Rumlow actually smiles and crackles “our puppet, like you,” his voice so quiet and the words so distorted that Barnes just barely makes them out. He tells himself that they’re just words, and they’re just words designed to elicit an emotional response. It’s been just two months; there’s nothing HYDRA could have done by now, to make those words true. Right?

A story of how far three people will go to bring Steve Rogers home -- and of how far HYDRA will go to bring home their Winter Soldier.

Disclaimer: Captain America, et al are owned by Marvel. All original content and characters belong to me. The opening quote is from "Somewhere" by Run River North.

Characters: Bucky Barnes, Natasha Romanoff, Sam Wilson, Steve Rogers, with appearances by Nick Fury, Tony Stark, Maria Hill, Bruce Banner, Brock Rumlow, Peggy Carter, Chester Phillips, the Howling Commandos, and Becca Barnes. Minor original characters.


Timeline: Begins almost immediately after CA: TWS. This was mostly written before Age of Ultron, Ant-Man, and the Civil War trailer came out and takes very little, if anything, from that canon. This story was written solely based on the first two Captain America movies and the first Avengers movie.

Note: Liberties were taken with regards to Bucky's family, with a deviation from the comics. Some other liberties were taken. Additionally, a few of the locations in the story are fabricated. Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy.

Edited to add: Check out the sequel, The Drowning Wasps, found on my Works page.
Prelude to a Ghost

"Took all that was left of me.
Threw it back into the sea.
To find you."

***

Mahilyow, Belarus. Off Highway 76, near the railway, there's a farm: a mildew-gray, wood house, a crumbling, white barn, a scummy pond, a field of tall weeds.

Bare floorboards creak under his boots. The house is empty, and every sound echoes off the thin, wooden walls.

He remembers this house. He remembers a thin man with thinning red hair and thin wire-rimmed round glasses, leading him through this empty house with its thin walls.

There's an empty bookcase against the south wall, next to a boarded window. The house is empty, except for the empty bookcase.

He walks to it and knows that it swings toward him instead of inward. He pulls on it and is surprised at how easily it opens to a shiny silver metal door, with a dual-access panel on the right-hand side.

Palm and eye, he remembers.

He hesitates.

It's only been six days. What the news stations call "HYDRA" has been in disarray for only that long, and he wonders...

He wonders, if they think he's dead, or if there's anyone left right now to restrict his access, or if they're waiting for him to check in.

He's waited too long to check in.

He wonders, if he should simply rip the door from its frame, or if that would activate a failsafe. It probably would.

He's waited too long.

He slowly straightens his right arm; it doesn't feel entirely broken anymore. Palm pressed flat against the hand reader, a wide, green light oscillates back and forth at eye level, until the whole panel abruptly lights up orange.

The door slides open to a spiraling set of metal stairs, lined by dim yellow, oval lights.

He goes down the stairs.

He reaches an open room without any sort of door. He stops at the entrance, arms at his side.

A man sits at a table, attention focused on an array of computer screens. A black handgun lays next to the mouse, close to the man's hand. The man is familiar: white hair, wrinkled face, square eyeglasses. He's a handler, and a hardware tech, and they call him Nazarri.
There are words, which he's supposed to say. They're words crafted to stop his thoughts. The words want to be said, but he doesn't want to say them. He has questions—

"Identify," Nazarri says.

*James Buchanan Barnes. James Buchanan Barnes. James Buch-

"The Winter is—"

He stops himself, eyes squeezed closed, and thinks of words they never used: *cold, icy, snowy, white, James Barnes, March 10, 1916, James Bar-

He doesn't want to say their words.

Metal scrapes against metal.

He draws and aims his sidearm, before he opens his eyes; when he opens them, it takes a split second to adjust his line of fire and pull the trigger.

Nazarri, uninjured, yelps. The mangled handgun clatters from his hand to the concrete floor.

"Asset, you're out of containment—"

He hadn't wanted it to happen like this. He'd just wanted to ask questions.

It only takes a second to walk to Nazarri and grab his jaw with his left hand and squeeze, though not hard enough to break anything. Hard enough to make a point. Nazarri whimpers anyway, a glob of saliva dribbling down his chin.

*Out of containment.*

He hadn't wanted it to go like this, but that doesn't mean he wasn't prepared for it to. "Michela. Porto Torres. Pretty pink fingernails. Rides her bicycle. Do you love her?"

He remembers from an overheard conversation. It was before a mission, with billboards for the 2012 London Olympics. The girl must still be young.

The man's eyes squeeze close, and the whimpers continue. He squeezes harder, and the whimpers turn to a throaty scream and a strangled, "Yes."

"She's buried, with twenty hours of oxygen. She has fourteen left. Do you think I care?"

He remembers those words from a picture: the moving images reflected against a glass window, the voice of the actor easily heard, a looped IV pierced into his right hand.

Nazarri's eyes widen, Adam's apple bobbing. "Anything. Please."

He releases Nazarri's jaw. "My arm. Remove the trackers."

Nazarri's jaw is clenched, lips trembling, until, finally, he looks at a wooden chair next to the desk and says, "Sit."

He sits, handgun in his lap, left arm on the table. He watches Nazarri type a string of commands onto a thin, black keyboard, and then sees a schematic of an arm appear on the center monitor.

"You broke your programming," Nazarri comments, eyes on the monitor. Over a dozen spots on
the schematic highlight yellow. "Again. You're quite good at that."

_Broke your programming._

He doesn't answer. He watches Nazarri pull out a pouch of tools that smell like leather and metal, and he watches Nazarri peel plates from his wrist and forearm. Nazarri neatly lines the plates up on the table, in precise order.

"I don't care about HYDRA," Nazarri says, while he peels. "I don't care about you. None of this matters to me."

He doesn't answer. Not a moment later, dull plodding echoes from the stairwell. He moves his eyes from his arm to Nazarri, right hand tightening around his handgun.

Nazarri keeps working.

He doesn't know what it means, only there's usually at least two people at any safe house, and so this must be the second.

"Nazarri, I have your fucking laza—"

The man crumples, a bullet through his right eye and out the back of the skull. Nazarri spares only a glance, a wince, and a hand to his ear, before refocusing on the arm.

"That was my dinner."

He doesn't answer. He lowers his right arm and the gun in his hand.

More silver plates come off the arm and are laid onto the desk. Then, Nazarri takes longer and digs further, reaching under a plate by the elbow with a long pair of tweezers.

The first tracker already comes out.

Nazarri holds it up, balanced in the pair of tweezers. "Damaged and nonfunctional. EMP, likely."

It _clinks_ onto the table.

In his head, there's an image of a red-haired woman; it goes together with "EMP." He doesn't know why. There are also words and voices, running into each other: _Mr. Pierce, we won't have time to repair the failsafes. If he- He won't. He's wiped. He's ours again, for long enough. That's all we need._

He looks at the schematic displayed on the monitor. The next device will be just above his elbow.

_Ours again._

It takes only minutes for Nazarri to uncover and find it, then pull it out. Thirty centimeters of silver and black wiring comes out with it, from all the way down his forearm and hand.

"Deactivates the entire arm. Damaged."

He doesn't answer, and Nazarri keeps working and talking.

"HYDRA means nothing to me. These devices? You didn't know about." Nazarri gestures at a circular, wiry device: the first one that came out. "This is a kill switch. HYDRA flips button, boom, you die. I didn't have to remove it, or the two others still in your arm. But: I don't care that you live."
I just care that I don't die. And that my Michela doesn't die."

_Kill switch._

He doesn't answer.

"Please don't hurt my Michela."

He doesn't answer.

Another device _clinks_ onto the table.

"A disabler. Kills the arm. There are four of them," Nazarri says, and keeps talking. "Michela does not know HYDRA. She is just twelve. A schoolgirl. She loves puzzles."

_Disabler._

He doesn't answer.

Another tracker. Another disabler. Another kill switch. The arm is nothing but raw, exposed wires, and Nazarri is nothing except empty, thin words that string together into a conclusion -

"Was I a prisoner?" he asks, his first words in hours.

Nazarri stops working, still hunched over the arm. Nazarri looks him in the eyes and says, "Of course. You didn't know?"

_Wipe him. Start over._

"How long?"

He thinks, briefly, of the museum, of the picture of someone who looks nothing like him, of the picture with the name that Captain America had given him, and remembers the date there: _1945_.

Nazarri shrugs, focused on the arm again. "Many years, but no longer. You are to be killed on sight."

1945.

A newspaper he'd glimpsed in Minsk said it was 2014.

_Your work has shaped the century. I need you to do it one more time._

The last device hits the table, and Nazarri spreads his hands. Sweat beads on his red, thin face.

"Satisfied?"

Nazarri gestures to the monitor. He followed Nazarri's progress, much like a map. He's as satisfied as he'll ever be.

"Back together," he says.

Nazarri wipes his forehead with his upper arm, wipes his sweaty hands on his brown cloth pants, and puts the arm back together, a plate at a time. For once, the man has no words.

Once Nazarri's finished, he runs his right hand over the length of the left arm, ensuring the plates are installed smoothly. He takes his right hand away and shifts the plates, makes a fist and moves
the fingers. It's all in order.

Nazarri turns to the keyboard and pulls up two more diagrams, each on different screens. One is clearly a brain, and the other is another diagram of the arm. Nazarri points to the screens.

"MEA microchips in your posterior parietal cortex and primary motor cortex, linked to chips in your shoulder and hand. They help your damaged nerves move the arm. Another microchip in the amygdala-helps erase memories and control emotional reactions, when interfaced with HYDRA computers. You would not survive their removal."

He'd known about the trackers. He hadn't known about the disablers, the kill switches, or the chips.

Another diagram comes up: a skull, with teeth. The diagram shows two objects. Nazarri points. "Bottom left molar, upper right molar. Trackers."

Another diagram: a leg. He memorizes the location of the object on the diagram. "Outer left thigh, upper region. Another tracker. HYDRA took very few chances with you."

Nazarri turns away from the computer. "I did not need to tell you about those. But I don't care about HYDRA. Do you see? I'll help you do anything, for Michela."

"Is that all?" he asks.

Nazarri nods. "That I know about."

There's a wall vault, similar to a banker's safe deposit box, in almost every location like this that he can remember. Those vaults contain his lives.

"The vault," he says.

"The wall, over there. Behind the cabinet. Take it all. I don't ca—"

Nazarri falls backward against the chair, limp. The rolling chair rolls, and Nazarri's body slumps off of it, onto the floor.

He lowers the handgun, steps to the wall, and rips a small, square cabinet from it. Behind the cabinet is a handle, and, when he pulls, a long, rectangular metal box slides out.

Inside, there are five passports: American (Matthew Taylor), Russian (Alexi Zuyev), Italian (Pietro Bassani), German (Jakob Gehrig), and Canadian (Daniel Sanders). None of them say James Barnes, but they wouldn't, would they?

Instinctually, he finds himself more familiar with Russian, and so he puts the Russian passport on top and opens it again.

It says he was born 8 September 1984. It says his name is Alexi Mikhailovich Zuyev. The photograph shows a man, brown hair pulled back, without expression, nothing in his eyes. He says the name out loud, feels it slip around his mind: "Alexi Zuyev."

There is also paper money in the drawer: $16,000 USD in various currencies, bundled in increments of $2,000.

_Enough to get you by, in case you miss exfil. Don't._

He closes his eyes, shoves that splinter of a memory away. He drops an empty, black backpack off
of his back and onto Nazarri's desk. He puts the money and passports inside and turns his attention to Nazarri's computer.

HYDRA cells are separate and insular, knowing only what they need to know, and doing only what they need to do. Everything about this cell is on that computer.

He rips open the RAID tower and pulls four hard drives from it. He sticks them all in his backpack. He doesn't know why he does it, only that it feels wrong not to.

Next, he searches through Nazarri's drawers, finding a signal jammer and a pair of long pliers. He turns Nazarri's monitors off and uses one of them as a mirror, then easily extracts the two teeth that have trackers inside. It hurts, but barely.

He drops each tooth and the pliers, spits globs of bright blood onto the gray floor, and shoves the small signal jammer into the front pocket of his bag.

He draws his own combat knife, unzips and pushes his pants down far enough to see his left upper thigh, and slices and digs until he finds a black, wiry device. He pulls it out, bringing bits of muscle, fat, and skin with it, and drops it on the floor, too. The wound bleeds, but not much. He pulls his pants back up and grabs his bag.

On his way out, he picks up the cold bag of Nazarri's dinner. He can't remember the last time he's eaten.

---

Steve passes Sam the Winter Soldier file, neatly contained in a regular manila prong folder, and makes a wordless beeline for the restroom.

Sam looks down at the folder and remembers that he can't read Russian.

After ten or so minutes, the restroom line growing three deep, Steve sidesteps his way down the aisle and all but collapses into the airplane seat. His face is a little white, and he smells a little like puke.

"What?" Sam asks, at the same time as he presses the button for service.

Steve takes a deep breath, glances at the file, and then stares at the seat in front of him. "It's describing his attempts at suicide. All eight of them. And how if he wasn't so good at what they had him doing, they would've just let'em die and be done with it."

Sam closes the file and tucks it between the seats. He doesn't miss the glisten in Steve's eyes, but he sure as hell doesn't say anything about it.

"He was still fighting them. Where was I? I should've..."

There are real tears now. Quiet ones, but Steve just took himself to a bad, bad place, on a long, long flight.

"He was the best person I've ever known. And they..."

Steve covers his face with his hand and slinks down in his seat, legs way too long for whatever he's trying to do.

The flight attendant approaches, looking curiously at Steve. "Headache?"
Sam smiles. "Yeah. He gets real bad migraines. Do you have any Sprite or...?"

"Sure."

"Tissues would be great, too." For that migraine. "Thanks."

The flight attendant walks away, and Sam is stuck trying to figure out something positive to say. What he believes is that there is no way Steve's hunt for the Winter Soldier is going to end well, and what he believes is that there's nothing left of Steve's friend to find.

Sam lies: "It's going to be okay. It's all gonna be okay."

Steve disagrees: "Everything went wrong, Sam. Everything went as wrong as it could. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

Sam looks at his watch: five hours until Berlin, and a lifetime until home again.

---

Two-hundred kilometers northwest of Mahilyow, face pelted by sheets of sleet and his boots sinking into the inundated, half-frozen ground, he comes across a free-standing, white wooden shed. It's leaning violently to the right, its undoubtedly rotted foundation hidden by tall, grassy weeds.

It's as good a place to rest as any.

The wide, rolling door scrapes against its rusted-orange track; though stiff, it's no match against either of his arms.

Inside, it's dark and just as cold as it is outside. The floor is packed dirt, across a small, open, single-story space. His eyes adjusted to the light, he sees that there is nothing inside the shed: just four walls and a leaking roof, with tiny puddles on the ground.

He takes a few long steps into the shed, the sound of rain pelting against the shingled roof, and drops his bag. He breathes out, his breath white, tiny puffs of air that bleed into the dark, stale air.

He sinks to the floor, eyes heavy, tucks his right arm under his head and pulls the bag close to his chest with his left arm.

It's uncomfortable: hard, cold, damp. His stomach groans and twists; it never did that, before. A memory whispers something better: clean water, dry clothes, a thin mattress and a thin blanket, and a prick in his hand that brought calm. That memory whispers HYDRA.

He yearns to go back, even despite Nazarri's words like "prisoner" and "kill on sight." The longer he's on his own—nearly two weeks now—the more he wants those days.

There's another base in northern Russia: he doesn't know the coordinates, he doesn't know the nearest town, but he knows where.

Maybe that's a way home.

---

Sam kicks a black rolling chair away from a silver metal desk. It rolls past a decaying body: gray
hair, gray glasses, black clothes, and cloudy, white eyes. Flies buzz and swirl around the body, and Sam knows exactly what the mass of white worms squirming under the body's skin are.

He guesses the body's been a body for maybe three weeks. Maybe less.

Sam turns around and looks at the desk, noting a wall of black monitors, a black keyboard and mouse, and a group of towers that are ripped open and missing the same thing: hard drives.

Natasha's unnamed, anonymous contact seemed sure that this was Bucky's work; Sam doesn't know enough to agree or disagree.

His back to Sam, Steve is rifling through a dozen or so wiry trinkets on the desk. Sam watches him take his SHIELD phone out of his back pocket and hold it over the desk.

Sam walks over that way, peering around Steve's thick body to take a closer look at the trinkets. He squints his eyes and blinks at a pair of ivory white…things on the desk.

"Bucky was here."

Steve says that at the same moment that Sam realizes those things are molars.

"The teeth are his. DNA confirmed."

Sam notices a pair of pliers, then dried globs of blood on the desk and floor.

He pulled out his own teeth.

That's fucking crazy, Sam thinks.

"The rest of this—" Steve gestures towards the wiry trinkets. "—I bet these are trackers."

Sam picks one up, noting the long string of stiff wires attached to a thick, round black device of some kind. He could buy that it's a tracker.

Captain America, the bastion of all things moral and good, looks like he's just won gold.

"This is good," Steve says.

Sam cocks an eyebrow. Steve just found his long lost best friend's teeth laying on a desk, and he say it's good.

"Yeah?" Sam asks.

Steve nods and moves toward the door. "He knows who his enemy is. In my book, that's pretty damned good."

Just because Bucky might have killed one HYDRA goon, doesn't mean that he's capable of seeing sides. Sam doesn't put his voice to those words.

"Ready?"

Sam takes one last look at this little, hidden room, sees nothing helpful, and gives Steve a single nod. Ready.

It's not until they're in their car and powering down a highway that Sam asks, "Where next?"
Steve's answer is immediate. "Minsk. I figure we can review Maria's report there, map a route, and go from there."

Maria's report is a truncated version of the SHIELD leak materials, noting all of the HYDRA installations revealed in the file dump. Besides Natasha's contacts, and the few locations overtly mentioned in Bucky's file (the one Steve still hasn't read all the way through, not that Sam's keeping track), it's all they have to go on.

It's damn little.

"Okay."

Silence hangs in the air, every moment without words another moment reminding Sam that he and Steve are little more than acquaintances. Right now, he knows Steve enough to know one thing: there's only one topic on his mind.

"Tell me a little bit about him?" Sam asks.

Steve darts between vehicles, the speedometer proving that even Captain America breaks laws. It's not until they've become the head of the vehicle pack, nothing but empty road in front of them, that Steve then answers, as if he's rehearsed this very conversation.

"When he was twenty, he got married. Her name was Anna Elizabeth. No one ever thought he'd settle down, but he never looked back with her." A ghost of a smile stretches Steve's lips. "I liked her a lot. She was good for him."

Sam does the math in his head and starts talking before he really thinks the whole thing through. "Is she still alive? Probably remarried. Kids, grandkids, all that."

A hint of melancholy threatens to settle in his gut, and he resents the idea of feeling bad for Bucky. Before that happens, Steve spares a second to look at Sam – like he's grown an extra head – and asks, "What?"

Sam just looks at him, until Steve finds the proverbial switch for that proverbial lightbulb.

"Oh! Oh. No, she died in '40 – pneumonia. About three months later, my mom died, and he was right there for me. Like he always was."

"Is that why you're doing this?" Sam asks. He thinks he made it sound like a bad thing; he hadn't meant to, even though he thinks Steve is chasing a fairy tale.

"He was always there for me, no matter what I said, or what I did, or what was going on with him. He was there. I won't let him do this by himself. If it was the other way around, he wouldn't let me."

Steve's all conviction, all the time. Most of the time, Sam admires it. Right now, he might pity him instead. He chooses his words carefully but packs them with just as much conviction: "And if he won't let you? What then?"

Steve barely hesitates. He just looks at Sam, jaw set. "He's not gonna end here. He's coming home, Sam."
He scales a barbed wire fence, the barbs at the top tearing his clothes but leaving only thin, white scratches across his skin.


*Kill on sight.*

His body aches and aches. He's tired and cold and he *aches.*

He puts his hands in the air.

All he knows is –

A bullet whizzes past his arm. Another tears through his gut. Another two hit his right arm. More *plink* against his left arm.

He sees red.

There's no coming home.

Strategically, the best move is to go back over the fence and run away. He's outnumbered and outgunned in unfamiliar territory. He could die.

He sprints forward, outrunning the searchlight and blending into the darkness. The dark cover won't help him for long: they'll have thermal cameras and night-vision goggles.

He kills the first person he gets close to: snapping the neck, slipping the night-vision goggles off the person's head, and taking the rifle.

The world turns a familiar green. A bullet skims his right arm.

He walks, aims, and shoots: the closer targets first, then the ones further out, then the six-person group storming out of the entrance to the building, and then twelve others who come out of the building.

A thought scampers through his head: *this is what they used me for.*

At the entrance to the three-story, gray building, his own blood drips onto the cracked concrete. He ignores it and steps inside.

The walls inside the concrete building are concrete and unpainted. The concrete, unpainted walls are lined with red lightbulbs that are flashing red. A screeching alarm screeches. The concrete, unpainted ceiling is lined with bright, white lights.

Something about it all is familiar. He doesn't waste time thinking about why.

He kills another soldier, drops his own expended rifle, and takes the dead soldier's rifle. He clears the first floor: every room, every corner, every hallway, killing everyone he sees.

He can't go home. He *wants to* so bad.

He advances to the second floor, which has the same concrete walls, the same ceiling lights, the same red, flashing lightbulbs, and the same screeching alarm. He kills the same kind of people, over and over and over again, and clears the floor: every room, every corner, every hallway.

He advances to the third floor, which has the same concrete walls, the same ceiling lights, the
same red, flashing lightbulbs, and the same screeching alarm. He kills the same kind of people, more and more and more and more of them than before—

A bullet tears through his right ankle. In an instant, he backtracks the bullet's trajectory and kills the person who'd shot it.

—until he finally, finally, he finds what he's looking for.

It's the fifth door he opens, inside the fifth room he finds on the third floor. It's a tall man standing in front of a wooden desk, wearing a black business suit instead of fatigues. A black handgun is laying on the desk, and the man holds a manila folder in his hands.

Every base has a person like this: home.

He lowers the rifle.

"The Winter is..."

He doesn't remember the last word. He can't go home, without that word.

The man waits.

"Please," he says, instead.

The response is: "The Asset has exceeded its breach of containment limit. The disposal protocol has been activated. Stand down."

Those word mean nothing, because he doesn't know what they mean.

The man picks up and aims the sidearm from the desk. That's as far as he gets, because he's faster with his rifle.

It's over.

Home is gone.

His body aches.

He should have let the man shoot him.

He has nowhere to go. He has no identity. He has no purpose.

He drops the rifle.

He stands in the room, above the man's bleeding body, and doesn't know what to do. His thoughts are maze-like, drifting in circles, and the only thing they can find is there's no point.

No point.

The building trembles, a roaring boom echoing through the walls and floor. The window behind the desk cracks, splinters, then shatters. The room tilts and sways, and he looks down at the rolling, wave-like floor.

They blew the building.

He runs toward the desk, slides across its paper-strewn surface, drops to his feet, sprints another
few steps, and jumps out of the window.

The building sits on the edge of a frigid Russian shoreline, and the window overlooks the base's harbor. As he falls, he sees a myriad of boats: some large, some small, some metal, some wood.

Legs straight and arms pinned to his side, he enters the water with a minimal splash. The water is cold, colder the deeper he submerges, like – like the river in Washington.

Bricks and slabs of concrete crash into the water. A heavy piece of the building slams into his upper body, knocking the air out of his chest and pushing him deeper and deeper, colder and colder.

Like another river, entombed by walls of ice. Like frozen agony pulsing through his left arm, an afterthought as the ground reached for him, closer and closer and closer. Like hitting solid ice with the left side of his body, hard enough that a horrible snapping sound bounced off of the walls of ice. It sounded like cables snapping one by one by one. It was the red ice—and that was wrong, ice wasn't red—cracking, cracking, cracking.

Like when he plunged into the frigid, slushy water, and like when he sank, deeper and deeper, colder and colder, and he saw the intricate patterns of ice form across the surface. The water swirled red, red, red, even as he reached up, up, up, up with his right hand. Like –

His back hits the silty riverbed. He uses its leverage to push the concrete block off of his body, the effort triggering a tearing feeling in his stomach. He ignores it and kicks up, up, up, and breaks through to the surface and icy air.

Even in the dark, he can see that the building is all but gone. A film of dust and ash hangs heavy in the air, attaches to his eyes. Fiberglass and wood debris float past him. He swims past the debris: kicking the sinking remains of boats, batting away the destroyed remnants of others. In the near distance, he sees the outline of one that still floats, and he swims to that one.

It's a black boat with a long nose, and it looks intact. He pulls himself onto it, his right ankle holding up, and starts the engine. It purrs to life.

He guns it out of the harbor, toward anywhere.

"Sources say: five days ago, Barnes took out a key HYDRA installation near Indiga, Russia. Wiped off the face of the planet. Would advise against investigating – Moscow is on ground."

Steve reads Natasha's message out loud, his tone and expression reminding Sam of a proud mother: a maroon mini-van, with a bumper sticker on the back – "proud mom of a brainwashed, homicidal assassin."

Sam figures that they've just spent the past ten days exploring old, abandoned HYDRA bases for nothing: Barnes is romping around Siberia, not former Eastern Bloc countries.

"No, Steve," Sam warns, as if there's a question about Steve wanting to also romp around Siberia. "He's long gone, and you know it."

He should but doesn't say: "And it looks like his list of bases is more updated, so we're wasting our time."
"I know." Steve stares at the message, his eyes bouncing back and forth between the small lines of text. Finally, he turns off the screen and puts the phone on the table, face up.

Sam turns his attention to his tablet, where he's skimming the data leak. Fresh eyes and all that, right? He can feel Steve's eyes on him, can feel a heightening awkwardness, and, for his own sanity, ignores it and focuses on the text.

"What are your parents like?"

Not the question Sam expected. He lowers his tablet, looks at Steve, and answers, "Anything more specific you want to know?"

"Mine was a nurse. Worked long hours. Hated New York. I miss her mashed potatoes. I miss how she played the piano. She'd always wear this red housedress – it's what they were called back then—because, I think, it was the last thing my dad ever bought for her."

Anger and frustration dissipates. Sam reciprocates: "My mom's a high school teacher in Arlington. Math. My dad was the one who cooked – every night, while my mom graded papers, and I did homework, he'd cook dinner. He was a bank manager."

"'Was'?

Sam looks down. Four years ago, out of the blue some would say, his dad took his own life. It wasn't out of the blue. "He's, uh, he's not here anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Siblings?"

Sam shakes his head "no."

"Me, neither," Steve says, with the expression of someone who knows that his whole life is public knowledge. "I guess."

Every damned biography out there spent chapters discussing the brotherhood between Steve and Bucky. And why not? History's heroes were brothers-in-arms from childhood until death.

The better caliber biographies had gathered information from Peggy, the Howling Commandos, and Bucky's family, and it was those biographies where Sam believed it: Steve and Bucky argued like brothers, hated each other like brothers, loved each other like brothers, knew each other like brothers, and supported each other like brothers.

"My best friend growing up was Dylan Painter. Haven't seen him in ten years, but we were close. Like what I imagined having a brother would be like."

"Yeah" is all Steve says.

Sam doesn't push, and, for once, Steve doesn't pull.

Over 1300 kilometers from the base, the boat's transponder at the bottom of the Kara Sea, he docks on a snow-covered bank, picks up the boat's nose with his left hand, and drags it inland.

Inside the nose, he hears bags and boxes slide and crash into each other. He ignores the sounds and keeps dragging, intending to make it at least a couple of klicks away from the shore and into kilometers of forest just ahead.
Hours ago, the bullet wounds in his arm stopped bleeding. The one in the right side of his lower stomach burns and still bleeds, sluggishly, and he's not worried about it. It's the one in his ankle that will limit his ability to run and fight.

He's had ten hours to let it settle: he's kill-on-sight. HYDRA won't take him back. The ache in his body has become a painful throb, and they won't do anything to make it go away – except kill him.

He doesn't want to die.

So. He'll need to be able to run and fight.

Nine kilometers from the coast, deep enough in the forest to hide, he drops the boat, climbs onto the deck, and then ducks into the cabin.

The cabin is the entirety of the boat's long nose, but it's dark, cramped, and cold. He pushes away the bags of weapons and boxes of ammunition and lays down on the bare fiberglass floor, right arm tucked under his head, left arm wrapped protectively around his bleeding stomach.

He should fix the wounds, but he's tired. His body doesn't only ache but throbs. He wants to go home.

The only two things he knows are that he can't go home, and that he doesn't want to die.

So, instead, he sleeps.

Every four hours, he wakes up, adrenaline pumping through his body. He listens for sounds and only hears wind, sometimes the movement of animals, and often song birds.

The fourth time he wakes up, his entire body is shaking, and the ache that had turned to a throb has turned to paralyzing, encompassing agony. Every muscle is trying to break out of his skin by way of fire.

His head alone feels like it's being pressed together in a vice, the pressure building into waves and pricks and stabs of pain inside his forehead. Chills snake up his legs and into his gut, then through his arm and into his neck. His stomach writhes and twists, rolls of searing pain looping back and forth.

He wants to die.

He curls in on himself, eyes squeezed tight. He doesn't know what else to do.

He bites back nausea and swallows hot saliva. Vomiting isn't an option.

Tangled whispers of words fill his head, vines of them wrapping around his brain and squeezing, growing, never letting go: Asset mission target timeframe wipe under seventeen containment home entire life.

He digs the fingers of his right hand into his scalp, clutches clumps of sweaty, wet hair, and wills the whispers to shut up. They only grow louder, the only things he can focus on, over and over and over again: containment mission Asset seventeen target.

After seconds or minutes or days or hours, he remembers something. He remembers to count.

One. Two.

The nails of his right fingers press into his scalp, harder and harder and harder.

One –

The hull of the boat creaks; the wind whistles.

One. Two. Three. Re—

He holds his breath and focuses on not, not, not –

One.

Two.

Three.

Black.

One.

Two.

Three.

Red.

At first, it's hard to keep his thoughts centered on the pattern, but, once he manages to keep focused, his mind slides into the routine: over and over and over again, for hours or days or seconds or minutes.

All that matters is the pattern and his breaths. Nothing else.

A tree trunk *snaps*, its woody fibers breaking one by one. It hits the ground as hard and as loud as lightning.

He opens his eyes, confused for a moment, before realizing that he must have fallen asleep.

