to keep you in business.”

“I'd find something.” Bucky had always found something - selling newspapers, unloading ships, odd construction jobs.

“I noticed,” Philby pressed, “in your folders, you don't have a wife or much in the way of kin back home. There's nothing keeping you from moving to Britain at the war’s end.”

*Except for Ma and Becky. Except for Steve.*

For all Bucky knew though, once the war was over, Steve would marry Peggy. The two of them might even, Bucky realized, live in London.

“Go on,” Bucky replied, for the first time legitimately considering Philby’s proposal.

“I'm certain a man with your abilities could easily find a position in the MI6.”

Something in the way Philby said “your abilities” put Bucky back on guard.

“Doing what?” Bucky asked cautiously.

“Any number of things, I suppose. You've shown us a knack for intelligence work. Among your other skills.”

Bucky understood the implications, glancing down at the table. Killing in war was one thing. The wars of spies and diplomats, however, was not something Bucky was keen on.

“I'm not sure I'm looking for that sort of action.”

“Really?” Philby appeared genuinely surprised. He folded his hands on the table and leaned forward.
“I must say I wouldn't have thought it, looking at your record.”

Bucky grew uncomfortable. The air had suddenly grown tense.

“It's a job,” Bucky replied. He wasn't the sort of person Philby was looking for. He didn't enjoy the killing. He'd long since lost his stomach for it. He would serve the rest of the war, whatever Steve asked, but after that he was done. Done with this bloody business.

“If it’s just a job you’re looking for, I can assure you, working for us would be quite lucrative. A few years time and then a long, comfortable life.”

“Perhaps.”

The rejection hung in the air, Philby’s quiet frustration almost palpable. Bucky could see the gears turning under his gentleman’s mask, composed and genial. Disarming and calculating.

“Intelligence work sounds more appealing to you?” Philby asked finally, leaning back with the smug ease of a chess master.

“Yes, sir,” Bucky replied.

“Allow me to lend you some materials. Something to give you a taste for our work. I'm sure you'll pick up one or two things that would help in your current mission too.”

“I owe you one,” Bucky answered, sick of the mind games. Philby rose, extending his hand across the table. Bucky stood and shook his hand.

“It's nothing at all. All I ask is you remember us, when all this is over. Give it a thought.” He handed Bucky a card, stamped with little more than the words “Kim Philby,” a London address, and a few numbers.

“Take care of that,” Philby implored him, gathering his coat from the hanger by the door. With that, he departed, calling back breezily, “Don't worry about the check.”

The door swung closed in his wake with a soft click. Bucky stood in awed silence, business card in hand. Shaking out of his stupor, Bucky gathered himself and tucked the card in his pocket. With one last look at the plush dining room, Bucky slipped out and headed homeward in the afternoon sun.

That evening on the shooting range, a young man in a suit approached Bucky with a briefcase. He handed over the case without explanation.

“Keep this on your person at all times.” The man handed over a small bronze key. He looked Bucky over once or twice, sizing him up.

“I assume you understand the discretion required?”

Bucky nodded, stringing the key on his dog tags.

“Give my regards to Mr. Philby.”

The man nodded and left, disappearing around the corner.

As soon as the messenger was out of sight, Bucky ran the briefcase back to his room. He shared quarters with Falsworth, Dugan, and Dernier, but no one was in. All out training on their own, probably. Maybe out for early drinking.
Bucky tucked the case in his duffle, hidden beneath a handful of folded shirts. It wouldn't fool anyone who was looking for it, but no one would be. It simply needed to be out of the way of prying eyes.

Bucky returned to the range, keenly aware of the added jingle the key made, ringing softly against his dog tags with each step. He felt nervous, though he didn't know why. Philby unsettled him. These sorts of things were glamorous in spy novels, but real life matters were rarely so clear cut.

Bucky's fingers twitched, just a hair, and the shot went wide, clipping the edge of the target. Bucky swore, reloading the gun and lined up the shot again. A moment's calculations. Breathe in, breathe out. His body relaxed and realigned, breath held tight like the bullet in the barrel. Fire. Breathe out. Bullseye. Bucky took two more shots, clustering the holes in the target paper.

He mulled over Philby's proposition in his head as he moved down the range. The dying light made things tricky. He made shots in the dark, sensing more than seeing if they found their mark. The shrill sergeant's whistle called him back in, closing the range for the night.

Raid sirens bellowed low across the city as Bucky clambered down from his perch. His hands disassembled and cleaned the gun automatically. The fumble in his motions had smoothed out; he would reject Philby's offer after he read the documents. Best to get whatever information he could, just in case.

That night, when his bunkmates had nodded off, Bucky grabbed his duffel and headed out. He didn't sleep much these days. Bucky wandered, chasing the blinking lights that rippled off as curfew descended. He ambled along until he ended up in front of Steve's room. Despite the time of night, light poured out from underneath the crack in the door.

Bucky paused, one hand raised to knock. He hadn't spoken to Steve much since the bar. It'd been almost a week since their last conversation. Now, Bucky found himself arrested at the threshold. He forced himself to knock.

The door opened almost immediately, as if Steve had been waiting.

"Bucky! I knew it was you."

"How? By my breathing?"

Steve smirked, sliding to the side of the doorway so Bucky could come in.

"No, the stench."

Bucky rolled his eyes and shoved Steve into the doorframe as he passed. He plopped down on Steve's bed. The sheets were rumpled and Bucky could see the dip where Steve had been sitting. A few papers and books were stacked on the ground; Steve's notebook was abandoned at the head of the bed.

"I see you've been busy. What is this anyway?" Bucky asked, setting down his load and picking up the open book spread out on the bed.

"How to maintain transport routes," Bucky read from the open page. "This has got to be the driest reading you could find around here. Seriously?"

Steve shrugged, shutting the door and retaking his place on the bed. He seized the book from Bucky, bookmarked the page, and leaned back against the headboard to look at Bucky.
“I’ve got more stuff. I’m just picking up whatever might be useful. Besides, you wouldn’t want
to starve out there, would you?” Steve teased. Bucky shrugged, scanning the rest of the files littered
around the room.

“What’ve you got in there?” Steve asked, gesturing at Bucky’s duffel.

“A little reading of my own.”

Steve raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

“Taking this awfully seriously, aren’t you.”

“Nah, I just gotta cover the stuff you’re likely to forget. Like sleeping, or having fun.”

“Hardly a manual on that around here. Really, what is it?”

Bucky took out the briefcase with a flourish.

“Top secret. Might be above your clearance level, Captain,” Bucky teased, pulling out his dog
tags so Steve could see the glittering key hanging from the chain. Steve’s eyes glittered with intrigue
and he leaned forward, lunging for the key. Bucky pulled back fast, letting Steve swipe air.

“C’mon!” Steve whined, smiling as he eyed the key. Bucky just rolled his eyes and took off the
chain to unlock the case.

“Hey, even I don’t really know what’s in here. This is my first time opening it too, you know,”
Bucky admonished Steve, turning over the suitcase looking for the lock. Steve scooted over on the
bed until he was shoulder to shoulder with Bucky, making the flimsy bed creak with their combined
weight.

“Get off,” Bucky muttered but made no move to push Steve away.

The case opened with a satisfying click and revealed a neat stack of folders and files, slightly
disheveled from transport.

“Where’s this from?” Steve asked, gingerly pulling out one of the folders. Bucky took it back
before Steve could get a good look.

“MI6. Trying to convince me to join up. As if,” Bucky huffed, sliding the case under the bed
and opening the file Steve had pulled out.

“MI6, huh?”

“Jealous?”

“A little.”

The packet Bucky held dealt with ciphers and communicating in secret, if the type stamped cross
the front was any indication. He eyed the inky “CONFIDENTIAL” label with smug satisfaction.
Bucky opened the file and pored over it with Steve reading over his shoulder.

“Don’t you have your own reading to do?” Bucky chided him.

Steve grumbled, scooped some papers up off the floor, and settled down next to Bucky. They
read deep into the night, getting up only to stretch their stiff legs. Bucky's head ached with
information: how to send letters to a secret post, creating composite keys so no single person could
break the code, enough layers of secrecy and diversion to make anyone dizzy. Bucky devoted what he could to memory, murmuring the words aloud to make them stick. He finished the file sometime in the very early morning.

With a groan, Bucky threw the packet down on the floor and flopped over on the bed dramatically. He landed half sprawled across Steve’s legs, sending loose sheafs of paper fluttering.

“Finished?”

Bucky nodded into the mattress.

“Good job. Now get a little sleep.” Steve absent-mindedly carded one hand through Bucky’s hair, still intent on his reading. Bucky purred in response and pulled Steve’s pillow under his head. One of Steve’s knees was wedged uncomfortably against his chest, but Bucky couldn’t be bothered to move.

“You going to sleep anytime soon?” Bucky asked, voice muffled against the pillow.

“Just a few more minutes. I've got ten pages left.”

“Damn.” Bucky lifted himself off the bed and rolled off of Steve.

“I’ll let you get to sleep then,” Bucky said, slowly packing the case back in his duffel. He rose and headed towards the door.

“Wait,” Steve called out after him, “It's fine. You can sleep here if you want. Plenty of room.” Steve tapped the mattress invitingly and slid over.

“Besides,” he added, “go back now and you might wake everyone up. Last I checked Dum Dum isn't exactly a morning person.”

Bucky snorted, remembering the way Dugan rolled out of bed every morning, glaring at the curtained window as if the sun rising behind it had personally offended him. Bucky dropped his duffel at the foot of the bed and crawled back on. Steve moved over and Bucky stretched out, back pressed against the wall.

“I think they gave you a better mattress,” he muttered in place of a thank you, yanking the blankets out from under Steve.

“You're tired and delusional. Just go to sleep already,” Steve replied. He pinched the bridge of his nose, concentrating on the page in front of him. Bucky buried his face in the pillow and waited for Steve to finish. A few minutes later, Steve's weight vanished, followed shortly by the sound of shuffling papers and the light clicking off.

Steve climbed back in bed carefully, just in case Bucky was already asleep. He let Bucky keep the pillow and cushioned his head on his arm. On a bed that only barely fit Steve to begin with, it wasn’t a very comfortable way to sleep, but it was somehow so much better than sleeping alone. Steve allowed himself a small smile.

He’d known it was Bucky at the door immediately, something in the sound of the footsteps, the small pause before knocking.

Steve hadn’t known it until he’d Bucky had appeared outside his door, but he’d been afraid that the man who came back from Azzano was no longer Bucky. Steve feared in the shadowed recesses of his mind that one day he’d look at Bucky and notice a new tic, some facial expression or
mannerism that he’d never seen before, the marks of another man in the body of his James Buchanan Barnes. The notion was ridiculous, but while Bucky was absorbed in his reading, Steve had snuck a few glances at him over the top of his papers. The way Bucky squinted just a little when he focused, the way his lips moved as he read over the difficult passages, the thrum of his fingers tapping the bed - they were all the hallmarks of Bucky Barnes. Now, with Bucky snoring behind him, Steve’s fears began to dissipate like the London mist at noon. Sitting with Bucky and reading until morning had felt right, bordering on something normal.

God knew all Steve wanted was a little normal.

Chapter End Notes

Historical Note Time!

1) Finding information about training for snipers was surprisingly difficult. Apparently Britain didn’t have much of a sniper program until later in the war, and in America most of the formal sniper programs were through the Marines. My fuzzy ideas about Bucky’s own training stem more from descriptions of the German programs, which involved hours at the shooting range every day, shooting gardens (areas with moving papiermache targets), and lots of training about how to move on the battlefield to avoid detection. The culture of being a sniper (at least in Germany) was pretty different from normal army culture and definitely gave off vibes of superiority. The training itself was considered an elite course, so there were no screaming drill sergeants or unnecessarily long and hard drills meant to give soldiers discipline. The snipers were also told to regard themselves as special and as "hunters among men." My idea of vain, competitive snipers draws mostly from those sorts of slogans.

2) Kim Philby was an actual British intelligence agent in London during WW2. Why did I choose him? Hint: He moved to the US in 1949 after the war (Zola and other German scientists were already in the US as part of Operation Paperclip by this time), then later defected to the USSR in 1963. I don’t want to give too much away in case I end up using Philby again, but I’d recommend scanning Philby’s wikipedia page.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Sorry that this took ages to put out! It was a tough chapter (and admittedly might not be my best work) but life got in the way. The next chapter we finally get to witness the Howling Commando's first adventure, so please stay tuned! (Thank you to all the lovely people who have commented and messaged asking when the next chapter would be coming. It was the extra push I needed to finally finish this.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve woke at precisely 0700. Before he even opened his eyes, he was keenly aware of the warm body pressed up against his back. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, Steve stared at the the stacks of books on the floor as the last night’s events flooded back to him. He turned his head slowly, only half awake. Bucky was sound asleep behind him, legs sprawled and mouth open. His splayed limbs were twisted up in the blankets, cocooning him completely. Steve studied his sleeping form and debated whether or not to wake him. The deep bags under Bucky’s eyes made a persuasive argument for a few more minutes of sleep. Steve got out of bed slowly, extricating himself from the tangle of sheets and limbs. The instant Steve disappeared, Bucky spread out further on the bed, taking up the entire mattress with a small contented sigh.

Steve tidied up around the room, careful not to rouse Bucky. When he came back from washing up, Bucky was still asleep, unabashedly snoring. Steve glanced at his watch and decided it was finally time for Bucky to wake up. He was going to miss breakfast.

Steve knelt and rifled through Bucky’s duffel, searching for a fresh change of clothes. Overcome by a sudden curiosity, Steve paused, clothes in hand, and took an appraising look at Bucky. If the snoring was anything to go by, Bucky wouldn't be waking up any time soon. Quietly, Steve set aside the change of clothes and started rifling through the bag’s pockets. The contents were unsurprising, standard issue stuff: toiletries, an empty pomade tin, and a tattered copy of the book Bucky had been reading when he got his draft notice. Steve moved on, pulling out the rest of the clothes. At the very bottom of the bag, Bucky’s dress uniform was tightly folded and pressed, as if it’d never even been touched.

Bingo.

Bucky was horrible at hiding things for one simple reason: he was a slob. Steve and Bucky’s apartment was a pigsty. Bucky left work clothes over the back of chairs and liked to slink out of bed with the blankets draped over his shoulders, only to shrug them off in front of the dresser. His hiding places stuck out simply because they were the only tidy, purposeful-looking spots in the middle of the chaos. Crammed underneath the loosely folded clothes, the crisply folded uniform stuck out to Steve in the same way.

Steve gingerly lifted the jacket out of the bottom of the bag. With one last cautious glance at Bucky, Steve unfolded the uniform and heard the telltale rustle of paper. Unbuttoning the jacket, Steve discovered a small pile of letters. He immediately recognized the handwriting as his own. Steve checked the dates and noted that the last one he'd written - the one from the night before the experiment - was not in the pile. There were two or three other letters missing. Faults in the mail
probably. Steve searched the jacket pockets, pulling out a motley assortment of foreign currencies and half eaten chocolate. Steve continued looking, running his finger along every inch of the jacket. Finally, he found new stitching on one of the cuffs where Bucky had made a little compartment between the lining and the coarse fabric on the outside of the jacket. The cuff was barely closed with a few loose stitches, the loops spaced just enough to slip something small inside.

Snaking his fingers between the stitches, Steve pulled out a little packet, just smaller than a playing cards box. Steve opened the packet, pulling out a plain business card belonging to a “Kim Philby.” There was no business listed, just a London office and a few numbers. Steve studied it, concluding it must be Bucky’s MI6 contact. Steve tucked away the information for later and slid the card back inside the little packet Bucky had been using like an envelope. Just before he tucked the little package back into the jacket sleeve, something made him pause. The packet looked oddly familiar. Steve turned it over, failing to find any identifying mark that would explain where he’d seen it before. Steve opened it, inspecting the inside, when the answer hit him.

It was the packet of painkillers the nurse had given to Bucky when they’d returned to base. Steve’s stomach turned at the unwelcome reminder. *Empty.* The packet was empty. Maybe Bucky had thrown the pills out like Steve wanted, but Steve knew better. He hurriedly returned the packet to its hiding place and quickly searched the rest of Bucky’s jacket, looking for more. Tracing his fingers frantically over the jacket’s contours, looking for other hiding places, Steve found nothing else. He breathed a small sigh of relief. Satisfied that there was nothing else to find - or perhaps afraid he might find something else if he looked any further - Steve folded the jacket and lowered it back into the duffel. He hastily repacked the bag, putting it back at the foot of the bed. He paused a moment before waking Bucky, running a hand through his hair and calming himself. What was done was done. Antagonizing Bucky about the pills wouldn’t do either of them any good. Not when it looked like Steve was finally getting Bucky back.

Steve fixed a smile on his face and chucked the pile of clothes at Bucky’s head. They landed with a quiet thump, perfectly on target. No response.

“Bucky.”

A small groan.

“Get the hell up.”

A louder groan.

“You’re going to miss breakfast.”

Bucky stirred at this, sitting up with a sour expression.

“Don’t give me that look. I even let you sleep in.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not all Captain America,” Bucky grumbled, tugging on the fresh shirt. Steve leaned against the wall and waited for him to finish changing.

“How’d you sleep?” Steve asked once Bucky had finished. Bucky paused to consider the question for a second.

“Actually? Pretty damn well.”

The answer earned a shit-eating grin from Steve. Bucky groaned inwardly, pointedly opening the door to discontinue the conversation.
“Well, I suppose you’ve still got lots of reading to do.” Steve remarked, looking too casual as he fiddled with the lock on the door.

“You trying to get me into your bed, Captain?” Bucky’s voice dripped with innuendo, relishing the word ‘captain’ with the breathless enthusiasm of a dime novel heroine. He stepped into the threshold with Steve, standing far closer than necessary. He grinned up at Steve, watching him blush furiously. Just like always, the red flush spread all the way to the tips of Steve’s ears. Steve recovered after a second, leaning over Bucky and closing the distance with a sly look of his own.

“Last I checked, it was you knocking on my door last night. Sergeant.”

Bucky huffed, stepping away. He’d lost this one.

“Go fuck yourself.” (It was not his most graceful retreat.)

“Breakfast first.”

---

Teasing forgotten, Bucky showed up at Steve's door the next night, duffel in hand. Steve wouldn't admit he'd been waiting, but he’d been staring at the door knob for at least five minutes.

The two of them quickly settled into a pattern. By the fourth night, Bucky didn't bother with knocking, simply barged in and sat on the bed with hardly a word. Their silence was comfortable, punctuated only by the occasional disbelieving guffaw or “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

On a nostalgic night, they might waste an hour reminiscing about some awful thing back in Brooklyn. Pamphlets on city planning prompted fond memories of the six block trek to the nearest grocery store. Field medicine handbooks led to fond recollections of the time Steve clubbed a man with an empty bottle (just like in the movies) and Bucky’s excruciating evening digging the little shards out of Steve’s hand. (The movies never show what happens when your victim doesn't drop unconscious and instead decks you, sending you face first into the new pile of shattered glass. Steve, luckily, learned this lesson the first time.) Discussions of what sort of blankets to pack inevitably wound up as distracted arguments about whether or not the scratchy blankets from the corner store were really wool or if the store owner had scammed them. It wasn't an unpleasant way to spend an evening.

Bucky’s nights were blissfully uneventful, for the most part. He still found himself waking up in a cold sweat with his serial number on his lips, but somehow it wasn’t as awful as it used to be. Pressed at his back, warm and solid, was Steve. It was safety. Bucky could shut his eyes and no matter how loudly the raid sirens blared, he knew he was safe. As he nodded off, his hammering heart steadying, sometimes he swore he heard his name in Steve’s sleeping breaths. It was soothing, even if it was just Bucky’s mind playing tricks on him.

But really, he was only coming to Steve’s room to work. So Bucky told himself.

Bucky steadily worked his way through the MI6 files, reading deep into the night. The writing was dry but palatable enough. He read with an urgency, too anxious to be bored. If he was going to have Steve’s back, he needed to know everything. They had just over a week left until shipping out again and Bucky could feel the deadline breathing down his neck.

Without looking, Bucky plucked another manual from the case. It was thinner than most and Bucky smiled to himself automatically. He might get through two files tonight, three if he didn’t sleep. He settled on the far end of the bed from Steve, stretching out his legs and settling in for the night. He flipped to the first page but froze at the header.
Blinking hard, Bucky peered at the words again. He looked at the cover of the file hurriedly, hoping this was a misplaced page. To his chagrin, the front was stamped with the same header.

“Something wrong?” Steve asked, noticing the way Bucky had started flipping through the pages.

“No,” Bucky lied, “I just thought I had read this one before.”

Steve grunted knowingly. “They really all do start sounding the same. If you ever want to swap, I can’t say I have anything more interesting to read, but…”

Bucky’s heart jumped. Steve probably shouldn’t see this.

“I’ll pass. Thanks though.”

Bucky opened the folder again, carefully schooling his expression. He needed to read all of the MI6 files, just in case. Steve wouldn’t be reading anything like this, which meant Bucky needed to fill in those blanks. Angling himself so Steve couldn’t see his face, Bucky took a deep breath and dove in.

A Note from Robin Stephens: Never strike a man. In the first place it is an act of cowardice. In the second place, it is not intelligent. A prisoner will lie to avoid further punishment and everything he says thereafter will be based on a false premise. Never strike a man.

Bucky barely held back a shaky sigh of relief. He’d been braced for far worse. All the same, as he worked through the pages, his stomach turned on certain phrases. Some parts still rung with too much familiarity; the isolation, the constant confusion of night and day, the unrelenting pace. Still other sections were wholly new. As Bucky read on further, the clearer it became that the inmates at Azzano had never been intended for information; breaking the men’s spirits had never even been an objective. They were bodies, and the people inside were of no particular importance. It was a painful distinction for Bucky, but it let him dig further, able to distance himself.

No chivalry. No gossip. No cigarettes. Do not keep men in the same cell or allow them contact with each other. A man’s only contact should be with you. Use his loneliness against him. Appoint a junior officer to intervene every hour or so and play the part of sympathizer. This can take a more subtle form, such as whispering in the interrogating officer’s ear, as if he is concerned for the interrogated man, or outright vocalizing sympathies for the spy. This illusion of comradery can be of use during later interrogations.

…

The law can be used as leverage in most cases. At the beginning of the first interrogation it is recommended to remind the spy that they can be executed under British law for espionage. Camp 020’s Stephens often begins such encounters in the fashion of, “I am not saying this in any sense of a threat, but you are here in a British Secret Service prison at the present time and it’s our job in wartime to see that we get your whole story from you. Do you see?” In light of his successes in procuring reliable and valuable information, it is suggested you use him as a model for your own discourse.

…

The use of misinformation, such as implying that you already know the answer to the questions you are asking and are merely corroborating another source, has also proven fruitful. It is critical in
these situations to be as vague as possible to avoid leading the source or providing him with information. (Misinformation and counter-interrogation on page 62)

…

Psychological pressures are proven to be the most effective method of interrogation when you have custody of a source for long periods of time. Isolation and silence are critical. Refrain from references to time or happenings outside of the cell. Other tactics, such as sleep deprivation or hooding, have proven effective in many cases. (Details on page 31)

During the interrogation itself, once a source is deemed to be pliable, endurance is critical. Many fruitful interrogations last over 24 hours in order to wear down the source’s stamina. Pressure is tantamount in the role of a “breaker” (page 23). While physical threats should be refrained from in all cases, intimidation and other such pressures are useful. The tone and rapidity with which one asks questions has significant influence, though it is advised to maintain composure at all times.

Bucky consumed the information, filing away anything that might be useful on the field. Most of it wasn’t, but Bucky continued onwards, drawn in by morbid fascination. He read it feeling slightly nauseated, trying not to imagine himself on the receiving end of the MI6. It was a strange pivot for him, reading the why. He read all the reasons he’d broken (nearly broken, he reminded himself). Yet, he made it through, finishing the text before morning.

He snapped the file closed with relief and immediately grabbed the next report from the stack, pushing onwards. After the fifth time rereading page one, Bucky closed the file and stood up, combing a hand through his hair tiredly. In that moment, the truth finally found him, arrived as abruptly and brutally as a lightning strike. He was going back out in the field, would be running right back into the hands of men like Zola and Schmitt. And if he made it past all that, all his future had laid out was taking those men’s places, employed in the art of breaking men with either bullets or words. Bile rose in the back of Bucky’s throat.

“Bathroom. Be back,” he muttered to Steve, heading for the door.

Steve looked up, scanning Bucky’s face for a moment. Steve’s eyes inexplicably fell to Bucky’s hands, then to his pockets. Self-conscious and confused, Bucky jammed his hands into his pockets and fled the room, closing the door behind him. He managed to keep his tread slow as he went down the hallway, breaking out into a jog once he rounded the corner. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but he was gripped by a sudden urgency. He needed space, somewhere where no one would see him.

He ended up jamming himself into a shower stall, separating himself from the outside world with a thin sheet of plastic. Bucky’s throat felt like it was closing up. He struggled to breath, clammy hands pulling at his neckline in a futile attempt to get air. Bucky tilted his head back, gasping for breath, and steadied himself against the wall. He was gripped by blind terror.

Barbed wire and sand. The quiet sound of a grenade rolling beneath the door. The rumble of tanks passing beneath his sniper’s nest. A bolt of blue so bright it burned his eyes. Hands at his neck. Warm flesh, no pulse. Icy metal at his back and fire in his veins. The sharp smell of ozone before the chair took the world away. Low voices quietly singing. The sound of blood rushing in his ears, like crashing waves. Open eyes staring up. The chime of dog tags. “It’s me. It’s Steve.”

The world had disappeared into an all-consuming storm, fragmented sensations raining down with the force of hailstones. Numbly, Bucky felt himself carried off by the flood, trying to do little
more than keep his head above water. He must not drown.

It did him no good to hide here; the stall was too reminiscent of the cells, empty and cold. If he could get somewhere warm and safe, he thought, he could weather this out. But he simply couldn't find the strength to leave. He leaned against the tile, sliding down onto the ground. As he sat, eyes tracing the lines of the tiles, the tempest passed. The cold of the tile leached through Bucky’s clothes, slowly pulling him back to reality.

He was in London. It was the middle of the night and he was sitting in the shower. He was, for all that was worth, safe. Steve was waiting for him back in the room. Bucky whispered these things to himself, listening to the way his voice echoed off the tile in the silence of night. Eventually, he pulled himself to his feet and stumbled out of the stall. He glanced in the mirror on his way out and stopped, arrested by his reflection. He was pale, ghostly even. His own eyes stared back at him in disbelief, bloodshot and red-rimmed. The bags under his eyes had disappeared, but his skin glistened with sweat at the temples. Bucky wiped his face and splashed it with water, trying to scrub off his haunted expression. He frowned at his reflection, dissatisfied. He wouldn't be fooling Steve.

“You’re fine,” he told his reflection, glaring himself down. “You’re perfectly fine.”

He gripped the sink with white knuckles, repeating reassurances to himself until he believed the words. Slicking back his hair one more time, Bucky strode out of the bathroom, forcing himself to straighten his shoulders and walk with his chin up.

He entered Steve’s room confidently, trying to act nonchalant. Hearing the door, Steve’s eyes flicked up to him immediately. He’d clearly been waiting.


“You were gone a while,” Steve replied with a similar degree of false composure. He seemed to be looking Bucky over, studying Bucky’s face too closely. Bucky frowned at him but said nothing, just scooped up the papers he’d been reading. Steve looked like he wanted to say something, so Bucky turned away, immersing himself in an article on the strategic layout of modern strongholds. Steve begrudgingly returned to his own reading, shooting covert glances over at Bucky. Bucky pretended not to notice, determined to finish his reading and get to sleep without giving Steve a chance to ask questions.

Steve eventually gave up, frozen out. Bucky’s face had turned stony, his eyes flying over the pages with fierce determination. Something was clearly bothering him, although Steve couldn’t tell what. He’d feared, when Bucky left, that Bucky was going to get high again. Steve hadn’t seen him take anything to the bathroom with him, but he couldn’t relax until Bucky returned, looking haggard but distinctly sober. Steve debated pushing the issue, but dropped it. If it mattered, Bucky would tell him. Or, at least, that’s what Steve hoped.

Steve went to bed first. Bucky followed later, plunging the room into quiet darkness.

Steve awoke a few hours later to one of Bucky’s hands gripping his arm.

He tensed, ready to leap out of bed. The shield, a new one from Stark, was hidden under the bed. Steve had practiced retrieving it, knew he could have it on his arm in two seconds. He could completely cover Bucky and himself in another three seconds. Heart in his throat, Steve shot up, wildly scanning the darkness for the threat.

He quickly realized they were alone.
Beside him, Bucky’s eyes were screwed shut, his left hand digging into Steve’s forearm. Bucky’s head tossed on the pillow, loose hair half obscuring his face. He seemed feverish, softly moaning as if he were in pain. He mumbled in his sleep, growing more and more agitated. Bucky’s speech was unintelligible, but Steve recognized the cadence, knew exactly what words Bucky was repeating. The familiar sight pained Steve, but he didn’t know what he was supposed to do.

“Bucky,” Steve whispered urgently, hands floating over Bucky’s shoulders, uncertain. Bucky’s mumbling grew louder and he turned his head away, brow furrowed. His fingers dug into Steve’s arm, holding on for dear life. Desperate, Steve brushed off Bucky’s hand and took Bucky’s shoulders.

“Bucky. Wake up. Listen to me, Bucky.”

Bucky’s face smoothed out, going slack and Steve’s shoulders sagged in relief. He gently brushed the hair out of Bucky’s face, murmuring to him reassuringly.

“Wake up, Bucky. You’re safe. We’re okay,” he cooed, running his hands through Bucky’s hair.

“Stop.”

Steve froze at the sound of Bucky’s voice. He hastily pulled back, alarmed.

“I’m sorry, I..I..” Steve started to stutter, confused.

“God, please...stop...,” Bucky’s voice rose, eyes still shut. His face contorted in pain and Steve realized he was still asleep. He’d never heard Bucky beg, not in his life, not during any nightmare before. Even when Steve had been rattling in his winter deathbed, Bucky had been stoic, saving his desperate prayers for after Steve had fallen asleep. The look on Bucky’s face, so exhausted even in sleep, was something Steve had never seen before. With growing panic, Steve took Bucky by the shoulders again.

“Bucky,” he called, no longer bothering to keep his voice down. Bucky’s desperate pleading grew louder, every word like a stab in Steve’s heart. Steve pulled Bucky up into a sitting position, propping him up against the wall.

“Bucky! Wake up!” Steve shook Bucky by the shoulders. With a strangled yell, Bucky’s eyes shot open. Bucky looked at Steve for a moment, wide-eyed and confused. The dream faded and Bucky’s gaze sharpened, finally noticing Steve in front of him. Bucky blinked hard, his eyes watery. Steve let go of Bucky’s shoulders and looked away, pretending to look around for something, giving Bucky a moment of privacy. When Steve turned back a moment later, Bucky had gathered himself, tugging awkwardly at the collar of his shirt and not quite looking Steve in the eye. Steve smiled at him, trying to be comforting.

Bucky grimaced, staring down at his hands. He glanced up at Steve and opened his mouth, trying to say something. He was still shaking off the dream, reassuring himself that he was in London. Safe. Alive. Anchored back in reality, if still a little shaky from the terror, Bucky’s mind whirled with other concerns. He’d never woken Steve before. It must have been bad, judging by way Steve was smiling - softly, as if he were afraid Bucky was about to break into pieces. Bucky straightened his clothes and roughly brushed his hair out of his eyes, but he couldn’t bring himself to look up at Steve. He didn’t know what would be worse: annoyance or pity.

“Look, Steve, I…” Bucky started, but Steve gave him no room to finish the apology.
“Look at me.”

Bucky’s head snapped up immediately, shocked by Steve’s tone. Steve’s expression was difficult to make out in the dark, but he seemed almost angry, eyebrows knitted together and jaw set.

“Don’t you dare say sorry.”

Bucky was at a loss for words.

“Steve, I....”

Steve just shook his head.

“Nope. Don’t want to hear it.”

They sat in tense silence for a few moments. Bucky leaned his head back against the wall, breathing in deep and slow until he was calm. The noise in his head quieted until all he could hear was the sound of Steve next to him, patiently waiting.

“Hey, Buck? You wanna talk about it?”

Bucky shook his head immediately.

“Bucky, for the last time, you’re not okay. You’ve got to talk to me, to someone…” Steve trailed off, sounding almost defeated.

“Look, Buck,” Steve tried again, “if you keep carrying around shit like this, one day it’s going to blow up in your face. Like carrying a bomb in your pocket. It’ll blow up on you, and if you keep pretending it isn’t there, it’s gonna hurt someone else too. So talk to me.”

Bucky glanced at Steve then at the wall opposite him. Steve seemed to get the message, moving over next to Bucky. They sat, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the far wall.

“It was nothing, Steve.”

“I will punch you if you don’t stop lying to my face.”

Bucky smirked.

“That might actually hurt now.”

Steve elbowed him.

“Seriously, Bucky.”

“It was just a dream.”

“About?” Steve prodded.

“About Azzano. The field. What else.”

Steve hummed knowingly, waiting for Bucky to elaborate. The vivid terror of the dream and the episode in the shower left Bucky feeling like an exposed bundle of nerves. He was terrified of going back out onto the field. He couldn’t stand to keep watching men die, couldn’t bring himself to imagine what might happen to Steve. His fears clawed and howled in his mind, ready to all come tumbling out in their undisguised ugliness.
“What was different tonight?” Steve asked gently.

“I…” Bucky started again, struggling to find words for the mess of memories and emotions slowly uncoiling themselves. How to explain to Steve that he wasn’t the man he was before? How to tell him that he couldn’t go back to fighting like before, that his bravery died on a lab table.

“Back in Azzano, back there, I...I was weak. I broke, Steve. I. .”

Steve cut him off.

“They didn’t break you.”

Bucky wanted to believe the sureness in Steve’s voice, unshakably certain of Bucky’s strength.

“No, Steve, you don’t understand.”

“Sorry, Bucky, but I don’t think you understand. They did not break you. Bucky Barnes, the man I grew up with and lived with and fought with, is right here. They break you when you stop being a person. Anger, fear, guilt, whatever it is that keeps you up at night - that’s all part of being a person. And, for the record, you’re the strongest person I ever met.”

Bucky huffed. Steve was always so sure of himself. So sure that he knew Bucky backwards and forwards, so confident that the man sitting next to him was everything he’d hoped and dreamed of. Bucky wanted to jump on the bed and wave his arms in front of Steve’s dopey eyes and demand him to see Bucky properly for once in his life. Bucky was not a good person. He was not a strong person. He was scared and tired and weak. He was undeserving of someone like Steve Rogers. But here he was anyway, because he was too selfish to give it all up.

“Don’t laugh, Buck.”

“You’re a fucking idealist, Rogers. You’ve got no idea.”

“I’ve only got no idea because you’re not telling me the whole story.”

The tension peaked, the accusation hanging between the two of them. The silence stretched on longer. Bucky would admit to nothing. Steve couldn’t accept half of a truth. They sat stubbornly on opposing sides of a no man’s land.

Steve gave in first, shaking his head. He drew a deep breath, suddenly calm. When he raised his voice again, he was speaking only to himself.

“I’m going to kill them all.”

The oath took Bucky aback and he whipped around to face Steve. Steve didn’t look back at him. He sat with his fists clenched and jaw set, staring through the wall.

“I’m going to kill every last one of them,” Steve continued in that same low voice.

“You sure Captain America’s supposed to say stuff like that?” Bucky joked, unable to stop the shiver running down his spine. Bucky had seen Steve angry, had seen him spitting furious, but Steve’s expression had turned cold. He glared at the wall with icy fury, his voice terrifyingly calm. He finally turned, fixing his unsparing gaze on Bucky.

“I’m not doing this as Captain America, Buck. I’m doing this as Steve Rogers and as your best friend. You don’t have to tell me what happened. That’s your choice, but I’d appreciate if you’d
“Point where I ought to be shooting. Seems that’s the only way I can help at this point.”

Bucky looked away.

“I’m going to be right behind you the whole time, you know that.”

“You just gotta promise me one thing, Buck.”

“What?”

“Let me help.”

Bucky grunted noncommittally.

“Jesus Christ, Bucky. You’ve been propping me up for how many years? Let me return the goddamned favor for once.”


“I don’t know, Buck. Not a goddamn clue. But, if you need someone to have your back, you know where to find me.” With that, Steve slipped back under the blankets. Bucky sat alone for a moment, biting his tongue and trying desperately to think straight. He knew where this ended, where it had to end.

“Alright.”

“Alright what?”

“I’ll lean on you.”

“You mean it?”

“I think so.”

Chapter End Notes

History Notes:
The MI6 stuff is all as accurate as I could make it and a lot of it is either quoted or paraphrased from a famous “breaker” named Robert Stephens who ran Camp 20, one of the most effective interrogation centers during the war. The MI6, while super shadowy, didn’t use conventional torture much (or at least, that anyone seems to know about) but relied mostly on psychological "pressures" like sleep deprivation and 72-hour interrogation sessions.

This was one of my major sources: http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-monocled-world-war-ii-interrogator-652794/

P.S. Philby gave Bucky this packet (amongst the ones more relevant to his work with the HCs) to rattle Bucky a little and dissuade him from intelligence work (since Philby
wants Bucky as a sniper). He also hoped that it might prompt Bucky to withdraw from Steve's team, where he is at high risk of capture again, to work as a sniper for the MI6 (a safer job). Philby knows that Bucky was captured and, given that Bucky was able to get valuable information, definitely suspects that Bucky isn't telling the whole story about his time as prisoner.
I swear I didn’t forget about this fic! Thank you so much to everyone who has been patiently waiting and indulging my slightly-less-than-reliable writing schedule. The next chapter is already written, so ideally it’ll be edited and posted ASAP. I can’t thank you all enough for the kind comments. They really are what motivates me to find time in my schedule for writing.