He listens and hears the sprinkling of snow against the boat's hull and the rush of wind gusts. In the wind, the boat gently rocks.

His clothes stick to his skin, soaked in sweat. His hair is matted against the back of his neck and all over his face. His stomach still twists, and his muscles still burn, and his body still trembles, and all of the pain and the tangles of words are *still fucking there*.

He wants to –

"Bucky?"

The voice is vaguely familiar. He's only heard it say a few words. But the way it says that name is unmistakable, and he knows who it is.

"Buck, are you in there?"

The person the world calls Captain America.

A twinge of heat prickles in the back of his throat. Nausea climbs through his stomach, higher and higher. His throat itches.
He *bangs* open the cabin door, hits the deck on his knees, and rolls over the side of the boat, into centimeters of snow and frozen, dead leaves. On his hands and knees, the only thing that comes up is frothy, yellow bile. His body doesn't seem to understand that; the bile turns to dry heaves, each one sucking more and more energy from his body.

A hand settles on his back.

"Buck. You can beat this."

He'd forgotten –

"I'm with you, Pal."

The dry heaving stops, and he waits a few moments to make sure. He tries to stand up, but his legs are weak and his right ankle threatens to buckle. He settles for dropping onto his ass, his bare right hand sinking into frigid snow.

Around him, the thickets of green conifers are dusted white, branches bending in the wind. A curtain of snow violently blows almost entirely sideways. A blizzard, his mind supplies. A Siberian blizzard.

But not –

He blinks and sees: Captain America, in his costume, shield strapped to his back, standing meters and meters away, almost invisible in the snow.

"It's not a costume, Buck. Remember?"

"Is that a joke?" he rasps, the words near meaningless in his own mind.

"Take care of yourself. You know how."

Without another word, Captain America disappears into the snow, and those dry heaves come back, his chest convulsing as the rest of his body shakes and sweats.

After, he can barely find enough energy to collapse on the ground. Even he could die of exposure, and he knows it. Snow is already covering his pants, flakes accumulating on his eyelids and eyebrows.

He doesn't know when he makes the decision, but his left arm drags through the snow, bends, and pushes his body up. He stands, very little weight held on his right ankle, and manages to get himself back onto the boat and under deck.

He lays back down, in the same spot as before, and closes his eyes. He feels entirely expended, his body barely able to keep shaking. Despite the pain, despite everything, he closes his eyes and sleeps hard.

_Bucky._

Steve scratches it out.
Buck.

Steve scratches it out.

James.

Steve doesn't even write it.

Buck.

Steve leaves it.

My friend. My brother. The last thing good.

He doesn't write any of that.

He tears out the paper and starts on a fresh piece.

Buck –

I'll make this as short as I can. I was wrong.

The words bleed from his pen, then more and more, as if he was talking to him. As if Bucky was listening.

He reads and re-reads what he's written, taking too many long minutes to do what should just take seconds. He thinks of what Bucky would say, how he would react, and imagines what their reunion will be like.

"You okay?" Sam asks.

Steve looks up, putting the letter face down on the coffee table. "Sure."

"What's that?"

Steve looks at the blank underside, the black ink of the cheap hotel pen bleeding through the white paper.

"A letter. I've gotta talk to him somehow," he says. "It's almost been a month. Maybe he's ready."

Even to his own ears, those words sound ridiculous. But they're all he's got.

"You can't make him listen."

Sometimes, Steve thinks that if he can convince Sam, he can convince the whole world. Christ – maybe if he convinces Sam, he can convince Bucky.

"What if he does?" Steve counters. "I've gotta try."

He looks down at the wooden, brown table, at the handful of black and white photographs laying next to the letter. They're all his favorite, but especially the one of the entire team, all of them but Steve with cigarettes hanging from their lips. Bucky's smiling, crinkles in the corner of his eyes, and, although it was a different world, a different planet almost, from where they'd come from, he seemed happy.

He's bringing that person back.
Forty kilometers from the boat, there's a tiny village, its lights a glittering beacon in the clear Siberian night.

Six days after the blizzard ends, and nine days after his body stops trying to implode, he breaks into a yellow, two-story house, one without any lights on, and fills his backpack with canned food from the kitchen.

Upstairs, a floorboard *creaks*.

Before leaving, he ventures into the sitting room, takes all the blankets he can find, swipes a black laptop and its cord from the sofa, drops a handful of HYDRA's cash because it seems like the right thing to do, and disappears into the night.

Back at the boat, he spreads two blankets out on the floor and uses the last two to cushion his back against the wall. He opens the laptop, powers it on, and is dismayed to see that it only has 28% battery life. That won't get him very far.

He hits the "enter" key to bypass the welcome screen, only the computer asks for a password. He hits "enter" again, just to be sure, and then shuts the lid and pushes the laptop away.

He knows how to use computers, not hack into them. It's useless.

Instead of messing with the laptop, he takes out fifteen cans of food from his backpack. Their labels are old, but he doesn't even mind to read them.

With his left hand, he pops off the lid of one of the cans. The smell that puffs out of the can is fish-like. Inside, the contents are gray and mushy. He tilts the can to his mouth and eats it all without tasting more than he has to. He does the same with the next can—it's full of little green, mushy balls.

None of it makes him feel better. Nausea rolls into his stomach again, and he puts his head onto his knees, willing it to go away. After a time, it does.

During that time, he thinks he should have gone after medical supplies instead of food that makes him sick.

He kicks his right boot off and peels off a damp, smelly sock, its gray fabric stained black with old blood. Carefully, he rolls up the leg of his pants and looks at the outer side of his ankle, where the bullet had entered days and days ago.

The entry wound is a puckered mass of raised, pink skin. He touches it and feels acute, sharp pain, along with something hard and fibrous underneath the scar. It's all closed up; there's not much he can do about it.

He moves onto the wound in the right side of his stomach and finds the same: a healed wound. He doesn't know if it's dangerous to leave the bullet in; he doesn't know how to get it out.

He flexes the muscles in his right arm; it causes pain, but the muscles still work fine. He doesn't know how effective he would be in a fight – and isn't that all that matters?

Neither his arm nor his ankle are at full capacity. Waiting until they heal more will at least give him time to think about what comes next: HYDRA wants him dead, and he has nowhere to go, nothing to do.
A tiny spark ignites: HYDRA wants him dead, after seventy years their prisoner.

HYDRA wants him dead.

He rolls up the blankets, puts them under his head, and spends a handful of days thinking.

Just thinking.

Steve's shield *cracks, cracks, cracks* against the heads of three HYDRA soldiers. Sam shoots another three.

Steve catches his shield and shoves it over his right arm. He heaves out a breath and furrows his eyebrows. "He hasn't been here."

Not really a surprise.

It's been fifteen days, since Natasha told them about Indiga. Eleven days, since there was any sign of or news about Barnes. Steve still sounds surprised, when they find that Barnes hasn't been anywhere near them. Surprised that Barnes didn't skip all the way from Siberia to Jesenice, Slovenia.

"Let's go inside and check it out."

Sam lets Steve lead, for better ease in throwing the shield and *not* cracking open Sam's head, sidestepping bodies. They enter a half-moon shaped, corrugated metal tunnel, the floor slightly sloping downward.

At the bottom, standing atop a metal grate that opens to nothing but darkness below, they come upon only two sections: a server slash computer room and a barracks with bunks of clean white mattresses and shelves of rifles and handguns. There's no secondary egress point, a surprising thing.

"We're not staying here," Sam says, preemptively. "We're not waiting for him. They'll send more."

Steve nods. "I know. I know."

Steve drops his pack onto the metal floor and unzips one of the front pockets. He pulls out the letter he wrote seven days ago, the paper folded around the three or four black and white photographs. He sets it all on the computer tower.

"Whoa. You're going to leave that here?"

"This place is early in the leak materials. In no world is he *not* reading those; he's going to come here. He's going to see this."

"*HYDRA* will find it, before he does."

Steve stands and shoulders his pack.

"Maybe. It's nothing they don't already know. Let's go."

Sam looks at the letter, a bad feeling in his whole body, but follows Steve out of the base.
He walks the couple hundred klicks to Novy Urengoy, unsure of what he's going to find or what
he's going to do.

All he has are a handful of passports, the wads of bills from Nazarri's safehouse, his SIG Sauer,
and a couple of hard drives with a signal jammer.

He thinks that planes are a no-go, although he doesn't know why, beyond that his left arm is a
burden. It's instinct, maybe. He listens to it.

A half-remembered memory of a memory whispers that Moscow should be his destination, then
Riga.

He finds a train station, goes inside, and is surprised by how empty it is. More to the point: there's
no security.

_Siberia, dumbass._

It's five hours until the train to Moscow. He buys a paper map and the most expensive ticket
available, from a man who won't look him in the eyes, and then leaves the station, backtracking to
an electronics store he'd passed on the way to the station.

Inside, he buys a black laptop, not noticing how the few people in the store markedly avoid him,
and not caring that the man he gives money to doesn't speak to him.

Barely out of the store, he pulls the laptop and its charging cord out of the box, tosses the box
inside a trash can, and walks back to the station. He finds the outdoor platform and sits on the far
side of it, out of sight from most passersby.

Four hours later, when the train arrives, he's staring at the black, blank screen of the monitor,
having gotten no further than opening the lid. His mind is everywhere, anywhere but here.

A handful of people disembark onto the platform, and only a handful of people, including him,
board. He watches each of them, studying their clothes, their expressions, and the way they hold
their bodies. He listens to their conversations, all of them in native-accented Russian, and
determines that only two of them are former military – and none of them are an overt threat.

Last to board, he takes too long to situate himself: the cabin numbers are near the ceiling, and they
don't go in the right order, and he –

"Sir, your ticket, now."

The guard extends both hands: the right toward his ticket, and the left toward his back. He slightly
turns his body to avoid that touch and holds the ticket out.

The guard plucks it out of his hand, looks at it for longer than it should take anyone to read, hands
it back, and gestures sharply to the left.

He goes left, tracking the numbered cabins with his eyes, until he finally comes to the one that
matches his ticket. The door is already open, and he steps through, finding a compartment with two
blue single-person beds, an outside window, and heavy, maroon curtains.

He closes the cabin door, pulls the curtains shut, and sits down on the right-side bed, and –
He goes blank again.

That's all right.

He drops his bag, lays down flat on the bed, and drifts, watching the gray sky blur past through a slit in the curtain.

The train's two day course leaves him exhausted and worn.

He pays for a ticket to Riga, Latvia and finds a quiet, secluded place inside the Moscow train station to wait for the night train.

Another kind of ache has overcome the muscles in his legs, back, and arm: blunt, throbbing, diffuse. A sharp stab, stab, stab has rooted itself inside his forehead, and the back of his neck is stretched as tight as a piano wire.

Piano.

He closes his eyes and can see a ramrod straight spine, the red fabric of a housedress draped over the thin, bony vertebrae. Her hair was dark brown and pinned up in tight, short curls. White gloves were neatly folded and laid on the floor, and the thick, short-nailed, calloused fingers they usually covered glided over ivory keys.

He took careful, daring steps, not wanting any sound to distract her playing – or make her stop. Just before crossing the threshold into the room where she played, he turned around, pressed his back against the door frame's wall, and leaned there, following the melody in his head.

Gonna build me a log cabin on a mountain so high, so I can see Willie as he goes walking by. Oh, the coo-coo, she's a pretty bird, she warbles as she flies. She never say coo-coo 'til the fourth day of July.

Not really mainstream piano fare, he thought.

He remembers thinking.

"Moscow to Riga, boarding, Platform 3. Moscow to Riga, boarding, Platform 3."

The memory and its music fades. He grabs his bag off of the floor and heads for Platform 3.

There's a side entrance fifty meters east, and a fire entrance a hundred meters southeast of that. He examines the people moving toward him: how they walk, how they hold their arms, what they look at, where they stop, when they begin walking, and the words that are coming out of their mouths.

No threat.

The train is twenty meters north, its doors hissing open. More people pour off the train, pulling loud suitcases and lugging large packs on their backs. A few of them aren't carrying anything at all, and it's those that he worries about - but they each walk far clear of him.

No threat.

He doesn't expect the black-gloved hand that stops him, palm facing out.
"No vagrants," the gloved man says. He wears a hat and official-looking clothing.

It takes a moment for the words to process. At first, he can only focus on the language - not Russian, not Ukrainian or even German or Turkish. Heavily accented English, he realizes.

Language deciphered, he can process what those words mean: "no," "vagrants."

He considers his long, unkempt hair - so different from the memory he has of another person. His clothes - slimy and old-feeling against his gritty skin. His face - gaunt in the reflection of windows, dark patches under his eyes, scraggly hair covering his jaw and most of his cheeks.

Yeah. He probably looks like whatever a vagrant looks like.

*So, you know all this, but you just fucking ignored it?*

"Hey. No vagrants. You cannot board. Go that way." The man jerks his face toward the south entrance.

A strange, burning feeling crawls into his arms and legs. It almost feels like adrenaline, but it's not as strong. *Shame. It's shame.*

"Okay," he says in Russian, not to prove a point, but because he doesn't much like speaking English.

He walks away, more quickly than he should, eyes on the entrances and exits because he's trained that way, but his mind more focused on *how the hell he went out like this.*

Body hot and prickly, he ducks into the first restroom he comes to, close to the entrance, and goes nose-to-nose with a spotless mirror above a white sink.

The sensor-activated faucet turns on.

*Whhhhhhissssshh.*

He ignores it.

His hair is visibly greasy, messy, and knotted - it pisses off a part of him he hadn't known was there all this time. It stirs a memory of going to the barber every month, in a small side-shop tucked away in a narrow Brooklyn alleyway.

He sees blue and purple circles under his eyes, framed by puffy, sleepless skin. He can't help that so much. Sleep comes easy but tends to not accomplish much.

A thick, brown beard covers most of his face - and there's that pissed off part again, the part that doesn't like stubble, let alone fucking lumberjack shit, *what the fuck is on your face.*

There are dark blood stains on his ragged red shirt, and the long-sleeved jacket he wears has holes and tears. It all hangs from his body, weight loss evident in how full his left arm looks compared to his right.

He can control the beard.

He can control the hair.

He can control the threadbare, unwashed clothes.
Fifteen meters outside the train station, he steals a magazine with a man on the cover and only stops walking, when he comes to a shiny, skyscraper hotel along the busy street. At the front desk, he throws down his Russian ID and enough money to wipe the near-horrified look off of the clerk's face.

"Can you get me good clothes?"

The woman gives him an insulted look, even as she slips the money across the counter toward herself. A dark eyebrow raised, she finally says, "The elevator is on the second floor; take the escalator. There's a hairdresser on the third floor lobby. Shower in your room. 2638. Shower first."

Key card in hand, he starts to walk toward the escalator, when the clerk says, "And food. There's food in your room. You should... Um..." Then she just smiles, close-lipped.

He walks up the escalator to the second floor lobby, walks along the edge of the expansive, busy area, and easily follows the signs to the elevator bank. He's the only one calling an elevator. When it comes, he steps in and presses "26."

"Twenty-sixth floor" a computerized, female voice confirms.

It unnerves him.

On the twenty-sixth floor, he walks the length of the hallway, until he finds the room marked "2638." He swipes his card, opens the door, and steps inside.

It's big. Empty. Quiet. Things he doesn't care much about. He cares more about the map stuck to the wall, on some kind of plaque thing, and he takes a couple of moments to both situate himself and memorize it.

Just off the big, empty, quiet living area, there's a small kitchen, with a refrigerator.

And food. There's food.

He goes to the kitchen and pulls open the refrigerator, finding inside five sandwiches in clear plastic boxes and water in five clear plastic bottles.

He doesn't know how to tell when he's hungry. Before, food came on a schedule, not when his body demanded it.

There's a little bit of a strange, empty feeling in his stomach, but, after he eats all five sandwiches and drinks all five waters, that feeling only grows bigger-bottomless, even. It's nothing like the feeling that came when he ate the canned food in the boat. He notes its existence and then ignores it.

He strips his clothes, piece by piece, as he walks to where the shower has to be - down a short hallway, opposite what appears to be a bedroom.

He sits his backpack on the tile floor, beside a white sink. His sidearm is in the front pocket, which he unzips for easy, quick access. On top of the sink, by the faucets, there are a tiny bar of white soap and small bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and something called "body wash."

Soap and shampoo in hand, he steps into a white tile shower and places the soap and shampoo in a messy pile on a small ledge. When he twists the shower handle, cold water pours from the shower
head. He doesn't so much as flinch; cold water is what he's used to, but he has a vague memory of something else.

He wonders.

He twists the handle all the way to the left, and, in all his elite operative glory, flinches so violently that he slips and falls onto his back. His head cracks against a tiled bench.

It doesn't hurt. It almost never hurts.

The ceiling is white tile, like the rest of the bathroom. There's a tiny, nearly invisible spider sitting in the far corner.

Steaming, hot water drizzles onto his chest and stomach, trickling down his legs. The water that drains away is gray and dirty, but he doesn't so much notice that. Rather, he notices the way his muscles jump and the way his skin contracts against the scorch of the water, and what he thinks is that it feels so good.

Something in his back pops, and that feels good, too.

He closes his eyes and lays under the spray of the water.

*James Barnes. My name is James Barnes.*

It almost feels...acceptable. Not good, not okay, but acceptable.

*James Barnes.*

*James Barnes.*

*James Barnes.*

*Bucky.*

That feels wrong. It's not right. And it sounds stupid.

*James.*

Not that, either.

*Barnes.*

He opens his eyes.

The ceiling is white, there's a spider in the corner, his fingers are pruned, and his name is "Barnes."

Legs stiff, he stands and cleans his hair with the entire bottle of scentless shampoo, fingers tangled in matted knots, and uses the whole bar of filmy soap and body wash—he thinks it's the same thing as shampoo, but whatever—on his body. His fingers feel good against his skin, even over the scarring on his left shoulder. The heat of the water and suds of the soap feel good.

"C'mon, Buck, you're using all the water!"

Barnes has the water turned off, even before the female voice stops talking. He doesn't breathe. He
listens for footsteps, creaking in the floorboards, another person's breaths. He hears nothing.

Dripping wet, he steps out of the shower and slips the sidearm out of his backpack. It's loaded and ready to go, as always.

Barnes leaves soaking wet footprints behind, as he walks into the short hallway and clears the bedroom. Errantly, he thinks the huge bed, fluffy white blanket, and pile of crisp, white pillows look confusing and yet incredibly inviting.

He advances into the entryway, kitchenette, and living area - and finds nothing, no one. Nothing out of place. His clothes exactly how they had fallen, as he'd taken them off. The dark wood entrance door closed tight. The plastic sandwich containers and water bottles on the floor, precisely where he'd left them. The windows closed, navy blue drapes still and unmoved. The only scent detergent and some sort of air freshener.

Barnes lowers the gun and blinks through a hazy wave of lightheadedness. The voice-female, young-had almost been familiar, the tone kind.

Becca. It was Becca.

He doesn't know who "Becca" is.

Becca, he realizes, is probably someone who is long dead. 1945.

And, he realizes, he's alone.

Barnes walks back to the bathroom, avoiding his own wet footprints in the white carpet, puts the gun on top of the sink, and scrubs himself down with a white towel. He feels clean-and extremely tired.

He drops the towel, picks up the gun, presses the safety, and walks the short distance to the bedroom.

Faintly, he recalls that what his body is used to are thin mattresses and thin covers, nothing like the thick, fluffy, white cover under his palm or the mammoth, thick mattress that gives only a little, when he shifts his body weight onto it. He counts six pillows.

He grows more tired, his body aching in a way he hasn't felt before now.

Barnes pulls the white cover and its white sheet down and slips under them, his head hitting half the pillows at once. The sheets and pillow-cases are cool and fresh against his skin, and it feels good. It all feels good.

He closes his eyes, and sleeps.

Knocking wakes him. The click of the door opening sends his hand to his sidearm, underneath the pillows. He clicks off the safety, and he lays still.

Plastic bags crinkle.

Soft footsteps shuffle.

Flimsy plastic crackles and plops into what sounds like a large bag.
The seal of the refrigerator pops, the footsteps shuffle, and more plastic crackles, then scrapes.

His palm is sweaty, and his right shoulder is numb. He slides the gun to his left hand and, as an afterthought, shimmies down under the cover, so that his left side is completely covered.

He doesn't know if he should feel threatened; he doesn't.

Clothes rustle.

Footsteps shuffle, closer and closer.

His stomach clenches.

The footsteps slap against tile. Water whooshes. There's a squeak and then spraying, spraying, spraying.

A cough. Female.

Hollow plastic bottles knock onto tile.

Footsteps slap, then shuffle, shuffle, shuffle, all the way out, then shuffle, shuffle, shuffle, all the way back.

Plastic bottles smack onto porcelain.

The water stops running.

His eyes are heavy. He wants to sleep more.

The footsteps shuffle, and the door clicks closed. Wheels squeal.

He wants to sleep, but he has to see.

Barnes pushes the thick cover off his body and rolls out of bed, gun still in his hand.

His hair is still damp, and he hates it.

Across the short hall, in the bathroom, there are fresh bottles of shampoo and body wash, and a new bar of soap. The crumpled, dirty towel he'd used before is gone, replaced by a folded, new one.

On the way to the kitchenette, he sees that his clothes have been taken from the floor, folded, and stacked on a chair.

In the kitchenette, all of the empty containers are gone, and the refrigerator is full–full–of sandwiches and water. At the sight of them, the weird, empty feeling in his stomach comes back–hunger–and he has no shame in sitting next to the open refrigerator door and eating every damned last one of them, a gun in one hand, and sandwich after sandwich in the other.

He doesn't taste them. He doesn't know what they're made of. But they're good.

Barnes drains almost all of the bottles of water, stopping when his throat gets tight, and leaves all of the empty plastic containers and bottles on the floor. Doing that seems to bring more.

He gets up and looks into the living area, interested in the plastic-sheathed, small pile of clothes in an upholstered chair by the door.
It's a pack of underwear and gray socks, two pairs of black waist overalls (though the tag reads "black denim," and he tells himself to remember that), two black t-shirts that feel soft, a dark gray water-proof jacket with a hood, and -

He has a tingle. It's warm, settles in his stomach, and shoots little splinters of lightning into his shoulder.

It's a dark blue pull over sweater, with four buttons down a third of the center, and a rib knit trim on the sleeves—his mom was a seamstress, holy shit, *his mom was a seamstress,* and he knows *clothes*—and he likes it. It reminds him of something else, something that he can't remember.

His name is James Barnes; he once knew someone named Becca; he knows Captain America; and his mother was a seamstress. That's four things he knows about himself, and, like a lot of other things lately, it feels good to know them.

Though tired and thinking of the huge bed and its six pillows, he takes another long shower, before putting on underwear, the socks, a t-shirt, and the blue sweater.

Then, he climbs into the bed, still finding its white sheets and pillows cool and fresh against his legs, and, once again, sleep finds him easily.

---

Barnes wakes up in the afternoon, groggy and hungry. He lays in the bed longer than he should, enjoying the warm comfort of the sheets and pillows.

It's when he accidentally brushes the back of his right hand against his face that he remembers: shave, haircut, train.

He gets out of the bed, the air of the room warm and comfortable, and still feels clean. He goes to the bathroom, takes a long piss, and walks to the kitchen, where he finds an empty refrigerator, a couple bottles of water, and an unplugged…thing.

*Coffee maker.*

He plugs in the coffee maker and studies a diagram printed on a plaque, right next to it. It looks simple enough. He finds where the white filter goes, sticks it in, dumps a packet of Folgers in it, and then pours a bottle of water into the reservoir.

A couple minutes later, he's got a cup of coffee, and, a couple seconds after that, he's got an empty cup of coffee. It reminds him of dark, early mornings and overdone voices on the radio, and he doesn't know why.

He takes a bottle of water to the living area, grabbing his stolen magazine on the way, and sinks down into the gray sofa. He opens the magazine to its middle and looks blankly at the glossy pages.

He flips past watches, cars, cologne bottles, and clothing, looking for only one thing. He flips all the way to the back, and then goes back to the front of the magazine. He flips and flips and flips, and then he sees it.

A haircut he likes.

He rips the page from the magazine, tosses the magazine on the floor, pulls on a pair of the black
denim pants, and heads to the hair salon on the second floor.

Through the glass, shiny doors, a guy wearing a black apron stares at him, mouth closed, from top to bottom.

Something suddenly clicks: he forgot to put on shoes. All he's wearing are gray socks.

He holds out the page from the magazine. "Do you do this?"

The guy lifts an eyebrow, takes the page, looks at it, looks at Barnes, and then gestures toward a black swivel chair – just like the Brooklyn barbershop.

He sits down, avoids looking at the mirror, and closes his eyes. If he watches, he won't be able to sit still: someone else touching his hair, someone standing behind him, someone holding a razor to his face.

Through all of it, he focuses on how good it feels: every drop of hair hitting the ground, the smell of shaving cream, the sensation of a warm cloth scrubbing his face, the fruity smell of hair cream, even the sensation of someone else's fingers brushing his skin and rubbing his scalp.

"All done."

He opens his eyes, because he has to, and he forgets to not look in the mirror. He nearly jumps out of the seat, because there's a stranger staring back at him.

It's the face from the memorial wall. It's Bucky Barnes.


"Holy shit," he breathes. *I'm really him.*

"You don't like it?"

Barnes blinks, and his brain and mouth form words without him knowing. "No. It's just been a long time."

The guy smiles. "Small tip: wear shoes next time."

Backpack strapped to his back, all the clothes from the hotel neatly folded inside, with his handgun and still-never-used laptop in the middle of them, Barnes walks the same path as last time, toward the same train as last time.

Cold air prickles the back of his neck, a strange, new sensation. He decides he likes it, and he decides that he doesn't miss the heavy, tangled weight of the longer hair.

He passes the same guard as last time and feels a strange sense of satisfaction, when the guard waves him onward toward the platform without a second glance.

He boards the Latvia-bound train and heads into his assigned one-bed sleeper compartment, slides the curtain over the window, and settles onto the thin mattress.

He unzips his bag and pulls out the laptop, powering it up. Before his mind has a chance to blank out again, he searches the Internet for one thing: HYDRA.

The first item that comes up is a Webpage that leads to a Webpage that leads to a link to a massive data file dated back to April 5, 2014.
He knows that date: the day HYDRA fell out of the sky.

Before the train moves, he's downloaded the file, and he doesn't waste time. It's only seventeen hours until Riga.

"Simonis, Latvia. Source says it's a bloodbath."

It's a small building: one story, flat, satellite dishes on the roof. The sign out front says "Oskars Komunikacijas" and even has an .lv Web address underneath it. The parking lot is full of cars – on a Sunday.

Steve's stomach somersaults, and one thought wipes out the rest of the world: he's killed civilians.

It changes everything. He hasn't even seen inside the building, but he can't defend any part of this.

"No police," Sam comments. "You'd think."

The words coming from Sam, of all people, calm Steve, but only a fraction.

"Just saying."

Just inside the glass, front door, a black lacquer front desk is splattered with blood. A young woman is crumpled on the floor, a wide hole through her skull. The coffee in her Latvijas Futbola Federacijas coffee cup is congealed, mold growing on the surface.

"God damn it."

Sam's hand lands on Steve's shoulder. "See that engagement ring?" Her left hand—paper white on top, red-blue and swollen on the bottom—has a diamond ring on the engorged ring finger. "Someone would've come looking for her."

Steve can't afford to reach like that.

"Back in April, he didn't go after civilians," Sam says. "Not saying he didn't kill any, but, on the highway, they were all over, and he couldn't've cared less. He walked on by. This isn't really him, you know?"

Steve gets Sam's point but can't help but think: unless he's snapped.

"C'mon."

Steve kicks down the white, windowless door, just behind and to the right of the front desk.

Natasha's source wasn't wrong: it's a bloodbath.

Mottled bodies, sticky pools of blood, and the stench of death fill the gray-cubicled room. Some of the bodies are shot; others, eviscerated.

Sam ventures further in, stepping over bodies, checking every cubicle, silent and calm.

Steve can't follow. He wraps his hand around his nose and mouth, tries not to breathe, and knows what he has to do. How he has to face this nightmare.
Over two months ago, Hill called Bucky a threat, and Stark had all but promised to hunt him down. Steve hadn't listened. Not then.

But now.

God damn it now.

He has to stop Bucky, for Bucky's own sake. Bucky would never have wanted to become this.

*Buck.*

"Found a super secret staircase to a super secret lair. You coming?"

*What?*

Steve rushes across the room, dodging bodies, blood, staplers, papers, and black binder clips, and finds Sam inside a glass office darkened by gray blinds. On the right-hand wall, he sees an open entrance to a brightly lit, metal staircase.

"I didn't really find it. Bucky left it open."

Sam gestures to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, and Steve just now notices that the part of the bookcase Sam is standing next to is doubled up.

In a single-file line, Steve behind Sam, they skulk down the stairs, their boots loud no matter what against the metal treads. At the bottom, a silver metal door is already kicked off of its hinges, lying flat against the concrete floor.

Sam steps over it first, clears the small room with a wide swipe of his sidearm, and points at the red HYDRA logo painted across the entire far left wall.

"Well - pretty sure it's HYDRA. Don't ask me how I can tell."

Stomach sick with sudden relief, Steve steps around Sam and to the row of lab tables and computer monitors. The tables are papered with schematics and tiny, star-shaped pieces of metal of some sort; Stark would have an overly complex explanation of what the tiny stars are and what they could do; Steve doesn't have a first clue.

But, as he looks around and sees more schematics and more electronics and more pieces of metal, he realizes that it's an R&D lab.

And he sees that Bucky has taken more hard drives.

"What the hell are you doing, Buck?" he whispers.

In his mind, he tracks Bucky's known movements: Mahilyow straight to Indiga, and, then, more than three weeks later, Simonis. Not one of the bases has been mentioned in any of the intelligence Steve has seen.

Except he still hasn't read most of the file HYDRA had kept on Bucky. Maybe it's as close to Bucky's map as he's going to get, and he just can't bring himself to look at it.

He pulls out his phone and quickly texts Natasha: *does Simonis or Oskars Komunikacijas appear anywhere in the leak?*

Her response is nearly instantaneous: *No. Totally off grid.*
"He's remembering," Steve says out loud.

"And he's pissed," Sam adds. "Some of those bodies up there were pretty messed up."

A couple weeks ago, Steve might have been happy to hear that. Today, he'd rather Bucky pop out of the shadows and agree to just go home.