Without further ado, the flimsy beginnings of the Howling Commandos!

Shout out to everyone who swooped in to save the day and fix my French. (Merci to prettyDespair in particular!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dernier had insisted that they visit the HYDRA factory in France first. He’d made the speech to the Captain in stilted English, rehearsed from his lessons with Gabe. Steve made the arrangements at once, saying it would be a good first mission. Given Dernier’s experience in the Resistance, Steve figured France would be more familiar territory than the other locations. Goodness knew they should take any advantage they could get. The magnitude of Steve’s assignment was only now really seeming to take shape, a mountain that had once been a speck in the horizon now loomed over him, craggy and intimidating.

Naturally, Steve left his misgivings unvoiced and in less than a week he and his men were off. They flew in near the French border, crossing in on foot during the evening hours. They were still 40 miles or so away from the factory, but they pitched camp in the hills.

All of the men were anxious and the campfire buzzed. In their midst, Steve was the calm in the storm, somberly preparing the tents and scoping out the area. They convened over dinner, circled around the smallest fire they dared to make. When they’d finished, Steve stood, drawing their attention. He’d been rehearsing a battle plan in his head on the plane ride over, hoping that it would somehow sound more concrete if he repeated it enough times.

“Every man knows his job. You’ve all been preparing for this in London. Bucky, sniper. Dernier, explosives. Morita and Jones, comms. Dugan and Falsworth will be with me in the front.”

Each man nodded in his turn.

“With all due respect, Captain, you got any idea what we’re doing?” Dugan piped up, drawing a flask from his pocket. It wasn’t a mean question, but an honest one. War made gentlemen blunt. Steve smiled grimly.

“Honestly, not much of an idea. But I’m doing my best.”

“We know that, Cap. So, let me make a suggestion. Let us go in together on this one. All men in front. Run in, blow the place to smithereens, and run out as fast as we can.”
“It’s not that easy, Dugan.”

“I’m not saying it is, but we don’t exactly have men to spare. We can’t afford to leave anyone in the back.”

The others nodded, looking up at Steve. He turned to Bucky, sitting perched to his right.

“I agree with Dum Dum,” Bucky added quietly, “we don’t have enough of a system to pull off anything that specialized yet. Perhaps if there was something in the geography for us, but the reports indicated flat land for a mile around the factory. Not much cover either. Speaking as your sniper, I’m not going to be much good from afar.”

“Alright,” Steve conceded, nodding brusquely. “Tomorrow, we’ll scout the place, get a lay of the land and talk strategy from there. Once we’re within 10 miles or so, Dernier will come with me on recon. Agreed?”

“Yeah.” “Yes, sir.” “Sounds good.”

“We’re in.” “Oui.”

“Alright then.” Steve sat down, smoothing out his pants. His palms were sweaty. Dugan had a point; they didn’t have men to spare. He was already making mistakes and the factory wasn’t even in sight. Steve glared down into the fire, brow furrowed. He needed to do better than this.

Bucky watched Steve thinking, could almost hear the gears grinding in Steve’s head. He sighed to himself, but didn’t intervene. Steve needed to learn to trust himself. Jumping in wasn’t going to help.

“I’ll take first watch,” Bucky declared, packing up the last few bites of his K-ration. He shoved the leftovers at Steve as he passed by. *You better eat that*. Bucky grabbed his gun and strode off before Steve could argue. Behind him, Dernier stood, going to join Bucky. The two of them walked out to the perimeter of their little campsite, a small clearing. He and Dernier stood in silence, scanning the darkness. Dernier’s face was wistful, a small sad smile on his lips.

“Glad to be back?” Bucky asked. The words themselves didn’t matter, Dernier would understand what he meant.

Dernier nodded. “J’aurais préféré ne pas être en uniforme.”

“Yeah, me too.”

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The next day, the group hiked through the valley in considerable quiet. Bucky walked beside Steve, following Dernier. They had all run out of jokes in the first few hours, only Dernier seemed to have anything left to say, babbling on in French. Jones had stopped bothering to translate an hour ago, but Dernier continued on, unruffled. Only Steve seemed to be listening, lips occasionally twisting into a smile. When he suddenly started laughing, Bucky turned to him.

“Don’t tell me you speak French now too.”

Steve flashed him an impish smile, “Juste un peu.”

“I’ve been giving him a couple lessons,” Jones piped up from the back, “You’ve got no idea how fast he’s picking it up,”
“God damn super-soldier serum,” Bucky grumbled, “Big muscles. Big brain. And if you don’t watch out, Jones, he’s going to have a super human ego too.”

Dugan chuckled. “French is easy. Practically English. The real test is gonna be that factory. If we actually pull this off, it might just be super human.”

“Dum Dum, you have to stop saying ‘if.’ You’re making me nervous…”

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The factory that they were targeting was deceptively small. It was a plain building situated outside of a small French village, nestled in a picturesque valley. From afar, it appeared docile, unguarded and vulnerable. The only sign to the contrary was a fat intelligence dossier that Peggy had put on Steve’s desk in the days leading up to the expedition. According to a dozen or so intelligence reports, HYDRA was lurking in the sleepy little village of Reyersviller.

Once dusk fell, Steve, Bucky, and Dernier went off to scout. The factory compound was surrounded on one side by forest. The other side was exposed to the open, about a mile from the village of Reyersviller itself. The no man’s land in between was crisscrossed with roads, flat with nowhere to hide. Naturally, the scouting party opted to move through the forest and look for a way in through the back.

They approached with little incident - but the silence made the hair on the back of Bucky’s neck stand on end. The forest was too quiet, as if it were holding its breath. Dernier was on edge too, pausing every minute to listen. Steve did his best to hide his impatience, but Bucky knew that every passing second this deep in enemy territory was eating away at Steve’s nerves. They were in a forest, which provided decent cover, but the undergrowth was sparse. Should they meet company, there was almost nowhere to hide.

After painstaking hours, the compound came into view. Bucky caught a whiff of the sharp industrial smell. The odor was familiar. He’d had his doubts, feared that they might have read the maps wrong, but his misgivings about the factory’s peaceful exterior crumbled away. Weapons manufacturing without a doubt.

Ahead of them, Dernier suddenly stopped, a hand stretched back, signalling for them to stop as well. He took a deep breath and frowned. Bucky followed Dernier’s line of sight. Nothing seemed unusual, not overtly, but his skin crawled with unease. Like smelling a thunderstorm on the wind in the middle of a sunny day.

“This is no good,” Bucky whispered, one hand resting on his holster.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, scanning the horizon worriedly for something he’d missed. “There are almost no guards. Only two layers of fencing. We have good cover up to the first fence. It looks like a good shot.”

Dernier shook his head emphatically.

“*It eez too good, do you not think?*” Dernier waved his arms helplessly, grappling to find the right words. They should have brought Jones along to translate.

Steve shifted in place, uneasy.

“<Speak French. I will try to understand,>” Steve said slowly. Steve’s American accent was unmistakable, but Dernier grinned, surprised. Immediately, Dernier started babbling frantically. Steve squinted at him, earnestly focused on keeping up. Eventually, Dernier noticed he had lost his
audience and stopped, starting over again.

Dernier knelt and waved for Steve and Bucky to join him. He breathed deep, wafting the smell of earth. Bucky followed his lead. There was nothing particularly special about the odor of the forest floor: the same musty earth smell of half decayed debris, tinged with the inescapable chemical edge that radiated from the factory and the faint smell of smoke. Dernier looked to Steve expectantly, but Steve shook his head, not following.

Dernier started explaining, this time in slow, patient French, sifting through the loose dirt and pointing at the darkened tree trunks around them. Steve listened, nodding, a look of comprehension slowly dawning on his face.

“Ash!” Steve cried, triumphant before quieting, remembering where they were. He turned to Bucky. “They burned this place out just a few days ago,” he explained in a whisper, “to clear out the underbrush. You can see the marks on the trees. If you look, all the ground cover here isn't actually growing. It's all been cut and moved here from somewhere else in the forest.”

“But why bother?”

Steve looked back to Dernier, parlaying the question in uncertain French.

“*Bombes*,” Dernier replied, mimicking an explosion. Dernier pointed to the land between them and the fence, indicating the small bumps in the forest floor. Freshly turned dirt, half covered by loose branches and posed debris.

“Landmines,” Steve translated over Dernier, “planted around the perimeter. Just for idiots like us to walk into. That's why there's practically no security.”

“What's the burning for then?”

Dernier gestured, wiggling his fingers and pointing around at the forest floor.

“For the long term. I think he's saying,” Steve started, glancing back and forth between Dernier and Bucky, “it's so the plants don't set the bombs off. I imagine If you leave the mines there a long time, the roots can get down and set them off, or stop them from going off. So they burn before planting the mines for any long period of time.”

Bucky nodded.

“No chance of getting in from the back here then?”

Dernier shook his head. *No way.*

“Alright. We've seen what we've needed to. Let's head back.”

The three men turned back in contemplative, frustrated silence. The silence of the forest now seemed glaringly obvious. Of course it had been a trap.

Halfway back to the rendezvous camp, Steve broke the sullen quiet.

“HYDRA’s hemmed themselves in. They can't retreat through the forest. There’s no exit. Sure, no one can get in through the back, but what about their own men? There must be some sort of secret exit, a tunnel or something. Let's go back.”

“No.”
Bucky shot down the suggestion without so much as breaking stride.

“No?”

“There is no secret tunnel, Steve. You'd be wasting your time.”

“How do you know?”

Bucky grimaced.

“You should know better. HYDRA doesn't retreat.”

Steve relayed the grim intel over a pathetic campfire dinner.

“So, we infiltrate a transport. Enter the front gates,” Dugan suggested.

“Not that simple, is it, Captain?” Morita asked around a mouthful of biscuit. Steve bit down a sharp smile around his own biscuit.

“The trick is approaching at all. Our best chance is waiting a few miles up-road and trying to ambush one of the cargo trucks. That’d hide our approach right until we’re inside their gates.”

“All eyes to disagree, Cap, but I don't think so.”

All eyes turned to Jones, a wry smile on his face.

“I've been watching 'em all day. They fly through the mountains. The Resistance has HYDRA’s men on their toes.”

“It's true,” Falsworth agreed, “Jerry is on high alert. Must have had a few ambushes before. Every transport had their guns out and ready. We won't be catching them by surprise.”

“But,” Jones waggled his eyebrows “they do stop once they hit Reyersviller. I think they're loading up food and water there. Lots of little trips. The longer trips from outside the valley are rare, maybe a few a day. But I counted maybe 20 stops in town. That's our in.”

Steve nodded thoughtfully.

“Okay. So we find a way into town then.”

The men hummed in agreement but came up with no ideas outright.

“J'irai. Si La Résistance est là, ils nous aiderons.”

The men looked around at each other, but there was no real need for Gabe’s translation. Every man knew “La Résistance” and the words struck a chord of boyish hope in each man’s chest.

“You go tonight then, Dernier. Get in and out, fast. No risks. Understood?”

As soon as Gabe had finished translating, Dernier sprung to his feet, barely caring enough to not send of the rest of his meal flying. He shoved the leftovers in Steve’s direction and started to get his gear together. A gun, some paper, and little else.

“Gee, you think he wants to go, Captain? Looks a little hesitant to me,” Bucky snickered,
The mood that night was light-hearted, but every man could see the occasional flash of search lights. The brilliant shafts shattered as they hit the trees, suddenly illuminating strange corners of their encampment before disappearing again. The men listened long and hard for sirens, for any indication that things had gone wrong, but were rewarded by unbroken silence.

The proximity to the HYDRA base had set them all a little on edge. In the trenches, they’d been closer to the enemy, but there was the solace of the trench walls - a flimsy pretense of protection. Here, they felt exposed. If the enemy’s light could shine on their faces, even at this distance, they couldn’t quite feel safely out of reach. Despite the miles between them and the nearest enemy ears, the group stayed quiet deep into the night. As if so much as a whisper might bring the enemy down on their heads.

Bucky took first watch while the rest slept uneasily. He didn’t stray too far from the campsite, only as far as a small break in the trees. From there, he could make out the outlines of the houses in the little valley. Not a single light was on. A small town cursed to darkness every time the sun set. The searchlights roamed over the scope of the valley, glancing off Bucky episodically.

Behind him, the camp was quiet. If he listened carefully, Bucky swore he could make out the rumble of Dum Dum snoring. It was a familiar sound, one that had filled his ear at night for months. As Bucky grew accustomed to the dark and the quiet, the sounds of the forest’s nightlife filled the air, echoing from every shadowed corner of the forest. Bucky had been on enough night watches to know better than to leap out of his skin at every broken branch. Human tread was a much heavier, clumsier thing. In the quiet of the countryside, Bucky would hear the enemy coming a mile away.

Bucky hummed to himself, rubbing his face to stay awake. Just another hour and he’d hand off duty to someone else. He was in no hurry to get to sleep, even as exhaustion tugged at his eyelids and the gun over his shoulder grew heavier and heavier.

When Falsworth came to relieve Bucky from his duty, the sound of his approaching footsteps pulled Bucky out of his light doze. He jerked back to focus, groggily reaching for his gun.

“Just me, Barnes.”

Bucky breathed a sigh of relief, slinging the gun back over his shoulder. Falsworth approached, his red beret just visible in the moonlight. He clapped Bucky on the back good-naturedly.

“‘Bout time you got back. Your shift ended a while ago.”

Bucky nodded and turned back towards camp.

“Thanks, Falsworth.”

By the time Bucky had found his way back to his tent, even the hard ground couldn’t stop him from falling asleep. He barely made it over Steve and Dugan’s sleeping forms before he collapsed onto his sleeping roll. In moments, he was asleep.

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The next morning, Dernier was happier than any man had right to be. He grinned over his breakfast, digging in with undisguised zeal. He practically floated around their encampment, unable to stop humming for more than a few seconds. He had returned on Morita’s watch in the very early morning hours, ruddy-faced and distinctly not sober. In the first light of dawn, his enthusiasm hadn’t faltered in the least, despite the dark circles around his eyes. Instead, Dernier had simply looked at

snagging Dernier’s unfinished biscuit.
his reflection and begun singing a strange, and most definitely made-up, ditty with a chorus of:

**Voici le raton-laveur combattant,**

**Oh, qu'il est beau ce raton,**

**Si rusé, et aimé de tous,**

**Et quand il lave ses pattes du sang des boches,**

**Devant ce raton laveur toutes les dames se pâment!**

It didn’t quite rhyme, but Dernier seemed so proud of himself that no one bothered to point it out.

By the time breakfast was over, Dernier seemed about to explode from containing the news.

“You got something for us, Dernier?” Steve asked once they’d all sat down in a circle. Bucky could hear the smile in Steve’s voice. Steve tried to keep his manner neutral, professional, but Dernier’s excitement was downright contagious. And Steve needed a lucky break, something to let him know he hadn’t made an enormous mistake.

Dernier pulled out a scrap of paper from his jacket with a flourish, handing it over to Gabe. Gabe scanned it, a small smile on his lips. He cleared his throat before slowly reading the note, translating one sentence at a time.

“The Resistance has been made aware that you have need of our services. We will gladly assist in whatever ways you need. We are not well equipped, but we can help you get access to the factory, if that is what you wish. We will send one of our English-speaking members to the location agreed upon with Jacques. Expect her at dusk. She will be armed.”

“Her? She?” Dugan asked, surprised.

“There are plenty of women in the Resistance,” Gabe replied, folding the letter and giving it back to Dernier. “At least that’s what Dernier has led me to believe.”

“*Ze best women*,” Dernier assured them all, syllables thick with his accent and innuendo.

“She’s armed, so you better keep your distance,” Falsworth teased.

The conversation dissolved from there. Bucky found himself in high spirits, the promise of excitement in the air. The hours passed in comfortable isolation, broken only by the occasional roar of a half-track passing on the road half a mile away. They whiled away the time with card games and idle chatter. The noontime sun filtered in through the trees and warmed their backs, making the men soft and nostalgic. The sleepy noon hours were devoted to stories of loved ones and younger siblings, the friends left back home, and beautiful strangers.

Steve and Bucky had all kinds of stories between the two of them. The time Steve threw up at Coney Island. The time Steve pushed Bucky off the dock at Coney Island. (These events were not coincidental.) The winter Steve almost lit the apartment on fire after leaving his jacket draped over the radiator. (The room smelled like smoke for a month.) Stories about Becky, how she liked to cut
school (every now and then, for adventure, she would explain), the frantic way she danced as if she had embers in her shoes, her sweet tooth and fiery temper, and the boy at school she teased mercilessly (the prevailing theory was she liked him). Becky was Steve and Bucky’s sister both, spitfire and sharp as a whip. And good at cooking to boot.

Jones joined in about his sister, Angie. Angie was a year younger than Rebecca. He had three sisters, all younger than him, and a brother one year older than him. He showed the group a family picture proudly. Jones had a girl back home too. They were madly in love, Gabe said. Looking at his dopey smile, they all believed him. He’d ask her to marry him when he got back home. Once they married, they were going to move out of the city, go somewhere up North. Have three children, maybe a dog. He had their whole future planned, down to row of azaleas he wanted to grow in their garden. (A garden was a must.)

Only Morita didn’t join in. After they’d started talking about families, Jim had started to drift until he was sitting alone. Bucky dismissed him as the less talkative type. To each his own. Steve, of course, couldn’t let things be. After letting Morita stare at his shoes for an hour, Steve called him over.

“Something wrong, Captain?” Morita asked, begrudgingly joining the rest of the men.

“You’ve been a bit quiet is all,” Falsworth replied on Steve’s behalf, extending a pack of cigarettes to Jim.

“Trade you one for a story, how ‘bout it? A wild tale from the Morita family.”

Jim declined the cigarettes.

“I don’t smoke.”

“Well, come on anyway.” Faslworth nudged Morita playfully, trying to lift the mood.

“We had a farm. Strawberries, mostly. Would have harvested them back in June probably.”

There was a pause among the men at the past tense. A sudden realization that a line had been crossed, though no man knew precisely what that line had been. The answer hit Jones first.

“Oh shit, man. I’m sorry; we weren’t thinking.”

Morita grimaced. “It’s fine. I’m just not really in the mood to talk about it.”

The rest of the American men muttered embarrassed apologies.

“Sorry fellas, but this must be an American thing. What’s going on exactly?” Falsworth butted in, confused. The American men looked down at their feet, suddenly uncomfortable. Jim glanced at them awkwardly before realizing he’d have to be the one to answer the question.

“My family got ‘relocated.’ One day the government puts up a sign saying, “All Japs move out.” Everybody sold house, sold anything, and then the army came to cart us all off. We all lived at a race track for a few months, after that, a camp called Manzanar in the middle of Nowhere, California. When I got the questionnaire asking if I wanted to serve, I checked “yes” and here I am.”

“Why were you relocated?” Falsworth asked. Morita’s face twisted in a bitter smile.

“Cuz I’m a Jap. We can’t be trusted unless we’re fighting Nazis or locked up in the desert.”
“Oh.”

The following silence lay thick over the group.