"Steve – he's on a warpath. You're not going to be able to stop him." Sam acts like he has something else to say. Steve looks back at him and waits. "You barely stopped him last time."

That's fair, and probably right. But.

"His warpath is SHIELD's advantage. He's doing us a favor."

Something like incredulity passes over Sam's face. Steve's used to it.

"Look, I might not get the whole history of SHIELD, but I was there when you all realized that SHIELD was HYDRA. You're assuming he sees a difference—but I can't see how he would. You're going to get burned, Steve."

That's another fair insight – and also, again, probably right. It doesn't mean that Bucky's not inadvertently helping SHIELD clean up its HYDRA mess. Even if Bucky might help HYDRA clean up its SHIELD mess, and that, that is definitely something Steve has already considered.

"You think I'm going into this blind. But places like this – every text from Natasha – I'm half-convinced it'll be horrible news. But I can't not do this. He – He's not what HYDRA made him. This" – he gestures at the room, to the stairs – "is proof of that."

Sam nods, solemn. "You think I don't get that. But I do."

"But."

Sam shrugs. "Leave it at that. Where next?"

Good question.

The answer is in a place that turns his stomach and maybe, probably, definitely gives Steve a clear idea of his own warpath: Bucky's file.

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From Simonis to Riga and onward to Vienna, Barnes scouts HYDRA bases near Lilienfeld, Murau, and Gitschtal. All places mentioned in the HYDRA/SHIELD data leak.

He finds that they're all but worthless, except for quick access to money and nearly two dozen hard drives. They've all already been worked over, their soldiers and staff weeks dead.

The only interesting aspect of any of them is how the bodies were killed: mostly cracked skulls. The fracture lines are familiar half-crescents, and a memory is as close as an opaque, impenetrable, paper-thin wall—that he's on the wrong side of.

There's one more base on his memorized list, formed from his reading of the first part of the data leak: Jesenice, Slovenia. He's tempted to not even waste time going there: he has no use for someone else's dead bodies.
From Gitschtal, he drives his stolen car back to Vienna, the radio on as loud as it will go, and is fully planning on holing up in the backseat of the car, when a brightly lit "Sheraton" sign in the night sky catches his eye.

He hesitates only for a moment.

HYDRA buys him a comfortable room, a warm dinner, a hot shower, and a huge bed, which he spreads out on: no pants, no shirt, just a laptop, a pile of hard drives, a signal jammer, and a mound of pillows.

It takes him three days, nearly nonstop, to get through the data. He only stops to eat and shower, eat and shower, eat and shower, a routine that he's quickly becoming accustomed to.

He travels to the floor of the bedroom, to the sofa in the sitting room, the floor of the sitting room, the kitchenette island, and the floor of the kitchenette, dragging his laptop, its cord, and various hard drives to every area, before finally ending up back on the bed.

Out of all the hard drives, he writes down only two things: coordinates to an unknown location in Germany and a base near Jesenice, Slovenia. The latter matches up with the base information in the leak.

It becomes the next base on his very short list.

All he finds are bodies: three shot in the chest, three with half-crescent shaped fractures in their skulls.

He blinks and catches the memory.

Once, once, once, he caught a red-and-blue shield, slipped it over his left arm, and broke someone's eye socket in half with it. Sliced through a cheek bone, severing an ear. Created a gorge out of a trachea. All of the wounds half-crescent shaped, and then, then, then, he threw the shield back to a costumed man –

Captain America.

*You don't call him that.*

Captain America's been to this base, and the other three before it.

*You don't call him that. Stop.*

The bodies are over a month dead.

The leak came out over two months ago.

Which means: Rogers was here, relatively recently. Which means: Rogers is in Europe.

*I'm not gonna fight you. You're my friend.*

Rogers is looking for him.

He's not sure how he feels about that. Or anything else, for that matter.

He rolls his shoulders and steadies his SIG Sauer. He advances down the round, corrugated metal tunnel, his footfalls quiet and careful. He listens for any signs of people or traps, hearing nothing.
At the bottom, he finds only two sections: a data/computer room and a barracks, with soaked, white mattresses and wet weapons. He visually scans each room for cameras: the only ones he sees are shot out.

He's not sure what the hell this place even is, or why it exists.

He takes three hard drives out of the computer, breaking the tower nearly in half to get to them, and then sees something odd on top of the desk: a letter-sized paper, folded in thirds, with the edges of heavier paper sticking out.

Barnes picks up the paper and unfolds it. Photographs fall onto the desk. The one on top is of a group of men. He recognizes Rogers.

Dugan.

Morita.

Gabe.

Dernier.

Falsworth.

And the seventh man – he doesn't know who –

He blinks.

It's Bucky: smiling, happy. A different person.

He puts that photo down and ignores the rest of the photos. He doesn't care what they show. He only cares who put them here.

He looks at the letter:

"Buck –

I'll make this as short as I can. I was wrong."

He skips to the end, to the signature line:

"That Little Guy from Brooklyn Who Doesn't Know When to Back Down"

He unknowingly tilts his head, eyebrows pressed together. It could only really be Rogers.

That's who I'm following.

Maybe he's supposed to feel something. He reads the rest of the letter and still feels nothing.

He drops it on the desk, picks up his handgun, and leaves.

On the train to Graz, Barnes reads a half hour of data leak material, done with it right about when he gets to the Aliens in Manhattan part. He tucks his laptop into his backpack, slouches down in his seat, hood up, arms crossed, and sleeps fitfully for the last two and a half hours of the ride.
When he gets off the train, he pulls his hood down with his right hand, and accidentally shocks his forehead. He runs his right hand through his hair and finds more tiny shocks and a gross, dry feeling in his hair.

It's too dry.

An instinct triggers inside of him.

He walks down the street, toward a sign that says "dm-drogerie markt," and calmly walks inside the building.

When he sees the rows upon rows of aisles, with rows upon rows of shelves, packed with items he doesn't even recognize and can't even put a name to, he doesn't feel so calm inside. He feels anxious, out of place, overwhelmed, and –

This is a mission. He only has one option, and that option is success.

He walks to the very back of the store. He notes the white, ajar door, restricted to employees only, that undoubtedly leads to a back exit. He keeps walking, visually scanning each and every aisle, from end to end, until he finds it.

The hair product aisle.

He turns and walks calmly down the aisle: past hairbrushes, hair dye, hair accessories, shampoo, conditioner, until he finds the section he needs.

Barnes stops, engrossed by the rows of hair product.

The men... The memory swirls, in and out of focus, just-just-just-just out of reach.

He runs his right hand through his hair again, more irritated by the dry softness. The length is okay, but the softness is...

He takes a deep breath and stares at the shelves. Mousse, gel, spray-all kinds of shit. There are colors and slogans and different strengths and-shit. He has no idea.

The softness feels dry. It feels fucking dry and he hates that.

"Don't let your daily dip cause dry hair, Sarge. Wouldn't want that."

"Fuck you, Gabe."

The men used to tease the fuck out of him about always having Brylcreem in his pack.

The memory hits like a gut punch. He takes a step backward, straight into the shelf behind him. Cans of whatever rattle and fall over, some to the floor, but he doesn't care.

He closes his eyes and remembers the pocket mirror he had, the way the cream made his hands feel but also the way having his hair right made everything else a little bit better.

"Christ, Buck, you're gonna be off doin' your hair, when the war ends."

"But I'll look real good, and that's really all that matters, Punk. Captain. Punk."

A blond man with a wide smile, a quiet laugh: it was everything right in life, everything he'd ever known. The man's face cut and bruised, breathless: "you've known me your whole life."
"Kann ich ihnen helfen?"

Barnes looks up and finds a female clerk, her name badge reading Odelia.

"Es geht," he responds, automatic. He doesn't know how he got onto the floor. "Es tut mir leid."

She looks uncomfortable, skeptical, unsure. He ignores her and climbs to his feet, grabbing the first small bottle of hair product he can put his hand on. He accidentally punts a thick can of hairspray under a shelf or three and walks calmly to the registers.

His heart is only going a hundred klicks a second, and he only feels like he's going to burst into tears any moment, but it's all things he can't-won't-show. When it's his turn at the register, he greets the clerk with an even voice and pays without trouble.

Out the door, he ducks into the first alley he comes to, slides down the brick wall, and loses it: deep, heaving sobs, and he doesn't know why. He wraps his arms around his chest, right arm on top, and buries his face into that arm.

It feels horrible, it feels good, it feels wrong, it feels right, it feels like everything, it feels like nothing.

It feels like something.
Prelude from a Ghost

Chapter Summary

A part of him wants to go back to Jesenice, back to that base, and take the letter and photos. It’s a small part, but a loud and painful one.

Chapter Notes

See chapter one.

"He wanted to be someone better. I won't fault him for-"

"God damn it, Peggy, he was someone better. He was better than all this shit. What he had was a fucking gift, and what you took was... You know what, just fuck you."

"Language, Sergeant. Please."

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I talking to you like you're a real person, Agent Carter? Should I stop doing that?"

"You've clearly had too much to drink. This conversation is-"

"Sure. Okay. You tell yourself that. Yeah, it's over. Got it."

A part of him wants to go back to Jesenice, back to that base, and take the letter and photos. It's a small part, but a loud and painful one.

He doesn't. He can't. The rule is that you never go back to a place you've been, and it's a good rule for a good reason.

Instead, Barnes takes a train to Frankfurt, the city where HYDRA's coordinates lead. On the way, he pulls out a notepad and pen he'd taken from that first hotel, and writes down everything he can think of.

His name. His birth date. Brooklyn. Names: Steve Rogers, Becca, Peggy Carter, the men the world called the Howling Commandos. Brylcreem. "Mom was a seamstress. Maybe played the piano."

"My hair feels better short" makes the list. So does "hot showers." So does "food," which he crosses out and replaces with "warm food."

He thinks there should be more on that list, but he can't think of anything. Except.

Way down low on the page, in small print, he writes "1945-2014," "out of containment," "kill on sight," and, strangely, "I need you to do it one more time." He writes "tracker," "kill switch,” and
"boom you're dead."

He thinks of a blip of a tiny memory: waking up to bright lights and a sawing, searing, agonizing pain in his left shoulder that made his fucking gums hurt. The tip of the pen touches the page, but he can't bring himself to write anything.

He thinks of another blip of an even tinier memory: white snow stained with a long, long swipe of dark red blood, the cold that once never touched him somehow freezing his bones. How it hurt to breathe. How he couldn't move. How he couldn't feel his left hand. The ink of the pen bleeds a dark, deep stain into the page, but he still writes nothing.

He feels more than curious about HYDRA. More than curious about if every cell was told the same thing about him. More than curious if his memories are reliable. More than curious.

"More than curious" feels like heat in his stomach, tension in his arm, and a skipping of his heartbeat. It sounds like plates on his left arm shifting and shifting, and it looks like the photo of himself smiling, when he had a name and a place and a mind that fucking worked.

He puts the notebook away, back in his backpack, and uses the pen to write HYDRA's coordinates onto the back of his right wrist.

Those coordinates lead to Verlauben Tower, in Frankfurt's Bankenviertel district.

From a green, leafy plaza two blocks down, the sweet smell of mid-summer flowers wafting with the soft breeze, he watches the building for hours, observing the three people who go in and come out.

He notes the way they walk; how they're dressed; how they interact; what they carry. He knows they're trained operatives, because he just knows, like he just knows how to read and speak different languages.

At the end of the work day, when other buildings are emptying troves of people, Verlauben remains quiet.

It reminds him of the fake communications company in Latvia: cars that never moved, doors that never opened, a company that didn't exist.

Verlauben is a front for a HYDRA cell. The hard drive data from Latvia says that HYDRA occupies every of the building's thirty-two floors. In person, he believes it.

In his head, a wire crosses. He's aware enough to know that's what it is: a damaged thought, erupting from a damaged mind. Only: it's a good idea, only getting better, the more and more he thinks about it.

The palm of his right hand flushes with cold sweat. Goosebumps prickle on the back of his neck.

It's rage, and it's going to turn Verlauben to fire and dust, one explosive at a time.

The data from Jesenice leads to the outskirts of Pilsen in the Czech Republic, which, in turn, leads to Kielce, Poland, then Baia Mare, Romania, then Zrenjanin, Serbia, and then Rijeka, Croatia.

Blood on his hands from every base, lab, and communications depot across Europe and its
neighbors, he's not interested in finding answers. He's not interested in anything except death and how many bodies he can make.

He finds enough explosives to disintegrate HYDRA's glimmering tower in Frankfurt, but he uses it all to make craters of tiny bases. He thinks it's called impulsivity, and he thinks it feels fucking good. There will be plenty more for Verlauben.

Because he's got scars all over his body. Splinters of pain in his right hip. Something like tearing in his right knee. Tingling in his hand. Burning aches in his neck. And he doesn't know where any of it came from. Because of them.

Because he can pick up any weapon and immediately know how to dismantle, load, and fire it. Hand-to-hand combat comes as natural as breathing and as easy as swatting mildly annoying mosquitos. He hasn't yet heard a language that he doesn't understand or can't speak. Maps are engraved in his brain, coordinates seared into the neurons. Because of them.

Because of them, he keeps going.


He doesn't stop.

He won't stop.

Because of them.

Sources say: in the past 70 days, he's destroyed 20 bases across Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine, Kaliningrad, and Poland. Map to follow.

"Why are we just hearing about this?"

Steve barely has time to spit the words out, before Natasha's map pings an alert onto his phone. He opens it.

Next to Steve, Sam breathes, "Holy..."

Steve doesn't share the sentiment. It's a lot of bases, sure, but Steve zeroes in on something different. Something worrying.


"What the hell are you doin', Buck?" Steve whispers, eyes crawling over the small map dotted with numbered pins.

"The hard drives," Sam says, almost immediately. "He doesn't know where he's going next. He's mining their data."

Steve looks at the map again. The pins are dated, and he quickly notes that Bucky spent ten days somewhere in Bosnia, before going to Bulgaria then back up to Romania and then Ukraine. He sees that Bucky spent eight days in Ukraine, before traveling all the way to Turkey, then back up to Poland and Russia's Kaliningrad exclave.
"There's three groups—"

"Yeah, I see it," Steve interrupts. "That was a good catch."

The discovery presents a new problem: they can't possibly track and intercept Bucky, when Bucky doesn't even know where he's going.

Trying to hide how upset he is, Steve grabs his tablet, opens up his map tracking application, and maps Bucky's route in green pins. Then, he inputs their route in blue pins.

Sam flips channels, landing on something called Baywatch. Steve ignores it and stares at the pins.

In five months, they've been nowhere near Bucky. Not once.

He looks up at the TV and stares past the images. They're not going to be able to catch up with him, barring some dice roll that lands on dumb luck. Every day that passes is another day that Bucky could end up dead or captured again, while he and Sam watch –

"This is the dumbest fucking show," Steve bites.

Sam nods. "Yep. How're you coming with that file?"

Steve deliberately doesn't look at his bag, where the file HYDRA kept on Bucky is slipped between his clothes. He doesn't want to read any of it. He looks back down at his tablet and closes out of the map.

Before SHIELD fell, he'd felt lost, a foreigner in his own world. Right after SHIELD fell, he'd felt a distinct sense of purpose and thought he'd found a distinct place: Bucky, always.

Now, he doesn't know what he's doing or how he's supposed to do it. He just knows that he can't sit at home, while Bucky's alive. He can't let Bucky do this alone, but he doesn't know how to do this with him.

He doesn't know.

His phone buzzes: it's Natasha. There's rumors of an installation near you just out of Bratislava. You good for it?

Steve shows the message to Sam, who nods unenthusiastically. Steve answers, Sure.

They're just as likely to run into Bucky there as any damned where else.

Inside a dingy brown base outside Debrecen, Hungary, a dead HYDRA soldier crumples to the ground. Behind him, quiet footsteps patter against the tiled floors.

Barnes spins, rifle aimed, finger a hair from pulling the trigger.

"I'm SHIELD!"

A black, plastic helmet hits the floor and bounces into the wall, and a pair of black-gloved hands stretch toward the ceiling.

It's a woman. She shakes her head, which does nothing to shift away the sweaty clumps of hair
"God, I really hate those things." She huffs out a breath, looks him up and down, and repeats. "I'm SHIELD."

Barnes doesn't lower his rifle, but he doesn't shoot. "What do you mean, 'you're SHIELD'?"

In his mind, the data leak had been clear: SHIELD wasn't clean, but SHIELD – the real SHIELD – hadn't known about HYDRA. Not until the very end. So. He doesn't have any interest, one way or another, in SHIELD. Likewise, he has no interest in killing someone who isn't HYDRA.

She hesitates to answer.

A mostly dead body next to her feet groans and shifts. Barnes shoots it in the back of the neck and then re-aims his rifle.

"I was sent undercover, after SHIELD fell. I'm not HYDRA." She blinks, looks at him closer, and asks, "What are you?"

He could laugh, but he chooses not to.

He doesn't know if she's lying. In five months, not one of the hundreds he's killed has tried pretending to be SHIELD. He's inclined to believe her.

"If you're actually HYDRA, you can tell'em one thing: I'm coming. Run."

She doesn't run. Her hands lower but not all the way. "Why?"

"Because if you don't, I'll shoot you, SHIELD or not."

Her hands drop all the way, and she backs away, stepping nimbly over a body, and then another body. He can easily see that she's extremely well-trained, enough so that he believes she's undercover SHIELD. What's left of HYDRA isn't extremely anything except shit.

Before she backs into a hallway, she says, "Vasatra, Romania, near the Moldovan border. Heard there's a pretty big HYDRA base there. If you're interested. Also, nice hair."

She leaves, and he lets her.

Altogether, he thinks that whatever that was had been super fucking weird.

Vasatra.

He takes all the hard drives he can find and fills an empty bag with explosives from the base's meager armory. He stashes the explosives a couple klicks from the base, hidden high up in a leafy tree, and plans to come back for them on the way back from Vasatra.

Because why the fuck not.

It's a seventeen hour train trip, and he spends it mostly sleeping, dozing, and eating. The break from gathering data and attacking bases settles well with him. Before the train arrives, he showers, shaves, and runs gel through his hair. He notices that it feels a bit too long – still short, but long enough to irritate him.

From Iași, he drives to the tiny ghost town of Vasatra: a town lost in the revolution and never rebuilt. Five klicks out, he parks the car and hikes the rest, SIG Sauer drawn and loaded.
It's early autumn: mild temperature, a nice breeze, and all things still green. Through the grassy flatlands and immense forests of eastern Romania, it's an easy hike, and it doesn't take him long to reach the limits of the town.

Birds chirp. Leaves rustle. Insects buzz by his head. A European robin hops in a grassy patch adjacent to a massive hunk of marble half-buried in the ground.

All that's left is a crumbling, bombed-out, multi-story church, made of that same white marble and limestone.

HYDRA hides, though.

He scans every vantage point he can see, looking for snipers or look-outs. He sees nothing.

He carefully sweeps the ground with his eyes, looking for traps. He sees nothing.

His gut says to turn back and run. That the woman was HYDRA and this is a massive, massive mistake. It's all that it can be.

He's not scared of HYDRA, and he doesn't run from HYDRA.

He advances on the church, weapon aimed.

Birds scatter. The robin flies to another patch of grass, meters away.

Barnes ducks through a breach in the limestone wall, jagged bricks scraping against the top of his hair, and enters a hallway in the church. Weeds are growing through the water stained, marble floor; vines, reaching in through broken stain glass windows.

The hallway leads to a steep, marble staircase, and he climbs it, crawling over a fallen, wooden beam. His hand slides through the rotted wood and comes away covered in what reminds him of coffee grounds.

At the top of the staircase, he comes to another hallway, its walls lined with faded fresco murals painted in gold and blue. That hallway leads to narrowly long, limestone room with a heavy, dark wood table in the center.

A man in all black is standing on the other side of it.

Barnes loosens his grip around his SIG Sauer, readying to fire it. He steps closer and closer, walking over crumbling marble and wood debris.

The man turns around.

Barnes freezes. He knows who it is.

"If you're gonna shoot, I suggest you go on ahead and do it. Otherwise, put that motherfuckin' thing down."

Barnes recognizes the man: Nick Fury. It's a memory he trusts: three high-powered bullets to the chest. Catching Rogers' shield, on a DC rooftop.

Also, a lot of the SHIELD leak data involved Fury; he's a hard one to miss.

"I said, shoot if you're going to, or put it down."
There's no instinct telling him to shoot. Any target of HYDRA is likely someone he doesn't want to kill; they, on the other hand, would likely want to kill him. He lowers the SIG Sauer but keeps his finger hovered over the trigger.

"You're supposed to be dead," Barnes says.

Fury throws a glare at him. "You're not one to talk. Do you even know my name?"

He has an uneasy feeling about this. This guy lured him here. That woman, from earlier, found him. That means he's a threat.

But.

Fury's someone who definitely wasn't HYDRA and definitely wasn't involved in the Winter Soldier program.

"Fury. Director of SHIELD," he answers. Stalling.

Fury's expression softens. Barnes doesn't trust it. "Former. Also an ally of Captain America, and his friends. Are you his friend?"

Barnes' fingers tighten around the handgun. "Are you here to bring me in?" he asks.

"Are you offering?"

Barnes deliberately doesn't react: not a twitch, not a blink, nothing. "SHIELD, HYDRA: same shit, different name."

He doesn't necessarily believe that, but it sounds convincing.

Fury's eyebrows shoot up. "If you really believed that, Hill would be dead right now. You better watch it: your colors are showing."

The name "Hill" doesn't mean anything, but Barnes guesses she's the woman from the Debrecen base. The one who told him to come here. To meet Fury.

He's been played – by SHIELD.

"It wasn't an offer," Barnes says.

Fury's eyebrows drop back down, and he stuffs his hands into his pockets. It's a horrible defensive position. "I'm not here to bring you in."

"What do you want?"

"All the information you're stealing. I'd get it myself, but, see, you've destroyed everything you've touched. Had to follow a long line of bodies to find you here."

There it is. His finger is on the trigger. "You'll be one more."

Fury's hands come out of his pockets, hands up, left palm open. There's a black device clutched in his right hand. "Whoa. Not what I meant."

Fury wiggles the device and slides it across the wood table. It comes to a stop only a few centimeters from Barnes. It's a smart phone: the kind SHIELD agents carry.
"Rogers doesn't know what you're doing. He probably thinks you're rampaging around Europe and Russia, trying to get revenge the bloodiest way possible. But that's not what you're doing. You're doing what you've always done, when given the choice. Maybe you don't remember, requesting a transfer to the Strategic Science Reserve. Maybe you don't remember: you're SHIELD, Barnes."

Something Fury said resonates: Strategic Science Reserve. At some point, that was something he believed in. A purpose. But, more than that, at some point...

The scent of a memory floats so close. So close. And then it's gone.

It's a lot of words, a lot of fluff, and a lot of bullshit. A lot he still doesn't remember.

Barnes looks at the phone. "You..." He blinks and cycles through the information again. "You want me to upload HYDRA's data to SHIELD. You want me to work for you."

Fury shrugs. "I see an opportunity, for both of us. You're not going to stop. But do you have an endgame? Something to do with the information you find? Resources? Besides guns."

The plan is to find names, add to his list, and empty that list, one by one. Take out Verlauben. No matter the cost.

But.

This is a way to something better. Maybe.

He doesn't even know if he wants something better, or if he wants to burn with the last dregs of HYDRA. Maybe that's what he owes the world.

"That easy?" Barnes asks, because it's too good of an offer to be true. Things like this just don't happen. The Director of SHIELD, the man he'd tried and tried to kill, doesn't just recruit him out of nowhere.

"Doesn't have to be hard. Not always."

Barnes can think of plenty of reasons why it should be hard: five of them put Steve Rogers in the hospital, and another three of them fell flaming out of the sky. And he thinks... He thinks that another seventy were full of unforgivable things.

He doesn't know what to say next, because he can't get around one thing: "I don't trust you."

"Didn't expect you would," Fury replies with a nonchalant shrug. "I don't really trust you, if it makes you feel better. But I've taken chances on worse."

Somehow, he so much doubts that.

Somehow, his instincts still whisper: take it.

"Is it tracked?"

Fury's hands go back in his pockets. "I don't have much to gain, by having you captured or dead. It's off-grid. Use your right hand, by the way."

Using his right hand, Barnes picks up the phone. It's light, metal, cold against his fingers. Without his prompting, the screen fades from black to white and then black again, before text reading "DNA imprinted: Blackbird" flashes briefly across the screen.
"What's Blackbird?"

"You," Fury replies.

Barnes doesn't waste time considering why. He puts the phone in his pocket and looks Fury directly in the eyes. "No promises," he warns. Maybe he'll drop it in the next trash can he passes.

"You just do your thing. And then? I'll do my thing."

"And what's that?"

Fury almost smiles. "Taking every one of these fuckers down."

Barnes doesn't ask any more questions. He leaves the same way he came in, and then panics. He hauls ass back to Iași, hops a night train to anywhere, and leaves Romania, Hill, and Nick Fury far behind.

In the cabin, he draws the curtains on both sides, blocking out both the gazes of curious passersby and overcast sunlight from the wet countryside.

He doesn't know if he trusts Fury, or even if he trusts Fury's words. He doesn't know if he trusts this phone. Maybe it will lead him to a team of SHIELD agents and a prison cell, or maybe it will lead him to a HYDRA strike team and another seventy years of…

His heart skips, and he breathes the panic away.

Fury could have made that happen in Romania. His instincts are telling him to trust.

That's a hard thing to do.

He takes the first step: powering on the phone, using his right hand. It only takes a second to recognize his fingerprints or thermal signature or both – and then it loads up, like his laptop.

There are icons for phone calls, Internet, photography, text messaging, e-mail, and then one for apps. He pushes the icon for "apps," and a screen pops up, loaded with more icons. Two stand out: DNA and Toxicology.

He opens the DNA application and holds the phone over his right hand. A soft blue light scans his skin; almost immediately, the "analyzing" screen shifts to the results.

It's a technicolor picture of him from the war. It's a snapshot, not an official photo, likely from a video. He expected a surveillance photo of what they called the Winter Soldier. He's relieved it's not.


Generous. Very generous. More than it should be.

Barnes turns the phone off, keeps it in his hand, and lays down across the seat, his legs hanging off the edge.

His mind doesn't blank out, doesn't drift. But he spends the time thinking. Just thinking.
Deep in a forest northeast of Marianka, Slovakia, Steve sits close to a round, crackling campfire. To his left, Sam is laying on a foam camping pad, the glow of his tablet dim against the orange licks and sparks of fire.

Steve flips through the last pages of the file on Bucky, already knowing that it ends far, far in the past. The bases they've visited because the file mentioned them: old, long abandoned. The scattered information and infrequently named people: long outdated and long dead. The couple of thin pages left until the end of the folder.

It ends with: Seventeen has reached maximum pain threshold. No vocal sounds heard; breaths controlled; muscle tension below benchmark. Right hand tremor remains. Subject appears unaware of same.

The file crumples in his hands.

"Steve—"

He barely hears Sam.

On the highway, Bucky hadn't made a sound. Not a single one. Now he knows why.

"They destroyed him."

Sam makes a sound, then asks, "What?"

"It's what it says. They ripped him apart, until the only thing left was them."

Sam doesn't say anything. Steve can figure why.

"I know you don't believe me, when I talk about him. That you think I only remember the good. But he drank too much. Slept around. Thought he knew the right answer for everything." Despite it all, Steve smiles. "He usually did, though. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

It really wasn't supposed to be like this. Bucky had the world. He was supposed to make it home from the war, be successful, and grow old and fucking ugly, like the rest of them had. He wasn't supposed to die in a ravine, or spend seventy years of his life being ripped to shreds by HYDRA.

Anger ripples through his body; he could destroy something, anything, right now. He chooses the file.

One by one, he tears pages from the folder, feeding them into the fire. Handwritten scribbles next to paragraphs of Cyrillic characters. Photos. Testing data. All of it. Every piece. Every word. Every bit. He'll never have to look at it again.

"You couldn't have changed any of it. You know that. What you're doing for him now – it will make a difference."

He hears Sam, but the words don't make a difference. He could've made a difference. He could've stopped brushing off all the signs that Krausberg had turned Bucky into something more. He could've made a different plan to capture Zola, and he could have never asked Bucky to walk into near certain death. He could've gone back to the Austrian Alps and found Bucky before HYDRA.

Steve doesn't say anything like any of that. He feeds more of the file into the fire and watches the
papers curl, blackened, until they're nothing but disintegrated, white ash in the night's wind.

Sam was there, right there, in the hospital room by Steve's bedside, when Maria Hill walked in. He expected pleasantries. Camaraderie. Something like that.

Not:

"Steve. I have to ask."

Steve's fingers curled around the slick pages of a five-year old issue of *Real Simple* magazine.

"No, you don't."

Sam felt uncomfortable, trapped between these two strangers, talking about a stranger Sam would rather never see or hear about again, ever, in his entire life.

Maria Hill drew her shoulders back. "We have to find him. You know that. He's a threat."

One of the pages from the magazine ripped away from the glue of the spine. Steve crumpled it up with one hand and tossed it on the floor.

"Or HYDRA is a threat to him," Maria Hill said. "Maybe both. Either way, he would be safer with us."

Sam agreed, so much agreed, but, despite himself, asked: "With who? SHIELD's gone."

Maria Hill looked at him. "Officially." She turned her eyes back to Steve. "Did he say anything? Do anything that would tell us where he might be?"

Steve's knuckles turned whiter and whiter, the magazine crumpled and more crumpled, jaw clenched into an action-figure square, until finally, "I'll find him. *Me*. SHIELD stays out of it."

"Steve—"

"I god damn mean it, Maria. Have Natasha find what she can about what HYDRA did to him. But SHIELD stays out of it."

Maria Hill hesitated for just a few moments, before nodding and leaving, without one more word.

Sam didn't say a word, either. He watched Steve try to smooth out the magazine with his IV'd, bruised-knuckled hands. He still had stitches holding the slit skin of his face together. Three bullet holes in his body. Two stab wounds. Broken bones.

"At the end. He remembered. I could see it."

Sam looked down. Sometimes, it felt like he'd known Steve for months: it came that easily. Other times, like this one, it felt like he'd known Steve for a couple days: it came that real.

He didn't have a right to judge this relationship between Steve and the person Romanoff called the Winter Soldier. Except: the person Romanoff called the Winter Soldier was ruthless, emotionless, and a murderer, and Sam knew first-hand, multiple times, what it was like to almost be that person's victim.
"Steve."

"I'd've been dead before I hit the water, if he hadn't. He remembered. He's there." Steve paused, eyes on the magazine. "I don't expect you to understand."

"I do. You've got to do what you feel you should." Steve perked up, just a bit, and Sam felt bad for finishing his thought. "But I don't believe."

"If you knew'em, you would."

But I don't.

Barnes doesn't drop the phone into the next trash can. He sends Fury a list of names: names he remembers, and names he's found in the data he's been stealing for four months.

In the end, Barnes doesn't care who kills those names, as long as they die. And, if it ends up being less for him to do, the better.

Fury's answer comes hours later. "Locations?"

Barnes waits hours to reply: "No."

Sitting on a bench along a scenic canal, warm gusts of air blowing through his hair, he watches flowing, dark ripples of water, calm ducks swimming by, and squawking geese that bicker with each other. Joggers jog. Couples walk. The sun moves, casting long shadows from each bench and light post.

He thinks about throwing the phone into the water.

He thinks about leaving it on the bench.

He thinks about crushing it in his left hand.

He thinks about going to the next base on his list, taking more data, and having to send that data to Fury – and it's funny how it kills every iota of his motivation.

I've taken chances on worse.

He keeps the phone, thin edges digging into the skin of his hand, and walks the canal all the way to a lake-side park.

The leaves of bushy trees are yellowing, but almost everything else is summer: shimmering water, buzzing insects, sweet-smelling flowers, blue skies, warm air, and more paths to walk than he's had in a long, long time: it feels good, it feels bad, it feels terrifying, it feels confusing, it feels like relief, it feels like everything and nothing and it feels like—

Something.

Just something.

He keeps the phone.

Five months turn to six. In that time, he destroys two bases and sends Fury only a handful of
information.

Six months turns to seven, and he destroys three bases.

Seven months turn to eight, and HYDRA loses five bases.

Eight turns to nine, turns to ten, and he only takes out one more base.

Between those eleven bases, he has enough explosives stashed around Europe to bring down more than Verlauben, and yet – he hasn't gone anywhere near Frankfurt. He doesn't even know if he wants to.

He thinks it's what everyone probably expects him to do, and he remembers that Bucky Barnes didn't often allow himself to be that predictable. And Bucky Barnes would never kill civilians just to get to a handful of enemies.

Still. He doesn't know what he's going to do with that tower.

The only results he's seen from Fury are the arrests of two people, two of whom Barnes doesn't really care about. Verlauben and two others like it still operate. Fury promised to "take them all out," but either Fury's slow or Fury lied.

Barnes doesn't know what to think. He just thinks that the phone is a potential lifeline, the working relationship with Fury a potential leverage point, which means, for the first time in a long time, he can visualize some sort of future. Something beyond HYDRA – something, maybe, possibly.

But not yet.

Outside Krakow, just inside the Tatra Mountains, across a grassy meadow encased by walls of conifers, there's a broken doorway carved into a grassy hill. The door grinds open, and Barnes enters the pitch black hole.

Usually, he feels nothing: not fear, or excitement, or dread. Today, he's intrigued. This isn't just a base: it's a hidden, forgotten complex that sprawls kilometers underground, if his research is to be trusted. It's a base, a railroad, tunnel systems, and a town lost to time and HYDRA's secrecy.

He can't wait to find all of it, because, if he does, it just might tell him a little about himself, the way nothing else quite has.

He flips on the light of his SIG Sauer and advances down the hallway. Drips of water plink echoes down the concrete, damp walls, stagnant vapor hanging in the cool air. It reeks of mildew.

The hallway leads to a metal stairwell, which he goes down, taking each tread slowly. No matter how lightly or carefully he steps, each footfall clangs. He descends multiple flights, ignoring numbered steel doors, until he comes to the one marked "9" in flaking red paint.

"9" was specifically mentioned in the last wave of data.

Pulling open the door, he expects a trip wire and a building-leveling bomb, like Indiga. He doesn't instantly die, so he advances forward, the small light of his sidearm barely scratching the depths of the dark.

Glass crunches and scrapes under his boots.
He can see that he's in a wide hallway, the walls mildewed concrete. In front of him, he can see just a few meters, and it's only empty space.

*BANG!*

His body tenses, grip tightening around his weapon. He takes a measured breath, relaxes his body, and loosens his grip.

The sound—metallic, loud, thunderous—came from just ahead, to the left.

Thing is: his memories are mostly incomplete, fledgling instincts still ruling his every action and decision, but he knows—he *knows*—that he doesn't *get scared*. The dark doesn't taunt him. Noises don't scatter vivid fears through his imagination. Every memory is of one: being indomitable.

He walks forward.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

Pieces of the concrete ceiling crackle to the floor. Metal lurches.

Barnes shines his light toward the sound, finding a wide, thick, brown metal door and an electronic keypad, dead.

*BANG! BANG!*

The door shakes with every pound. One of the hinges—kept outside the room, interestingly—is bent.

*BANG!*

He pauses for longer than he should. Indecision rattles him.

He has no fucking idea what could be on the other side of that door.

Except –

He looks down at his left hand and makes a fist of it, thinking that maybe once or maybe many times, he'd erupted into blind rage and pounded, pounded, pounded walls and doors and people and equipment and anything he could reach.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

The hinge bends further.

Thinking *fuck it*, he wraps the fingers of his left hand around the u-shaped door handle and pulls as hard as he can. Two hinges tear away, the door swings wide open, and a blur smacks into the concrete wall across from the doorway.

Barnes steps back from the door and brings his weapon to bear. The dimming light of his flashlight shows only pale skin, bloodshot whites of eyes, and a body-sized dent in the concrete.

He takes another step back and shines the light at the face – crusted blood on the mouth, red smears on its neck and cheeks, deep scratches on its forehead, hair line, and cheek bones. That mouth opens wide and screams, screams, screams, the words making no sense. It takes a step toward Barnes.
The person crumples, a splatter of blood against the wall and then a small pool of it on the floor. He shines his light across the body and sees it's not wearing any clothes; its body is emaciated, sharp, jagged joints and skin stretched across jutting bones. It's missing both of its ears, torn flesh in their stead.


His light dims another notch.

*Help.*

He –

He doesn't feel bad. He feels that maybe once or maybe many times, he would have chosen a helping of bullets over a helping hand.

Before his light dies, he wants to explore the room, and so he does, and then wishes he hadn't.

He finds shiny, steel lab tables, a couple with decomposed bodies strapped to them. Broken glass cages.

Rotting corpses, gouges of flesh partly missing and partly strewn in an identifiable path. No windows. No food. No way out. There's not many paths for that.

He steps further into the room than he should, shining his fading light on those broken cages and reading "Subject Thirty," "Subject Thirty-Three," "Subject Forty" inscribed on their tops.

*Seventeen.*

They called him *Seventeen*, and they cut incisions across his left rib cage and all along his back. They wrote notes in a file that he pretended to never see. They strapped him to lab tables.

This – this was a lab for human experimentation.

Ten months, since HYDRA fell. Ten months, since HYDRA abandoned this base and the dozen people it'd kept inside.

A whisper says he should care, he should feel something, he should be angry and upset. He doesn't and isn't, though.

He regrets that his flashlight is running out of power; he regrets that he can't follow-through on his plan to explore the rest of the base; and he regrets that there's a flashing red camera in the far, far corner of the room.

In an instant, he backs out of the room, eyes pinpointed on the camera until he turns the corner and sprints down the hallway, up the stairwell, and out of the entire base. He runs and runs, across the meadow and into the thick treeline, and, even then, he keeps running, gaining more and more distance from the base.

He isn't running from HYDRA. He's strategically regrouping, because it involves a sprawling, multi-complex base that he doesn't know. Also: he can divert HYDRA with SHIELD.

Two klicks out, he stops, back pressed against the trunk of a tree, takes out his phone, and
sends Fury the base coordinates, along with *Subfloor 9; recent human experiments; and active monitoring system*. He doesn't know what else to send.

He remembers enough and has read enough to know that Fury should send people to investigate and detain. Fury's move will tell Barnes everything he needs to know about their arrangement, about SHIELD, about Fury.

If he's lucky, SHIELD will take out HYDRA, and, if he's real lucky, he'll get a shot at exploring the underground rail system and tunnels.

He slips the phone into a side pocket of his backpack, holsters his SIG Sauer, and takes out a dismantled long-range sniper rifle from his backpack. It takes just moments to assemble and load.

He gets to work.

Nestled among a high range of conifers in the east treeline, Barnes finds as good a nest as he's going to find. He spreads out stomach-flat on the ground, perches his scoped rifle on a mound of dirt, and waits for SHIELD or HYDRA or both.

Thirteen hours later, he sees two people he hadn't expected to see: Rogers and the winged guy from the helicarrier—the one who, by all rights, should be pretty fucking dead right now. It's okay that he isn't.

He just can't believe that Rogers and his friend are still in Europe. Still looking.

Beyond that, Barnes has a memory of Rogers always wearing a ridiculous costume—a walking, talking, running, punching American flag—and he's glad, in a weird way, to see Rogers wearing what passes for normal clothes these days.

And it burns, in a weird way, to see Rogers walking shoulder-to-shoulder with someone else.

It used to be him. He remembers that. Actually, he remembers a lot about that.

Barnes follows their path for longer than he should, before turning his watch to the surrounding area. He carefully scans the tree line across the meadow, looking for any signs of HYDRA: gleams of metal, a pattern amidst nature's chaos, movement.

Above him, perched in a tall, leafy tree, dozens of birds chitter, endlessly and endlessly. Wings flutter, back and forth. Long-dead, brown leaves fall. The chittering of the birds tells him that there's no one near him.

He re-scans the tree lines: west, north, and south. Steve and his friend are nearly across the meadow, heading toward the northern tree line. From there, it's only 150 meters to the doorway inset into the hill.

Barnes scans the tree lines again, and, again, finds nothing.

The birds keep chittering.

Steve and the friend disappear into the tree line. Mentally, Barnes begins keeping time. Otherwise, he stays put and watches.

Minutes pass, and there is no movement or sound, except for the birds above his head.

Five minutes becomes ten becomes twenty becomes thirty becomes forty.
At eighty three, comes gun fire.

He doesn't hesitate.

Floor Nine is inhuman in its cruelty.

The first body they come to has been shot in the head with a small caliber weapon. It's male, the body nude, starved, beaten, and mutilated. Steve's no expert, but he thinks the man has been dead for less than a day.

"Okay." Sam sounds sick. "Who opens the door, shoots this guy, tips off SHIELD, but doesn't stick around to help?"

_Bucky_, a stupid, naïve part of Steve thinks. Bucky, who hasn't touched any part of SHIELD, and, Bucky, who would likely be shot dead if SHIELD got a clean enough shot at him. Bucky, who has no way to tip off anyone. It's a nice thought to have in a nice dream world, but that's all.

"Good question," Steve says.

He jerks his head toward the open door, waits until Sam looks ready, and walks in, shield held protectively in front of them both.

The dark room reeks of death. Their flashlights swarm across the concrete floor, the walls, the lab tables. What Steve sees is easy enough to explain—human experimentation, abandonment, and, ultimately, cannibalism—but too hard to wrap his mind around.

Two months ago, they'd been sent to another base—an abandoned hospital in a former Eastern Bloc town—and found the same twisted disregard for human life. The small kid from Brooklyn doesn't want to believe that there are likely dozens more rooms like this, but the person he is now, after everything during the War and after everything since, knows that there must be.

"This is…" Sam doesn't complete his thought.

_What he survived and you still can't see that_, Steve wants to yell. He doesn't, though, because Sam's been a stalwart support, when he should have just said "good knowing you" and gone about his life.

"This is HYDRA," Steve responds. "Let's photograph what we can and then check out the rest."

It's the worst work: taking photos in the dark with their Starkphones, nine stories deep inside an abandoned HYDRA base, while sifting through body parts, blood stains, and sick tools used to destroy human flesh. Sam periodically coughs and gags, which Steve ignores.

He approaches a black, thin metal supply cabinet, the metal wavering loudly as he opens the door, and sees the bare remnants of what was undoubtedly used for paper filing. He shines his light on the couple of loose leaf papers still on the shelf and can't read the language; he takes photos of them, instead.

Sam runs out of the room, back into the hallway, and, soon after, the tangled sound of dry heaving echoes to Steve's ears.

During the War, in late December '44, the team had come upon a mass grave dug into the earth:
soft, gooey bodies, with naked limbs sticking out of the ground. Blackened skin. Marbled veins. White-coated eyes. Swirling, black flies and swarming, white maggots.

The smell was everywhere: stuck in his throat, soaked into his skin, even coating his eyes. It was months-old rotting people. It was people.

He turned on his heel, took rapid steps forward, a sickness crawling up from his twisting stomach, until it spiked in his throat and he was on his knees and –

A hand settled on his back.

"We can beat this."

Bucky. Always Bucky.

"I'm with you, Pal."

He heard Dugan talking loudly – an obvious ploy to make it harder to hear the sound of their commander heaving and breaking.

The dry heaving stopped, and he waited a few moments to make sure. He dropped on his ass, fingers curled against the hard ground.

"They're people, Buck," Steve said.

He saw Bucky look at the grave, take a deep breath, and let it back out again. He nodded, eyes downcast. "Yeah. S'why we're here. Why we're gonna stop'em. Let's go."

_Buck. Come back._

"Steve?" Sam.

He pushes away those days long past and walks toward the door. "Yeah."

"Now."

In the dark, Sam can't see Steve roll his eyes. He passes the threshold, back into the hallway, and he doesn't even need Sam to say a word.

At the end of the tunnel, in what has to be an open stairwell, there's a dim, steady light. It hadn't been there before.

Without a question, he pockets his phone and takes point, shield out in front. Both of their footfalls are silent, though it doesn't matter much. At the entrance to the stairwell—a doorway without a door—it's clear that the light is coming from several floors down.

Steve motions them onward, not even questioning if Sam is in or out. Right now, he'd go it alone, not a problem.

Steve takes the stairs neither slowly nor quickly, just like he'd been trained. Sam is a step behind him, all the way down to the tenth, eleven, twelfth, and, finally, the thirteenth subfloor, where the light is bright.

The stairwell opens to a round mezzanine with dull, pockmarked floors and curved walls made of disintegrating, white subway tile. The light source is a blinding upright floodlight, aimed down the mezzanine's walkway, where there's a closed door.
Questions swirl in Steve's brain: *what is this, where did the light come from, who's here?* He's certain Sam has the same questions. They just don't dare speak.

Once again, Steve motions them forward and begins the short trek across the mezzanine, to the unmarked gray door.

It opens to four parallel subway platforms: nothing but concrete floors, ceilings, and structural columns, with dark, menacingly shadowed tunnels that lead to anywhere. Their platform, though, is lit with the same kind of upright flood light as the mezzanine.

Simultaneously, multiple doors slam.

"Uh—"

Steve snaps his gaze to their platform's tunnel and sees darkness shift at the far end. He looks at the other, closer end and sees black-clad soldiers, all armed with assault rifles, storming down the tunnel, right toward them.

Between the slamming doors and the two tunnels of soldiers, it's a decent assumption that they're surrounded and outnumbered and that this—the whole thing—had been a set-up.

"Plan?" Sam asks.

"Attack" is the only word Steve has, before he gets started.

He sprints toward the nearest group, the ones pouring in from the closer tunnel, and cracks heads, arms, necks, and chests with the edge of his shield. He hears the sound of gunfire, hears concrete shatter, the sound of Sam activating his wings, and then the sound of more gunfire.

The key is to not give the soldiers time to shoot.

He ducks a sloppy punch and breaks the kneecap of his assailant, before punching him in the throat, grabbing his body, and throwing that body into the crowd of soldiers trying to surround him.

Steve jumps and kicks the next closest soldier, then spins in midair, kicks off of a column, and punches straight through the helmet of another one.

It used to be that he felt bad, when he killed or seriously injured those who were seriously underskilled for a fight against him. It's not that way anymore.

Their numbers drop: from at least twenty to fifteen to ten to five to none. He's barely broken a sweat.

Steve turns and sees that, although Sam isn't having much trouble with his group, he's getting surrounded by a lot of soldiers with a lot of guns.

He sprints toward those soldiers and throws his shield: a perfect arc, over a perfect trajectory, that takes out five of them. He catches his shield on its return flight, easily slipping it over his right forearm, jumps off the platform and into the rail's alcove, and gets to work.

Using a combination of hand-to-hand combat and his shield, he cuts through the soldiers, like Brooklyn bullies used to cut through him. After fifteen, he stops caring to keep count, and focuses more on keeping an ear out for Sam and eyeing a viable exit strategy.
Because the honest truth is that, while HYDRA's current crop of recruits is seemingly untrained, there could be an endless supply of them, compared to Steve and Sam's two. Sam will tire, and, after a long enough while, so will Steve.

The two tunnels closest to them are out of the question, as far as Steve can tell. Going back the way they came seems foolhardy: it leads back into a largely unknown building, which HYDRA very likely occu—

Steve hears Sam scream, almost a roar, and then the hollow clicking sound of an expended magazine. Steve whips his head around—Sam's flat on his back and surrounded—readying to throw his shield at Sam's assailants and then jump in.

But.

Bucky's there, interjecting himself into a gang of at least ten HYDRA soldiers.

*Bucky.*

Once they see Bucky, HYDRA forgets about Sam and Steve. They converge on Bucky.

Steve's mind blanks, the platform spinning. Eyes wide, jaw slack, he's no good, no use. He just watches.

It's been ten months, and –

Bucky's brutally efficient, like he was in April. He aims and shoots calmly, as if they're not ridiculously outnumbered by a callous, relentless enemy, and as if he's an executioner. Soldiers drop, one by one, and the ones still alive can't aim at Bucky fast enough.

Steve feels lightheaded. Outside his own body. As if he's not really here and this isn't really happening. It's been ten months, and, finally, finally, finally, Bucky's here, and Bucky's *helping.* *Saving.*

Three soldiers come out of nowhere, lurking behind Bucky. Snapped back to reality, Steve throws his shield at them.

Bucky uses the neck of a soldier as a counterweight (snapping it), jumping up and twisting around in mid-air. As he comes down, he kicks another soldier hard in the throat, all the while throwing the other one—the dead one—into two others.

The shield finds its marks: one, two, three skulls cracked and three more bodies for their ever-growing pile. It bounces off the wall, into Bucky's waiting hand. It easily slips over his right forearm, and he uses its edge to crack the heads of the last two soldiers around Sam.

He turns around, shield still on his arm, his eyes on Steve.

For a single, limitless moment, the world and this old subway platform turn still.

Bucky's still pale, still tired-looking, still with a couple of days of stubble shadowing his face. But his hair's short again, and it's moderately styled, as if he's remembered how preoccupied he used to be with it. He's got on dark jeans and a dark gray v-neck t-shirt under a dark blue jacket. He looks like the person Steve knew.

Knows. The person he *knows.*
Bucky's eyes are only what Steve can describe as calm-but guarded. Not empty. Not dead. Not feral. They look like the eyes of the person he grew up with, fought with, and, once, all but died with.

The moment ends. An injured HYDRA soldier groans, and Bucky shoots her in the head, as casual as throwing a piece of trash on the ground. Steve flinches—not for the HYDRA soldier, but for the person Bucky used to be, who would never have done that.

Bucky draws his right arm back, as if he's going to throw the shield. Steve's stomach somersaults. The trajectory will be—

No, no, no, no -

He throws the shield, directly at Steve. Steve has more than enough time to dodge it, and he simply steps out of the way. The shield swoops past him, down the far tunnel.

"Damn it!" Steve yells.

He'd hoped—he'd thought—that Bucky was back, but Bucky would never-

Bucky honest-to-god rolls his eyes. "Behind you."

Steve turns and sees at least eight more soldiers, rifles aimed, just meters down the tunnel. Four of them are already on the ground, taken out by the shield.

Then he hears it: crunching footsteps, picking up in pace, echoing away. He spins around and sees Bucky sprinting down the closer tunnel, decades-old dust puffing into the air behind him.

"Bucky!"

"I got this," Sam says, back on his feet, with a HYDRA rifle in his hands. "Go get him."

If Sam thinks he can handle the handful of HYDRA, Steve believes him. He darts after Bucky.

"And don't tell him 'thanks'! He owed me that!"

Barnes runs down the east platform, picking up speed around a curve, his boots crunching against crumbling concrete. Any moment, he expects to hear Steve pounding behind him.

He's not ready for this. He's not ready for Steve.

It'd just been – He couldn't let the other guy die like that. He hadn't meant for them to even see him.

Barnes takes a sharp left and sprints up several flights of a steep, decayed staircase, two steps at a time, and then bolts across an expansive mezzanine. The only light comes from the fading sunlight streaming through the holes in the deteriorating, cracked ceiling, and, even with that, it's dark. He's following the fifty-year-old map that he's memorized, hoping it's still accurate.

Footfalls echo behind him, boots grinding against granulated concrete and broken ceramic tiles.

Steve.

The door to a pedestrian subway tunnel is marked by a rusted metal sign hanging from only one of
its two anchor points, its Latin letters faded. Barnes slows his sprint to a fast walk and gently nudges the steel door open, paint chips flaking onto his hand.

He slips inside the pitch-black tunnel and quietly closes the door, ensuring that it makes as little sound as possible. The creaks and scrapes of its hinges won't be loud enough to tip Steve off.

Then he runs, a flat-out sprint, the fingertips of his right hand trailing against the curvature of the tunnel's tiled wall. Based on the map, the tunnel isn't a straight shot: it turns and curves. He follows the wall.

The floor of the tunnel is much more intact than the subway's, and the wall is cool and smooth under his fingers. He runs faster, unconcerned about the possibility of running straight into debris piles.

An echo of a door slamming reverberates through the tunnel.

"Bucky! Stop, damn it!"

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

Barnes picks up speed, anxiety gripping his stomach. He doesn't want to-can't-talk to Steve. Not after everything. Not after. Not ever.

The tunnel is only about two klicks long, ending in a HYDRA built-and-abandoned military/industrial town no bigger than six square kilometers. It's just on the edge of an immense forest, and, once there, he's home free.

He runs faster, even as the concrete floor becomes spongy, and the tiles under his fingers become jagged and unsmooth.

Pinpricks of dimming light gleam in the distance, those pinpricks growing both bigger and dimmer, as the architecture of the tunnel crumbles and as the sun sets.

*Bucky!*

The pinpricks transform into shapes, then into the most intricate design of the entire complex: generic, geometric wrought-iron, casting its long shadow onto a flight of concrete stairs.

He takes the steps two at a time, going down hard onto his hands and knees, when one of the stone treads collapses under his boot.

The *pelting* of Steve's shoes reverberates through the tunnel. He's not far behind.

Barnes digs the fingers of his left hand into the next step, pulls himself up, and bounds across the rest of the stairs, straight toward the wrought-iron gate. He puts his left arm forward, shielding his head and neck, and crashes through the brittle metal of the gate and into the dark evening dusk of a town taken by time.

Beyond the skeleton, stone buildings and devoured, gray asphalt roads, is the forest, and, even beyond that, is pure countryside. Hundreds of kilometers to become lost in.

Just past the gate, he cuts north and dashes up a debris-littered, broken road, its asphalt long overtaken by long grass, twisting vines, and spongy moss. Tall, age-blackened, white buildings tower upward on either side of him, some seven, eight stories tall.
Even in his narrow-focused hurry, he notices that none of the buildings have windows. It unnerves him, his instincts prickling, so much so that he disregards any notions of ducking inside one of them.

"Bucky! Would you just stop?!"

It sounds like Steve is still by the pedestrian tunnel; he must have had trouble on those stairs.

_Is he ok_- 

Barnes shuts that thought down. He's not here for Steve. If he'd wanted to know how Steve was doing, he wouldn't have walked away from the Potomac, and he wouldn't be in Europe.

He makes a sharp turn west and picks up speed.

The windowless, dirty-white buildings give way to stout, two-to-three story, solid red brick structures.

He counts the meters in his head, tracking his progress, all the while looking ahead at the end of the street, and deciding which way to go, which way Steve will go, and the chances that HYDRA operatives may be-

A sudden burst of fear flashes through him, prickly heat blistering through his arm and face. His fight reflex kicks in, and he comes to a slow stop.

The air is stagnant, yet cold. It tastes stale, its mustiness sticking to the back of his throat. The town has been abandoned and forgotten for almost fifty years, and yet, there are no animals-no singing birds, no drawling insects, no early, swooping bats.

No graffiti. There's always graffiti.

No trash. There's always trash.

There are no signs of life at all: only himself and Steve.

He looks at one of the tall, blank, windowless brick buildings, and his heart skips, stomach coiling. A flash of lightheadedness comes and goes.

It all feels wrong.

They shouldn't be here.

His flight instinct overtakes everything else, and he wants to run as far away from here as possible, as quickly as possible.

They never should have come here. _He_ never should have come here.

_Steve_.

By now, Steve should be close, if only a block or so over. He hears the rhythmic _thuds_ of Steve's footsteps, the hesitant kind that belong to a person who's unsure. He remembers enough about Steve to understand that Steve is just a minute or two from doubling back to the tunnel and regrouping with the friend with the wings.

He can't leave them here alone.
He coughs, loud and once.

Predictably, Steve's pace picks up; it now sounds focused. Barnes runs toward the edge of the town, intentionally being noisy, and deliberately luring Steve out of the town.

The blocks of the town blur by, and the sounds of Steve steps blend together with Barnes' heavy breaths.

Barnes cuts north, then back west, pointedly ignoring the buildings. He tells himself that he doesn't care how they look; in a couple minutes, they won't matter to him ever again.

"Bucky!"

The voice is just meters behind him, doubtlessly within eyeshot.

"Stop!"

Barnes can see the forest: it's between the end of the rows of buildings and a meadow of brown, dead weeds, spotted with rotted wooden freight cars.

He runs faster, focused on making it to the edge of the town. It's only about fifty meters out, but Steve is so close that Barnes can't tell their footsteps apart.

"Bucky, no! Stop!"

Steve's just steps behind him.

Barnes breaches the meadow. He's five, six, seven steps in, when he feels Steve's arms wrap around him, and his feet lose traction off the ground.

His forehead smacks into an iron rail, above his left eyebrow. Usually, it wouldn't even register, but Steve had hit him hard. He blinks away shoots of yellow sparks.

"Really? Really, Steve, didja-" Barnes complains—and that's... Those words aren't his own; they're a reflex, leftover from the last dregs of a person long gone.

Steve rolls off of him, his clothes and the weeds rustling as Steve stands up. Barnes ignores Steve's outstretched hand and stands on his own, moving a few meters away from Steve and turning away from him.

"Are you okay?" Steve asks, breathless.

Barnes touches a painful spot on his forehead, and his fingers come away with a thin swath of blood. It's fine. He wipes the blood on his jeans.

"What do you want?" Barnes asks.

He stares at a tilting, rotted-black freight car, reading the barest outline of the words tkanina, dworzec kolejowy, and dziewięć. Textiles, his ass. He can still smell the faintest hint of gunpowder: this was a munitions depot, at the least.

"Can we just... Can we talk?"

Words die on the tip of his tongue. The fingers of his right hand dig into his thigh. He doesn't know if he's upset, mad, relieved, disappointed, or any of the above. He doesn't know what he wants out of this.
"We used to talk all the time. All the time, Buck. It's all I'm asking. Just... Just a talk. And then I'll stop."

Barnes tastes blood and realizes he's biting his tongue.

He wants this, but he doesn't want this. He knows enough to know that he's not ready. He knows enough to know that Steve won't stop.

Barnes turns around and faces Steve. Steve's face is dirty, the sleeve of his jacket torn, and maybe he had a harder time in that tunnel than Barnes thought. He looks like a terrified, small kid from Brooklyn.

The last one picked for everything, unless Bucky was doing the picking. The last one invited to anything, unless Bucky was doing the inviting. The last one, always, and always, that stubborn, terrified look on his face, like he was waiting for Bucky to walk away.

Bucky would never walk away from Steve.

"Go home, Rogers."

The name choice is deliberate. Steve really only understands one language, and it's a painful one.

"Buck-"

"I walked away." Barnes takes a deep breath and tries—just tries—to calm the anger, to fight away tears, because he's not Bucky. It's all turning to something more vicious, and he doesn't want it to.

"I walked away. I'm asking you to stop."

Steve is quiet, expression still terror. It's just his breaths. The wind. The snap and click, click, click of Steve's friend's wings retracting, far behind Steve.

The friend doesn't look terrified: just pissed and ready to defend Steve. That's fair, and good.

"Don't go back the way you came. That place isn't good," he says, so at least he'll have a sliver of peace of mind.

Barnes turns back around, toward the forest, and walks away, throwing back, "Go home to your life, Rogers. It looks like a nice one" as he goes.

"You are my life," Steve says, with ridiculous conviction. It's familiar, at least.

Barnes doesn't stop walking, but he gives into that vicious feeling, an incisive one: "You're not mine, Pal. End of the line."

Regret is immediate. He remembers the helicarrier and what he did there. He remembers Steve's words and everything Steve did. He remembers that Steve doesn't deserve what he just did, but he keeps walking anyway.

The sounds of dead leaves crunching underfoot precede the hand that wraps around his right bicep. Steve grips Barnes' arm hard and yanks him back.

When he turns around and draws a black combat knife, holding it poised to strike, it's instinct. Rawness. An acknowledgment that he's still learning to walk-on treacherous ground.

This is why.
Steve just glances at it and then locks his gaze on Barnes' eyes. The terror has given way to dark anger. Barnes doesn't shy away from it: he stares right back, knife still at the ready. He has no intention of using it, or admitting that he regrets pulling it out.

"You gonna use that? Really?" Steve doesn't let go of his arm. He leans forward, as if they're still friends and the concept of personal space between them doesn't exist. He can feel Steve's warm, sour breath against his face. "Because I can go get us another helicarrier. Is that what you want? Am I still your damn mission?"

Barnes leans in even closer, choosing his words like he does weapons of war. "Am I yours?"

He knows he's not.

Steve deflates, face crumpling into an ugly mixture of surprise and hurt. When he speaks, his voice is no longer a hiss; it's a step above a whisper. "I'm not here to bring you- Is that what you think? I wouldn't do that to you."

Barnes waits too long to say something. Steve barges ahead.