Dugan shifted uneasily and stared down at his hands.

“About that…” Dugan fumbled for the words, not quite looking Jim in the eye. “About what I said back in Azzano…”

“It’s fine,” Morita cut him off.

Dum Dum looked up, surprised.

“Believe it or not, you are not the worst thing to happen to me.”

Dum Dum snorted, relieved and embarrassed.

“We’re all sorry though,” Jones interrupted pointedly, “about what happened to your family. That’s not right.”

The assembled men nodded adamantly.

“All the same, how ‘bout just one story, huh?”

An olive branch, from Dum Dum to Jim. Jim nodded thoughtfully.

“So, you guys know anything about strawberries?”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1) "Jerry" is British slang for the Germans (specifically Nazis).
2) Jim Morita is from Fresno, California, so his family would have most likely been relocated to the Manzanar center. Moving people to the internment camps was not a fast process, however. Most Japanese-Americans had a few days' notice to sell their businesses and property or to make arrangements with their neighbors to take care of their pets or watch over their houses. Very few Japanese-Americans ever got their property back after the war and those who did sell got next to nothing.
3) In Southern California, especially the Fresno area, strawberries are a major crop and many of the biggest farms in the region were owned by Japanese families. (Morita's back story is based roughly on that of a family friend.) When Morita returns from the war, I don't think his family ever got their farm back.
4) Just like with Morita, Jones is also a nod to the plight faced by African-Americans after the war and the Second Great Migration, in which more than 5 million African-Americans left the South and resettled in (primarily) urban areas in the North and the West. I like to think that maybe Jones got his dream in the end, or at least a decent house and a few azaleas.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Sorry to keep going so long between chapters. I am (at long last) out of school, so I should have a little more time on my hands without papers and research to keep me busy. Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me through these little hiatuses. Your constancy is the greatest compliment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time dusk fell and it was time for the rendezvous, the men had run out of stories. The air was clearer now, missing a little of the tension no one had noticed before. After a lazy afternoon of card games and banter, the team felt rested and ready to go. The operation had all the makings of the perfect adventure: a few rag-tag men against an entire army, a foreign land, a mysterious dame. The men set out with a boyish sense of optimistic cheer.

At sundown, Dernier guided the squadron to the designated clearing. It was situated on the edge of the forest, close enough that anyone wandering beyond the outskirts of the village might happen to see them. Steve felt dangerously exposed out on the perimeter. The only thing that kept them hidden was the dying light, weaving thick shadows between the trees.

From the glade, Bucky watched the lights in the village blink out. He surveyed the fields, naming vegetables to pass the time. He was ostensibly a city boy, but he knew a few things, picked up from summer vacations with his grandparents in the country. The fields were sparse at this time of year, dominated by winter greens and bitters. Every house seemed to have an herb garden, delicate and bursting with little flowers. The land was well-tended, but retained just a touch of the wild. Little clumps of stray plants - weeds, herbs, vegetables - bubbled up between the houses and fields, apparently left to their own devices.

The houses were in similar shape. The paint was flecked, as if no one had bothered to paint for a year or two. All the same, the windows bore the tell-tale streaks of regular washing. All were closed tight, trapping in the last of the day’s heat before a cold winter’s night. Already, a few chimneys smoked languidly, sending inky spirals into the evening air. The sounds of quiet nightlife were audible from the clearing: lowing cows in the sheds, the clang of cooking pots, a door slamming.

Bucky watched it all as the sun died, one last burst of cherry red before nightfall. The darkness congealed around them, suddenly thickening until the men could barely make out each other’s outlines. All of the lights in the village were extinguished and the valley plunged into blackness. Bucky searched the horizon for the dim outline of the factory. Any minute now they would start the searchlights.

The men fell silent, the spirit of adventure fading with each mundane minute. You never read about heroes waiting.

Steve worried the most, shifting the shield from one arm to another. Could this be a trap? He still hadn’t quite recovered his confidence after his fumble the other day. If not for Dernier, he would have walked his men right into a minefield. For all the books he read, Steve didn’t have the battle sense, that instinctual read of a situation that the rest of the team had. He was naive, and if he didn’t
learn faster, his ignorance was going to get them killed. What if Dernier’s connection in the village was a spy? What if there was a HYDRA squadron lining up this moment to blast them out of the trees? These were ridiculous hypotheticals, but Steve worried. This was too easy.

The men sat in tense silence for another hour before Dernier shot to his feet, grinning.

“C’est elle!”

Dernier grabbed his bag and made to dash off. Steve grabbed him quickly, catching him abruptly by the back of his shirt.

“<How do you know it’s her?>”

“<She gave the signal.>”

Before Steve could ask, he was interrupted by the sound of delicate footsteps, hardly louder than the breeze winding through the undergrowth. He turned, letting go of Dernier, and looked for the source of the noise.

With his enhanced vision, Steve spotted her first, just a second before Bucky. She had a petite figure, but Steve easily made out the silhouette of an automatic strapped across her back. Dernier jogged over to her and they stood in conversation a brief moment before he led her back to camp. He joked with her in low tones, holding branches out of the way and falling over himself to act like a gentleman. When he returned, Steve could make out the grin plastered across Dernier’s face, white teeth flashing in the dark.

Steve had to wait for the searchlights to reach their clearing before he got a good look at the woman. Her hair was tucked back in a kerchief and her clothes were plain, the mark of a working woman. The automatic across her slender shoulders rested comfortably, natural. She slung it off and leaned it against a tree easily, but Steve didn’t miss the brief ripple of muscle. Farming women were not to be underestimated.

“She’s hiding a knife under her skirt,” Bucky whispered in his ear. Steve smirked. She was careful too then. He didn’t need to ask Bucky how he could tell.

“Watch your eyes, Buck,” Steve whispered back, clapping him on the shoulder and going to greet the woman.

“I’m Captain Rogers. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Steve extended his hand to the woman. She shook it briefly. Like the rest of her, her palms were rough and callused. As she stepped away, Steve caught the scent of rosemary.

“I am Simone,” she replied curtly, casting a glance behind Steve at the rest of the men. Steve didn’t flinch every time the searchlight rolled over their clearing.

“You want to sneak into the town, yes? And then to the factory?”

She addressed Steve, and Steve alone, like a general before her troops. Steve found himself
unconsciously standing at attention. Out of the corner or his eye, Steve noticed that all of the other men (except, of course, Dernier) were similarly rapt.

“That’s the plan.”

She nodded. “And how had you planned on getting in, if we provided somewhere for you to hide?” An awkward pause as Steve searched for an answer.

“We weren’t entirely sure.”

Something in Simone’s look sharpened, her jaw tightening.

“Let me tell you a little about Reyersviller that you might not know,” Simone replied wryly, “Did you know that there are no men in our village?”

Steve shook his head.

“Do you know why there are no men?”

Steve shook his head again.

“They are all in that factory, Mr. Rogers. Do you know what happens to those men if the soldiers find you in our homes?”

Bucky spoke up from Steve’s side.

“They’d kill them.”

The woman shot Bucky an appraising look and nodded curtly. “That is correct.”

“So why did you agree to help us then?” Bucky asked.

“I haven’t agreed yet.”

Steve was taken aback. Before he could interject, she continued on calmly.

“I need to know that you won’t end up killing all of our husbands and sons. Whether you are caught or if you are not careful, it is dangerous to those inside. What makes you more likely to succeed than us in the Resistance? We are no mere women, Mr. Rogers.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“So, why should we take the risk of helping you?”

Dum Dum stepped forward, chest swelling with bravado. Bucky watched Dugan slip back into his carnival days, mimicking the ringleader.

“Ma’am, do you know who this man is? He’s Captain America. I don’t know what you all hear out here in France, but he’s the real deal. He single-handedly raided a HYDRA factory twice the size of this one. And we’re his elite team, best of the best. There ain’t nobody more qualified than us.”

Simone smiled coldly.

“And do you know who we are, soldier? In the last year, we’ve smuggled a hundred Resistance fighters here and across the border. We are a critical link on the chain of information that
informs fighters across France, and even people like you.”

“A circus act,” she continued with a vehement look for Dugan, “is not going to impress us. Captain Rogers, tell me why we should risk the arrangement we have now.”

Steve glanced down at his feet, searching for the right words. Bucky came to his rescue again, subtly elbowing Steve. Get your act together.

“I assume you’ve tried sabotage before, right?” Bucky asked. His face had turned steely and calculating. The question carried no feeling, was asked from one soldier to another.

Simone regarded Bucky coolly, but a darker emotion flashed across her face.

“Yes.”

“And HYRDA retaliated, right? Randomly killed a few men, whether they were involved or not. Maybe got a few of you in the town too. Am I right?”

“Yes. How did you…?”

“We’ve all been in your husband’s shoes. Worked in the factories. Stayed in HYRDA’s prisons. We know what it’s like in there. That’s why we’re the most qualified men for the job. We’re the closest things to experts. Trust me, we won’t underestimate them.”

Simone nodded and Steve sighed in relief. He cut in, trying to resume his role of leader.

“That’s right. These men are familiar with how the factory works. We know where the men would be staying, where the guards are posted, all of that. And, we have the element of surprise. They know you won’t be willing to risk sabotage again, so to them the most likely threat is a large outside force, like an army. They won’t be expecting a small stealth mission like us. HYRDA won’t see us coming until we’re already inside.”

Simone stood and approached Steve and Bucky, stopping just inches away. Even in the dark, she was close enough for Bucky to make out individual eyelashes, to see the steely way she fixed her gaze on Steve.

“And you can promise me that once you are inside you will eliminate HYRDA and rescue the men? Because if you fail…” The threat lingered in the air.

“I can’t promise that,” Steve replied, calm. Simone blinked once in surprise, taken aback by his response.

“I can’t promise you every man’s safety. But I will treat everyone of your fighters as if they were my own. That’s the best I can offer.”

Simone nodded, composure regained.

“Good enough.”

She turned on her heel and sat back down again.

“Let us talk strategy. I have already arranged houses for you to hide in, but you will all have to stay separately. That way, if one is discovered, there is some hope for the rest of you.”

Steve nodded solemnly.
“But how do we get into the village?” Jones asked, “There’s a good half-mile between us and the closest house. There’s six of us; someone would get caught in the spotlight.”

The men began to mutter amongst themselves.

“Could we do it in daylight?” Falsworth suggested, “Dress as women or something, just enough to keep from drawing any suspicious looks?”

“Are you kidding?” Dugan shot back, “Have you taken a look at us lately? We aren’t the most lady-like. And I’m not shaving off this beauty.” Dum Dum looked almost defensive, stroking his mustache protectively.

“Besides,” Jones added, “Jim would never blend in anyway. And no dress is going to hide the Captain’s shoulders.”

“Shit.”

“What if we grabbed a bunch of branches, dressed up like bushes? That way if the searchlight catches us…”

The group dissolved into speculation, each scheme more ridiculous than the last. Simone and Dernier watched from the sidelines, exchanging amused looks. Simone cleared her throat pointedly and the men turned back to face her.

“I told you,” she started, a touch of pride in her voice, “that we’ve smuggled over a hundred Resistance fighters through here before. There’ll be no need for…dress-up.”

Falsworth blushed and studied his shoes.

“We have mapped the way the search lights move. You cannot see it now, but every time the searchlight hits the houses, it creates a certain shadow, yes? In the last year, we’ve built sheds and that sort of thing in the gaps between the houses to make - how’d you say - ‘blind-spots.’ There is a road through the center of the village where the search lights can never see.”

The men looked at each other incredulously. Simone smirked, taking in their expressions. She swelled up again in satisfaction, drawing herself upright and standing in their midst.

“Now, the path is very narrow. And it is not straight, otherwise the guards would spot it in daylight. It would be too suspicious. And, all of the houses must stay dark, otherwise the light will give you away.”

“So, how do we find it in the dark?” Morita asked.

Simone smiled, as if hoping someone would ask.

“You do not see it, you smell it.” She paused long enough to savor their confused expressions before explaining, “We’ve planted rosemary bushes on the edges of the path where there aren’t buildings. That way, if you go off of the path, you will brush against the leaves and smell it. It’s a very strong smell, quite hard to miss.”

Jones stared at Simone with unmasked admiration.

“That’s incredible.”

The men were quick to agree, laughing a little at the simplicity of it. They died down and
turned back to Simone, who had slung her gun across her shoulders again.

“Where do you hide that, by the way?” Bucky asked, pointing to the automatic.

“This?” Simone smirked. “Oh, we keep these disassembled in the kitchens. The average soldier might think he knows what a gun looks like, but put it in the kitchen and he assumes it’s just some strange women’s gadget. Perhaps if the Nazis spent more time with their mothers, they’d know they’re looking at an armory with a stove rather than a kitchen.”

“You’re amazing, did anyone ever tell you that?”

Simone brushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. Bucky almost mistook the gesture for flirtatious, but something in the way she did it reminded him of a sniper adjusting her scope. Reassessing and honing in.

“Of course I know.”

She turned away from them and started briskly walking towards the edge of the clearing. They lumbered after her, seeming to snap every branch underfoot while she floated through brush.

“Do try to make less noise,” she chided them. “Walk on your toes. Closer to the bases of the trees.”

She stopped at the edge of the treeline, scanning the village for signs of movement. She tracked the searchlight, ducking back into the trees as it roved over them.

“The second it passes over you, run. The second light usually follows in ten seconds, so you have that long to reach the first point. Watch where I go and only one person at a time. If you are caught in the light, lie on the ground. Am I understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” came the chorus of replies.

With a playful smile for Dernier, Simone crouched, waiting for the next light, and sprinted off into the black. She dove under an abandoned wagon, then hid behind an old shed, reached the first house, and continued to zigzag until she was out of sight. At one point she began to walk, completely confident in the shadows. Bucky’s jaw dropped just a little.

“I’ll go first,” Steve whispered. “Then Bucky, Gabe, Dum Dum, Falsworth, and Jim. Gabe, tell Dernier his job is to watch and make sure everyone stays on the path. No one left behind. Alright?”

“Yes, sir.”

Before he could think twice, Steve dashed out into the dark. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the crisscrossing searchlights rolling over the fields. The piercing light drew closer, racing him to the wagon. Steve leapt for the wagon, rolling under just a moment before the light passed over. He blinked spots out of his eyes and looked for the next hiding place, a dilapidated shed. Once he reached the shed, he was safe.

He ran over, crouching low. He ducked behind the shed without incident and glanced back at the edge of the forest.

If they had planned better, Steve would have wanted to wait until a new moon. Overhead, a crescent moon illuminated the landscape. The town was thick with shadows, but the empty land between the village and forest was dangerously exposed. Behind the shed, Steve felt vulnerable.
fighters had made this trip before him. Steve bit back his misgivings and plunged onward, darting from barrier to barrier until he was safe inside the heart of the village.

Simone waited for him, leaning against the wall of the house idly. She nodded when Steve approached and rapped on the door of the house. One safe.

Steve waited anxiously for the rest of the men to arrive, straining to see the edge of the forest and the checkpoints. He never caught a glimpse though, not until they were close enough for Steve to hear their footsteps. One by one, the men filed in, rounding the corner out of breath but relieved.

Simone guided each off into the darkness to their respective safe houses.

“We’ll arrange for someone to carry messages between you. But it is too dangerous for you all to stay together,” Simone explained.

“Can’t you tell me where my men are staying?”

Simone shook her head.

“Too dangerous if someone is caught. No man may know where the others are.”

Steve started to protest, taking issue with the implications.

“No, Captain. This is not negotiable. For your safety, and our safety, no man knows. Not even you.”

Steve ground his jaw but accepted it. It was too late to argue anyway.

Once Dernier brought up the rear and disappeared off to his safe house, Simone invited Steve inside.

“You’ll stay with me, Captain Rogers.”

Simone held the door open, revealing the dark interior. Just inside the doorway, another woman sat by the door, a rifle across her lap. Simone stepped over the threshold and gave her a small smile before waving Steve inside.

“Allumer une allumette, Arlette.”

The woman, presumably Arlette, stood and struck a match, lighting up her corner of the house. Steve quickly closed the door behind him and took a look around. His head threatened to bump against the low ceilings, but the small rooms didn’t feel crowded. He could see he was standing in the living room. The door to the kitchen was wide open, and the door to another room, a bedroom it seemed, stood ajar.

Simone said little by way of introduction, scarcely more than, “Captain Rogers, this is Arlette. She does not speak much English.”

Steve politely took a seat in one of the dining room chairs and watched as Simone passed in and out of the rooms.

“Are you and Arlette sisters?” Steve asked, trying to feel a little less useless.

“No.”

Another minute of silence. Arlette left the room, returning the gun to the kitchen before
slipping into the bedroom.

“How long have you two lived together?” A second attempt at conversation.

“A few years.”

“And your husband doesn’t mind?”

“I never said I had a husband,” Simone replied curtly. “Perhaps conversation is not the best use of your time?”

Steve flushed, abashed.

“Of course.”

Steve stood and wandered over to the kitchen. He disassembled his guns, taking a moment to count ammunition. Simone came in behind him, swiftly breaking down her automatic. She opened a few drawers, tucking the components here and there. The gun vanished among the kitchenware. She held out her hand for Steve’s pieces and he watched as they dissolved into the cabinet space.

“Why did you join the Resistance?”

Steve winced the moment he asked, expecting Simone to shoot him down again. All the same, the question had been burning in the back of his mind too long.

“I want to kill Nazis,” she answered bluntly.

“That,” she continued, closing the kitchen drawers, “is the only way to protect the ones you love. At least here in France.”

“And the danger?” Steve asked, fully aware exactly what sort of answer he'd get.

“Life has always been dangerous. Especially for people like me and Arlette.”

Steve didn’t push any further. He was raised in Brooklyn after all, understood what was carefully being left unsaid.

“Are you hungry?” Simone asked, changing the subject.

Always.

“No, thank you. It’d probably just be for the best if I went to bed.”

Simone nodded, looking a little relieved, and led Steve off to the bedroom. Inside, Arlette was curled up in bed, not quite asleep but not bothering to stir. Simone crossed to the other side of the room and started pushing on the second bed. Steve rushed to her side to help. It was a fairly small bed, much smaller than the one Arlette was sleeping in. Simone hardly needed Steve’s help, but said nothing as they pushed the bed into the corner.

She then climbed on to the bed, shoes and all, and stood precariously on the narrow headboard. Steve automatically reached out a hand to steady her, but she ignored him, scanning the ceiling. Standing on top of the headboard, her head nearly brushed the ceiling. She reached up and pushed. The ceiling turned out to be a trapdoor, the edges practically invisible in the gloom. She pushed it all the way open with a thud before stepping off the bed and gesturing for Steve to climb up.
Steve awkwardly climbed onto the musty bed. He hardly needed to stand on the headboard. The ceilings were already too low for him. He hauled himself up through the small trapdoor and into the attic. It was pitch-black and stank of cigarette smoke. Steve felt around on hands and knees and quickly found a blanket spread out for him.

“Thank you,” he called down, returning to the trapdoor. Simone was no longer beside the second bed but had disappeared from view on the other side of the room.

“Good night, Captain Rogers.”