An old-sounding voice in his head demands that he accepts that offer. Whatever's left of Steve's friend wants desperately to go home, anywhere that home is. The only problem is that it's not 19-fucking-43 anymore, and he-

He's not ready, and Steve will never accept that. Because Steve thinks he can fix the fucking world, as if everything is as easy as a serum in a bottle.

"I remember you. I remember me. I remember a lot."

Relief and stupid happiness floods Steve's face. "Bucky, that's great."

"And we're not friends," Barnes finishes, and then pulls his arm out of Steve's loose hand. "And that's not my name. Is that clear enough for you?"

He's eviscerated people with single swipes of a variety of knives, but none so efficiently or completely as that. It hurts. He doesn't try to imagine how it feels for Steve.

He turns and walks away, sheathing the knife and ignoring tangled, confused feelings of relief, want, and regret.

"You owe me a fucking car!" Steve's friend shouts. "But, hey, your hair looks nice! I'm glad about that!"

After New York, Steve rode into the sunset. Well - it was more like mid-afternoon, but he was definitely going west. Anywhere. Nowhere. Wherever. He picked what they called a highway, and then what they called an interstate, and he rode.

Buck - would you be proud?

In his head, the memory of his friend said, Are you kiddin'? You did fucking great. You saved the
world. Again.

And, in his head, Steve would argue - he hadn't saved it the first time, and he wasn't the only one out there this last time.

And, in his head, the memory of his friend would say, Had it up to here, Rogers. Right up to here. And Steve could see the smile and the way the memory of his friend would shake his head.

And, on what they called a back road, somewhere off some highway or interstate in Nebraska or maybe Kansas, Steve pulled to the side of a grassy green ditch, hugged his bruised stomach hard, hunched over the handlebars, and tried hard not to cry.

"I miss you, I miss you, I miss you, I fucking miss you," Steve breathed, not nearly loud enough for the breeze to carry the breaths or the words.

It wasn't even three hours later, the sun burning bright and low in the western horizon, that Romanoff messaged or texted or whatevered him: Got an op. Interested?

He read it, then put his phone in his pocket, and then took it back out, because he wasn't good at ignoring things-especially the sort he wanted to ignore. The real, honest answer was that he had nothing else to do. He knew nothing else. He knew no one else.

Sure, he answered.

During that first briefing, in the situation room, Romanoff and a unit called Strike looked to him for strategy. He squared his jaw and looked at the intel real, real hard, and real, real serious-like, a way to stall that he'd picked up from Bucky, and wondered, What the hell would you do, Buck?

The memory of his friend would say, I showed you this. You know this. You'll do great. Just don't put me somewhere weird.

After that first op, with a gray and blue shield strapped to his arm, the guy named Rumlow cuffed his shoulder with the back of his hand and said, "It's an honor. Ready for the next one?"

Romanoff was only a few meters away, listening, and because he could tell she was listening, he knew she didn't care that she was being obvious.

He stalled again, still thinking that he knew nothing and no one else. This time, thinking that he chose this. This is what he'd pushed and pushed to do, and he owed it to -


Can't do that, Buck. Neither can you.

You said you would.

I said we would.

- and he owed it to himself, maybe, to see it through.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Good," Rumlow said, his smile nothing but a small uptick of the right corner of his lip. "It really is an honor." And then Rumlow was gone, trotting up past Romanoff to the unit called Strike.

"So many admirers," Romanoff commented, her tone seamlessly changing from teasing to ice.
"Are you sure this is what you want to be doing?"

Steve huffed out a laugh. "Are you sure you care?"

"I'm sure that someone who doesn't want to be out there, is someone who is a liability. Is this really a world you want to be fighting for?"

Did you ever stop?

Steve frowned. "Getting there." That was an honest answer.

And then - then - she moved her eyes and her head, appraisingly, like Bucky used to. Or - he was just going crazy and seeing things. Mapping people from now to people from back then, trying to make links that didn't exist. As if Romanoff and Bucky were anything alike, even.

"When I'm done, you'll know it," Steve continued.

"Fair enough," Romanoff said. "By the way, Fury wants you in charge. Congratulations, Captain."

She walked away, and Steve didn't immediately follow. All said, he wasn't sure if he was ready for what she expected or what Fury wanted. But he didn't know anything else, so he did it.

Every op, every meeting, every everything followed the same mantra:

What would you do, Buck?

Is this right, Buck?

Am I doin' okay, Buck?

And every op, every meeting, every everything went well. Successfully, even.

It was the downtime that was the problem.

Before, downtime was Bucky – music, reading, talking, going out.

So, he read the last book he remembered Bucky reading, back in Brooklyn – Calamity Town, by some guy named Ellery Queen, and found it to be humorless and so unlike Bucky that -

Move on, Pal. You've gotta move on.

Right.

Romanoff tried to teach him more about combat, but her moves were similar to what Bucky used to show him during the war. She was harsh and poised, but Steve preferred Bucky's warm scrappiness to Romanoff's cold perfection. And - all said - he really didn't like her, or really even trust her.

Rumlow and Strike tried to go for beers, and Steve declined, every time. Too close, too soon, and Rumlow was basically supposed to be his new Bucky - the right hand, the confidant, the eyes and ears and everything, everything good.

I'm dead. Go.

Everyone's dead. I don't want to.
"It must be hard," Rumlow mentioned, one day in the Triskelion's cafeteria. "All this."

Steve shrugged. "Kinda funny: hasn't really changed all that much. Shinier."

"I meant people," Rumlow corrected, almost gently.

Steve smiled, fingerprints sinking into the sugary white bread of his awful turkey sandwich. He really didn't like bread, anymore. Or turkey. "Yeah, them too. It gets easier. Mostly."

"You make it look easy. I get that you don't like to drink-"

"Can't get drunk," Steve interjected, a pretend kind of light-hearted.

"...but if you need anything, it's what a unit's there for. All you've got to do is say the word. Is 'mostly' that word?"

It took Steve a moment to track back and then catch up to what that meant. Rumlow was less than what they called "touchy-feely" these days, but there was an itch, and he was scratching it.

"Sergeant Barnes." Stupid. Everyone knew they were friends. "Bucky. It's still hard."

Rumlow's face went still, eyebrows relaxing. Subtle, but the difference was real, and instant.

Steve decided to back off, quickly: "That's all."

"I can imagine. Whatever you need. 'Kay?" And Rumlow, like usual, was gone, just as quick as he came.

_Miss you, Buck._

Because talking used to be easy, when Bucky was the one doing the listening. Bucky never got scared of or weirded out by talking. He never offered something he wasn't willing to give. There were never layers to peel away.

_Yeah, well, you kinda sorta get that, when you know each other your entire lives. Give these people a break, Captain Asshole._

Steve plucked at the bread of his sandwich, Rumlow out of sight around a corner, and muttered under his breath, "I miss real bread."

And, he thought, again and again and again, _I miss you, Buck._

And, he went home, to a humorless novel because he couldn't remember any of the others that Bucky ever read, and to shelves full of World War II biographies and non-fiction, because that's all he felt comfortable with, and to a record player screeching out Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller, because anything else made his head hurt.

And, he wondered, _what's it all for?_ And, maybe, he thought, _I was better off in the ice._

_You don't mean that._

And, he wondered – if Natasha had been right, all those months ago, about this being a world he didn't want to fight for. There was hardly anything in it that he cared about, and principles couldn't carry him for eternity.

_I mean it, Buck._
And, as a black-clad, black-masked, metal-armed assassin beat the shit out of him, the entire shitty, shiny world falling down around him, he thought, *I'm done, Buck; I'm so fucking done - I'm*

The world tilted, gravity dissipating into too-thin, fiery air that burned his eyes and scorched his throat.

"Bucky?"

Through the rush of white noise pounding through his ears, he heard five words spoken in his best friend's ever-calm voice, "Who the hell is Bucky?"

---

Sam expects Steve to keep going: to make excuses and never be deterred. Instead, they take a train from Krakow to Frankfurt, straight to the airport. Steve looks out the window for an entire five hours, silent.

Sam tries to read a book, finding it difficult to focus, but nevertheless only vaguely aware of when they enter Frankfurt's city limits.

"The last time we were here-" Steve cuts himself off. "Me and Bucky. We..."

Sam waits, eyes on his book.

"It was five years ago."

Steve's only been out of the Arctic for four.

Sam states the obvious, but maybe it needs to be stated: "It's been a lot longer than that for him. He'll come around."

Steve doesn't answer, and they barely talk, even at the airport, through security, during the two hour wait in the terminal, during boarding, or even while they wait thirty minutes for take-off.

"Welcome to Transcontinental United Flight 416 nonstop from Frankfurt to Washington, DC. Your estimated flight time is eight hours and forty minutes. The captain is finishing up some pre-flight checks, and we will be taking off shortly. Please keep-"

Sam tunes out the rest. His ass is already numb, from the hours upon hours of sitting they've been doing.

He looks over and sees that Steve has his head against the fuselage, eyes closed. Sam can tell Steve isn't asleep, but that's okay. This trip hadn't gone the way either of them had hoped.

He pops in his earbuds, doesn't turn his music on, and opens all the articles on that he can, before he loses data access.

Two hours in, with nearly seven to go, the sky outside the plane has dulled to a dim, starless grey, with black slips of clouds passing under the plane. The investigation into Tom Brady and his ball-deflating team has evidently taken a "bizarre turn" and the Scouting Combine is gearing up for a so-so draft year, when Sam looks over and sees Steve staring out the window.

Another hour passes. Steve stares. Sam's been out of NFL articles for forty minutes and has been on the same page of his clinical mental health counseling journal for at least thirty of those.
The woman to Sam's right is asleep. Her arm is taking up his armrest, and it really sorta sucks.

Another hour. Four to go. He's only read three pages, in a whole hour.

"It was him."

Impulsively, Sam pulls out his earbuds and looks over at Steve, who is still staring out the window.

"Yeah. It was."

"No," Steve says, tone completely unreadable. "It was him."

Sam has no idea what Steve means. "Okay," he says, anyway.

"I think he hated me, near the end." Steve's voice is quiet and flat, still unreadable. "I really think he did."

Sam looks down. He can stay quiet, and let Steve take these little *non sequitur* potshots, or he can try to lead Steve down a path.

"Near the end of what?"

Steve breathes out his nose, arms pulling tighter around his chest. "Doesn't matter."

To be fair, Sam thinks, he *had* asked a dumb question. Bucky and Steve went down less than two months apart: the end.

Sam takes a leap, a big one: "I think if you were right about that, he would have let you die last year."

Finally, Steve looks away from the window. The flight progress screen on the seat in front of him is suddenly fascinating.

"The night before he shipped out, I finally managed to enlist. We'd been fighting about it for a whole year. The *morning* before I shipped out, I got a letter from the art school I'd gotten into but couldn't afford. Bucky'd paid for the whole thing. Could've started that fall."

Even Sam, who still doesn't think Bucky is worth all this heartache, feels a pang of regret, and his mouth betrays him: "People just don't do that."

Steve grins, lost in another time, but it doesn't last long. "He did. That's who he was."

Sam doesn't know how to gracefully follow up on that; he's heard the same riff about "best person evar!11!" about once a week for the past ten months. He's only seen the guy do one decent thing for someone else, and, of course, it involved killing a lot of people.

Neutrally, he asks, "What happened to the tuition money?"

"It was still there, in a trust account, when they brought me out. I turned it into some scholarship fund, in his name. At least it wasn't completely wasted."

"If you hadn't gone over there, he would've died. Remember that."

Steve shakes his head. "No, HYDRA would've just had'em for a few more years than they already did." He says it like those few years don't matter very much. "Someone else would've stopped Schmidt. HYDRA would still be here. It'd be the same."
"With no one left to bring him back. You may not like what he's doing, but you brought him back. That matters. He's just a little mixed up, still."

For the first time in hours, Steve actually looks at Sam, and he nods. Just nods.

Steve maneuvered artillery, ground troop, overwatch, and civilian figurines around a mock tabletop battlefield. It was the sixth attempt of the night to perfect this plan of attack.

"Okay, Buck, how about this?"

It was late, way past lights out, and Bucky had just hours ago gotten back from a six-day excursion to Germany with Lacy's squad. He'd showered, shaved, and come straight here, with three packs of Charlie-rats, a half a tin of cigarettes, and gray shadows under his eyes.

"Buck?"

Steve looked over and found Bucky asleep, leaning half over the table, his left arm straight out, head on his arm.

For once, he wasn't wearing a long-sleeve pullover. Instead, he had on an olive green t-shirt, with the sleeve accidentally bunched up a bit. It was the only reason Steve saw it: HYDRA's symbol, burned dark pink into the inside of his upper left arm, along with a handwritten number in thin, black ink: KB-0017 / LX-3.

Steve stared at it, thinking over and over again: they fucking branded him, they called him by a fucking number.

It'd been months since Krausberg, and it shouldn't-didn't, maybe-change anything, but-

But his stomach turned, and his shoulders tensed, and he thought of that little girl from last week, with the same mark-not a fucking brand-on her left arm. He thought about what if he'd never made it to the 107th in time to save Bucky, and if HYDRA still had him, what they'd be doing-

Bucky jerked awake, sitting straight up with a gasp, which he tried to mask by turning it into a yawn.

Steve looked down at the mock battle set-up, pretending a little himself. Bucky'd never hidden anything, not ever. They were two open books, since before Steve could even remember. The only explanation was that Krausberg had been bad.

"You got it ready?" Bucky asked, voice muffled. "You didn't put me somewhere weird again, did you?"

Steve looked at him and saw that he was rubbing his eyes and face with both hands. Then the real yawn came; wide and long, the kind that made his eyes tear up. The kind that meant he was ready to drop.

"No, let's say we call it a night. And probably."

Bucky didn't need told twice. He stood up fast and headed to the tent flap, nodding and yawning the whole time.

Steve caught up and slung his arm around Bucky's neck and shoulders, just like Bucky used to do
with him.

For once, he could protect Bucky. For once, he could carry that burden.

Eleven months later, Steve twirled the overwatch figurine between two fingers, the mock battlefield empty.

Bucky wasn't asleep on the table, or eating bad combinations of leftover rations, or leafing through intelligence reports, or showing Steve better strategies. He wasn't out with another squad, or sleeping in his tent, or gambling cigarettes and rations and flasks of the worst gut rot this side of Italy.

It'd been two weeks. He didn't know there were three-thousand five-hundred and ninety four more to go, until he shouldered that burden again.

From Krakow, Barnes flees to anywhere. The first train available is a sixteen hour night train to Brussels, Belgium, and he fucking takes it.

His stomach is tiny, painful knots; his cheeks and neck are inflamed red; and he feels sick to his stomach. He didn't catch some bug from the abandoned town or subway station: it's regret, shame, and remorse all bundled into one horrible package.

Go find him. Fix this. Fix it fucking now.

He could break the cabin window and slip into the night, race back to Krakow and likely Warsaw, and find Steve. He could do that.

He doesn't do that.

He slinks down in his seat, wraps both arms around his stomach, and wonders when he's going to be done hurting people.

I'm not gonna fight you. You're my friend.

His mouth tingles, jaw aches. His stomach and throat turn numb and prickly. The little train cabin becomes blurry, and he feels like he's floating above himself, at the same time it feels like the four walls are squeezing toward him, tighter and tighter and tighter.

You're my friend. I've known you my whole life. Please don't make me do this.

You're my—

The sound of sketching and the muted sound of Nelson Omsted on a new radio program pulled him awake. He was right where he'd been, before he'd closed his eyes for just a moment: on the couch, an uncomfortable pillow under his head. A warm blanket had appeared over his legs and stomach.

"And I may take it you're turning down my offer?"

"You may!"

"Catherine Zane – you wouldn't know her – is working in the Secretary's office at the university."

"Ah, yes. Catherine Zane. Secretary's office."
"What are you doing?"

"Just a notation, Mr. Latimer."

Bucky tuned out the voices; for a new program, it sure sounded boring.

He blinked, bleary and still tired, mouth dry and disgusting, his head aching and his lower back aching even more. Steve, though a blurry figure, was curled up in the blue high-backed chair kitty-corner to the couch, dead serious intent on whatever he was sketching on his paper.

Steve's eyes flicked up, and his hand kept moving, and Bucky fucking *knew* what Steve was doing.

"Do you know how creepy this is?"

Steve barely reacted. He took a moment to swipe away a chunk of too-long hair from his forehead, the piece that always fell into his eyes. For as much good as it did: the chunk was right back where it started about three seconds later.

"Steve."

"Don't move." A smile crept onto Steve's face. "I'm tryin' to figure out how to draw snoring."

If anyone could, it'd be Steve.

Bucky had half the mind to turn over, but two things happened: firstly, the muscles in his back seized into a tight spasm, enough so that he didn't want to breathe. Secondly, panic stole Steve's smile.

"C'mon, don't move!"

"You didn't even ask, you asshole," Bucky griped, a little breathless. He relaxed back into the old sofa and was relieved when his muscles accepted the truce.

"I've known you my whole life. I don't have to ask. Now lay still."

Bucky closed his eyes and decided to just listen to the radio program. Even if it didn't sound all too great. Steve, when he was in artist mode, was lousy conversation.

"All right," he acquiesced. "Have at it."

*Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. I've known you my whole life.*

Barnes gasps in a sob, his lungs threatening not to work. He brings his right hand up to cover his face, but sees that it's shaking. He brings his left one up instead and doubles over in his seat, folding in damn near half, and swallows back a wave of tears.

It's not enough. Shivers crawl up his body, sending tiny little trembles through his flesh, and the tears build to heaving sobs.

He could've— He could've gone back to that. He could've accepted Steve's offer to go anywhere, to stop all of this, and he –

*Stop.*

There's no going back.
That world's been gone for a long time.

"Meet me at Spring Hill Diner in about sixteen hours?"

Those ten words tell Natasha that Steve and Sam are flying into Dulles and likely taking the Silver Line to Spring Hill Station. She can swing that.

It's a good thing she errs on the side of being early, when the next text from him comes fourteen hours later and reads, "Can you make that now?"

"On my way," Natasha texts back.

When she arrives, Steve is sitting alone at a booth in the far corner. There's a white cup of coffee cradled between both of his hands. Natasha slides in opposite him and doesn't say a word.

"I found'em," Steve says, after a while, brooding-like.

A day or so ago, Sam had texted "mission status: they had words."

"He..." Steve laughs. "He basically told me to fuck off."

Natasha lifts an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

He rubs a thumb on the cup, self-conscious. His eyes don't leave the cup. "He pulled a knife on me."

She doesn't say, "I warned you. You didn't listen."

"He's still killing."

Natasha blinks, and not just for show. "HYDRA, Steve. He's killing HYDRA. Only HYDRA."

"He's killing," Steve finally looks up. "Does he know he can stop?"

"Can he?" Natasha asks, neutral. She thinks about baiting Steve into thinking this out for himself, but that sounds exhausting. "You'd be a fool to think HYDRA wasn't going to go after him. Nowhere's safe."

She speaks from experience, the kind Steve doesn't and hopefully will never have.

"I'm safe. We're safe."

Natasha successfully stops herself from laughing but evidently not from making a face, because Steve rolls his eyes, sighs, and asks, "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, say it," Steve demands. "Say it."

Natasha tilts her head and decides, carefully, how to say it and, more importantly, how not to say it. How much to say and how much to never give away.

Blue eyes, not always blank, not always dead. Krasavitsa myya, Natashka.
Her lips quirk, before she remembers to quell the nostalgic smile. The person she remembers, much like the one Steve does, has been gone for a long time. And the person she remembers, as she now knows, is the twisted, tragic version of a better man. Thinking of it that way, it's easy to not smile.

"He's not safe for you, and he knows it. Trust me. I've been...somewhere near where he is. Coming out of a place that bad isn't easy. Give him time, Steve."

Steve spits a sad laugh. "Time's all we've had. Hasn't gotten us very far."

March 3, 1945. It was Saturday. Bucky died on Tuesday. It'd been four days.

Steve didn't have a single memory of life before Bucky. The longest they'd been apart was six months, and now...

Now.

Dernier had asked, in French, if Steve wanted help with Bucky's personal effects. Time enough had passed that Steve could understand the language, and he shook his head.

Bucky hadn't brought a lot. Hadn't kept a lot. He was the true oldest child of a sorta big family, coming of age in the Great Depression: anything you had but didn't need, you gave to someone else. He'd never shown attachment to things, just people. He loved people.

There were letters from his mom, all addressed to "James," and which always talked more about Bucky's siblings than anything happening in Brooklyn. A tin of cigarettes. The beat-up watch that he never wore, next to his grandfather's pocket knife, which he never used. A jar of stupid fucking Brylcreem. A set of clothes. A couple of paperbacks, so worn the pages were falling out. A deck of playing cards.

That was all. Not a lot that he needed help with.

Steve sat there for a long time, looking at the footlocker, wallowing in dread and hopelessness. Two weeks ago, Bucky had asked him if it'd all been worth it, and now...

Steve would give anything to be back home, small and sickly, if it meant Bucky would be on the couch, with a book in his hand and a radio program in the background.

That was gone. It was gone.

You're gone.

Footsteps came up behind him, boots on thin tarp and hard dirt ground. It was a rhythm of footfalls he recognized: Colonel Phillips.

"Captain."

"Colonel."

Steve shut the footlocker. In an instant, he decided to send the knife and watch to Bucky's folks; the Brylcreem to that dumb private from Illinois, the one who looked at Bucky with stars in his eyes. The men would gladly take the cigarettes and the playing cards. Someone would take the books. There was more back home, in their apartment.
"I've already extended my condolences, and given you time, so I'm just going to ask, and I'm going to ask just once: what did he tell you about Krausberg?"

Steve laughed, breathy and mirthless. "Really?"

"Three weeks ago, he requested a permanent transfer to the SSR. Anyone with a set of eyes could see how miserable he was here."

Steve's neck stiffened. He had a set of eyes, and he hadn't seen that. Bucky hadn't told him about the transfer request, either.

"And yet, he was asking to stay, after the war. He didn't see a way home. Why do you think that is?"

Steve didn't answer immediately. He knew: because of me, because he didn't trust Phillips. He turned the information over in his head, over and over again, and finally came up with a good enough excuse: "He believed in the work we were doing. He believed in a better world."

"Without a doubt." Phillips paused. Steve grinded his teeth, ready to snap. "Please answer my question."

"What do you want me to tell you? That he wasn't normal? Because I never noticed anything not normal."

"I mean this respectfully: you've never known what normal is, Captain. Would you have known it, if you'd seen it?"

His stomach burned hot. His jaw ached.

Bucky was dead.

Steve stood and spun around, coming up closer to Phillips than he'd expected. He towered over the man.

"I asked him," he bit out. That hot-tempered, Brooklyn anger was coming out. "I asked him. He told me that you're wrong. We knew each other for twenty-three years, and he never lied to me. And he's dead. What more do you want? Sir."

Phillips pressed his lips together, nodded, and looked up. "Fine. If you need anything-"

"I won't ask you."

Steve didn't care about rank, or insubordination, or any of that, not right then.

Phillips left.

Bucky was dead.

Barnes is reading through another chunk of the leaked SHIELD information, his right hand on the keys of his laptop and his left hand balancing a loop of cooked asparagus on a fork, when the talking head on the TV says two things that grab his entire attention: "Verlauben Tower" and "HYDRA."
He sits up fast enough that the laptop balanced on his knees clunks to the ground; his attention is so
fixed to the TV that he doesn't even try to catch it, and he forgets about the fork in his hand.

Between the talking head, the images, and the scrolling bulletin on the bottom of the screen, he
pieces together that hundreds of people are in custody, and Verlauben's offices are being seized
and searched. The street is jammed with ambulances, their white and blue lights flashing out of
sync.

He watches in astonishment, and then keeps watching, long after the reporters have begun to
regurgitate information, rely on quasi-expert commentary, and air the same repeated clips.

He remains so engrossed that the notification alert on his SHIELD phone barely registers. After a
few minutes, he pulls himself away from the TV, rolls across the bed, grabs the phone, and reads
the message.

It's from Fury: "Fifty-one human prisoners rescued. Two-hundred and three operatives detained.
Might kind of beat that other thing you were going to do."

He doesn't know how Fury knew about that. It doesn't so much matter that he did.

He looks back up at the TV, in time to see new footage of a handcuffed brown-haired, bony woman
being escorted out of the building. Her face twists his stomach and shoots chills into his arm. He
knows her. He doesn't know who she is, but he knows her.

He picks up the phone again, re-reads Fury's message, and doesn't know what to say. It does beat
that other thing - the stockpile of IED components, the fuzzy plan of "blow it up," and the
inevitable onslaught of the world's pursuit. All of that seems so far away, now.

Maybe it shouldn't. Maybe they'll all be in custody for a couple days and then be released, never to
be charged. Or maybe that bony woman will be in prison for the rest of her life, along with
everyone else in that building. Maybe she'll know what it's like, even that little fraction.

For now, it works, and he'll take it.

"It works," he replies. Though an unwritten afterthought, thank you is still a thought that crosses is
mind.

The next day, a couple more thoughts cross his mind.

Just east of the Swiss border, there's a HYDRA industrial depot. He doesn't know what's there, or
what's not there. He doesn't know who might be there, or who might not be there.

There's a library, just west of the hotel. It's described in the concierge brochure. It looks interesting.

East or west.

It's an easier choice than it would have been, even a month ago. A quiet part of him has found a
voice, and it's becoming louder.

West of the hotel, the Riponne library is overwhelming. Incredible.

He wanders the different levels and all the different categories-literature, music, movies,
magazines, newspapers, computers-his laptop tucked under his arm. The rows of books are
endless, and the compact discs of music and movies fill entire rooms of shelves.
The library is busy, and there are people almost everywhere. He hears hushed voices speaking French, Italian, German, and a few in English. Usually, he would avoid any place like this: multiple levels, too many people, and an unclear understanding of exit points.

Except, the entire world and lifetimes are in this place.

_Seventy years_ of books are in this place. It's more than he ever dreamed of.

He wanders into a massive fiction section, avoids aisles that have people in them, and finds himself in the Na-Nb stacks. He tilts his head sideways and reads the spines of the books, pulling out one here and one there that sound interesting.

He reads and pulls, until he has a stack from belly button to chin, and then he wanders to the far, deep back corner, where there are no windows or doors or people.

He sits down there, back flat against the wall, laptop under his crossed legs, books on the ground, and pulls the first one off the pile, cracks it, and digs in.

The lights turn off. His eyes adjust to the darkness, and he doesn't even think to move or to leave. Hours later, he hears the slow, bored steps of what is undoubtedly a security guard, and he simply keeps still, until those footsteps fade away.

The lights turn on. He takes another hour to finish the first book, before picking up five of the others and his laptop and moving across the room. He finds a similar hideout: no people, windows, or doors, in a secluded corner.

When the lights turn off again, he keeps reading. When the guard's steps come closer, he keeps still. When the lights turn on, he regretfully leaves his small stack of books behind and wanders to the restaurant he'd seen two days earlier. He buys a large cup of coffee and four sandwiches, eats them, uses the restroom, and then goes back to the fiction section.

Eight days pass in the library, and, when he finally leaves (only because he can smell himself), with the morning sunshine on his face, he wants to immediately go back inside.

For eight days, he'd forgotten about HYDRA.

Those eight days break him.

The next mission out, on the sixth floor of another HYDRA base, a gun in his right hand and a person's throat in his left, he says out loud, "I don't want to."

The soldier gurgles, "T-t-hen d-d-on't?"

He crushes the windpipe and drops the body.

He looks down the hallway and knows that he's barely halfway through the fake factory.

He dreads the rest of it. In fact, it turns his stomach.

_I don't want to._

Barnes wonders if the body count he's made over the last year has done anything at all to dent the seventy years of memories he doesn't have. If it's done anything to balance a scale he maybe doesn't care about.

Six more floors, at least fifty more to kill, he goes back the way he came and disappears into the
wet, early spring forest. Dark storm clouds coalesce in the sky, lightning blitzing the horizon.
Rain droplets *patter* against dead leaves and old logs, and a cold wind carries the smell of a storm.
Storms don't last for long, he thinks his mom always said. Even the worst ones last just minutes.
Minute's up.
"I'm out," he texts Fury, not a scrap of hesitation in his resolve.
Fury's answer comes much faster than anticipated, within just a few minutes. "You're going after them?"
A part of him still wants to. They took seventy years of his life and then washed their hands of him. A bigger part, the better part, the Bucky part, wants nothing to do with it ever, ever again.
Lightning hits close, shaking the ground. He's got a metal arm and not a whole lot of luck.
"No. I'm out."
Fury's next answer comes a little slower. It's not what Barnes expected: it's the name of a Swiss bank and an account number, accompanied by a short message.
"This belongs to you. Good luck."
Barnes memorizes the information and powers off the phone. He nearly drops it into a hollow tree, water pooling in its trunk, when, instead, he slips the phone into his back pocket.
It doesn't mean anything. Fury's not a bad connection to have, and the phone's not a half-bad piece of technology to have available.
He makes his way back to the city, takes a train to Zurich, awake and staring at the cloudy night sky the whole time.

*Can I really be. Can I. Can I really be me.*

Those thoughts are in English, he finally realizes. They have been for a long time, now.
Rooftop Interlude

Chapter Summary

It's been eleven months, since Steve and Bucky had words. Eleven months, and there’s really only one person it’s going to be.

Chapter Notes

See chapter one.

"You wanna come in?" Steve asks. There's a pinprick of white ranch dressing on the corner of his mouth, and his breath smells like roasted tomatoes and raw onion.

Natasha grins. Coming from anyone else... "No, I've got places to be."

"Things to see?"

She nods, her grin growing wider. "Something like that. Thanks for dinner. Take care."

"You, too," he answers, closing the door.

Natasha trots down the staircase, hand hovering over the rail, and, when she gets outside, just a step out the door, she freezes.

It's a feeling, honed from years of experiences and instincts. She looks up, at the roof of the fifteen-story building across from Steve's, and catches a glint of metal and a moving shadow.

It's been eleven months, since Steve and Bucky had words. Eleven months, and there's really only one person it's going to be.

The red-haired woman finds him. Maybe he lets her. Maybe he doesn't care, so long as it isn't Rogers, Rogers' sidekick, or someone who will try to take his freedom.

"You probably don't remember me," she says, words careful, tone smooth.

He remembers her.