Steve lowered the trapdoor, sealing himself into total darkness.

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:
I did a fair bit of research on the French resistance for this chapter, but I'll admit I still don't know much about them. Some of the activities Simone references - smuggling fighters and transmitting intelligence - were just a part of the Resistance as a whole. The Resistance's intelligence often made its way to British intelligence agencies (like the MI6) and its most likely that the Resistance are the ones who told the SSR about the existence of this particular HYDRA base in the first place.
Simone's character is entirely fictional (as is the village of Reyersviller), but Simone is loosely based on resistance fighter Simone Segouin. In reality, a woman like Simone likely wouldn't have been put in command of a group, since women in the resistance were usually relegated to underground roles and didn't see as much action (or recognition). But, given the special circumstances of a men-free village, I thought that the women of the Resistance might be able to seize the special opportunity. The German practice of recruiting locals into the war effort is a well established part of history (and not exclusive to Germany), but the situation in Reyersviller was inspired by an Italian account of a village that was taken by the Germans (after Italy's defeat) and the village people were forced into labor, digging trenches, building fortifications, etc. Conditions were hellish and life seen as expendable, so much so that many laborers opted to try to run across no-man's land to the Allied side of the fighting.
I’m back! And the action continues (and is a little more fleshed out than the original 30 second montage in CATFA). Looking to add the next chapter very soon. Thank you for anyone who has come back to read this after all this time. SO to Himmelreich for fixing some of my Google Garbage French!

Steve pitied the little girls running the messages between the houses. Every other minute, another tot scrambled through the doorway and handed Steve a crumpled note. He’d offer the child a cookie, write a new message, and send the kid off again. In this absurd fashion, Steve spent his day alone in Simone’s house, coordinating the attack with the rest of his men.

By the time Simone and Arlette returned home in the evening, Steve’s plans were nearly finished. In the meantime, he’d had a little time to kill. Never let it be said that Sarah Rogers raised an ungrateful child.

Simone froze the moment she walked in the door, arrested by the unexpected aroma of stewing vegetables.

“What is that smell?” She brushed past Steve and made a beeline for the kitchen.

“I started on dinner, if that’s alright,” Steve explained, following after her.

Simone shot him a strange look - somewhere between skeptical and impressed - and examined the stew Steve had started.

“It’ll do.” Simone made to leave again before pausing. Then, as close to awkwardly as such a confident woman could be, “merci.”

With that begrudging thanks, she left the house again, off on one of her myriad errands. Probably checking on the rest of the men. Arlette joined Steve a few minutes later, helping him finish the meal. She was far warmer than Simone and indulgent in Steve’s disjointed French. Arlette made a habit of pointing to everything she handled and naming it in French for Steve to repeat after her. The game continued until all of the food was set out and Steve had accumulated a vocabulary wide enough to cover the entire kitchen.

Simone returned just after they had finished. She took one look at Arlette and Steve naming assorted household objects and rolled her eyes. She said something to Arlette in rapid French, probably intentionally too fast for Steve to understand, before disappearing into the other room to change.

Arlette yelled something teasing back before facing Steve with a soft smile.

“< She is a good person. >”
“< I know. >”

Arlette started loading up a plate of food and shoved it at Steve.

“< Eat up. >”

When Simone returned, the three of them ate in comfortable silence.

Simone was the first to break the quiet.

“When do you leave?”

Steve looked up from his third helping of stew. He felt bad about eating so much, but Arlette continued to push it at him long after she had finished her own bowl.

“We will attack tomorrow night.”

“That’s rather soon.”

“Yes. But the longer we stay, the more dangerous it is for all of us. So we’ve agreed to strike as soon as possible.”

Simone nodded.

“What about ammunition? We can supply you.”

Steve considered this, running through the calculations in his head. He’d already planned the attack around the ammunition they’d brought with them. They had plenty of bullets, but they only had a grenade or two apiece and no heavy explosives to speak of.

“We could use some explosives.”

“How big?”

“Whatever you have.”

Steve thought he almost saw Simone smile.

“I forgot how much I really don't want to go back inside one of these shitholes.”

Bucky gave Falsworth a sympathetic look. It was too much to admit that some days it felt like he’d never really left. Maybe none of them ever had, but that was the sort of thing spoken into the bottom of empty liquor bottles.

“That's precisely why we gotta do this.” Morita replied, stoic but as fidgety as the rest of them.

“Besides, it's a little late to turn around now, huh fellas,” Bucky joked, hoping the bumpiness of the road would cover up his shaky voice. HYDRA jeep rides were no smoother than Allied ones. Maybe worse. So much for German engineering.

Steve gave Bucky a chiding look. He was nervous too, not for himself, but for his men. If anyone got killed, the onus was on him. It was like jumping out of Stark’s plane all over again: he had no plan, no idea what he was doing, just simply hoped instinct and gravity would carry him the rest of the way.
A bump in the road sent the men crashing into each other. Steve could hear the gates ahead of them, knew they had only a minute before the firefight began. The men fell silent, each running over the plan in their minds one last time, knowing full well their careful strategy would go flying out the window the moment guns started blazing. But a plan was nice to have, like those little pocket bibles, something to tuck in your uniform that might just be the only thing between you and an early grave.

As the truck rolled to a stop, Bucky stood up and laid down on his stomach in the center of the truck. This was not in the plan, but Steve took one look at Bucky’s expression and stopped. Bucky’s face had suddenly gone smooth, his shoulders slack and relaxed. He moved with fluid grace, twirling his pistol as he slid to the ground. There was a certain bounce to his step, as if he’d come home from a long night out dancing.

Bucky was in position the moment the truck doors opened.

One, two. Three, four. Double taps, because he was a goddamn professional.

To Steve’s credit, he hardly flinched at the point blank hits. To Bucky’s credit, his stomach didn’t turn the way he’d expected. He’d managed to pass back over the threshold to battle numbness - kill or be killed. Going in, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to do it.

Bucky’s shots carved out a perfect opening, downing the two HYDRA soldiers so quickly that neither side had time to process what was happening. In a rush, the invaders flooded out of the back of the truck, guns blazing. Bucky followed behind them, swapping his pistol for a rifle, as they raced across the courtyard. The alarm sounded just as they reached the main entrance.

Bucky’s memory was spotty after that, the way it always was after a battle. They broke up inside, Steve wielding that ridiculous shield and throwing it in ways that utterly disregarded all known laws of physics. The beginning of the onslaught had been easy, like shooting fish in a barrel. HYDRA was completely unprepared for the assault and took too long to put together any sort of cohesive counter-force. Everything rolled along, just as planned.

Steve had decided to attack at night for two reasons. One, with a group of invaders so small, it would be far harder for HYDRA to distinguish them from its own men, especially in the dark. Not being able to see each other would be a much smaller issue. Second, in Azzano the prisoners were always locked away at night. If the men could reach the cages before HYDRA collected itself enough to leverage the inmates as hostages, then the battle was won. With the army of inmates hell-bent on classical French revenge, they’d have the numbers to tip the scale and overwhelm the factory. Timing was everything.

The Resistance women had been unable to give them detailed information about the factory’s layout, but they believed the prisoners’ cells were somewhere in the eastern wing, probably adjacent to the manufacturing center.

Steve raced towards the eastern wing, choosing speed over stealth. His ears echoed with the alarms and already he started calculating how long it would take before someone decided to blow the whole place up.

Morita and Falsworth sprinted ahead down the narrow corridors, bolt cutters and explosives strapped haphazardly across their backs. At the bottleneck, Steve settled in for a defensive fight, hoping to give Morita and Falsworth a break to find and free the prisoners. Dugan and Jones fell in at the Captain’s side, ducking for cover behind what looked like the body of a half-built tank. Bullets pinged against the tough shell, but Steve knew they wouldn’t be able to hold the position long. He lobbed a grenade into the approaching swarm of men and waited. The blast sent the attackers scattering for a moment, adding to the swelling tide of confusion. In the split-second of
opportunity, Bucky and Dernier scrambled up onto the empty catwalks stretching the length of the building. Dernier, strapped with enough explosives to level every ramshackle apartment in Brooklyn, danced across the balconies, raining small charges down on to the men below. Bucky followed closely behind, rifle blazing, clearing the path ahead of Dernier.

In the meantime, Morita and Falsworth wove through the labyrinth of the factory. They opted for stealth, threading through the shadows of the looming machinery. Overhead, they heard boots thundering towards the fight. The factory rocked with an explosion every minute, a testament to the raging battle. It comforted Falsworth, just a little, proof that someone was still out there fighting, maybe even winning.

Ultimately, it was the prisoners that found them first. The inmates must have sensed some sort of rescue was going on and took it upon themselves to make as much noise as possible. Morita and Falsworth simply followed the noise, creeping up on an aisle of cages nearly identical to the ones they had inhabited in Azzano. Morita counted cages, estimating about 120 men and only a dozen guards. HYDRA’s forces were spread thin, the majority committed to the fighting in the main factory. Prisoners were an afterthought it seemed, meaning Steve and the others were doing a good job keeping HYDRA’s attention diverted. Dealing with the guards would be a challenge nonetheless.

Morita and Falsworth watched from a distance, trying to find a way to draw out the guards. It couldn’t be overt, otherwise the guards would take the inmates as hostages in an instant. They surveyed the cages before Morita noticed something a little different from Azzano. The cages were within arm’s reach of each other, an oversight in planning. Morita crept forward towards the closest cage. He was only feet from the cage when one of the inmates noticed him. The man took one look at Morita before understanding what was going on. He smiled and mimed a gun. Morita crept forward and handed the inmate a gun, one of the tiny, single shot pistols favored by the resistance women. Easy to hide and easy to clean, the kind that slips unnoticed down even the slimmest farmgirl’s bodice. The French women had lavished the little guns on Morita and Falsworth. They were little help in a real battle, better for self-defense or a quick shot. A single bullet was better for blowing your own brains out than anything else, and Morita had wondered if the little pistols were some sort of morbid farewell gift. The guns had been intended, he realized, for the inmates all along. Morita quickly slipped the man a few more of the pistols, gesturing for him to pass them down the line.

By now most of the cell had noticed the plot underway. Professionally, the men pretended not to notice and the men in the opposite row of the cage grew louder, diverting the guards’ attention from the firearms being adeptly slipped from cell to cell. Morita snuck over to the other row, unloading the last of his guns into open palms. The inmates grinned at him, indicating for him to leave. We’ve got this. Morita returned to Falsworth’s hiding place, heart in his throat. It was out of his hands at this point. The inmates were playing a dangerous game; if the guards noticed anything awry, every man could be dead in under a minute. They were trapped in their cages, target practice.

Morita didn’t risk looking out from his hiding spot but the inmates grew quieter, as if calming down. After a tense minute, another explosion rocked the base. As if on a signal, the men all screamed, launching into mayhem again. Concealed under the sudden human uproar, the sound of a dozen pistols loading went unnoticed. The guards banged the bars, menacing with their guns. The inmates shrunk back and fell silent long enough for the guards to turn around.

“Attaquez.”

The single order cut coldly through the silence, uttered so calmly and quietly as to completely
mask its killing intention. In an instant, the factory rang out with 12 shots in near perfect unison. On the signal, Morita and Falsworth leapt out from hiding, barrels raised. All 12 guards lay prone on the ground, shot at point blank. The prisoners did not cheer but remained stoically silent, careful not to raise any further alarm. They weren’t out of the woods yet, even though they exchanged sly glances, smirks smudged with optimism. Falsworth and Morita rushed forward, slinging their guns in favor of boltcutters. They handed off the cutters and rifled through the dead men’s belts in search of keys. By the time they found the right keys, two of the cages had already swung open. The open cages’ inhabitants surged forward in a quiet tide, pilfering guns and ammo from the fallen guards. Armed, they went to work cutting free their comrades and the air filled with the sound of metal on metal and whispered French.

The crowd solemnly gathered around Morita and Falsworth. Falsworth looked over the ragtag army, the men limping and livid.

“Radio Steve now,” he told Morita before addressing the assembled crowd.

“Anyone here speak English?”

A man at Falsworth’s shoulder stepped forward, tapping him. “Of course.”

“Tell them we’re heading out the front. No man goes out the back or to the forest unless he wants to be blown to pieces. Our compatriots are out front. Make sure you’re only shooting HYDRA and head to the village. Let’s move before this place blows up on us.”

The man relayed the message and in a moment they were off, running down the corridor, all caution thrown to the wind. You could feel it in the air, that the battle had shifted. No more need to hide. Time to attack.

The crackle of Morita’s voice over the radio might have been the sweetest sound Steve had ever heard.

Overhead, Dernier turned on his heel and dragged Bucky out to the roof.

“What the hell, Dernier? Steve needs our cover!”

Dernier waved Bucky off dismissively and ran on towards the roof. Bucky plunged after him in frustration.

Dernier stopped at one of the enormous spotlights, abandoned and glaring down into the courtyard. Dernier angled it down towards the houses, as if searching for one in particular. He found his mark and began pulsing the light. It wasn’t morse code, but Dernier worked with a sense of purpose, flashing out some other code. When he had finished, he didn’t watch for a response, but rather turned on his heel and sped back towards the inside of the factory. Just as abruptly as he’d begun, he was finished.

When Bucky and Dernier fought their way back inside, the scene had changed. The main area was swarming with men, the freed inmates now joining in the fray. They were useless up on the catwalk, unable to drop explosives without hitting one of their own. Bucky and Dernier fell in behind Steve. The inmates gathered behind the invaders, taking shelter behind makeshift blockades. Slowly, they pressed forward, crowding HYDRA out of the lobby and through the doors. They burst into the open space, leaping for every open vehicle.

The outside was the bitterest fighting with the least cover. With fewer explosives, the sides were more evenly matched. After a few minutes of fighting, the factory suddenly erupted into flame with
a deafening boom. Hot air and shrapnel washed over the sea of men.

“Did we do that?” Steve shouted over the radio. The team answered with a chorus of ‘no’s.

“They must be close to the end if they’re trying to destroy the factory. Looks like we’ve got them on the ropes,” Bucky radioed from his hiding spot behind an overturned truck.

“Hardly seems like it. The buggers just won’t quit,” Dugan grumbled.

“Captain, if we let this settle into a proper fight, we’re going to start taking real casualties,” Falsworth added. His end of the line was loud, full of gunshots and yelling.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Steve replied.

Bucky shot to his feet, scanning the battlefield for the glint of Steve’s shield. Beside him, Dugan stood up too.

“What is it, Barnes?”

“He’s going to do something stupid.”

Bucky spied movement in the burnt out factory, an outline briefly illuminated by a spray of sparks. Bucky scanned the chaos in the courtyard, plotting a zig-zagging course among the barricades. Before Bucky could run, Dugan seized him by the collar.

“Let him go, Sarge. You’ll give him away.”

Dum Dum was right. Bucky peeked over the edge of their barricade, surveying the rough line that HYDRA had established. Steve could get behind it unnoticed, but Bucky couldn’t figure out what good he hoped to accomplish on his own.

“What’s his plan, Barnes?”

Bucky considered for a moment. A bomb. It was the stupidest, riskiest thing Steve could do on his own. Bucky peeked back over the barricade and spotted Steve through his scope. Sure enough, he was carrying something with him.

“It’s a bomb,” Bucky reported, “and I’m pretty sure he hasn’t thought through how he’s going to get out of the blast radius.”

Dugan grinned.

“Then we just gotta go help Rogers. Last one to the truck pays the tab.”

Bucky didn’t question the plan until the truck - an armored monstrosity built to ferry cargo - took the first hit. The truck tipped dangerously, threatening to roll, and smoke flooded into the compartment. Dugan continued to drive like a madman, ricocheting blindly from enemy barricade to enemy barricade. Gunfire rang loudly in their ears, echoing as it hit the truck, leaving spiteful messages in braille on the metal siding. Bucky clung to the truck door for dear life, rifle tucked uselessly at his feet.

Someone finally succeeded in shooting out one of their tires and the truck spun. Dugan swore and tore himself out of the driver’s seat. The two of them dove towards the back of the truck and wedged themselves between weapon’s racks and whatever they could find. They fumbled for rope, strapping themselves to anything that might be bolted to the wall. In the front of the truck, Bucky
heard glass shatter. The uproar grew louder, no longer muffled by two-inch thick glass. The sharp rattle of machine guns spilled into the front of the truck, dangerously close to home.

“That’s all the time we can give you,” Bucky shouted into his radio, “You out of there yet, Steve?”

No response at the end of the line, then, quietly between panting breaths.

“Cover your ears. Now.”

What followed was the loudest boom Bucky had ever heard. They had driven right into the center of the HYDRA line, pulling every spare HYDRA fighter into a tight knot, right where Steve had planted the bomb. From the sound of it, Dugan’s aim had been perfectly on target.

The truck shook and tilted. For a split-second, the truck was suspended in slow motion, balanced precariously on two wheels. In the next instant, the world spun and everything around Bucky took flight. Crates smashed. Skull kissed metal. Floor became ceiling; ceiling became floor. The world burned and stunk of gasoline and smoke. Before Bucky could make sense of it, the chaos simply ended. He was strapped to the side of the truck, staring up at a metal sky, bruised and battered but remarkably alive. His heartbeat echoed around the smashed up cargo hold, interrupted by the occasional boom. A new noise cut through the din, the cry of tires chewing up earth. Horns blasted the earth in a triumphant choir, singing over the low baritone of rumbling engines.

“Reinforcements?” Bucky croaked. If Dugan answered, Bucky didn’t hear it before he succumbed to the black.

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Bucky awoke to the sound of banging. He jerked upright before being stopped hard by his makeshift seat belt. He fumbled with the knots for a moment before fishing for the knife on his belt. He sliced his way out and rolled. He took stock of himself for a moment there, resting on his hands and knees. His head was ringing and the back of his skull smarted with every clang of the doors. He was distantly aware of a hot pain in his leg. Part of a smashed crate had embedded itself in his leg, held firm by a half-bent nail. It had stopped bleed and the skin around it was raw and puckered, as if trying to devour the offending wood. He was already healing.

Bucky sat himself up against the side of the truck and studied the wood. The doors shook as if they were ready to break. Bucky was running out of time. In one motion, Bucky shoved his collar between his teeth and yanked at the wood. The flare of agony sent him reeling. Bucky’s vision went black for a second. In the next moment, he had a bloody shard in hand, triumphant. Blood bubbled up and ran down the side of his leg, eager as decanted wine. Adrenaline would keep the pain at bay and Bucky knew better than to fear bleeding out.

Bucky struggled to his feet, remembering Dugan. Dum Dum was out cold even as Bucky cut him out from his harness. Dum Dum’s arm lie bent at a strange angle. With any luck, it was a dislocation, not a break. Either way, Dugan wasn’t waking up any time soon. Bucky drew his pistol and crouched beside Dugan, aiming at the twin doors in the back of the truck. With baited breath, he removed the safety.

The doors sprung open with a mighty creak. The harsh glare of spotlights poured in, nearly blinding. Bucky raised his gun at the nearest figure. There were three of them, each armed, but Bucky couldn’t make out much more about them in the harsh light.