"Close to Odessa. An Iranian nuclear engineer. SIG Sauer P-220. Messy in a way that it shouldn't've been. It was humid, about 25 degrees. Probably spring."

"June 13, 2009, actually," she says, almost sounding surprised. "May I sit down?"

He tilts his head, and she sits about a meter away, next to him.
"You tried to lose me on some random back road, planned to get back onto 14 and fly out from Odessa International. That was good for me."

"Really." Neutral. Almost curious. They both know how the story ends.

"Sure," Barnes answers, like he's 20-something and has never left Brooklyn. "As the years went by, it got harder and harder to take down planes. HYDRA didn't want too much attention."

The woman stays quiet, then: "Natasha Romanoff."

She's waiting, of course. His lips stretch into a thin, closed smile, and he drops his head. He can't bring himself to say it. He still can't, even after all these months.

"You know who I am, Romanoff."

"You're not what I thought you would be," she says, almost kindly. He audibly snorts. "Rogers is upset with you."

Barnes closes his eyes. *Shit.* "Good."

"Do you plan on ever speaking with him, again? I mean, you shot him three times, stabbed him twice, and broke his face. All of that, he understands. What he can't get past is that you might still owe him a real conversation."

"I meant to shoot him four times," Barnes says, relentless because he can't let this stranger know that it is absolute fucking terror.

Steve's face, broken, swollen, and bruised, over and over and over again. Behind the gymnasium at school. In the cafeteria at school. In the corner of *multiple* alleys. At the dance hall. Somewhere along Parkside Avenue, by the lake. Beneath HYDRA's fist, on the helicarrier.

Terror, at what he nearly did. At how close he came. At how easily Steve let him.

He doesn't know why he's here, instead of anywhere else.

There are tears in his eyes. He runs his hands through his short hair, clutching the hair at the back. He's losing it. He stands up, turns to hide his face in the darkness.

"The answer is 'no, I don't,' and Bucky Barnes has been dead for seventy years."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"Fuck you."

He leaves, vanishing the way HYDRA taught him, regret building and building and building with every centimeter, meter, kilometer.

He goes home, to a place he doesn't deserve, and regrets.

---

Three months later, he goes back to that same rooftop.

He watches Steve and a curly blonde walk up to the apartment complex, neither of them very expressive. Steve finally smiles, "abashed" the only way to describe it, and then opens the door. He
holds the door for the blonde, and they both go inside.

Good for you, Rogers.

Barnes hears her, right before she announces herself. He's not so much surprised that she's here again; he's surprised that he's not already gone.

She's a stranger, but she's familiar. Familiar in a way that pulls on his memories, and he wants those memories back so, so bad.

"You do realize how creepy this is, right?"

He turns around, facing her, and shrugs. He remembers that one memory: the one of Steve drawing him in his sleep. They've known each other their whole lives – well, kind of – and that means it's not creepy.

"You remember me?" she asks, her expression and tone subtly indicating that she's joking.

He recognizes that but takes it in another direction. He knows her. He knows he does. He just doesn't know. "No. Not yet."

He gets her with that: he can see it in the way her face becomes still. In the way her eyes search his.

"What do you remember?" she finally asks.

He remembers Odessa. He remembers her on the highway bridge. He remembers that Steve should have been the target he pursued, not her, but he went after her, anyway. He remembers that, without her taser disc, he would have been dead less than a day after the helicarriers fell.

He feels—doesn't remember—trust. It's the only reason he says, "I remember killing. I remember doing it. And I don't feel anything. You should warn him."

It's the scariest thing he can ever admit. And it's all true.

Her expression changes completely: from guarded curiosity to damage control.

"I don't know you, but I've been where you are. All I can tell you is that the things HYDRA did to you aren't going to go away, just because you know your name. You're on an extremely difficult path. Give yourself time to walk it."

Those sound like empty words. He ignores them.

"I remember killing people. Good people. I should feel something."

"Why do you come to this rooftop? Why this one?" Natasha asks.

"Why do you?" he counters.

She tilts her head and gives him a hard look. She says nothing.

He folds, easier than he should. But, god damn it, he knows her. "You know why."

Natasha shakes her head and lies, lies, lies, "No, I don't."

He stares at her for several seconds, then looks over the rooftop, toward Steve's apartment. "Steve."
"Oh." She peers over the rooftop's edge and then down, at the complex's door. "Looks like the
door's pretty easy to find. Don't think it's up here."

His reaction should be irritation and annoyance. Not crumpling in on himself: shoulders deflating,
arms wrapping around himself, but it makes him feel better. He should say, "no, fuck," but he
shows her his biggest weakness and says, "I can't."

"It's right there – can you see it?"

"I can find the fucking door," he snaps.

"Oh. Well, he's home. See, his light's on." She even points at it: it's his bathroom light. "Sharon's
there, but I think you'd like her. Steve only says good things about you."

He glares at her.

"I don't understand what's stopping you."

"I can't," he repeats.

"Why?"

He knows her, but he doesn't much like her. He doesn't know why he's playing along. He doesn't
know why he's here. He doesn't know why he's letting her do this. His mouth runs ahead of his
brain: "Because of everything. Everything I've done. What I did to him."

little envy. I don't think HYDRA broke your feelings box."

He turns it all around on her: "Then I'm a fucking psychopath, because I feel nothing about
killing."

The street below is a little busy. She grabs his right hand and pulls him over to the edge of the roof.
She picks the first person she sees and points.

"Black hair, red coat. See her?"

He sees her. She's walking on the north sidewalk, a purse hung on her bent arm. "Yeah."

Natasha draws her own handgun and sticks it in his hand. His fingers instinctively wrap around it,
before he even knows he has the thing. "What—"

"Get down there and kill her."

She's barely finished saying the words, when he throws the gun across the blacktop, its metal
frame skittering in an endless circle across the tiles. He yanks his arm out of her grip and stares at
her.

"No? Just one tiny life out of billions. How much could it really matter?"

Anger builds inside of him. He could –

"You've been out for just two years. You're asking for seconds, to erase what took them decades to
do. Time."

Her words mean nothing. He backs away from her, glaring at her, before turning and heading
toward the other side of the roof.

"A month from now. Spring Hill Diner. 6 pm."

"Don't fucking count on it," he snaps, and then vanishes.

Thirty days later, he arrives at Spring Hill Diner twelve hours early. He finds a good nest and scopes out the restaurant and the entire neighborhood: all morning, all afternoon, until 5:30 p.m., when Natasha speeds up to the building in a shiny black sports car, steps out, winks at him, and goes into the restaurant.

She winked at him.

She saw him without even searching first.

He's –

He's not used to that. Any of that.

That someone saw through him so easily should shake him, but it doesn't. Not with her. It intrigues him.

He makes his way to the restaurant, enters, and easily spots her: sitting clear in the back, her back to him.

He sits down across from her and is happy that he can easily see all points of ingress and egress.

She did it on purpose.

"Thought you said you weren't coming?" she says, eyebrow raised, eyes on a plastic one-sheet menu.

He chooses to not respond. He takes the second menu from its spot against the window, glances at it, and asks, "What's good here?"

She shrugs with a single shoulder. "Steve likes the regular cheeseburger and plain coffee. Still trying to get him to be more adventurous."

There it is: the catch.

She reads him like a book. "Relax, he's not coming." She looks up at him, finally meeting his eyes. "Unless you want him to?"

He shakes his head: no, absofuckinglutely not.

"Why?"

He opens his mouth to say "we've already fucking discussed this," when a waitress comes with a pad in her hand.

"Just coffee, please," Natasha says, as she slips the menu back into its slot by the window.

Barnes shakes his head again: nothing, not hungry. It all smells like grease and fake food, anyway.
The waitress walks away, and Natasha doesn't waste time. "Call him. Email him. Leave a note."

A pang of guilt shoots through his gut: the letter in Jesenice, which he hadn't even bothered to read. The time Steve spent looking for him in Europe, for nothing. Everything Steve did on the helicarrier. Not one of those things even begins to scratch the surface of what he's done.

"No."

The waitress brings Natasha's coffee, with sugar and creamer. Natasha doesn't touch it.

"He thinks you're dead," Natasha says, as matter-of-fact as "the sky is blue." "No one's heard from you in a year. The intelligence community lost track of you. There's nothing out there. He thinks you committed suicide or was killed by HYDRA — or worse."

That's…

He swallows, his throat suddenly tight.

That's good, he wants to think. He can disappear and let Steve live his life.

"You don't seem to like that. Anything from you would make his life."

He wants that world back—that world with Steve—so, so much. But…

"There's no amount of good I can do to make up for what I've done. None. That hasn't changed."

Natasha sighs, rips open three packets of sugar, and dumps them in her coffee. She stirs the sugar in with a spoon, takes a long sip, sets the cup back down, and digs in.

"In Odessa, if given the chance, would you have walked away?"

Natasha is the sort of calculating that she doesn't ask questions if she doesn't think she knows the answer. Natasha is probably not often wrong. She's probably wrong today.

"No."

She doesn't flinch. "Why?"

"The mission was the only thing I knew. The rest of the world was just...noise. I wouldn't have even known—"

He stops himself right there. Ice in his gut. Mind reeling.

"Known what?" she asks, sugar sweet innocent. It turns to a knife's edge. "That HYDRA wasn't your entire world?"

Barnes leans back, arms wrapped around his mid-section. Almost normal. Almost like the early 1940's. Almost Bucky.

"Not always. I tried, over and over again. It never lasted long. I... I miss who I was."

His eyes sting for a brief moment, but the last part comes with a wistful, close-lipped smile. He stares at the gold, wispy design on the table. At the steam rising from her coffee. At anything but her. Like usual, he doesn't know why he's telling her all this.

"You're nothing like what you were."
Cushions on the floor. The sounds of Andrew and John's whispered snickers from their bedroom. Becca in her pajamas, big ugly curlers wrapped in her brown hair, leaning against the wall and smirking. Steve going quiet and all fucking demure and Bucky not saying, "Steve, you've known'er as long as you've known me; what's the big deal?"

Coney Island. Summer, hot, stifling: people everywhere. The ferris wheel at Steeplechase Park and the line there that lasted for hours. Steve's hands stuffed into his pockets, shuffling his feet - "no, Buck, it's fine" - until he wasn't fine and his breaths became desperate gasps. Fragments of conversations he can just barely remember.

"You're not. You have to know that."

Natasha means that he's nothing like the Winter Soldier, and he mostly agrees. Thing is: she has no idea who Bucky Barnes was, or what was done to obliterate that person.

"Yeah," he nods. He's nothing like Bucky Barnes.

Three months after Spring Hill Diner, Barnes is late meeting her at Black Duck Pub. Outside the pub, Natasha quells the urge to pace; she stands, back against the building, cool and calm.

She doesn't check her phone's clock.

She doesn't look back and forth, scanning the crowds for him.

She doesn't go inside the restaurant, to see if she missed him.

She waits.

"Hey."

Finally.

"Where have you been?" Natasha demands. "I've been waiting for you."

Barnes lifts an eyebrow at her. "I don't run on your—"

"Steve's missing."

Every part of Barnes freezes, picture-perfect. He doesn't even blink. Until finally: "When, where, and how?"

"One week ago. From his apartment. No sign of a struggle. Surveillance shows him being loaded into an unmarked, black SUV, with a plate that traces to nowhere."

Barnes' eyes are fire. He takes a step toward her, both hands fists. She can hear the plates of his arm rearrange. If it's meant to intimidate her, it's only working a little.

"That's not 'missing,'" he hisses. "He was taken. By who?"

"One guess."

"I don't guess. Where?"
"We lost CCTV near Andrews."

"Flight logs would have been falsified. You've had a week. What have you found?"

"All but one flight checks out," Natasha answers, and then quickly puts a stop to his interrogation: "Look, I didn't come here to play twenty questions with you. I came to ask if you were going to help. No one on our side knows HYDRA better than you."

He actually blinks and narrows his eyes. "Help who? You? You'll slow me down. Don't get in my way."

Then he's gone, disappearing into the sidewalk crowd, like a fucking idiot. Natasha rolls her eyes, mostly because Barnes is terrible at pretending to be a bad guy.

He's a ball, set in motion.

Time to get to work.
Chapter One

Chapter Summary

Barnes has more people on his side than he knows, but Sam Wilson isn't one of them. That's worrying—and guaranteed to be divisive. It's a mountain to climb.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

Natasha and Sam fly from Dulles to Lisbon, Portugal, and, once on ground, board a seven-hour train to Madrid.

Natasha doesn't know Sam overly well. He's Steve's number one, loyal through-and-through, and was an incredible asset during Project Insight. They've exchanged texts, emails, and evenings here and there since Project Insight, but, much like saving the world from aliens with Steve, those things don't create knowledge of a person.

"Intelligence suggests there may be installations in northern Italy and near Gran Zebru," Natasha says. "Trains are the safer transportation method. Far less trackable."

She only says it now, because he hasn't asked, not even during the eleven hour flight. From her interactions with Sam, he's been outspoken and inquisitive, unafraid to rub people the wrong way. She doesn't think the silence is like him.

Sam nods, absent-minded. "Reminds me a lot of last year. With Steve."

She reads worry in his tone, not that she blames him. "We have a strong start. We're going to find him."

There's no choice. They have to find him.

Sam tilts his head, works his jaw. "I just wonder… I wonder if he's involved."

The way he says "he's" is filled with bitterness and dislike, and Natasha knows exactly to whom Sam is referring.

Natasha studies Sam, and then chooses her path carefully. "Why do you think that?"

He shakes his head and screws up his face. "Not important. I'm going to try to sleep a little."

She watches Sam slouch in his seat, wrap his arms around himself, lean his head against the window, and close his eyes.

Barnes has more people on his side than he knows, but Sam Wilson isn't one of them. That's worrying—and guaranteed to be divisive. It's a mountain to climb.
Natasha files those thoughts away for another time and powers up her tablet. She reviews the trove of digital maps she has loaded on the device, and then opens a cross-listing of intelligence data and reports.

Three hours into the ride, Sam snoring lightly across from her, the train lurches. The sound of metal twisting and heaving echoes through the car, followed by screams and the thuds of luggage crashing against walls and windows.

"Sam!" Natasha shouts, as she slips his tablet into her bag, grabs his arm, and dives to the floor between the seats.

Their car tilts, further and further, before jackknifing and flipping onto its side.

Glass shatters.

People scream, ear piercing.

Luggage and personal items fly over their heads, slamming into the train's walls and raining their contents.

Natasha hits the side of the car hard against her shoulder, Sam's weight pressing into her.

The sound of metal scraping squeals for what feels like hours, but she knows better: it's only seconds, and it's slowing down.

"We've gotta go," she says to Sam. "It's HYDRA."

He's already a step ahead: rolling off of her body, strapping on his wings, taking her hand, and blasting off through the other side of the train cabin. She sees glass slice his arms.

Natasha twists around and looks at the train: the front of it is smashed, fire and smoke rolling from the first four compartments. The middle section—their section—is on its side, holes torn in the cars, with the end section tilted off the rails. People are crawling out of the windows.

"Keep going," Natasha says.

"Planned on it."

They fly for five minutes, before Sam sets down and they reposition—Natasha in his arms, instead of carried by her wrist—and then take back off. Underneath them, forest and farm land passes as a blur.

Ten minutes turns to fifteen turns to twenty, when Sam descends lower and lower.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"There's a car. Let's steal it and go."

Not what she had expected, but not a plan she's opposed to.

It's a fifteen-year old sedan, not in terrible shape but nothing that will give them top notch speed or maneuverability. Natasha hotwires it within seconds and slides into the driver's seat, Sam beside her.

She floors it down the farm house's driveway, and then down a paved, backcountry road. They only have about 80 klicks distance from the train crash. It's not nearly far enough.
"What happened back there?" Sam asks, as he rips two strips of fabric from his shirt and begins to bandage the glass cuts on his arm. He's bleeding onto the tan seats; his blood, dried on her arms.

"Likely HYDRA," she answers. "I didn't expect them to be onto us so quickly."

She chooses not to mention one tiny detail: it means there's still a HYDRA mole within their tiny SHIELD organization. Beyond the one that already cost them Steve.

"That's fucking crazy," Sam breathes.

Natasha had hoped the back road would intersect with a busy highway, but, to her eyes, there isn't one for miles and miles. All she can see are fields, forests, and plentiful narrow, empty roads. It makes them an easy target.

Twenty klicks later, HYDRA proves her right.

Six black SUVs are waiting at a T-intersection: blocking their road and surrounding every exit route. All four corners surrounding the intersection are forests: no escape route.

Their old sedan won't be able to do much against the reinforced, bulletproof metal composites that HYDRA's vehicles are made of. If she stops too far, they'll shoot them until they're hamburger meat. If she stops too close, they risk the same.

She chooses too close, flooring it.

Sam never took his wings off, and he already has two handguns out of his pack. She carries hers on her body.

"I'm jumping. You fly."

"Got it."

Twenty-five meters from the blockade, Natasha opens her door and jumps out of the car. Sam opens his and blasts out of the car, into the sky.

Natasha easily rolls twice and comes up on her feet, running and shooting toward the first SUV. Two, three, four soldiers drop, bullets whizzing past her body, as she dives and rolls behind the first SUV. She aims and shoots all of those near the second vehicle, pulling the doors open to ensure no surprises.

Behind her, she hears Sam shooting. He's still good.

It doesn't mean that they're still not –

"Oh, fuck, it's the Winter—" is all one of the soldiers has time to say, before the Winter Soldier happens.

Natasha spins around, weapon aimed, and can only watch.

She and Sam become all but invisible. All eyes and guns are on Barnes.

Natasha isn't sure how they recognize him so quickly. She only does, because she's seen him numerous times now, like this. Casual dark-colored clothes, short hair, young face, eyes grey in the sunlight. He doesn't exactly scream world's deadliest anything, though he acts like it.

His aim is sure, and when his clip is empty, he drops the rifle to the ground and draws a SIG Sauer
from the small of his back. Everything is smooth, composed, not a motion wasted. The deaths of nine soldiers take mere seconds.

Natasha drops to the ground and retrieves her weapon, aiming it at the soldier who's gaining ground behind Barnes-

And doesn't shoot.

Barnes is flipping over another guy, breaking the guy's neck in the process, and throws a knife pulled from who-knows-where at the one sneaking behind him. The knife buries into the soldier's helmet, and, presumably, his forehead. A gunshot rings out, and the last of this particular HYDRA unit hits the ground.

Just like that, their HYDRA problem are nothing but bodies. Forty bodies.

Sam lands next to her, his weapon aimed at the ground.

Natasha looks over to him. "You all right?"

He nods and adds, "Yeah. I was just deciding if I wanted to run for my life or not. Where the hell did he even come from?"

Natasha shrugs with a shoulder and an eyebrow. She presumes from under one of the SUVs. "You still think he helped them take Steve?"

Sam glances at her. "You're the one who said there was a mole."

"In SHIELD. He's not SHIELD."

Barnes sticks the handgun back into the small of his back and readjusts his shirt and jacket to cover it. He backtracks and pulls out a knife from a soldier's head, cleaning the blade on his victim's shirt, before retrieving a rifle and a black backpack. Rifle pointed upward and cradled against his shoulder, he strides back toward them.

Next to her, Sam tenses, and she knows why. This could be two years ago, with the Winter Soldier all over them, but it's not. She takes a step forward, putting herself just slightly in front of Sam.

"We need to keep moving," Barnes says. "HYDRA's all over you."

"Thought you weren't coming."

Barnes stops a few feet from them. "I'm hitting walls, and you two are basically defenseless, so."

"Oh, really. I thought we would slow you down? Isn't that what you said?"


"I've been covering you since Lisbon, a.k.a. Day One. HYDRA tried to blow up your plane, then tried to snipe you at the airport. You two—" and he actually points at both of them, with a half-gloved metal finger—"are the walls I'm hitting."

Natasha seems to take momentary offense at this, then deflates a little. "You're one of the few who can sneak up on me. Also: didn't think you cared."

Behind her, Sam scoffs, like maybe he's realized that she's playing Barnes. Just a little. She hadn't
known about the plane, but she'd known he'd taken out three snipers. There was a reason he was invited on this trip.

Barnes ignores that and looks at Sam. "You look uncomfortable."

Sam snorts. "Because I am. You're an asshole."

"A little more than that. Let's go." As Barnes walks toward their car, he throws back, "Head for Bern. Stay on the major highways. No more of this backroad shit. Are you both stupid?"

Natasha looks at Sam and smirks, eyes glittering. "Relax. I invited him."

Barnes slides into the back seat, quickly disappearing from sight.

Sam rolls his eyes at her, snarks "a memo would've been nice," and follows Barnes to the car.

Barnes directs them to a decent hotel near the edge of Bern. Just barely after Wilson parks the car, Barnes grabs his pack, gets out, and starts walking toward the entrance.

"Seriously?" Wilson bites, but Barnes keeps walking.

He pays for a suite and has three key cards, before either Natasha or Wilson make it into the lobby. He looks out the sliding glass doors, into the darkness, and can't see them.

"Herr?"

Barnes looks at the desk clerk, then back out the window. Are they coming? Do they want their own room? Does he want them in his? It's not often he finds himself this unprepared.

Finally, he looks back at the clerk, and says in German, "There's two more coming. Please keep the cards for them."

He doesn't wait for them. He goes to the room – 1201 – sits down at the small kitchenette, and pulls a folder of maps and a pen out of his backpack.

He pulls out a newer map, unfolds it across the tile table top, and finds that he can't concentrate.

It's…strange to be working with others again. And it's strange that one of those others is Wilson, of all people. Barnes remembers tearing Wilson's wings apart and kicking him off the helicarrier; given that, he doesn't know where Wilson stands.

When the door clicks open and Wilson walks in and says, "Seriously, fuck you," that question is answered.

"Stop," Natasha snaps.

In an instant, Barnes decides that he doesn't need to like them—or maybe just Wilson—and all he has to do is tolerate the dynamic, until they find Steve. And then, he can disappear away into the world again, and get back on a quiet path of no guns, no violence, and no death.

He looks down at the map again and still can't focus well. He's vaguely aware of both Natasha and Wilson moving into the living room, of their gear dropping onto the carpeted floor, and then of heavy silence.
Wilson breaks it: "Bucky, what do-

"Don't call me that." Barnes interrupts, calm, neutral. He looks over at Wilson and wishes he hadn't.


"Okay," Wilson says, toned strained. "What would you prefer?"

"Not that."

"What about 'asshole'? How does that work for you?"

"Sam. We're all on the same side here."

Barnes ignores them both. He traces the map, feeling out the names of the towns and cities in his head, letting himself be drawn to certain places. Past Минск, up north past Наваполацк, through Russia, up and up and up and up – until he's in the arctic water, and there's nothing.

He goes back to Stuttgart, and starts again: winding his way around the map. Mannheim brings a vague memory of a memory, but he knows enough to know it's not what he's looking for. Frankfurt evokes a stronger feeling but still not the right one. Cologne is -

"Are we?" Wilson challenges. "I was there in Krakow. I heard what you said to him. That you're not his friend. So. Are we on the same side? Really?"

Those words stop Barnes cold. He locks his eyes on Cologne, blankly studying the letters and their serif font. He doesn't answer and doesn't even know what his answer would be.

"Why are you doing this? Why now? He looked for you, for a year, before you basically told him to go fuck himself and then dropped so far off the map that he thought you finally managed to eat a gun. So, what is it?"


Barnes doesn't need her to defend him. This answer comes easy: "Because it's not about me."

Wilson narrows his eyes, brow drawn together, and shakes his head. "Not an answer, Man. You gotta do way better than that."

Barnes blinks and leaves Cologne, jumping east. "All I've got."

He circles a spot on the map in the Niedere Tauern mountains, close to the Enns River. Not a place he really wants to go, but there's a slim chance.

"Walk away, Sam." Natasha's voice raises, her grip on the whole cool soldier spy thing slipping.

Sam puts his hands up and backs away. "I'm gonna go outside. You two enjoy each other."

After Sam is gone, Natasha leans against the refrigerator. "You're not on anyone's timetable. He had no right to say any of that."

Barnes shrugs, still far more interested in the map than either of them. They're distractions. There's another possible place, in Slovenia's Kamniško-Savinjske Alpe; the area rings a proverbial bell, not that he's learned how to hear the sound yet.
"It's not an issue."

"Okay," she answers. "You know, you seem okay." Obviously, she means "too okay."

Barnes shrugs again. "Sure."

Only.

He looks up from the map.

Sleepless nights. When he can sleep, nightmares. Days where he doesn't mind eating, or shaving, or showering, or doing things that make himself feel good. Maybe going for a walk, exploring a neighborhood, sitting by the river in the early morning, listening to new-to-him music, reading a book.

Days where he doesn't deserve any of that and spends his time with hundreds of ghosts and regrets, and, when he looks in the mirror, the person he sees is still a nameless, mindless murderer.

Natasha nods slowly, like she doesn't believe him. "I've been where you are. It's going to come, all at once, and you're not going to be anywhere near 'okay.' It could be today, tomorrow, next month, next year, but it will happen. My advice is to be with people you trust, when it does."

Her words ring true. He knows there's a wall up ahead and that he's going to hit it too fast. He can sense it well enough to fear it, but he knows it's far enough ahead that he doesn't need to waste the energy to worry about it, not just yet.

"How long did it take for you?"

"About five years," she says, and then grins, just that little that she does. "I was the happiest I'd been since leaving the KGB. I felt good about my work with SHIELD. And then..." She presses her lips together, tilts her head. "It's hard to explain. But it all came down."

Natasha's not looking at him; she's looking at her hands, showing an insecurity that she shouldn't be.

"Who'd you trust?"

"Barton."

Barnes recognizes the name: Clint Barton, codename Hawkeye, the Avenger Initiative's overwatch. Barton was all over the SHIELD materials leaked during the helicarrier mess, and Barton was all over the news coverage of the alien attack in the City. But that's all Barnes knows about the man, which, in a big way, is a relief.

"I never tried to kill him," Barnes says, before he's really thought it through.

Her grin grows a little wider, and she goes with the horrible, horrible joke. "Oh, so you don't know him, then?"

Barnes can't bring himself to laugh, not at that. Not ever.

Natasha makes a horrible joke, regretting it the moment it leaves her mouth. She sees the way Barnes tenses, the tightness in his shoulder and lips.
"That was a bad joke," she says. "I'm—"

There's something else. An intense distance. The way he's tilting his head.

Natasha keys into it too many moments after Barnes does.

His chair is crashing to the ground, and he's smashing through the door, and she's chasing after him, before her brain consciously registers HYDRA.

Instincts are all they have, sometimes. And this is an instinct they both have. And a thought, apparently, that they both also have: Sam.

Barnes slams into the north stairwell, pounding down the stairs. Natasha is step-for-step behind him for the first flight, but he's as fast as Steve, and he pulls ahead of her more and more.

After ten floors, Barnes swings over the balastrade and drops the last four stories. All she hears is the slam of his boots, the crack of shattering floor tiles, and, then, the click and creak of a door swinging opening.

Natasha sprints the rest of the stairs—six flights—within seconds, reaching the outside in time to see Barnes sprinting south, toward Sam, while looking upward at the buildings surrounding them.

She sees a glint of metal, and she knows. She keeps running.

Barnes has Steve's speed but is built like an insanely agile hornet. He does an inexplicably controlled careen into Sam, who hits the brick building hard, just as a bullet ricochets off of Barnes' metal arm.

Barnes spins around, yells "get Wilson and back to the room!" and sprints after the sniper.

Natasha slides to the ground, where Sam is groaning and hurt—and alive. Under the dim, humming streetlight, she can see that a patch of skin on the left side of his face is skinned raw.

She asks the obvious question anyway: "You okay?"

Sam struggles to sit up, with a hand pressed to his face and his other trying to hold his weight. He's clearly dazed.

"You, uh... You ever play Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?"

Natasha takes a deep breath and straightens, shaking her head negatively. "No."

"Oh. Well. Feels a little like that."

"C'mon."

---

Natasha's handgun is on the hard-wood floor, next to the splayed-open, aged-yellow first aid kit from the bathroom. There isn't time to dig into their gear.

The blue sofa is on its side, flat-side toward the window. The coffee table is on the other side of that, a makeshift barricade. The door is to Natasha's right; she's only waiting.

The left side of Sam's face, from cheekbone to hairline, is a deepening bruise, scraped skin, and a
two-inch gash by his eyebrow. Dried blood flakes from his chin and neck.

Natasha smears expired antibacterial cream onto the scrapes, while Sam holds a wad of musty gauze to the gash.

"What're we doing?" Sam asks, slurred enough to count.

"Waiting for Barnes," Natasha answers. "Stop talking. Take the gauze away."

Sam complies, a second delayed; definitely a concussion. She's ready with another wad of gauze, this one loaded with rubbing alcohol.

Sam hisses and bitches, tries to bat her hand away, but he's uncoordinated and fighting him is like batting at a confused, persistent mosquito.

"Why? We don't need—"

His sentence ends with crunching outside the door: two broken lightbulbs, their fragments scattered outside the door. For the record: she'd known about that little trick long before Tom Cruise did.

"Hold the gauze," Natasha instructs, voice a whisper, her right hand wrapping around her nine millimeter. She moves into a defensive position, in front of Sam.

"Fuck that. Where's mine?" Sam answers, voice loud.

Natasha just stares at him: like, really?

Not that it matters. The crunch, crunch, crunch stops, and then transforms into crack, crack—gunshots—and then repeated bangs against the door, then against the outside wall, until there's only thud, thud, whimper, scrape, thud.

Crunch, crunch.

"Hold fire." Barnes, a split second before he kicks the door off of its frame.

Wham, slap.

"Ready to go?"

The look in his eyes is only described as "deadly focus." It looks a lot like the few World War II photos of him in the field, always shoulder-to-shoulder with Steve.

The answer is "yes." Barnes' backpack and Sam's wings, along with the rest of their gear, is by the door.

"Where's their overwatch?" Natasha asks, as she pulls Sam to his feet. His gash is bleeding again. "Sam, hold the gauze."

"What gauze?"

Natasha rolls her eyes and places his hand, with the gauze, on the wound. "Hold it there."

"Broke cyanide. We need to go. I got the gear; you get Wilson."

All the way down the stairwell, there are black-clad, masked bodies. Some have stab wounds; some have broken necks; some have crushed skulls; others have holes in their heads. All of them
are Barnes' efficient, effortless work.