“Who are you?” He yelled, keeping his aim squarely on the person in the middle.
“Vos Amis,” came the reply. A woman’s voice. Bucky breathed a shaky sigh of relief and lowered his gun. The women rushed forward, trampling the wreckage underfoot. Bucky stood and made way for them to reach Dugan. He watched them assemble a makeshift stretcher from the debris. He limped to the front of the upended truck to look for his rifle. The damage in the truck’s cabin was catastrophic, singed and warped beyond all recognition. He and Dugan hadn’t gotten out a moment too soon. The rifle was nowhere to be seen.

One of the women approached Bucky and tapped him on the shoulder, signalling for him to follow the women carrying out Dugan. Bucky turned to follow, walking unsteadily over the rubble. His injured leg spasmed and Bucky gasped, slipping. He caught himself against one of the overturned weapons racks. His breath was getting ragged, the pain from his injury slowly seeping back to him.

“You are hurt?” One of the French women asked, gesturing at his blood-soaked pant leg.

Bucky nodded a curt yes and slid down to the floor. “Just give me a minute here.”

The woman was about to say something when another figure appeared in the doorway. Steve.

Steve sent one appraising look at Bucky catching his breath on the floor. Bucky shrugged. I’ll walk it off.

Steve smiled. His happiness at winning, at finding Bucky, of just surviving, was too much to suppress. The sheer joy that blossomed in his chest was hard-earned and irresistible. All that remained was to announce their victory. Steve turned to Bucky and addressed the world.

“We did it.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Note:
The double tap. A double tap is the practice of firing two shots at the same target in quick succession. According to theory, this helps correct for the first shot, which is often fired so quickly in a fight that the shooter’s arm is not fully extended. As a result, the second shot tends to be more accurate. It also makes it less likely that you will miss something vital and seriously raises mortality rate. The practice began among British officers in Shanghai as a way to get around crappy ammunition, but the practice spread back to Special Operations Executives in Britain and members of the US Office of Strategic Services during the later years of WW2. Seeing how the SSR of the MCU is a joint effort among the Allies (notably the US and Britain), it’s not too much of a stretch to imagine that Bucky might have been trained in this cutting-edge technique during the team’s brief training period in London. You bet he was doing his homework. By the way, the Winter Soldier almost always double taps with a handgun in the movie, even though he had good caliber ammunition. Perhaps this is leftover training from the Bucky days, but it is also a way to guarantee minimum survivors.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Thank you a million times to anyone who has braved their way through these absurd hiatuses. I intend to see this story to its finish, though it looks like it has taken far longer than I expected. Your kind comments keep me motivated to keep going. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The women finished the last scraps of HYDRA. Twenty or so Resistance women camped out overnight in the smoldering factory, in case survivors came crawling out of the wreckage. Back in the village, however, the town blazed to life. All lights were on, all hands on deck. Sheds became hospitals and homes became mess halls. The sun had set on a sleepy town, only to rise on a newborn fortress. The Resistance women had been prepared. As soon as Dernier sent his signal, the entire town silently mobilized in the darkness - cooking, gathering supplies, sending out for reinforcements.

Steve returned in high spirits, charged up on adrenaline, only to find himself utterly useless in the fray. Simone, who had led the reinforcements, dismissed him.

“You are done now, Captain Rogers,” she informed him, “We will handle the rest now.” She sent the team back in a hijacked truck without another word or a backwards look. With nothing left to do, Steve spent his energy fussing over his team. Falsworth and Morita had emerged more or less unscathed. Dernier and Jones boasted only minor injuries themselves. Dugan - concussed, bruised, and dealing with a broken arm – bore the brunt of Steve’s attentions. Dum Dum would need a splint for two or three weeks, but in Morita's professional medical opinion, Dugan was a “damn lucky son of a bitch.”

Dum Dum didn’t feel so lucky once Morita started jostling the arm to get the bones aligned for a splint. The team took the stream of profanity as their cue to politely leave.

Bucky was the slowest to stand and Steve followed him out with all the subtlety of a circling hawk. They walked only a short distance away to the nearest open door before Bucky ducked inside. Bucky’s shoulders crumbled the moment he crossed the threshold. Steve seized Bucky by the shoulders and guided him to the nearest chair, afraid Bucky might simply fall where he stood.

At the sound of Bucky sitting down, the house’s resident popped out of the kitchen. Steve grinned at her and spoke to her in quiet, faltering French. Nodding, she led Steve into the kitchen.

“How is it?” Steve called from the kitchen. The sound of water running.

“Hurts like the devil.” Bucky called back, through teeth gritted in a half grin. This little interlude felt perversely nostalgic, as if Steve might return from the kitchen half his size and with that little limp from one leg being just a hair shorter than the other.

“How much did it bleed?”

“Not sure. Don’t think it nicked anything major though.”
A grunt from the kitchen. Steve appeared in the doorway with a glass of water in hand.

“Drink up while I take a look.” Bucky took the glass and sipped. The water was cool and sweet.

“Sugar?” Bucky asked. He tried not to wince as Steve rolled up his pant leg. The fabric clung to his skin, sticky with blood.

“A little salt too,” Steve replied, “Ma used to put a little in my water when I was little. The taste keeps you thirsty. Good for small, sick children,” Steve paused to shoot Bucky a smirk, “or stubborn adults.”

Bucky didn’t dignify the last comment.

Steve looked at the wound, prodding it gingerly. The edges were starting to pucker and draw in on themselves, slowly closing. There’d be nothing but a scar in a day or two.

“I’m going to grab some of Jim’s supplies and close this up, clean it out. Wait here.”

Before Bucky could protest, Steve stood and strode over to where they’d left Dugan. Steve returned a minute later, Morita’s medic kit in hand.

What followed involved iodine, sutures, and enough “sorry”s to sink the Titanic. In the end, Bucky was left with a closed up leg and a bloody lip. Steve walked away learning the difference between theory and practice. Reading about field medicine was definitively different from administering it.

“You’ve got pretty steady hands for your first time at this,” Bucky commented as Steve frowned at his work. Some of the stitches were lopsided, but Steve didn’t have the heart to redo them.

“Yeah, well don’t give me any more chances to practice,” Steve replied, packing up Morita’s stuff.

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbled, embarrassed.

“Any time, Buck.”

----

By the feast in the evening, Bucky was back on his feet. Limping, but walking all the same. More pressing than the pain in his leg was the horrific hollowness in his stomach. A mind-clouding, eat-a-handful-of-dirt-if-nobody-was-looking kind of hungry.

The team quickly found their way to the center of town. They helped drag tables outside, turned over carts, and stacked crates. Every flat surface was in the village was heaped with food. The men helped themselves and dove headfirst into the merriment.

The noise was nearly overwhelming - singing, clanging, dancing, yelling. Every time the trucks returned from the factory wreckage, the uproar became nearly deafening. The noise turned to cheers when the women disembarked, trading shifts. The crowd fell silent when the trucks unloaded the body bags. The bags had been cobbled together the night before, patchworks of potato sacks and old cloth. The crowds parted as the families of those still missing hurried forward. Only in those moments was the joviality of the reunion broken, the revelry rent apart by sobs. Once the bells had finished their tolling, the crowds departed and determinedly lost themselves in the feast.

There was a seriousness to the gaiety, a silent acknowledgement that their joy must be short lived. These were pragmatic people, and so they celebrated with a nihilistic fervor. Simone and a
few women disappeared to make plans, others traded shifts scouring the factory, and still others worked tirelessly in the infirmaries. Yet, by evening, the entire town was crowded into the square. Drinks flowed endlessly. Whole fields had been uprooted and their merits adorned the tables. A hundred chickens were plucked and dressed and the smell of roasted meat smothered the town. Every dish tasted of rosemary, as if every bush had been pulled up. As if to say, We’ll never need these again. After months of prudent living, triumph bubbled up in the form of extravagant living. If it wasn’t eaten in the next few days, it was as good as gone anyway. The people were determined to make use of every last scrap.

For the first time in months, Steve was full. Not just content, but full. He’d grown accustomed to always going a little bit hungry. Once the Depression hit, there hadn’t always been enough to go around. Even living with Bucky, money and food was never certain. The best he’d eaten was with the army, but with his new appetite he would eat the USO into debt if he wasn’t careful. Now, the French incredulously shoved food at him. It felt a little like a dare.

Next to Steve, Bucky tucked in, albeit at a much slower pace. Gradually, plateful after plateful of food disappeared in front of Bucky. The rest of the team started to catch on, watching with gaping mouths as the two Brooklyn boys ate a week’s worth of dinners in one sitting.

“Shouldn’t you maybe wait a little, Barnes?” Gabe suggested.

“You’re never going to be able to beat the Captain if that’s what you’re aiming for,” Dugan teased. “I’m pretty sure Rogers can eat like this through to next week.”

“This,” Bucky replied, gracelessly waving a chicken thigh, “is your last chance at a good meal for weeks. Maybe months. I’m not letting an opportunity like this slide by.”

By the end of the day, and an ungodly amount of food later, the team just came to accept that Steve and Bucky’s hunger was too great to be subject to the laws of physics. Must be a Brooklyn thing.

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The team got hopelessly smashed. Morita was the first to bow out. Lightweight, they teased him. Come morning, when the hangovers struck, Jim Morita had the last laugh. Falsworth was next, and he took Dugan down with him in a truly stellar drinking game. They fell asleep in a pile of hay, hiccupping and mumbling lewd songs to shame any decent soul in earshot. If anyone spoke enough English to understand, they would have been mortified. Jones outlasted Dernier, an upset that rocked the village.

Gabe danced better drunk, moving like he was more blood than bone. Every minute, he came dangerously close to tripping on his own feet, only to save himself with an elegant twirl. Then he was off again, sliding and whirling, tapping and swinging, ready to grab hold of any extended hand and whisk away a new dance partner.

When the melody sounded enough like something from home to make his feet ache, Bucky joined Gabe for a round. They were both talented dancers. Gabe was more of a solo dancer, prone to improvising and taking a little corner of the dance floor as his own. Nonetheless, he kept up with Bucky, adding jazzy flares to old swing routines, changing up the footwork just enough to keep even a seasoned dancer like Bucky on his toes. The two of them pushed each other, faster and fancier. They grew bolder, losing themselves in the music and pleasant feelings. The music was crude by dancehall standards. The players were short staffed and unprofessional, their instruments rusty with disuse. But there was hysteria in the air and booze on the table, so no one seemed to notice whether they were dancing in a barn or the Roseland Ballroom. All that existed was the rhythm, sweat, and
the need to move. Like sharks, they died if they stopped swimming, and so the two of them danced
with a fervor like a fear of death. As the song drew to a close, Jones grabbed Bucky close, spun him
around, and dipped him like a swooning starlet. Bucky didn’t resist and hung in Gabe’s arms
playfully as the last note died out. Before the next song could start up, they both dissolved into
giggles. Jones dropped Bucky and he hit the ground with an undignified thud.

Grinning and shamelessly unapologetic, Gabe pulled Bucky to his feet. Gabe smiled, glistening with
sweat.

“‘You’re not a bad dancer, Sarge.’”

“‘You aren’t so bad yourself. Though I don’t imagine too many dames come back for a second
dance if you drop them all like that.’”

“I never drop the pretty ones,” Jones teased, slapping Bucky good naturedly on the back. They
stood on the sidelines for a few moments, catching their breath and smiling like idiots. The twinge in
his leg would keep Bucky off the dance floor for the rest of the night, but he couldn’t stop grinning
anyway.

Jones shot him a sideways glance.

“Do you think it could ever be like this back home, if we win the war?”

Bucky considered the question, looking over the writhing dancers.

“I don’t see why not. There used to be a dance hall like this every Saturday night.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Bucky frowned, uncertain.

“‘A black man doesn’t dance with the whites back home. But people around here? People around
here don’t look at me like I wasn’t supposed to be invited.’”

_Oh._ Bucky couldn’t answer right away.

“I’m not sure, Gabe. I don’t know if things will change that much.”

Gabe nodded, slow and solemn.

“Figured. Before we came here, I spent a long time trying to figure out what the point was of me
putting my life on the line for a country that’s only going to hate me when I get back. Then I came
here and started thinking, maybe the US isn’t worth fighting for - not right now anyway - but places
like here,” Gabe gestured at the dance floor, “here could be what I’m fighting for.”

Bucky nodded and the two of them stared out over the crowd in unsteady silence.

“For what it’s worth,” Bucky mused, “I’d fight for you.”

They were both far too drunk for this, if Gabe’s expression was anything to go by. He clapped
Bucky on the shoulder.

“Tell you what,” Bucky added, “we survive this and we’ll find somewhere we can both go
dancing.”

Gabe smiled, a pinch-lipped, hesitatingly hopeful look. _If only._
The next song started winding up and Gabe couldn’t resist tapping his feet. He was itching to get back out on the floor and to escape this choking feeling of having said too much.

“Go enjoy yourself,” Bucky prodded, shooing Jones off towards the spectacle. Gabe tossed off a salute and vanished into the mayhem, crooning to himself in baritone French.

When Gabe finally stumbled off the dance floor and went to bed, Bucky was crowned the unofficial heavyweight of the team. Steve, the perpetual chaperone, had not participated in the drinking contest. In case of an emergency, he explained. Bucky wondered if Steve could get drunk even if he’d wanted to. Steve didn’t know, hadn’t tried.

“I have a very funny story about the wine,” one brave and mildly inebriated French man told them as they helped clean up the night’s festivities.

“When Hitler invaded France, he tried to steal our wine. Make himself a little money, you know?” A shit-eating grin and a slight drunken stumble. “And do you know what the Resistance did?”

The man leered at them ruddy faced and continued with his story before they could ask.

“We snuck in and stole the best stuff from right under the Weinfuhrers’ noses. And better yet? We noticed something - every time Adolf spent big money on the wine from Champagne, we knew he was getting ready to send out a big force. Big. And so when the old Desert Fox went to Africa, we knew before one German boot touched the ground. We told the British, and now they’ve got Rommel on his heels. All this from a few bottles champagne!”

The man draped an arm around Steve, laughing heartily.

“We French are a bunch of crafty bastards. Wine speaks, you know. And who better to hear it then the French, hm? Don’t touch our country; don’t touch our wine. You hear that, Hitler?” With that, the man spat on the ground and helped himself to more Hitler-confounding wine. It wasn’t the craziest story Bucky had heard in the war.

At the end of the night, Bucky and Steve were among the only people sober. Coincidentally, they were among only a handful of people outside and awake before noon the next day.

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The people of Reyersviller evacuated just one day later. Word would get back to HYDRA eventually, Simone explained. The Resistance didn’t expect them to reclaim the factory - there was nothing left to save - but they didn’t want to risk getting caught up in the retaliation. The villagers would hide in the mountains for a little while, wait for HYDRA to pass through, and return to the village when the danger had passed.

Two days, Simone told them, was as much time as they could afford. One day to celebrate, one day to grieve. As it turns out, a village could do a lot in two days.

Burn down the factory.

Gather the dead.

Heal the wounded.
Feed the living.
Mourn the dead.
Make plans.

Move on.

No one told the strangers in their midst about the funerals. An invitation was an accusation, a way of asking “Why my son? Why my friend?” No one told the strangers among them where to find the graveyard.

Bucky had known though. The night before the invasion, he’d been staying in a house near the fields. Late in the night, he heard the familiar rustle of shovel moving earth. With morbid foresight, the women had started digging graves before anyone set foot inside the factory. It only made sense, but it was a bad omen nonetheless. In the morning, Bucky came down from his hiding place in the attic to the smell of freshly turned earth. He said nothing of the matter to his host but merely asked for a scrap of red yarn. An old superstition his mom had insisted on when he was a small child. A red slipknot, to avert the evil eye. Having the little thread around his wrist helped him shake off the ominous feeling that one of those graves was waiting for him.

In the end, Bucky dodged the graves. He should have known he would. After all, he’d been born hard to kill.

That second day after the invasion, the dead were laid out in their homes. The atmosphere of the town was an uncertain stew of gaiety and sorrow. Arithmetically, the village had won back far more souls than they had lost. But, by means of emotional calculus, the festivities were cut by fledgling sadness.

The funerals, twenty-one men at once, were held at night. The Allied strangers simply found themselves in the midst of wakes with every threshold they passed. The team learned to spot the wakes by the line of mourners. Inside each door sat a little book, bound in black. The covers and pages were always blotched by tears, little notes of condolence written in shaky hand. Some entries lasted pages - written by close friends. Others were brief. The Allies wrote little notes of their own, sometimes a little extra if they recognized the face of the fallen. When the face was unfamiliar, Bucky lied, wrote things like:

I will never forget him, though we met only for a minute. We were trapped on two sides by HYDRA. I made a bold shot that opened our escape but should have cost me my life. Without hesitation, he pushed me aside and took the bullet instead. He saved my life. Please forgive me that I could not return the favor. Know that he died a hero’s death.

- Sgt. Barnes, SSR

The truth didn’t matter, not when there was no one to say otherwise. If Bucky could lend the families a little glory, some small comfort, he would not hesitate.

By nightfall, there was nowhere to go but to follow the repurposed horse carts to the awaiting graves. The seven invaders, heroes though they were, stood to the side and watched. A preacher stood and spoke for an hour, pacing amongst the graves pensively. The dying light fell over the assembled crowd and they pulled out candles. Only when Steve stared out at the sea of candle flames did he realize how large the village was. Hundreds of candles twinkled back at him in the dusk light.
Solemnly, two lines formed. A line for families of the dead. A line for the mourners. In an endless line, the mourners filed by, shaking hands, whispering, sometimes embracing.

Dernier broke rank first to join the line and the rest of the team quickly followed suit. Steve found himself struggling to make eye contact with the families. One woman, an elderly woman with tears in her eyes, pulled Steve down into a bony hug, kissing one cheek then another. She released him without a word. Soon after, the grieving crowd dispersed.

When the mourners had gone home, preparing to leave for the mountains in the morning, Simone was the first to approach Steve and his team.

“I want to thank you, Captain Rogers. Loss is not an easy thing. It makes it hard to see what has been gained. You won us back over a hundred men. When this is over - when hearts have healed - please know that you and your men will be remembered fondly here.”

Steve looked out at the new mounds of earth. There was a time to mourn, and a time to celebrate. In the end, Steve reminded himself, this was an earth-shattering success.

“We can’t thank you enough for your help,” Steve replied, offering up his hand. Simone shook it firmly.

“Get some rest. We leave early tomorrow morning. We can take you wherever you need to go after that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

---

The team slept together in an empty barn, kindly furnished with straw mattresses. The air was thick with the smell of hay and animals, but it was warm and comforting. They slept submerged in darkness, a small amount of light shining through the cracks in the weathered walls.

Steve woke first, an hour before dawn. The bell was ringing softly, an early call. The whole village was to be packed and ready to move as soon as the sun rose. Steve pulled open the barn doors, headed to the nearest house to wash up. As he stepped outside, he nearly tripped over the carpet of flowers. Roses, daisies, wild flowers - all heaped outside the threshold in a dizzying bouquet. Tiny dolls, little string bundles hardly an inch doll, waltzed among the flowers. Turning them over in his hand, Steve could almost feel the tiny fingers that put them together. The earnest look of a child hard at work.