Sam is uncoordinated and woozy, his feet catching on the steps so much that the stairs are nearly impossible to navigate. Barnes is more patient than Natasha ever would have given him credit for. He takes the lead but stays close, SIG Sauer aimed steady, expression set to "kill."

Which is a good thing, when a twelve-person HYDRA unit storms the stairwell from the ground floor. They're well-trained: so quiet that she can just barely hear the sound of their clothes rustling.

Natasha has Sam sit on a step and puts a finger to her lips. His eyes are half-lidded, blood dribbling down his face. He slumps against the wall, damn near boneless.

She pulls her handgun from its holster and watches Barnes silently shed all of their baggage.

Barnes uses U.S. military hand signals to tell her that there will be more coming from the top floors and that he's taking the bottom group. She signals back "okay."

Another ten come from the top. Natasha smiles.

"Hey there, Boys."

The entire stairwell erupts into flurry of movement. She doesn't have time to watch Barnes, but she hears his gunshots and the screams from his marks.

She runs up the stairs, using the banister and wall to kick herself up and snap the neck of the first soldier with her feet. She lands on a step and twists back around, back kicking the next soldier in the sternum. The resulting crunch is satisfying.

Natasha turns around, blocks a punch, and grabs an assailant's arm by wrist and elbow, snapping it. She pushes the screaming man into his friend, whom she palm strikes under the chin. His head snaps back, and his body lifts off the ground, before he crumples back to the ground. She shoots the other guy in the back of the head.

Only six more.

From her front jeans pocket, she pulls out four taser discs. Four discs come out, and four HYDRA soldiers go down.

And then there were two.

One comes at her with two combat knives. Preliminarily, his skill isn't bad. His form is solid, and he doesn't seem overly cocky, like most. Natasha drops into an easy defensive position and lets the guy come at her.

She easily blocks the first swipe of the knife, stepping down a stair step. He comes more aggressively, swiping at her neck. She leans back, the blade missing by a mile. She falls back into the lean, using the shift in her center of gravity to flip backward and kick the soldier under his jaw.

Natasha hears his teeth knash! together, and the ugly crack of his jaw bone fracturing. She lands neatly three steps down, hand on the rail, just in time to see the soldier reel backward and land hard on the stairs.

His knife clatters down the steps.

Natasha shoots him in the head.
The last soldier is leaning over the top of banister and has already popped off three shots from an assault rifle. She sprints up the steps, grabs the soldier's helmet, pulls him toward her, clutches his chin in her left hand, and twists. He drops.

She realizes that she and Sam are secondary targets; HYDRA is after Barnes.

Who is climbing the steps toward her. Blood freckles his face. He looks down at the black-clad soldiers, emotionlessly shoots all of the ones still breathing, and drops a HYDRA-issue Beretta M9.

Natasha doesn't comment. She's long past thinking of HYDRA’s soldiers as former teammates and colleagues.

"Do you all fucking mind?" Sam screeches.

He's covering his ears with his hands. The gauze is on the floor. Natasha doesn't roll her eyes, though she wants to.

"Get him and let's go."

Natasha holsters her pistol and takes a handgun from one of the dead soldiers. It's powerful and professionally silenced.

Sam is heavier and less coordinated on his feet than he was just a few minutes ago. It's more difficult navigating the rest of the flights of stairs; they take them one at a time, Barnes just a few feet ahead, HYDRA rifle aimed.

"'M sorry. Sorry."

Sam's words are slurred, and his voice low. His right leg gives out, and they almost go down. Natasha grabs the rail and pushes them both back up, steadying Sam against her side.

Barnes stops and looks back at them. Disappointment briefly flashes across his face. "HYDRA will be outside: teams, snipers, everything. Can he fly?"

Before Natasha can answer, Sam pushes off of her, answers "yes," and tilts to the other side of the stairwell, until his shoulder finds the wall. Clearly, the more accurate answer is "no."

"'Kay. Switch me."

Barnes drops their gear and climbs the stairs. When he takes Sam's upper arm, Natasha lets go, grabs the gear, and descends the steps.

"There's a parking garage off the second floor," Barnes says. He throws the rifle onto the ground. "You trust me?"

To her own surprise, she doesn't hesitate: "Yes."

"Then kill everyone you see. Everyone."

He doesn't need to tell her that. She doesn't mention it.

"You smell like hair cream," Sam slurs.

"Where are you going to be?" she asks.
"Right behind you."

Natasha doesn't ask why, if that's the case, he'd discarded the rifle. She leads them down two more flights of stairs, until they reach a gray metal door marked "2." Natasha swings it open, pistol aimed down a long, dimly lit, empty hallway lined on both sides by doors.

"All the way down, on the right," Barnes informs.

This hotel was his idea, and he's never been one to be unprepared. He likely has the entirety of the hotel's layout memorized: every exit, every vantage point, every weak point.

Oh so coincidentally, so does she. She's known for years that he still thinks like he used to-like how he taught her to think. It's nice, to be so in sync with someone, even if that someone doesn't know it.

Natasha starts down the hallway, going slowly to accommodate a slower and slower Sam. She doesn't dare look back, but she can hear Barnes' left arm hum.

"You're squeezing me to death."

Barnes doesn't answer, but, whatever he did with his arm, it made them faster. Barnes is right behind her, before she realizes and picks up her pace.

"Just wanted you to know. Don't feel bad or anything, okay?"

They're to the halfway mark, when a door behind them clicks open. Natasha turns around, Barnes already pulling Sam off to the side to give her a clear line of sight.

A woman exits the room, carrying an ice bucket and a blanket. Natasha can't see the woman's right hand, and the blanket is an odd thing to be carrying. The woman turns toward them, and Natasha has no doubt at all.

Without hesitation or regret, Natasha kills her, doesn't miss the subtle look of relief on Barnes' face, and keeps moving toward the parking garage door.

It's a relief, when they reach it. She pulls the door open, and clears the entry before nodding and jerking her head toward the garage.

"Your back's really wet."

"'Kay."

Natasha ignores them. The garage isn't well-lit, and it isn't well-used. There aren't any cars on the floor they're on - the number painted on the wall behind them is "4."

She leads them toward the garage's stairwell. It's lit and empty.

They take the stairs down to the second floor, Barnes all but carrying Sam down the steps. She opens the steel door and is relieved to see two half rows filled with vehicles at the west end.

Only: getting to one will entail traversing at least one hundred meters of vulnerable roadway, with exposure to the outside through the open slits between the floors.

"Take Wilson," Barnes says. "I'll grab a car and bring it around."

Natasha looks at him, askance.
"I run faster and can take more damage."

Though she could argue the second point, she doesn't. What she thinks is that Barnes really doesn't like being near Sam.

Sam is barely in her arms—he smells like blood, Natasha thinks—before Barnes takes off, effortlessly reaching a speed that rivals Steve's.

She's prepared for someone to come up behind her, via the stairwell, and she anticipates an attack on Barnes, but the garage remains quiet: just the wind and the faint echoes of Barnes' swift steps.

Within moments, he's reached the cars, wrenches the driver's side door of one of them open, disappears inside, and starts it right up. He back outs, makes a tight U-turn on the ramp, and pulls directly up to Natasha and Sam.

Natasha directs Sam to the back seat, noting how uncoordinated and sluggish he is. The bruise on his forehead is dark purple and developing into a swollen knot.

_Not good._

"Pop the trunk," she says to Barnes.

Before she gets around to it, she hears a _click_, and she deposits all of their gear on top of someone else's two small suitcases. Natasha shuts the trunk and climbs into the backseat behind Sam, directing his head into her lap, and pulls the door shut.

Barnes drives.

In the dark of the car, she can't tell if Sam's eyes are closed or not. She feels his pulse and finds that it's strong, and his breathing is only slightly slower than usual.

"We're coming to the exit - keep your head down."

Natasha doesn't voice her annoyance. She scoots down a minimal amount, ensuring her head is under the window, and readies her pistol. There aren't many bullets left in it.

"That's not going to stop a sniper from blowing your head off."

"Just drive," she snaps.

He drives smooth and normal: not fast, not slow. He doesn't make sharp turns or any erratic movements. She waits for gunfire, or for a HYDRA vehicle to ram into theirs, but none of that comes.

"My head hurts," Sam mumbles.

"I know," she says, inattentive.

Out the passenger window, buildings and lights blur past, and still nothing from HYDRA.

Faintly, in the distance, police sirens shriek. She sits up and chances a look through the back window; even this far from the hotel, she sees a mass of flashing blue and red lights. Behind them, the street is empty.

She turns around and sits normally in the seat, hand protectively on Sam's shoulder.
"That seemed easy," she says.

"Oh, sure," Sam mumbles. "Easy. Whatever the fuck easy."

She ignores him.

She sees Barnes' head shake. "They're cleaning up. Destroying video. Everyone's dead; it'll be all over the news. But they know we're here."

Natasha squeezes Sam's shoulder and nimbly maneuvers into the front passenger seat. She looks over at Barnes.

Every few seconds, his eyes slide to the rearview mirror. He must not see anything he doesn't like; the car continues steady, on through the dark night, onto an expressway. The sounds of the city whisper behind them, until there's little more than the traction of tires on smooth asphalt and the *whoosh* of passing vehicles.

"Thank you for being here," Natasha says.

He doesn't answer that. "We're headed south, toward Annecy."

"Back the way we came?"

"Predictability is going to get us killed, or worse. They won't expect us to go backward. Might buy us two or three days."

She doesn't argue. He knows HYDRA better than any of them and has made it crystal clear that he's batting only for them. She settles into the seat, head tucked into her bent arm against the window. She's exhausted but not tired; sleep won't come easy.

What he says next is unexpected: "Thank you for being his friend."

Natasha shifts her head and looks at him again. He looks relaxed, with his right arm limp, hand on his thigh, and his gloved left hand guiding the steering wheel.

"You still are," she replies. "You don't seem to be overly fond of Sam."

He doesn't answer.

"Asshole," Sam mutters.

The rest of their two hour drive to Annecy passes in silence.

---

Barnes drives to a nice hotel with a view of Lac d'Annecy. She doesn't ask how he can afford these things, or where he got a wallet full of credit cards.

His Russian-accented French is not great but passable; his smile, wide and flirty. He wraps his right arm around Natasha's waist and mentions things like "lune de miel" and "de Socchi." Natasha does not mention, not right there, the smell of blood under his jacket. In the car, she'd attributed it to Sam.

"I love you," he says in Russian, looking her in the eyes, still wearing that fake smile.
"You should have told me," she answers, also in Russian.

Barnes just shrugs and looks at the clerk, like he wants to fuck her on the counter. This is the Bucky that Steve always talked about: charming, flirty, a little dude-bro creepy.

The clerk eats up every word and even gives them a discount. She doesn't seem to notice that Barnes never takes his left hand out of his jacket pocket.

Sam is passed out in the car, until both she and Barnes maneuver him to their room through the back stairway. It's supposed to be a relief, to finally be somewhere safe—for now—and where they can sleep. But it's less than that.

Under a brighter light, Barnes is pale, face drawn. All traces of the happy Russian honeymooner are gone, and it looks like he's going to drop any second.

"Take off your jacket," she requests, calmly. "Let me see."

He does her one better: he strips to a bare chest and lays face down on the sofa, left arm buried under the throw pillow that he smushes his face into.

She schools her face into neutrality. There are two large, wide open bullet holes in his right shoulder blade, with blood coating his back all the way down his waistline.

Against her better judgment, her eyes are drawn to the bumpy, jagged scar tissue that outlines where his left shoulder blade used to be. It's worse than she remembers.

"When?" she asks.

"Stairwell."

She remembers: the assailant who aimed his gun over the banister and popped off three shots, before she snapped his neck.

"You want pain meds?"

"Just fix it."

It takes her an hour and a half to fish out the bullets with a pair of tweezers. The first one sends her stomach dropping: hollow point, designed to inflict the maximum amount of tissue damage.

"Barnes? How do you feel?"

Silence. His breaths are steady, deep, and even. He doesn't rasp or wheeze. She doesn't believe in luck, but, maybe, just this once, they got lucky.

It takes another hour to cleanse, stitch, and cover the wounds. He sleeps through all of it. Once again, it's not lost on Natasha how much trust it requires, to sleep soundly while someone else digs through your body. She just wonders when she gained it.

Bleary-eyed, she leaves Barnes covered with a blanket on the sofa and goes to the bedroom to check on Sam.

He's awake; his face, a swollen, bruised mess. It's better than a bullet to the chest, which is exactly what Barnes saved him from.

"Hey."
"Move over," Natasha says, right before flopping onto the bed and passing right the fuck out.

They didn't get lucky.

Barefoot, Natasha walks from the bed to the bathroom, vision that morning sort of blurry. She nearly kicks Barnes in the head.

She looks down, head tilted, and stares.

Barnes is curled up on the bathroom floor, clutching a blue throw pillow against his stomach with his right arm, and pressing the palm of his right hand against the base of the toilet. He's resting his head on the bicep of his left arm.

"What..."

Natasha squats down and touches his arm. Immediately, he jerks away, breaths heavy, face contorted in pain. He doesn't open his eyes. She notices that his skin is paler than usual, coated in a sheen of sweat. His whole body trembles.

"Don't touch me."

It must be a traumatic stress reaction. She's had her fair share of those, but, to her memory, none this extreme.

"Nat, c'mere," Sam calls from the living room.

Natasha feels uneasy leaving Barnes laying on the floor, but maybe Sam will have more information.

She crosses her arms around her body and walks the short way to Sam. He's sitting on the arm of the couch, his laptop balanced on his knee. Every other second, it wobbles and he tilts.

If HYDRA comes now, they are so totally screwed.

"He's been throwing up all morning. Around an hour ago, the shakes started, and then he became hypersensitive to touch. Says he's got muscle spasms. He won't move, won't go to the hospital." Sam looks up from the laptop and looks her straight in the eye. "He says the bullets were poisoned. Did you touch them?"

Natasha closes her eyes and tilts her head back. "Why."

"Did you?"

"No," Natasha snaps. "I used tweezers and gloves."

"Okay. Good. Because I think it's a variant of strychnine."

Natasha looks back at the bathroom, brow tight. "That's..."

Not quite what she expected. The Winter Soldier's file mentioned an early incident in 1959, when he broke his cyanide capsule after a successful mission, vomited his guts out, and then killed five handlers. Strychnine would only be enough to slow him down.
That's the play.

"Are you sure?"

Sam laughs. "My head is pounding. The room is spinning. But, yeah, the symptoms mostly fit. Mostly. Are you sure we're safe here?"

Natasha frowns. "Are we safe anywhere?" After a moment, she amends her answer: "He thought so. Pretty sure he's terrified of going back to that."

Sam looks toward the bathroom, then back at Natasha, and blinks, and blinks heavier.

"How are you?" Natasha asks. His face is bruised darker, and the scrape across his forehead is raw with early scabbing, but the lump is nearly gone. His pupils are reactive, and, cognitively, he seems fine. She's not so much worried about him.

"Tired."

"Lay down. Get some rest."

She doesn't have to tell him twice. His laptop clicks shut, and he slides backward onto the sofa, pulling a blue blanket from the back of the couch with him. She reaches down and takes the laptop out of his arms.

"I think…” Sam says, eyes still open. "I think we should leave him. He makes us a bigger target."

Natasha doesn't agree. In fact, she knows they're stronger with Barnes. "He makes us a target, or you just don't like him?"

He doesn't even hesitate. "Both. I don't trust him. I don't like him. And HYDRA's after him."

She's not in the mood to argue. "Okay. Sleep."

Every part of his body is a live, raw nerve. Every breath, no matter how small, shoots searing pain through his entire body. Hot nausea stings his throat and twists his stomach. There's a hot poker lodged in his right shoulder, and he has a headache so harsh and unrelenting that he can't see anything more than black or hear anything more than a rushing, white noise.

The cold, porcelain base of the toilet is his touchstone, and, if he died right now, it would be a motherfucking gift.

Fingers touch his arm. Red flashes explode across his vision. His instinct is to curl further into the pillow clutched against his stomach, but moving makes everything worse.

"Don't touch me," he bites out.

The fingers go away. The vibrations of footsteps against the floor pound nails into his head, until there's nothing but silence and the rushing, white noise.

The floor smells like bleach. His stomach rolls, threatening to seize. He doesn't know what could possibly be left inside of it to come back up.

The fingers come back, followed by an echo, and he knows it's Natasha. It wouldn't be anyone else.
"Go away," he hisses, and even those two words are like knives in his skull, sharp needles all the way down his body.

She leaves, footsteps pounding away, and he lays there, for days or hours or months or years or seconds or decades.

He doesn't know if he sleeps. If he does, it's the horrible waking, restless kind, where it doesn't feel like sleep at all.

The white, rushing noise fades, and he hears noises and words. Footsteps. The clacking of a computer keyboard. The TV. Voices.

"Seriously—"

"Just go downstairs."

"Fine."

Heavy footsteps and a door closing hard. A heavy sigh.

He opens his eyes and sees dark lint stuck to white porcelain. There's a single, long strand of curly, black pubic hair on the white tile floor. He can smell old, musty urine.

He chances to move his right arm, and, besides the agony in his right shoulder, it doesn't cause nearly the pain it had before. He's still nauseous, but he thinks - He thinks he can make it.

He pushes himself to his feet and breathes slowly, steadily. His stomach twists and turns. Heat flashes across his body, sweat prickling his pores. Every step is red-hot pain, another nail in his head, but he takes them, one by one, toward the bedroom and the blankets and the pillows and the cool, white sheets and his sidearm –

Breaths heavy, he opens the bedroom door and slides into the unmade bed, left hand wrapping around the SIG Sauer he'd left under the pillow. He pulls the cool sheets up to his neck, sinks his head into a pillow, and drags another pillow down to his stomach, where he holds it close.

He holds his body still, taking small, tiny, steady breaths, and waits for the needles and knives and hammers and nails to go away. He's asleep, before they do.

---

"Barnes is gone," Sam says. "I'm taking a shower. Finally."

Natasha twists her head around and, in disbelief, watches Sam stalk toward the bathroom. Barnes, no matter what he's doing, brings out the absolute worst in Sam, and, for the first time, Natasha has serious doubts about the three of them working together.

Natasha slides her laptop onto one of the sofa cushions and stands up. She also has serious doubts that Barnes actually left. He wouldn't get very far, should he try.

As suspected, she finds him in the second bedroom, buried under the duvet. A glint of metal catches her eye: his left hand, peeking out from under the cover, wrapped around his ever-present SIG Sauer. She doesn't forget that she's felt the power of that gun.

"Barnes, I'm going to touch you," she announces, voice clear and loud. She sits at the edge of the bed and carefully shifts the duvet down, far enough to see that he's tangled in the white bed sheet,
with a pillow against his stomach. His skin is pale, clammy, and shivering.

"It's cold. Stop."

"I have to check your shoulder."

"S'fine."

She ignores his protests and pulls the sheet down. He doesn't fight her. The gauze pads are spotted dark red; when she peels them off, she breathes relief. There are no signs of infection, although the wounds are nowhere near as healed as she expected them to be.

"You don't heal like Steve," Natasha comments.

He doesn't answer; whether he's asleep or just quiet, she doesn't know. That's okay, though. She works quietly, cleansing the wounds and the area around them, perhaps working more slowly than need be. Eventually, he shifts his body to make it easier for her, and, gradually, relaxes deeper into the mattress.

His body-skin, muscles, tendons-subtly moves in a way that tells her he's starved for touch.

"I miss him."

Natasha misses a single beat, blinks, then keeps cleaning his shoulder. "You're... You'll probably take this the wrong way, but Steve's had trouble letting go of the life he had. Finding you alive changed him, in a better way than you might think. Suddenly, he wasn't so alone in the world."

He stays quiet again, and she begins covering his shoulder with gauze and medical tape. She makes an effort to touch his bare skin and to go slower than she needs.

"The person he was looking for doesn't exist."

"It's only been two years." Although she thinks it's laughable coming from her, she says regardless, "Be kind to yourself. And give yourself time. It's not a switch you flip."

"Okay," he says, tone plainly conveying that he's done.

"Okay," she says and pulls the covers back over his body. "Do you want a blanket?"

"No."

"Get some sleep."

She leaves the room and sits next to Sam in the living room. He's watching Baywatch, dubbed into French.

"Steve hates this show, for what it's worth," Sam remarks. "Says it's the 'stupidest fucking thing he's ever seen.'"

Natasha smiles. "Sounds like he was in a bad mood."

Sam doesn't smile. "This isn't going so well. They've been on us, from the start. And they took down Barnes, of all people, after two days. I don't see how we're gonna make it."

"We're going to find him. We'll make it."
Sam shakes his head, lips twisted. "Wonder if that's what he thought."

Natasha turns those words over in her head, trying to make sense of what he means. When it clicks, she answers, "He made it."

"If it takes us seventy years, it won't matter, will it?"

She's done with this conversation. For one thing, Sam's still recovering from a concussion, and his whole line of irritated thinking is likely a symptom. For another thing, it's not helpful.

They sit in silence, not-watching back-to-back episodes of the show. Sam dozes, off and on, arm propped on the sofa's arm, head in his hand. Natasha turns his words over and over in her head, thinking he might actually be onto something.

The lifeguards are making a dramatic, ridiculous speedboat rescue, when she feels it.

It's a sense. An unidentifiable feeling. A chill crawling up her spine, a twist in her gut, a tension in her shoulders.

"We've been made." Natasha is on her feet, before she finishes the sentence.

Sam jerks awake, and, ever a soldier, doesn't waste time with questions. He's off the sofa and going for his wings and weapons, while she draws her nine millimeter and sprints to the wall adjacent to the room's main door.

The windows explode, glass fragments flying inward. Sam ducks behind the kitchenette's island. Bullets tear apart the wall just opposite Natasha, and she moves to better cover.

The door splinters and then bursts open.

Natasha runs toward it, kicking off the wall just in time to land on the shoulders of the first soldier through the door. She puts a bullet through the top of his head and flips backward, kicking the face of the next in line. She lands heavy on her back, weapon aimed and fired at his neck. The bullet tears straight through and hits the next soldier in the chest; she caps him off with a bullet to the eye.

The last soldier takes aim at her; she kicks the rifle from his hand and flips up in one smooth motion, landing in a low position that allows her to throw her weight into a palm strike that drives the soldier's nasal bone into his brain.

"Get Barnes and go! Rendezvous Sierra."

"Um. No?"

Natasha turns and looks out the window. All she can see are the lights of a military-grade helicopter and the quick gleam of Barnes' arm.

She winces. "Unnecessary, but I really hope he's throwing up on them."

Sam smiles and shakes his head. "I've got the gear. Let's go."

"Drop everything but his pack."

This time, Sam does question. "Are you kidding?"

Natasha looks at the door; it's still clear. "HYDRA couldn't find him for over a year. He joins up with us, and they're all over us. They're tracking us, not him. Drop the gear."
Sam considers this information with an "oh, fuck, really" expression, then drops everything except Barnes' backpack. With one final look back at the door, Natasha calmly walks to Sam and has a sudden, lucky thought.

They're not getting anywhere without their passports.

She makes a beeline to the gear Sam just dropped and rifles through the front pockets of her bag and his, pulling out two passports. They'd each only brought one. Hopefully, Barnes has his in his backpack.

"Good idea," Sam says. "Those might be helpful."

Natasha tilts her head and walks back over to him, letting him pick her up, just-married style.

"Guess the honeymoon's over."

"I ain't marrying you," Sam says, serious as can be, and then jumps out of the window, wings deployed the moment they're clear. "Nothin' but drama!"

They fall for three, four seconds, before Sam soars sharply upward. Natasha closes her eyes to the wind and ignores the burn of adrenaline and the pitter-patter-patter-patter of her heart skipping beats.

When she opens her eyes, the helicopter is gliding sideways, limp and uncontrolled, before finally tumbling into the lake, rotors twisting into gnarled slivers of metal.

"Did you see him jump out?"

Sam doesn't answer right away. He stops their ascent and hovers momentarily. "No. Hold on."

He lands on the roof of a tall building that's far too close to their hotel. For now, Natasha doesn't argue.

If HYDRA captures Barnes, it's all over.

She looks out at the water and figures the helicopter crashed at least a half mile off-shore. All she can see are glints of metal and the fading outline of the helicopter, as it sinks into the water. She doesn't see human movement.

In the distance, Natasha hears the unmistakable sound of multiple helicopter turbines and tail rotors. At least three. Sam turns his head that way; he hears them, too.

"They're never going to let him go, are they?" Sam asks. For the first time, she hears pity.

She doesn't answer. She goes to the edge of the building and looks out over the eastern part of the city. The myriad of small marinas with their small, open boats; an open, wide-expanse park with virtually no cover; and finally, another park surrounded by buildings, thick trees, and what looks like cars.

She knows where she would go; it's as good as knowing where he would go.

"Let's get our boy."
The average human can hold their breath for thirty seconds. The official world record is twenty-two minutes. His record is fifty-nine minutes and twenty-one seconds, before drowning in a HYDRA water tank.

*Let me let me let me please let me - "Breathe, Soldier. Breathe."*

Poisoned, his record is forty-eight minutes and some odd seconds. If he hadn't been too good to kill, HYDRA would have cut their losses on him long, long ago. Their only problem: they created something that is difficult to kill and near impossible to stop.

After the helicopter crashes into the lake, Barnes chooses not to surface. The water is warm and optimal. He toes off Wilson's tennis shoes-a size and a half too big-and takes a moment to orient himself and then another moment to decide.

He swims north, a map of Annecy all but burned into his mind. Imperial Park is only 500 meters to the north; there's a hotel there. People. Vehicles. Cover.

It's just not so easy. His right shoulder burns, the tendons and muscles pulling and tearing like they're rupturing with every movement. The sutures snap, and Natasha's carefully-applied bandage washes off.

Above, he hears the buffeting *whip whip whip* of rotor blades against the water. It sounds like at least three Pave Hawks. That was faster than even he expected it to be.

Against his better judgment, but not willing to risk being found, he swims five meters deeper under water. It takes more energy and oxygen than he expected, but when he sees the dim light of the search spotlights reflect off the surface of the water, he's relieved.

If he keeps moving, it will be difficult for them to find him. Logically, they'll expect him to surface to the closest shore, not swim to the furthest. The only thing he has to do is fucking make it.

He counts his strokes: *one, two, three, four, five, six-*

Anything to keep his mind off the gradual burning sensation in his lungs, and the creeping, black spots in his periphery. If he drowns, they'll revive him, and he loses.

--*thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen-*

The sounds of the Pave Hawks become dull, more distant. The lights drag behind him.

-*eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one-*

His left ear pops and fills with stuffy pressure.

-*twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six-*

His right ear pops. Prickles sliver from his forehead into his eyes and into his nose. The spots spring into his central vision.

-*thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three-*

There's just one problem with HYDRA's breath holding experiment: it had been in a tank, at perfect rest, neither injured nor physically exerted. Fifty-eight minutes is a joke.

-*thirty-...thirty-...thirty-...*
What count was he on?

It doesn't matter.

Go, go, go, go, go, go.

The spots double, triple, blend with the dark water. It's all dark. His legs and arm sting, lungs burn. Just fucking make it.

His head swims: light, airy, like a balloon, going up, up, up.

Just make it.

He needs to breathe. He can't, can't, can't.

Just make it.

His left hand buries into something malleable. His right palm slaps into silty mud. He's elated and relieved: it's the fucking shore.

Slow. Slow. Slow.

His instinct is to come up fast and gasping. Doing so will almost certainly draw attention from HYDRA's SAR teams.

He reaches high up with his right hand and damn near screams; being underwater and all, it's not such a great idea. The pain, though, is irrelevant. He'll survive the pain; HYDRA, not so much. He pulls his left arm against his chest; metal tends to gleam, like a signal mirror.

He kicks and floats upward, using his right hand to guide his ascent. The mud turns rocky and soon into concrete, then cool air against his fingertips.

GO.

Barnes doesn't waste a second. He grabs the ledge with his right hand, kicks his left leg up over the shallow concrete barrier, and leverages his whole body out of the water and into a smooth roll. He deliberately turns onto his stomach and hides his left arm under his chest.

He blinks water out of his eyes and looks back out over the bay. His vision is blurrier than it should be, and it's difficult to separate the bokeh-esque city lights from the crash.

When he does, though, he sees it.

A Pave Hawk, headed right for him, search lights criss-crossing the water.

"Fuck."

Barnes looks to the left. A batch of heavily-leaved trees are only a few meters away. He crawls toward them, staying as close to the ground as he can. His right shoulder threatens to give out, the nerves shrieking and muscles quavering.

He won't go back. He fucking won't. He can't.

He collapses between the trunks of two sprawling trees, again covering his metal arm with his body. His lungs shriek for air, and he gasps in heavy, gulping breaths. All he wants to do is close
his eyes and sleep away days of exhaustion. Like that's at all an option.

The sweeping pounding of the Pave Hawk rotors becomes louder and louder. The light sweeps over the trees, and he tries to ignore a gripping sense of desperation.

No, no, no, no.

The helicopter moves slowly, back and forth across the park, then back across the trees.

He tells himself the likelihood of being found here, under dense foliage and in the dark, is slim to none, but he also knows that there are multiple ground teams. The helicopter crew might not find him, but the longer they stay close, the longer he can't risk moving.

This is the closest HYDRA has gotten to him in over two years; they're not going to go easy on the opportunity.

Just like that, the helo banks west, sticking close to the coast line. It's a gift he can't waste.

Barnes draws energy from fear alone, pushes himself to his bare feet, wraps his metal arm across his chest and puts his right arm over it, and walks calmly out of the tree line.

He's not in a wonderful tactical position, but it's not a terrible one, either. There's an expanse of neatly-trimmed grass to cross, before reaching a brightly-lit, opulent white building—it's a four-star hotel, he knows—with a lot more trees and shrubbery, and then, if his memory serves, a parking lot to the north.

The key is to be calm. Walk, don't run. Never run. Running draws attention.

The grass is wet, ground mushy. He wishes he had shoes.

He ignores the panic settling in his neck and back, and the catastrophic thought that there's a team behind him, or a ridiculously quiet helicopter hovering right behind him, or something.

There's not.

It's fortuitous, though, that Barnes reaches the hotel and the safe-enough cover of large bushes and verdant trees a good five seconds before he hears them: spongy, heavy steps, like a fucking stampede, the soft swishing of combat pants, and the muted clacking of gun metal against straps and clips.