Steve stooped and picked up one of the bundles of miniscule wildflowers. Tiny blue and white petals, a sprig of green, all tied neatly with a strip of cloth. On the hand-fashioned ribbon, in a child’s cautious handwriting:

“Vive les héros!”

Chapter End Notes
Notes (there are a lot this time around):
1) The salt-sugar water that Steve gives Bucky is a pretty common field medicine trick (sometimes called "poor man's gatorade"). I don't know how long it's been around or where it came from, but it's something my parents taught me when I was a kid.
2) The wine story is actually 100% true. When I was doing research about the Resistance's intelligence work, this little tidbit came up. It's a fascinating example of unconventional intelligence work, but it really did make a difference in the war effort. You can learn a bit more about it (and just about alcohol consumption during WW2) here: http://warontherocks.com/2015/06/a-farewell-to-sobriety-part-two-drinking-during-world-war-ii/
3) The funeral practices are based on a pretty cursory amount of Internet research, but I tried to keep it in line with what you might expect in a small village (like Rayersviller). If you're interested in some of the customs (like the wake books or the lines at the funeral), you can check out this little website: https://www.mamalisa.com/blog/funeral-traditions-in-france/
4) On the topic of death, starting with World War 1, a lot of armies started digging mass graves before battles. It's a practical thing to do, but the morbid image really stuck with me, so I had to include it here too.
5) The red string. I'm 100% a member of the Jewish!Bucky faction, so I included this as a nod to Bucky's Jewish heritage and the superstitions that he might have grown up with. In the Jewish community, it's unclear where the practice originated, but tying a red string around your left wrist is supposed to help ward off the evil eye.
6) The dolls and flowers at the end. All countries have fascinating traditions of good luck charms (I'm partial to Japan's thousand-stitch cloths), but in France many young children made dolls called "Nénette et Rintintin dolls," which were usually about an inch tall and supposed to be pinned onto a soldier's clothes for protection. A little more info here: https://www.mamalisa.com/blog/nenette-rintintin-good-luck-charm-dolls/
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thank you for bearing with me, even as ridiculous as the hiatuses have been. I can promise the next chapter will be up within a week. How can I promise this? Because I already wrote most of it! I've got a two week vacation, but your support has given me the push I need to try and make more progress on this fic. I can't thank you enough for bearing with me, helping out with the French, and for the kind words. Hope this chapter can make up a bit for the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the hell is this.” A curse more than a question. Bucky squinted at the newspaper headline in disbelief.

“The Furious 7?” He read, picking up another paper. “The Allied Storm?” Who’s writing this bullshit?”

“I'm more concerned with how many papers there are. Weren't we supposed to be a top secret operation?” Falsworth shook his head at the towering pile of day-old papers on the table.

“Phillips said there was a slip up in the Resistance information channels,” Steve explained, thumbing through the papers. “Someone got a little too enthusiastic. The SSR decided to run with it and try to get something good out of the whole mess. Raising morale, counterintelligence, that sort of thing. I don't completely understand it myself.”

The men accepted Steve’s explanation with solemn nods.

“Seriously though, The Bayonets of Freedom? The Hercules Regiment? Is that last one supposed to be a pun about HYDRA?” Bucky wasn't sure whether he was amused or disappointed. He'd hoped that at least one newspaper in the whole free world could have come up with a decent nickname.

Dugan was decidedly more gleeful about the whole matter.

“I've got a cigarette for the man who finds the worst name,” he declared, shoving a pile of papers in Falsworth’s direction.

The men quickly dove into the task, shuffling through front pages from every English speaking corner of the globe. Dernier kindly investigated the smaller stack of French papers.

An hour of intense arguments later, Morita’s champion, “The Howling Commandos,” was declared the winner.

“You know, Captain,” Dugan began, “our little troop is going to need a name if we're gonna be playing on the big stage like this.”

The team snickered. Steve smiled to himself; he'd expected this the instant he read the first over-the-top headline.
“Howling Commandos it is.”

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The Howling Commandos? What kind of absurd name is that, Rogers?

It’s the one the men chose, sir. Besides, it’s already familiar to the press.

Tell me, Rogers. Do I look like I could use any more gray hairs?

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Armed with a name and with the eyes of the world on their backs, the Howling Commandos charged back into the fray with the cohesiveness of something resembling a fighting force.

They learned each other the way only brothers in arms can: irritably and intimately. The papers often likened the Commandos to a well oiled machine, but there was little natural or smooth about them. For all the gravity of their mission, the truth remained that they were a half dozen men who barely knew each other and had only the faintest idea about what they were actually doing. Still, they leaned into each other as circumstances dictated, learning each man’s quirks and faults. The Commandos were extraordinary, both in their strengths and in their occasional faults, but it was thanks to Steve that their greatness eclipsed their humanity. With the same attention to detail that could memorize a map of enemy terrain in seconds, Steve turned his eye to knowing each man to the fiber of his being and harnessing of every ounce of potential. Like the artist whose paintings seem more lifelike than their subjects, Steve brought out something in his men not visible to the naked eye.

For example, Morita could never sleep the night before a run, so Steve gave him sentry duty and particularly stiff coffee. Dernier - who became chattier the more nervous he was - often followed Morita out to keep him company. French lessons became a group pastime during the long marches and recon missions. The lessons mostly consisted of Jones rattling off vocabulary for Steve to memorize, occasionally throwing in a grammar point or two. Morita, after a few nights too many of listening to Dernier’s late night, anxiety-fueled monologues, gave in and decided to learn French too. With Morita joining in, Gabe’s French lessons took on a more logical set up. Soon enough, each of the commandos had a tenable grasp of a few common phrases which they gleefully hurled at Dernier, just to watch him flinch at their botched pronunciation.

Dugan’s bowler hat became a thing of legend. The hat itself was nothing extraordinary, a cheap thing the struggling circus had thrown at Dugan the day they hired him and told him to start growing a mustache. Cheap as it may be, Dugan treasured it above all things. He’d deny it until he was red in the face, but he was almost certainly superstitious about the hat. The right side had a blurry streak, a singe mark shaped like a comet’s tail from where a sniper’s bullet just barely missed its mark. Dugan insisted that the oversized hat threw off the sniper’s calculations and saved his life. Bucky neglected to point out that his hat is probably exactly what would have attracted a sniper in the first place. But after the “Czechoslovakia Incident,” arguing about leaving the hat behind became a moot point.

During their retreat, a gust of hot air blew the bowler hat off of Dugan’s head and into the path of the oncoming tanks. To Steve’s undisguised horror, Dugan pivoted without hesitation, nearly diving under tank treads to retrieve his hat, As soon as they returned to camp, Steve headed straight to the USO girls, borrowed a few bobbypins, and set to work permanently fixing that damned hat to Dum Dum’s head. The mens’ pockets now all rattled with spare pins.

Just as well as Steve knew his men, his men knew him.

Steve was the best to pitch a tent with. He took up more than his fair share of the tent, but he radiated enough body heat keep his tent mate warm even in the middle of Belgian winter. Bucky ran
a close second in the competition for human stove, but the team quickly learned to keep a polite distance. Bucky talked in his sleep and often woke up in a confused panic. After the first few embarrassing incidents, the team knew enough not to comment when Bucky showed up for watch duty at odd hours. If they noticed that Bucky stopped having nightmares when he slept with the Captain, no one mentioned it. Instead they grumbled about the two warmest bodies sleeping together and leaving everyone else to freeze. The body heat, they joked, must be a Brooklyn thing.

The bond between Barnes and Rogers was obvious in the way that the sky is obvious. If you thought to look for it, there it was, right above your head and clear no matter how much you tilt your head or squint your eyes. The team sometimes felt like they could almost hear thoughts passing between Barnes and Rogers, conversations carried in meaningful glances or smug looks. They fought like an old couple, bickering playfully in front of the men and saving the scalding arguments for late night sentry duty. The men sometimes devolved into imagining what the two of them might have been back like back in Brooklyn. They both ate their field meals without hesitation and stitched their socks with perfect needlework that spoke to hungrier times and premature adulthood.

Jones was the first to suggest going hunting and foraging to supplement their army rations. He pitched it as a matter of morale (no unit could properly function on foul army fodder indefinitely) and the rumblings in Steve’s own stomach prompted him to accept. Once Jones cooked their first catch - two plump ducks - there was no turning back. From a packet of salt, boiled water, and some less than trustworthy wild onions, Jones conjured up a bone broth that could chase out even the alpine cold. The duck meat itself, juicy and brown, only cemented hunting into their camp procedure. Jones was appointed cook and proceeded to exploit the position mercilessly. Cigarettes for the piece of duck with the crispiest skin. A flask of Dernier’s wine for a cup of meat drippings to pour over the morning’s bread. Out of consideration for a superhuman metabolism, Jones always set aside an extra serving for Steve, leaving it discreetly in the Captain’s tent after dinner. (If he tried to offer it to Steve openly, Steve would refuse immediately out of fairness to the team.)

For all that he was a social person, however, Jones insisted on bathing alone, taking to shallow rivers and creeks when the others dove into crystal, bottomless lakes. If the sight of the deep blue abyss struck a little fear into his heart, Jones would never admit to it. He’d drown before he let a soul know he couldn’t swim. It was precisely on his safe, shallow time in the stream near camp that he caught sight of Barnes downstream. In all their time, he’d never actually seen Barnes undress. He’d simply chalked Barnes up as a prude who’d rather change in the privacy of his tent. One glance at Barnes’s emaciated, bathing frame made it clear why he never changed in public. Bucky’s torso was littered with a mosaic of shiny scar tissue, keepsakes from stray shrapnel and explosions a few inches too close. But what stuck out more were Bucky’s ribs, visible even at a distance. Bucky cleaned his plate ever night but he was clearly wasting away, even with the little bit of extra food coming out of the Commando’s field kitchen. Jones never mentioned the issue to Bucky, simply left a second extra plate in Roger’s tent. Bucky never said a word to Jones, but the little bit of flesh back in Barnes’s cheeks spoke enough to his gratitude. When the sniper bullets rained down around Jones like prayers from above, Gabe couldn’t regret a single missing morsel.

The Commandos did not spend as much time on the battlefield as Steve had first imagined. He couldn’t be too chagrined, however, because time resting and debriefing in London meant more time to see Peggy. Besides, his men needed the recovery time between battles in a way that Steve never did. For that matter, Bucky didn’t need nearly so much time either, though that was a fact only the two of them knew. Bucky’s ability to stay out of the hospital was chalked up to sheer dumb luck - motherfucking lucky Barnes, to quote Dugan - and the truth stayed hidden in bandages changed behind closed doors. It also meant Bucky couldn’t get anything to deal with his pain either, and Steve was as relieved by that fact as he was bothered to see the way Bucky choked down a grimace.
while walking around waiting for the crushed bones in his foot to heal. These were the secrets they kept.

Steve took to drawing to fill some of the time on base. The drawing itself often attracted attention, made Steve uncomfortable, and so he withdrew to corners where no one would find him. A lot of the time, he drew Peggy. Drew her curls and sweeping eyelashes, the angle of her shoulders as she fired at the taxi in a busy New York Street. Steve could draw pin-up girls - hunger was a strong motivator to broaden one’s artistic scope - but the drawings of Peggy required an entirely different set of talents. On his pages, she looked out of the corner of her eye, a look that said she was already two steps ahead of you. Each sketch was a delicate snapshot, a moment frozen in time to commemorate one little thing she’d done, she’d said that had made him fall just a little bit harder.

Steve guarded the drawings of Peggy jealously, mortified that anyone might see them. After all, as any artist knows, the picture says far more about the artist than the subject. Steve’s infatuation was scrawled over those images so blatantly a total stranger would know them for what they were.

So, of course, Bucky found them. He hadn’t meant to find them, had simply been flipping through Steve’s sketch books out of boredom one night. Steve had never said so much out loud, but the notebooks were an off-limits possession. Or at least, to everyone but Bucky. The drawings of Carter were beautiful, love letters spelled out in charcoal. They were different than anything Bucky had ever seen in Steve’s sketches before. In the old days, Steve had drawn Bucky over and over. But the style had been different. The lighting was always harsher, playing with light and shadow, the light in his eyes against the shadows in the hollows of his collar. Bucky had always seemed to be in motion in those sketches too, smiling or bending over to pick up the paper. The pencil had never lingered long on any one detail. He’d drawn a detailed portrait of Bucky only once, one of the rare times he actually asked Bucky to sit still long enough for a drawing. Bucky had obliged, suddenly awkward under an artist’s eye. An hour or so later, Steve had finished, but he hesitated to show Bucky.

“It’s not right,” Steve had said, frowning at the portrait. Bucky came over to see, but Steve pulled the sketch pad up against his chest, hiding it.

“Come on, I’ve never known you to draw something bad. Lemme see.”

Steve shook his head, chewing his lip.

“Stevie, I posed for practically a day. I don’t care if you made my ears too big or my nose more crooked than it already is. Just let me see.”

Slowly, painstakingly slowly, Steve lowered the sketchpad, tilting it so Bucky could see. At first, Bucky couldn’t understand why Steve was so embarrassed. It was a good portrait, something in the tilt of the brows and the crinkle by his eyes that could only have been Bucky Barnes.

“It’s a damn good drawing, Steve,” Bucky reassured him, shaking Steve by the shoulders. “I don’t see what there’s to be embarrassed about.”

But the longer Bucky looked, the more something turned in his stomach. It was his own face alright, but not the way it looked in the mirror. It was his face through someone else’s eyes, an expression he’d only ever felt on his face but had never seen. Something about the relaxed smile felt more intimate than pencil on paper. Perhaps because he knew he hadn’t been making that face, that this was pulled from Steve’s memory. The detail with which that memory was reproduced, that was what unnerved Bucky. Every line was meticulous and echoed affection, and while Bucky couldn’t pinpoint why, the longer he looked, the more it felt like the picture was trying to tell him something else entirely.
“Really, Steve, it’s great,” he managed, his throat constricting a little. “My schnoz is a bit big, but hey, I like it.”

Steve shut the sketchbook, hiding the picture again. “Thanks.”

When Bucky snuck out of bed to look at the picture again that night, it was gone, torn from the pad. Something inside him hurt at that, but he and Steve never spoke of the portrait again. Bucky had posed any number of times for pictures after that, but never a portrait, not like that one.

These pictures of Peggy reminded me of the portrait he never got to keep, a cypher he never finished decoding. He bit back the urge to rip the pages out. He was supposed to be happy Steve was so in love. Bucky took a calming breath, then another, and kept flipping through the pad. Mess halls. London gardens. An overturned mug.

Steve came back to find Bucky flipping through the notebook, same as he always had in Brooklyn. When he leaned over to see what Bucky was looking at, he realized this was the notebook with Peggy. Judging by how far Bucky was, he had definitely seen the drawings. Steve felt inexplicably guilty.

Bucky closed the book and looked up at Steve with a teasing grin.

“Damn, looks like you found yourself a prettier model here, Stevie.”

“Turns out I’m actually a pretty decent artist and just never knew it ‘cause all I drew was your mug and piles of shipping crates.”

“And Van Gogh cut off his ear. Some hardship for you, having an ugly roommate and an apartment with a lousy view.”

Steve smiled, one of those rare relaxed smiles that said he was reminiscing about Brooklyn.

“Can’t wait to go back. London’s nice, but it ain’t Brooklyn.” Bucky was, for a moment, indecently happy. A beat of comfortable silence passed between them.

“You love her?” Bucky asked.

Steve didn’t respond for a long time.

“I dunno, Buck. I’d tell you I loved canned beans after a long hike.”

“And you’re thinking you only love her ‘cause she’s the first woman to ever look your way?” It was a ridiculous notion. Steve and Peggy were made for each other. Bucky could tell that much from day one, had been convinced of it every day they spent in London. He hated being back in London. Hated the field too, but at least he knew what exactly he was fighting out there.

“Look, Steve. Maybe you don’t know it yet, but you’re supposed to be with Carter.” Bucky picked up the sketchpad, waving the evidence in Steve’s face.

“You’re supposed to be with Carter.”

Steve looked at the sketchpad, then up to Bucky.

“Am I?”

For whatever reason, those words hurt. They hurt far more than Bucky was ready to stand. To hear that Steve loved Peggy was one thing. It would have been the prophecy he’d been waiting for.
An end of a war, a marriage, and a London flat far, far from Brooklyn and Bucky. But Steve wouldn’t give him that closure, than finality, and that uncertainty - that little glimmer of forbidden hope - was going to eat him up inside.

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The next day, Bucky tore one of the drawings out of the notepad. Steve would know, no matter how cleanly Bucky stole it.

He took the picture to Peggy, cruising into her office at lunch time when he knew Steve would be off at a meeting. Peggy didn’t look surprised to see him in the slightest, though that could just have been thanks to her acting talents.

“Was hoping I could ask you a favor, Agent Carter.”

“For the last time, call me Peggy.”

“Peggy.”

Bucky slid into the chair across the desk.

“So, you know, all the men here have pictures of their girls. For, you know, lonely times.”

Peggy, to Bucky’s disappointment, did not squirm at the innuendo.

“Yes, I’m aware. I didn’t think I was quite your type. Steve says you’ve got a thing for blondes?”

Bucky’s shit-eating grin was real this time. He honestly couldn’t dislike Peggy, not even when he tried.

“Agreed, you’re not my type, but you sure as hell are Steve’s type.”

“Is that so?” A knowing quirk of the eyebrow.

Bucky unfolded the picture in his pocket as a response. It spoke for itself and it felt almost voyeuristic watching Peggy’s reaction. He’d laid Steve’s confession on the table, clear as day. Peggy’s face went soft and she quickly folded the portrait back up, stowing it in her desk. To look at alone, no doubt.

“Steve’s got half a dozen like that,” Bucky continued, “I figure though he might want a picture of the real thing, if you’ve got a photo to spare.”

“Did he ask you to deliver this?”

Bucky shot her a look. “You kidding me? He’s gonna skin me when he finds out. But I’m not gonna let him get in his own way. Doesn’t matter what you give him, I’m sure he’ll love it.” Bucky stood to leave, swiping the apple from Peggy’s lunch.

“Delivery fee,” he explained, before dashing out the door.

Steve, to Bucky’s relief, wasn’t angry at all about Bucky going behind his back. If anything, he seemed a little relieved. Apparently whatever photo he’d gotten was well worth the embarrassment. Maybe it had been more than a photo, but Bucky wasn’t asking questions he didn’t want answers to.

The little black and white fit perfectly into the lid of the Cap’s compass. She’d help him find the
way home. It was fitting.

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:
1) World War 2 era headlines can get pretty ridiculous (the clickbait of another time). News reel narration was even more over-dramatic. To me, the name "howling commandos" sounded like the product of a rushed journalist trying to think of something original, rather than anything the team would have come up with on their own. Hence, the origin story for their name.
2) In the '40s, public pools were still segregated and generally not accessible to the average African-American, so my head canon is that Gabe never learned to swim (at least not before the war). I imagine that the Commandoes probably went out swimming a lot on their hikes between bases, which would perhaps bring out problems for Gabe and (likely) Jim. While the HC are a progressive unit for the time, I've always liked to imagine how their interactions might be affected by their different backgrounds. (It's never as harmonious as the propaganda reels want you to think.)
3) I am a fan of the theory that Bucky's family is Jewish, so I'm always looking to drop in a little Yiddish here and there. (No research for this one, just "what would my grandma say?")
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

As promised, at least this chapter came out in a timely manner. This is one of the scenes I’d been most excited to write (which means, heads up, it's pretty dark).

The captured soldier was sandy haired and stupid, probably around Bucky’s age, and not loyal enough to pop his cyanide capsule. Unfortunately for the soldier, he was smart enough – or perhaps dumb enough – to try to hide under the bodies and play dead when the Commandos ambushed his patrol. Dernier discovered the man when combing the bodies for ammo and intel. The moment before he was discovered, the HYDRA soldier tried to jump Dernier, maybe hoping he could take a hostage and make it out alive. It was enough to tell Bucky that the man might not be the smartest, but he did want to live, a combination perfect for a field interrogation.

After a brief struggle, Dernier had no issue taking down the fallen soldier. Dernier kept his weapons in all kinds of strange places and the HYDRA soldier was unlikely to get something as easy as a holstered gun off of him. Rather than put a bullet through his brain though, Dernier seemed to have the same thought as Bucky, knocking the man out with the butt of his gun.

Gabe strode over, pocketing his newfound ammo, and slung the soldier’s limp body over his shoulder.

“It’s our lucky day, Cap.”

Steve nodded, though his eyes had gone darker. Information was a good thing, but his mind was already ahead to how to get it. He had a sinking feeling “please” was not going to cut it. The same thought occurred to each of the men, gazes sinking to their toes, looking shiftily at each other. Bucky felt nothing. Not anxious. Not guilty. Not even angry. He knew this sort of thing was only a matter of time, had made his decision about his role on the team before there was even a team to speak of. He looked up at Steve, putting on his best smirk.

“Leave this to me, Steve. We always knew I was the better charmer of the two of us.”

“Buck, no ---“

“Sorry, Steve, remind me again who talked old lady O’Malley into discounting oranges for you on account of your needing more vitamins than normal folks?”

“Buck..”

“Or how many times did I convince some back alley idiot to leave you alone before he bashed your face in?”

“A few, but…”

“And you are failing to convince me you’re a better man for the job right now.”

Steve had that look on his face, a gritted jaw that said everything he couldn’t put into words. It said Steve saw right through Bucky but knew he couldn’t speak his mind in front of their audience.
The slit of his eyes said he knew Bucky had played him like a fiddle. But the true anger was turned inwards, balled in his fists, anger at himself for feeling relieved that Buck would take this bullet.

Before Steve could regroup, Bucky closed the distance between himself and Gabe, gesturing for him to bring the captured soldier along. Composure regained, Steve seized Bucky before he left the clearing, grabbing Bucky’s arm in a way that felt like it might bruise. Bucky wasn’t sure if it was Steve’s hand trembling or his own body shaking. Steve leaned in close, voice so low no one else would hear.

“Buck, don’t do anything you don’t need to do, alright? And…” a quick sideways glance at the men who were looking everywhere but at Steve, “don’t kill him, alright? For me? If he wants to live that bad, there’s gotta be a reason, right? Listen..”

Bucky cut him off before Steve could get any words under his skin, chip away at Bucky’s thin defenses. If he felt an ounce of sympathy for their captive, that was it. He wouldn’t be able to do it.

“Promise, Steve. Now let me get this over with.”

Buck hurried off, trying to wipe Steve’s words from his mind. He didn’t care if this man wanted to live or not. They all wanted to live, nothing special about that. He knew their captive would put a bullet in any of them if it meant even a remote chance of escape. He turned that thought into armor. Kill or be killed. And who knew, maybe there was a way out of this where the man lived. He was almost being too kind, he told himself, for even entertaining the idea of letting the man live. Bucky seized on that thought and led Gabe deeper and deeper into the woods, wondering how far they’d need to go that Steve wouldn’t hear anything. They’d probably need to go farther than Gabe could carry their prisoner.

When Gabe began to slow, shooting looks at Bucky as if to ask “Isn’t this far enough?”, Bucky signaled for Gabe to stop and looked around for a young tree slim enough to bind their prisoner to. The two of them worked in sober silence, tying their captive to a young pine. Neither of them looked at the unconscious man’s face.

“I’ll wait for him to wake up. You go ahead and get back to the others. Send someone if I’m not back by nightfall.”

Gabe looked at him, thin-lipped.

“You don’t have to do this alone, you know.”

“Do what?” Bucky asked. “We’re just gonna have a little chat, talk a bit about his job, and then I’ll send him home.”

“Sarge.” A cold accusation of bullshit uttered in a single syllable.

“Go,” Bucky told him, an order if Jones was going to remind him of his rank.

With one last apologetic look back, Jones slunk off, giving Bucky his privacy. Bucky waited until even his enhanced hearing couldn’t hear Gabe’s footsteps. Soon the only sound in the clearing was the slow breathing of his sleeping captive. Bucky still couldn’t look at his face. He pulled his knife out, fiddled with it, twirling it between his fingers. The fidgeting helped a little, kept his mind off the tense waiting game.

Soon enough, the sound of the captive’s breathing changed, just a small hitch, a few quick breaths, and then back to the slow, deep slumber of before. The prisoner was awake, though he knew enough to pretend he was still asleep. Biding his time. Something in Bucky’s heart clenched,
wanting to go along with the charade. Buy himself a few more moments. He took a deep breath and stuck the knife back in his belt, praying that by some miracle he wouldn’t be made a liar again today.

“I know you’re awake,” he called from across the clearing. The prisoner flinched at his voice, hesitantly opening his eyes. For a split second, his fear read plain across his face before he schooled his expression, turning hard. It was a decent front, though it wavered as Bucky approached. Bucky’s palms were empty but the knife on his hip made the threat on his behalf. The man’s eyes flashed back and forth between Bucky’s face and his hip, as if unsure which was the greater threat. In the end, he stared ahead, stoic and determined not to look at Bucky at all. Like a kid who thought not looking at the needle would make the shot hurt less.

“Look,” Bucky crooned, “it really can go the easy way. I don’t want to be here either, alright? You tell me what I need to know, and I let you out of here still breathing and with your bones in all the right places.”

“Hail HYDRA.”

Bucky barely dodged the spit flying for his face.

“Come on, we both know you don’t buy that shit. Real HYDRA fight to the last man standing. You’re a lousy excuse for a HYDRA agent, and we both know it, so quit the fucking act.”

The prisoner stared off into the middle distance, tight-lipped.

Bucky sighed, refocused on the task at hand.

“Look, I’ve got three questions for you. I know the answer to two of them. You lie about any of them and I stop being nice, understood?”

The prisoner swallowed hard but otherwise didn’t dignify him with a response.

Swallowing down the taste of bile in his throat, Bucky strode forward and delivered an uppercut directly to the man’s liver. The prisoner yelped, rasping as he caught his breath. He’d stopped ignoring Bucky though, gaze locked on Bucky with a look that finally understood the gravity of his situation. With one hand resting on his knife hilt, Bucky planted himself in front of the prisoner.

“Question 1. What time was your patrol supposed to report back? When will they notice you’re gone?”

Pale-faced, the prisoner looked back and forth between Bucky’s hand and his mouth. Bucky could tell he was on the edge of talking, just needed a push. When the prisoner’s next breath didn’t exhale an answer, Bucky’s left fist reconnected with the man’s liver, meeting tender flesh. Another yelp and a gasp.

“How long?” Bucky prodded, stepping into the man’s space.

“Five hours, probably. We report back at nineteen-hundred.”

Bucky recalled Morita and Gabe’s recon reports, felt like they’d mentioned a regular patrol that came in around that time. The “three questions” gambit was all a bluff, but Bucky knew how easy it was to lie under pressure. He’d read all about in the files Philby lent him back in London. More than that, he knew from experience. Bucky would have said anything, back on Zola’s table, if it could have made the pain stop. He needed to be more careful than mere blunt force. Bad intel here would get them all killed.
“Question 2. Is Arnim Zola in the base?” All of their intel seemed to indicate Zola was in some sort of safehouse. The odds he was marauding about somewhere in the countryside was unlikely.

The prisoner shot him a puzzled expression, taken off guard.

“Why do you want to…” Bucky cut off the question by quickly unsheathing his knife. The glint of silver shut down the prisoner’s question in an instant.

“I ask the questions. Zola, is he here?”

“No, no.” The prisoner shook his head furiously, eyes locked on the blade. Something in Bucky sighed with relief. A little reassurance that Zola wasn’t waiting. Bucky couldn’t escape him in his dreams, but at least in real life there were miles and miles between them.

“Question 3. What’s this week’s passcode?” At that the soldier stiffened, sensing this was a question he shouldn’t answer. His reaction also betrayed that he knew the answer. A man who didn’t know would have started pleading, maybe crying, betrayed some sort of desperation. All this man showed was fear.

“The passcode,” Bucky demanded, voice dropping low, his own eyes flickering down to the blade. The passcodes the foot soldiers knew were only good for a week, would only get them access to the most basic rooms, but it was more than enough to get the team through the base.

“No, no, please, they know where my family is…if they found out I was the one who told you…”

Bucky didn’t care if the words were true or not, the word “family” hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. Lies, lies, lies, he told himself. The prisoner is just trying to manipulate you.

Bucky’s hand flew on its own, a flash of silver making a blinding line across the prisoner’s chest, where the skin was thin but devoid of critical arteries. The man yelled, half in shock and half in pain.

“I don’t give a shit if you’ve got a family or not,” he hissed into the prisoner’s ear, leaning in so he didn’t have to look him in the eyes. He brought the blade back up, rested the cool metal against the man’s throat. He pressed ever so slightly, just so the man could understand just how sharp it was.

“The passcode.”

“It’s…it’s…” the prisoner stammered, looking everywhere but at Bucky’s eyes. Bucky could feel that whatever came next would only be a lie.

Barnes brought the blade down from the soldier’s neck and dragged it in a crimson line across his collar bone, pulling it out with a small twist in the hollow below the bone. The prisoner screamed – truly screamed – for the first time.

“Don’t you dare fucking lie to me,” he threatened, voice steely quiet.

The man seemed to be considering, so Bucky reached down, grabbed the man’s hand and broke the first finger he got ahold of. It was like ripping off a band-aid, the faster Bucky did it, the less painful it would be. Less painful for Bucky, anyway.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Bucky whispered, the point of his knife nestled between the man’s ribs, “the question I didn’t know the answer to was Zola. Play me here, buddy, and this knife goes through your ribs. Give me the answer I’m waiting to hear, and my knife cuts you free and maybe someday you’ll see that family of yours, assuming that’s not all a lie too.” He pushed the knife in just
a little, just enough to draw a drop of blood. His own heart was hammering. He couldn’t play this
game much longer. If he got this one answer, it’d be good enough.

“936525.”

It came out so fast Bucky hardly registered the man had answered. It seemed to pain the prisoner
to say. Bucky dug the knife in again and the man repeated the number in a pained yelp. Desperation
tinged his voice and he repeated the number a third time, unprompted. Bucky quickly pulled out a
pencil and scribbled the number on his arm, though he doubted he’d be forgetting it, not the way the
man was whimpering it, some mumbled prayer.

“937525?” Bucky repeated back, waiting to see if the man would catch the false number. If it
was a fake, odds are the man wouldn’t notice.

The man shook his head, growing paler and paler.

“Six, six! 9-3-6-5-2-5, I swear that’s it. I swear!” The prisoner was shaking now, all bravado
gone. He believed Bucky, believed he could leave here alive. He’d sold his alliance to HYDRA for
his own hide. And he’d taken Bucky’s bait. Bucky backed away, cocked his gun. The sound of the
click launched the soldier into near hysterics. He writhed against his ropes, hyperventilating as
Bucky leveled the barrel at his head, expressionless.

“I told you not to lie to me. I told you.”

The prisoner went mute with terror, eyes glued shut, bracing himself. But he didn’t utter another
word. No new numbers, no “wait, I know more!” He had given up his most valuable secret. Bucky
was convinced. He lowered the gun, loudly put the safety back on. The sound opened the prisoner’s
eyes. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked on the verge of tears. There was a certain smell of
ammonia that Bucky did his best to ignore.

Bucky pulled out the knife again and the prisoner howled, all bravery bled out of him. Bucky
shut out the sound and set to the man’s ropes. If the man cut himself struggling, Bucky didn’t
particularly care. Soon enough, the man figured out that Bucky was cutting him free and went stock
still, either to help or just from the shock. When the last bond fell free, the man stumbled forward,
his legs giving out beneath him. Bucky kept his expression hard as the prisoner picked himself up off
the forest floor, shaky and weak. Bucky reflexively went to help the man to his feet and he’d already
stretched out a hand before he remembered himself. Instead he seized the man by the front of his shirt
and pulled him to his feet. Blood from the wounds on the man’s chest oozed onto Bucky’s sleeves
and Bucky cursed his thoughtlessness. The stain would make it far harder to sell Steve the sort of
story he wanted to hear.

“I’m letting you go, but when you run, it better be to somewhere HYDRA isn’t. If I find you in
my scope, my bullet goes through your stomach, not your brain. Got it?”

The man nodded mutely.

Bucky let him go with a shove. The man stumbled the first few steps, still getting his legs under
him. He kept glancing back at Bucky in disbelief. Bucky simply rubbed his palm over his face, tired.
But then it hit him. He couldn’t let the man go. He wanted to believe the man wouldn’t go back to
HYDRA. In fact, he was fairly certain the man would head for the hills. But he’d seen too much.
The press thought that the commandos were traveling with an army, and so did the Germans. If
anyone found out how small they really were… Bucky combed through every word he had said,
tried to see if he’d given away anything at all. But he didn’t have time to check his every word. In
two seconds time, the man would be out of range.
Mercifully, Bucky’s gun arm worked on its own accord, having reached the decision before Bucky’s brain. A single clean shot and the man froze in place, a film reel jammed between frames. At close distance, Bucky could see the way the muscles locked up, the way the body’s balance went off kilter from the force of the bullet, the spray and splatter of blood and bone as the bullet met its mark. All things Bucky had seen a dozen times through his scope and in the foxholes. But for some reason, he felt like he’d never seen in from the back.

Nearly as soon as the body hit the ground, Bucky felt the acrid taste of vomit rising in his throat. He quickly leaned against the nearest tree, retching up the pitiful remains of an MRE. He stayed there a moment, breathing too quickly and holding on to the tree for dear life. His gun arm hung limp by his side, the hot barrel so close to his thigh that he could feel the heat radiating off of it through his pant leg. He wasn’t sure how long he stood there like that, fighting for his breath, processing what he’d done. He could hardly recall a time he’d felt like more of a coward. Bucky didn’t have long to ponder though when the sound of boots broke through his racing thoughts. Dum Dum stepped tentatively into the clearing, his eyes first landing on Bucky, then falling to the gun in his hand. Dum Dum’s gaze lingered on the gun before scanning the rest of the scene, finally landing on the body sprawled a few feet away.

“I came when I heard the shot,” he explained, making no comment on either the body or Barnes. He must not have been far away when it happened, probably waiting a respectful distance away in case Barnes needed help. Bucky wondered how much he might have heard. Dum Dum strode past Bucky, offering him a handkerchief and a sympathetic glance. His real attention, however, was on the body. Between the gun, the cut ropes, and the corpse with a hole in the back of its head, it wasn’t a hard story to reconstruct.

“You fired a warning shot and he loosened up. You got what you needed and we let him off with a warning. I saw you release him personally. No worries that he’ll go back to HYDRA.”

The words were for Bucky, though Dum Dum said them with his gaze still fixed on the fallen prisoner.

“You made the right choice, you know. Just wish you hadn’t made it alone. We’re a team.”

Bucky wiped away the last bit of bile and spit from his face, put away his gun, and straightened himself up. He held out his arm for Dum Dum to see, the numbers scrawled quickly on his forearm and plastered into his memory.

“I got the passcode, should get us in the door, probably the armory too,” Barnes said by explanation, trying to shift his attention to explaining the blood on his sleeve. Dum Dum’s handkerchief would handle the blood on the knife. Dum Dum returned to where Bucky was standing, eyebrows furrowed. His voice was softer than Bucky had ever heard it and the gentleness scraped against him. He was not the broken one here. That honor belonged to the still-cooling corpse in the corner.

“It doesn’t always have to be you, Barnes.” Bucky did his best to look Dum Dum in the eyes, to summon his previous bravado.

“Way I see it, I got the least left to lose.”

Dum Dum’s eyes searched Bucky’s expression, looking saddened when he found that Bucky wasn’t lying. He’d seen tired eyes, the hollow shell-shocked kind that longed for the embrace of a mother or death, whichever came sooner. The exhaustion in Bucky’s eyes was of a crueler, colder kind. A man who wasn’t willing to die yet but whose soul already had a foot out the door.
“I think you’ve got a lot more to lose than you know.” Dum Dum tidied Bucky’s uniform, took the gun from his loose hand. “Now we’re gonna get our story straight before we go back and explain that gunshot to Rogers. And you’re going to put your face together and we’re never going to talk about this again. And you’re never going to do this again. Not alone, alright?”

It wasn’t a question, but Bucky wasn’t sure he could deal with any more questions today. He nodded, quiet. He would count to ten and all of this would be behind him. He and Dum Dum would sort out a story and Steve would never need to know. He could go on believing there were pretty ways out of ugly scenarios and the world would keep turning the way it had every day. One, deep breath. Two. Exhale. Three…

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Bucky had hoped the first time would be the last time. There were others, far less cooperative others, and Bucky learned to keep his sleeves rolled up. He left their masks on, when he could, and brought himself back to the memories of Zola’s table. He summoned every ounce of anger in his being, every last trick he could remember from the files, but half the time it wasn’t enough. Half the men bled out before a single secret passed their lips.

When they weren’t in a hurry, Bucky kept his word to Dugan. Dugan came along, stepped in when Bucky was too tired to keep up the questioning. But Dum Dum didn’t have the knack for it either. He could beat a man half to death, but only Bucky could make them tell the truth. More often, though, it was just Bucky running through the base on Steve’s heels, spotting a body in the corner that wasn’t quite dead. He’d developed a sixth sense for survivors, the ones who wouldn’t quite die when they were supposed to. These unlucky souls became the source of the Commando’s luck, spilling just the information Bucky needed when he ground his heel into bullet-riddled flesh. It was…efficient. Steve never understood how Bucky always knew how the bases would explode, could predict the self-destruct patterns, or how he knew where the getaway trucks were hidden. Maybe some part of Steve knew, but in the heat of battle, it was hard to tell what was Bucky’s blood and what wasn’t.

Bucky understood something only the desperately lucky can understand. Luck is not fate’s gift; it must be earned. On the battlefield, that meant you paid the price in your own blood or you found someone else to bleed for you. Motherfucking lucky, that Barnes.

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