It's a ten-man HYDRA ground unit.

Son of a bitch.

Barnes slides down the wall of the building, breaths frozen, melting himself into the thick foliage. He watches them creep by and then fan out, toward the shore.

They're right on fucking top of him, and, sooner rather than later, they're going to figure that out. The second one of them looks his way, wearing their night vision equipment, it's over.

His right hand is shaking. His chest is tight. He's lightheaded. It's a panic attack, and it will get him captured.

Think. This is what you do. This is what you've always done.

HYDRA will be at the front of the hotel. The parking lot is gone. If they're being thorough-and
they are-then they already have operatives inside the hotel. The hotel is gone. There will be snipers going to the roof, if they're not already there.

The box is getting smaller, and his time frame for opportunity is shrinking. The only advantage-though short-lived-he has is that they don't know he's here.

Every rule has an exception, and he's gotta run.

South and west is the shore, and HYDRA. North is HYDRA. East is open, as far as he knows. He has to go east and cut across to Highway 909.

The time for thinking is over.

He stays close to the building, rounding a rotunda, and slipping around a small set of steps. He reaches the east side of the building and slips behind another set of trees.

There's a narrow alley, then a low fence, and then trees. It's maybe thirteen meters from his location to cover. That's barely a second or two.

Fuck it.

He darts out from the trees and sprints across the asphalt. He hurdles over the wooden gate and easily makes it to the trees.

He doesn't stop.

He fucking runs.

Barnes launches himself onto the top of a wood-slat carport, glides over it, and leaps off, clearing a row of dense bushes. He lands onto mushy grass, feels his right knee giving, and rolls, coming back up more certain on his feet.

Barnes darts through what looks like someone's yard, zig-zagging between a ridiculous amount of trees, and vaults over another wooden fence. He tears through another yard.

He keeps going, due east, dodging trees until he comes to a tiny strip of grass and a short fence. He jumps the fence and comes out to the near-empty Highway 909.

Not good enough. He keeps going.

He sprints across the first lane, jumps another fence, clears the second lane, jumps another fence (and fuck fences, for fucking real), lands smooth on the asphalt, and smacks into a slow-moving black sedan.

The window splinters.

He lands hard on his back, cracking his head against the road, not that he really feels it. It's the way his right shoulder blade hits the ground that hurts: an explosion of pain down his entire arm.

Curly, gold sparks float in his peripheral vision, more of them appearing every time he blinks. All he hears is a rush of white, booming noise in his ears, along with his own raspy, half-held breaths.

And then he realizes.

No headlights.
The fucking car doesn't have its headlights on.

It's HYDRA.

They're on him, like he used to be on his targets: insanely, insanely accurate. Right now, he almost misses that clarity. If he keeps it up, he's going to have that clarity back real, real soon.

Barnes smashes through another row of leafy bushes, before he realizes he's even on his feet. He races through a wide expanse of manicured, green lawn, surrounded on both sides by tall condo buildings.

With HYDRA right behind him, it's easy to forget about his shoulder, and the fire in his lungs, and everything else that's going wrong. He only needs one thing to go right, and that's getting the fuck away.

He speeds through a mostly empty parking lot and doesn't think about stopping to hotwire a car. He doesn't have the time. He skids around a corner and follows a thin alley to a diminutive back road, turns left, and stops.

He's at a dark, quiet, partially-lit street. The route east looks like more of a thoroughfare; the route west looks like it might taper off into less traveled routes. He decides west, sprinting down a narrow sidewalk with even footfalls and long strides.

Compartmentalization comes naturally. He looks ahead: Albigny Brasserie Bar, cleared. Then to the place with the red sign with the creepy logo: cleared. Then to Vallat: cleared. He rounds a wide corner and passes a pharmacie, then a building with white squares all over the front windows.

Don't stop. Don't stop. Can't stop. Shake it off.

The shopping district abruptly turns into residential, and the street tapers into a narrow back alley. He runs further: legs numb, lungs scathing, head swimming, ears crackling, right hand shaking.

Just a little. Just a little further.

Barnes sees what looks like an entrance to underground parking, and it will have to do. If he's at all lucky, there will be a car to steal down there.

He makes the turn. His right knee buckles, and he goes down hard on his left arm, world-spinning dizzy, metal scraping against asphalt. All that's in his lungs are hot vapors; he can't breathe. He can't fucking breathe.

It's over.

The underground garage is too far away; he'll never make it. On his knees, he drags himself around a concrete barrier and into a corner designated for two handicap parking spaces. Fitting, at least, and, at the very least, he's surrounded by concrete and hidden from view from the way HYDRA will be coming.

He brings his knees to his chest and wraps his arms around them, not even minding the feel of gross, wet denim, before putting his head on his arms. He swallows against a dry, tight throat, and floats with the lightheaded dizziness, biting back nausea. He's got one spot in this world right now, and he's not going to puke in it.

Headlights reflect in the windows, to his right. Even with his head down, the light sends sharp stabs of pain in his temple. His vision flashes to black and then back again.
The vehicle doesn't pass. He can hear the smooth engine, behind him. It's going slow, way too slow. His stomach free falls.

It's a black sedan, and it slowly slithers into the small lot. There's not even a question of who it is.

He presses his head into the concrete behind him, jaw clenched, tears blinked away. He just wants to live and be left alone.

The tires of the vehicle crunch over asphalt and fallen leaves, brakes squeaking as it comes to a stop.

Barnes lets out a breath and pushes his emotions away. He needs options right now, not never-will-be bullshit.

He doesn't have any other weapon but himself, and he evaluates how effective he has to be and can be. Answers: highly, not much. Solution: disarm at the earliest opportunity and use the stolen weapon to kill as many as he can, and re-evaluate the situation. Then: either run like hell or kill himself, depending.

A single prickle of warmth spikes in the back of his left cheek, and a sick sensation grows through his stomach, up through his chest, and into his throat. He fights back another urge to throw up.

Their poison is still in his system, and he's swam, ran, and jumped himself to a breaking point. He doesn't think he can handle an extended physical confrontation, let alone an extended attempt at physical exertion. "Run like hell" is not an option; likely, neither is "kill them all."

That leaves one option. Just one. Won't be pretty, but... It'll be okay, because he won't be their Asset. That's all that matters.

The front passenger side door pops open. Adrenaline slivers through his legs and right arm, seizes his gut, and he only needs one gun, one gun, only one-

Natasha steps out.

Barnes stares at her, only somewhat aware that his mouth is open. He hadn't expected them to look for him. He would never have dreamed that they would.

Natasha jogs over and squats down in front of him, expression contorted into concern.

"Are you all right? You're bleeding. What were you thinking?"

He feels euphoric, safe, even if Natasha and Wilson are idiot HYDRA magnets.

"Bucky?"

He doesn't bother correcting her. He smiles and pulls her into a hug and he doesn't even care. It feels so, so good.

"Whoa, there. Hi." She hugs back, arms tight and warm. "You okay?"

"Thank you," he breathes. "Oh, my god, thank you."

She pats him on the back; he feels tension growing in her body. "It's okay, Bucky. It's okay, but we've gotta go. Okay? C'mon. We've gotta go."
Her words echo to another time. Still lightheaded, the parking lot sinks below him. The smells of asphalt, leaves, and fresh lake water bleed into the scent of nothing but hard, manufactured plastic and dry, filtered air.

Jagged, gray rocks *crunch* under his boots. He hears the creaking of metal and the hurried shuffling of limbs across the ground.

And then, a female voice: strong, controlled, but panicked: "Dr. Javadi, we have to go. It's okay, but we've gotta go. C'mon. We've gotta go."

"No, I can't. My leg."

"Shit."

He clears the ridge, and the scene is splayed before him. The cliff is shallow, the sea beyond it, and an upside-down, twisted silver car lurches on a lucky ledge. Smoke hisses from the hood.

The male target is trapped under the vehicle by his right leg; the female is next to him, dumbly trying to lift the vehicle with a single arm. She looks up at him, and he sees fear.

He strides toward them: *crunch, crunch, crunch*. The female tries harder and harder, more and more frantic to free the target, but she has to know that it's over.

"He's here! Oh, my god, he's here!"

He slings his rifle over his shoulder and chooses his SIG Sauer P-220.

"Please, please, please, no, no."

The female is injured. Blood streams down her face; her right shoulder hangs limp at her side. He doesn't see a weapon.

She looks at him again. When she pleads, it's calm, and in Russian: "Are you really going to kill me? Because you'll have to."

He has no idea why she thinks he won't. He raises his weapon, and she flings herself over the target, shielding his vital organs and head with her body.

The rule is no witnesses. He aims the SIG Sauer at the back of her head. He puts his finger on the trigger.

_Natashka_. He calls her _Natashka_. Her hair is soft under his fingers, and when her lips curve into a slight smile, he almost remembers what it's like to live. But... But, if they're caught, they won't kill him. They'll kill her, and he can't let that happen.

It's the first time he can remember what it's like to care about something, anything. He _cares_ about _her_.

If he shoots her through the abdomen, it will hit the target's heart and none of her vital organs. So, he does. Her scream means nothing to him, just like the target's pleading had meant nothing.

The target is dead, and a seatbelt buckle is digging into his back. His legs are cramping, left knee a little uncomfortable from pushing into what feels like a hard plastic door. Without opening his eyes, he knows he's in the backseat of a small car.

"Natashka?" he asks.
"He's lucid?" Wilson.

"Yeah, he's back." There's so much in her voice that isn't usually there, like shaky, genuine shock. "Barnes, you good?"

The back passenger window is across from him; streetlights flash, flash, flash outside the window. The car drives smooth, steady, about 70 kilometers per hour; they're not being chased. He tilts his head back and looks up at Natasha, suddenly feeling her warm fingers on a painful spot on his forehead.

He looks beyond her, at the gap between the back driver's side window and Wilson's window. Wilson's window is splintered.

Oh. Oh.

He looks back at Natasha.

"Hey there," Natasha says. Her expression is tense, in direct contrast to the ever-cool tone of her voice. "You got lost for a little while."

A second ago, he was hiding in a tiny parking lot in Annecy, hugging her because she wasn't a car full of HYDRA soldiers, or, worse, handlers. He's not sure how he got into the back of a car, or even where this car came from (that makes twice, now), but that's not even barely the most important question on his mind.

"Why didn't I shoot you in the head?" he asks.

"That's it; I'm pulling over." Wilson, panicked.

"No, Sam, it's fine. He's fine. Don't stop."

"He's losing it, Nat. If he flips out-"

"I'm not going to fucking flip out. Fuck you," Barnes snaps. He switches to Russian, so Wilson will stay the fuck out of it. "I just need to know. In 2009, in Ukraine, why didn't I kill you?"

Natasha hesitates for way too long. She suddenly can't look at him. She knows exactly what he's talking about, and she's thinking of an easy lie-

His train of thought is lost to a sudden, stabbing pain in his temple, one that pierces into his eyes. His vision blacks out again, but it doesn't come back so quickly; every now and then, it does that. He's just ignored every sign up until now that it was going to happen.

"Fuuuuuck," he groans, dragging his left hand up over his face. It provides absolutely no comfort.

"I wasn't your mission, and you don't waste bullets," she answers, in English. It's complete bullshit. "Are you okay?"

"Whatever," he grous. Whatever energy he had is long gone, and this is a fight he'll have with her later. He only has one more question: "Where're we going?"

"Zurich," Wilson answers. "We'll decide where to go after that."

"Kay. Watch the checkpoint."

"No shit."
They'll be fine. All the checkpoint cares about is that they're not smuggling anything. More importantly, he can't feel his heart beating, and his chest doesn't feel like it's going to spontaneously combust, which altogether means he can relax into Natasha's lap and let go into a deep, dark sleep.

"Do you have your wallet?"

"Yeah, I had it in my pocket. We're good. What about him?"

"He needs to sleep. And he's a mess. We'll come back, after we have the room, get him, and then ditch the car."

"Well, let's get to it."

Two car doors click open near-simultaneously. Clothing shuffles over leather seats, but only one pair of shoes hits the ground. The doors close. Outside, their voices are muffled and become more and more distant.

"I don't have shoes."

"We'll get some tomorrow. Have you been here before?"

"Oh, yeah, I come here all the time."

"It just looks like a chea-"

"Don't start."

Barnes blinks his eyes open. He takes a moment to calibrate himself: still dark outside, with tall, yellow lights outside the passenger window and the intermittent sounds of traffic on an expressway to the near north. There's something sort of soft under his head, but he doesn't care to reach up and behind to see what it is.

A stabbing pain throbs on the right side of his forehead; he had really hoped that would be gone by now. He sits up, breathing through a wave of vertigo. A black jacket pools at his waist; it smells like Wilson's woody cologne. Out the windshield, he sees a multi-story, generic-looking hotel. He hopes they get a good suite.

He closes his eyes again and leans against the backseat. His head is doing barrel rolls and loop-de-loops. He hasn't felt this sick, since...

Since the first few days after Krausberg. Bucky puking, sweating, with a stinging ache in his whole body that made him want to rip out of his skin. Steve bringing a map, sheepish in a way he never really was, and Bucky puking on that map: "the bases are somewhere in there, Steve." Steve laughing and laughing, and Bucky mustering a shaky smile, because he really, really wanted to stop-

THUMP!

Barnes startles, right hand reaching to the small of his back and finding nothing there. His heart doesn't waste a second: tearing into a race he didn't know he was supposed to be running.

Little wheels scrape against asphalt and crackle over sand-size gravel. He looks out the window
and sees a woman pulling a small suitcase. The maroon car just behind her lights up and beeps twice.

It was a trunk closing. That's all. He got all bent out of shape over a car trunk.

"Fuck."

He drags his left hand over his face, the cool metal a welcome relief.

Barnes decides not to wait for them. He slides over to the passenger side of the backseat and carefully pulls on Wilson's jacket, surprised at how close a fit it is. He's not surprised at how still-painful his shoulder is.

The soft thing his head had been resting on is his backpack, thank fucking God. He grabs it and gets out of the car, jamming his left hand deep into the pocket of the jacket.

He stalks into the lobby and sees Natasha and Wilson at the front desk. He also sees two key cards laying on the counter, one by Wilson's hand. They both look at him at the same time; Natasha is unreadable, but Wilson looks annoyed, as usual.

He's about to annoy him even more.

Barnes goes to the front desk and grabs the card by Wilson's hand. "Der Herr zahlt," he says to the wide-eyed clerk, and then keeps walking. "Room number?"

"805," Natasha calls after him. "'Morning, by the way."

"He's a little weird. And clumsy. Falls down a lot, gets hurt," Wilson says, in really bad German. "I don't even know where we found'em."

"Your German fucking sucks," Barnes shouts across the lobby. He hits the "up" button to the tune of Natasha snorting, "I wasn't going to mention it."

"High school, okay? I learned it in high school. There were, like, four of us."

The elevator doors open. Barnes steps in and goes straight to the back corner, leaning into it. The last thing he hears before the doors close is Wilson saying, "You both suck."

The room isn't a suite, which he prefers only because suites are entirely self-sufficient, but at least it has separate rooms. There's a decent-sized living room with a couch and a television. He drops his backpack by the sofa, drapes Wilson's jacket over its arm, and seeks out the bedroom.

The two-bed bedroom is walled off from the living room. The queen beds are separated by a sheer, maroon curtain, the dumbest thing he's ever seen. Wilson must've picked out the hotel.

Barnes goes to the furthest bed, draws the heavy window drapes closed, and leaves all of his damp, uncomfortable clothes in a pile on the floor. His right shoulder is stiff and throbbing, and he can't raise his arm higher than chest level. Not good.

He sits down on the bed—not too soft—and bends his left arm back to his right shoulder blade. He runs his fingers over the area, jaw clenched against the pain, and can tell from the texture that the wounds have re-opened. There's a little bit of a dip where the two bullets entered. When he pulls his fingers away, there are bright droplets of fresh blood on the metal.

Shit.
Well. He's definitely had worse wounds. Running around Washington, DC for a few days, before stowing away on a transatlantic-bound, equipment-only, bouncy fucking C-17, while having a broken right arm, hadn't exactly been the pinnacle of wonderfulness. This? This is comfort.

He slides under the covers, eases down onto his stomach, and shuts his eyes. His arm'll be fine, and he'll sleep until Natasha finds him.

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Natasha finds Barnes exactly where she expected: lying in bed. He's the laziest super soldier she's ever seen.

"You awake?"

His metal arm flops up and then back down. His version of a "yes," she assumes. It doesn't escape her that he's holding his right arm very still and very close to his body.

She sits next to him on the bed, the mattress dipping and springs groaning.

"Sam and I left our gear behind in Annecy. Figured HYDRA was tracking something that wasn't you."

He makes a confirmatory noise.

The covers are only pulled up to Barnes' mid-back, and she can easily see that his shoulder is much worse than it had been yesterday night. The wounds are red, inflamed, and bleeding, and the area is slightly swollen.

"Fix it?" Barnes' voice is muffled by the pillow.

"Have a med kit right here."

Natasha pulls her legs onto the bed and sits cross-legged, one of the hotel's med-kits in her lap. There's an array of band-aids, antibacterial creams, antibacterial washes, gauze, gloves, and tape inside.

She puts on the gloves, saturates a square of gauze with the antibacterial liquid, and dabs the first bullet wound. Barnes takes a deep breath and jerks away, back arching. The plates on his arm shift, and his metal fingers twist around the white bedsheet. She wouldn't say it scares her; concerns, maybe, but not scares.

"That bad?" she asks.

"I guess."

He relaxes somewhat, enough for her to put the palm side of her left hand on the middle of his back. Maybe he'll find it comforting.

"If someone hadn't jumped out of a window and crashed a helicopter, maybe that someone wouldn't be in a lot of pain right now."

"I didn't crash the helicopter," Barnes mutters. "The pilot crashed it on purpose. I would've landed it."

Natasha considers that information. It means that Barnes is capture-or-kill-on-sight, no matter the
cost. It explains why his head was so far out of the game in Annecy, that he ran straight into their car and didn't even realize it was *them*. It also means he's drifting further away from the Winter Soldier and everything the Winter Soldier was able to do with pinpoint, dead-calm precision.

"Or crashed it into another helicopter," he adds.

Natasha almost smiles. There's a part of her that just wants to smack him.

"Or." She settles for a verbal smacking. "When you're sick and injured, and can barely run a mile, you leave the HYDRA fighting to me and Sam?"

She sees him swallow. "That's not so easy."

Natasha cocks her head, sliding pieces of his puzzle together. "You didn't think we would come for you."

He doesn't answer. That's fine. She tapes the gauze to his shoulder and goes in for the proverbial kill.

"You panicked. You ran. You made obvious choices and caged yourself in. Pretty sure I found you in the middle of some kind of breakdown. HYDRA would have found you, too. So, what's your plan?"

"Find Steve," he says, as if it's obvious. "Go home."

"Oh, HYDRA will take you right to him. And then we'll have two Winter Soldiers, and maybe you two will spend the next seventy years together. Help HYDRA take the world."

He visibly flinches and tries to push himself up. She pushes him back down. His right arm is near useless, and she hasn't pissed him off to the point where he's willing to use his left one.

"Stop," he bites, but he won't even look at her.

"What's your plan?" she asks again. "You're not anywhere close to what you were, even a year ago. You think you can still walk into HYDRA strongholds and pick them apart, by yourself? They've gotten stronger, while you gave it up and laid around for a year, doing who cares what."

"Stop," he says again, but there's little force behind it.

"They're waiting for you to take that one wrong step. When you do, you're gone." Natasha rubs her index finger over a strip of tape, smoothing it out. "I'd like for that not to happen. So, your plan needs to be trusting us-just us-to do everything we can to back you up. Or else, you're a liability, at best, and a threat, at worst."

She lifts her hand from his back and stops talking. Her gaze stays on his back, tracing the familiar scars there: fine, thin, white lines along the length of his spine, along with the ones that stretch and curve with each of his left ribs. The last time she saw these scars, they were fresher.

"Are you done?" he asks, finally.

"No, actually. Turn over, so I can see that gash on your forehead."

A beat passes. "What gash?"

He rolls over onto his back and pushes himself up with his left arm, until his back is flat against the padded headboard. He fusses with the covers, until they're bunched by his stomach, and then
covers his face with his metal hand, eyes closed. His breaths are a focused sort of steady. Natasha realizes he's fighting back nausea, and so she waits.

Finally, his hand drops to his lap, but he doesn't open his eyes. She scoots closer, sitting by his stomach.

The gash is on the right side of his forehead, a diagonal line from hairline to temple. It’s shallow and not much of a bleeder, but it's wide and the area around it is a swollen knot.

"You really didn't know you had this?"

He shrugs with his left shoulder. What else did she expect?

Like his shoulder, she cleans the gash, applies cream, and wishes the med kit had butterfly bandages in it. She settles for gauze and tape.

Her thumb brushing over the last piece of tape, he surprises her: he reaches up, the fingers of his right hand combing through her hair and grazing against her scalp. An electric chill slips down her neck and into her shoulders.

"I remember this," he breathes.

She puts her hand on his wrist, cautionary. He's vulnerable, physically sick, and still learning who he is. In no world does this go further.

Even if it could, this time with total impunity to do and be whatever and whoever they want.

But not yet, if ever. Something invaluable she learned from Clint.

Barnes shakes his head, confusion in his expression. Something isn't making sense. "Where were we? When were we?"

"That's something you need to remember on your own," she answers. "When you do, then we'll talk. Or you'll decide that this-what you're remembering-belongs somewhere you want to forget."

He doesn't argue or push, not the way she had with Clint, many years ago. He closes his eyes, drops his hand, and leans back against the headboard. "I hope not. You're..." He opens his eyes again, impossible to read. "You're incredible."

"Me? Have you looked at yourself, lately?"

He shakes his head, and his breathing kicks up a few notches. So: the wrong thing to say. Good to know.

"I've done things. Unforgivable things."

His eyes have the sudden shine of someone who cares and regrets and wants so badly to be someone better. She recognizes that.

The first time she cried, it was in front of Fury, and when she apologized for it, he said, "Don't. This is the first time I ever thought to trust you. Well. 'Trust' being a relative thing and all."

"A lot of people have. They don't all feel remorse. And that's the difference, don't you think?"

"Difference between what?" His voice is throaty and deeper than usual.
Natasha smiles, just a little. She puts her hand on his, pushing her own boundaries. Barnes surprises her again, when he turns his hand over and wraps his fingers around her hand.

"Redemption," she answers. "It's what I tell myself, at least."

He's quiet for many long moments. "I didn't shoot you in the head, because I remembered that I cared about you. I didn't know why."

"Wow. You should put that on a Hallmark card."

He ignores her. "And I think HYDRA figured that out, in '09, because I didn't remember you at all, on the bridge. I was going to kill you. And Steve. No matter what happens, I can't go back to that."

The shine turns to a single sniffle, like he has a cold, and he takes and lets out a deep, shaking breath.

Natasha has no idea what to say. The first thing that comes to mind is: "Do you even know what a Hallmark card is?"

The corner of his mouth twitches, even though his expression turns to incredulity. "Yeah, we had those."

"Well, I don't know," she says, with mock indignation.

"Go away." If he wasn't trying to stop a smile, she might have actually believed he meant it.

"Hey, I was just trying to lighten the mood."

"You're a jerk."

"Oh, wow. It's 'dick,' Barnes. You're a dick."

"'Kay, Muffin."

"Oh. So, you're a fucking dick."

Barnes has a wonderful, comfortable laugh, and hearing it is like suddenly hearing an old, forgotten song. He squeezes her hand, and she'd forgotten-totally forgotten...

All at once, she feels тоска. In her stomach, in the back of her mind, in her chest. Her smile fades. When she looks back at him, his smile is gone, and he's blinking heavily.

"You should rest up, get back on your feet. We're going to need you."

He doesn't argue, sliding down the headboard and under the covers. He's asleep almost the moment his head hits the pillow. Not that she can blame him: the last two days have only been two days.

Natasha pulls her hand away from his, rolls off the bed, walks to the living room, and sinks into the couch, thigh-to-thigh with Sam.

"He's asleep."

There's a black, medium-sized backpack between them, on the coffee table, next to Sam's wingpack. Sam is staring at the backpack. She groans inwardly; she just wants to sit and space out.
"We've gotta see what he has," Sam says. "We're essentially defenseless. Hell, I don't even have shoes."

From the weight of it, Natasha had already guessed that it isn't full of weapons, like Sam is assuming.

She's right.

It's smartly packed, with socks, gloves, undergarments, and hygienic items on the very bottom, and two pairs of jeans, three shirts, and two black hoodies on top of that. A loaded black, scoped, light-equipped CZ-75 SP-01 handgun is slipped along the side of the clothes, with ammunition for it underneath.

Tucked along the back, there's a novel (The Forever War); a folder full of all kinds of maps, new and old; a worn, small blue notebook with a pen clipped to the spirals; and a slim banker's bag full of crisp bills and two passports, one Russian and one German. A set of white earbuds, a small Samsung tablet, a jar of hair wax, a black comb, and a pack of Marlboro cigarettes are split between the side pockets, along with knives hidden in various, easy-to-reach places.

"Damn, his entire life fits in this bag," Sam says.

Natasha can't tell if he's being an asshole about it or not, but she says "you don't know that," nonetheless. Wherever Barnes has been for the past year, he's clearly been doing right by himself.

"He has one weapon, besides the knives. I think he lost the SIG Sauer in the lake."

Not that she's sorry to see that particular handgun go, but it was a powerful weapon. A good one to have.

Sam sits back. "He is a weapon."

"He's a good person."

Sam scoffs. "Really. He shot you. He nearly killed Steve. I don't get how easily you trust him."

Natasha looks over at him and smiles. "If you would've known me fifteen years ago, you would've been saying the saaaame thing. Also, you need to really let the helicarrier go. Really."

Sam looks off to the side and clasps his hands tighter together. His feet shift in a way that screams insecurity. The bird has landed on shaky ground.

So long as he's there: "HYDRA couldn't change him, no matter how long or how hard they tried. The person Steve knew is 100% there. You might not realize how much weight that carries."

"Maybe I don't," Sam replies.

At least he can admit it.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

The war was going their way. The Germans were losing ground: Belgium, Budapest, Lithuania, the Philippines. The Soviets had flipped sides. All sorts of countries were joining the Allies. HYDRA was running on limited resources, and they were closing in on Zola more and more each day. All of which meant: a choice needed to be made.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One

The war was going their way. The Germans were losing ground: Belgium, Budapest, Lithuania, the Philippines. The Soviets had flipped sides. All sorts of countries were joining the Allies. HYDRA was running on limited resources, and they were closing in on Zola more and more each day. All of which meant: a choice needed to be made.

Bucky knew, in every way that mattered, that "going home" wasn't an option. Not after Krausberg. There wasn't a choice.

Carter tapped a stack of papers on her metal desk, before sliding them into a folder. He rapped his knuckles on the doorframe of her office. Her eyes flicked up, and then her left eyebrow, and then the corner of her mouth.

Great.

"Sergeant."

"Ma'am. Do you have a moment?"

Her lips stretched into something like a smile. "Oh, for you, Sergeant, I think I can spare just one." The sarcasm dripped. "What do you need?"

Sure: all the moments in the world, as she kept tapping papers and slipping them into folders. Getting ready to leave London again.

"I've just got a couple more papers for you, if you don't mind."

He walked to her desk and, when she still didn't look up or even extend her hand for them, he laid them down. To be fair, it was really full of papers, and she seemed busy.

And, to be fair, not that long ago, she said something about him being a wet smack looking for a five spot filly, and he asked if she was actually trying to use outdated American slang to say he was a creep or, hey, maybe even a king size fucking jerk-and then they both smiled fake at each other and pretended to get along when Steve came around, oblivious. Because Steve was oblivious, floating in this magical, dream-come-true world of his.
Just as he was about to turn and walk away, her eyes moved to his papers, and her entire demeanor changed, just like that. She dropped her other papers and snatched his up, eyebrows tight.

"Transfer? To the Strategic Science Reserve? I thought you-"

"Wanted to go home?" He smiled. "No." And left it at that.

She looked at him, worried-like. "I'll pass it on to Colonel Phillips."

"Great. Thanks."

That was going to be a fantastic conversation to have, he thought.

He was just about out the door, when she called out, "Bucky... Sergeant!"

Bucky turned and looked back, hand on the doorframe. In order of things she called him, ranging from "Sergeant" to "Barnes" to maybe once or twice "James" to plenty of other things that were completely inappropriate but who the hell cared, her saying "Bucky" rated never.

Carter seemed unsure, the transfer papers still in her hands. She opened her mouth, sucked in a breath, and let it out again. Bucky blinked at her, only enjoying himself a lot. It was rare to get Carter all undone like this.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop enjoying yourself and get the hell out."

Bucky threw his hands up and left without another word. Five steps down the hallway, a pit popped into his stomach, and it was made of dread.

He never had that fantastic conversation with Phillips.

Barnes rolls out of bed, a dull, diffuse sort of pain bouncing around on the right side of his head.

_Fucking wonderful._

He heads straight to the shower, turns it as hot as it will go, and washes away a bone-deep chill and all the bits of dried dirt and grass from Annecy. The heat of the water is relaxing and helps ease the headache that's creeping toward migraine status.

After a while, he feels a foreign, pulling sensation on his forehead, and he peels off wet tape and soggy, red gauze. He remembers Natasha saying there was a gash on his forehead, and he has a vague memory of being sucked underwater, with the shadow of a gnarled helicopter rotor coming at his face.

He inclines his face toward the stream of water and doesn't mind the sting of the gash. The headache flares, but he's used to that. Curious, he swipes the fingers of his right hand over the wound; they come away with globs of dark red blood, nothing fresh, and the gash itself feels waxy and mostly healed.

He turns around and lets the water pound away at the back of his right shoulder, pleased that it doesn't hurt nearly as much as it had the last time he was awake. It's just a dull pain and an itchy feeling. He feels the gauze loosen, and he peels it off with his left hand. The blood on this gauze is old, too.
It suddenly occurs to him that he was most likely asleep for more than a day; must have been, given how healed his shoulder and forehead are.

Every day he-they-waste is another day that HYDRA has Steve. If Natasha and Wilson were being smart, they would have pressed on without him, but he knows Natasha wouldn't likely do that.

He quickly washes up, turns off the shower, dries off, and finds his way to the living room, going straight to his backpack. Someone's gone through it, and he doesn't care. He takes out clothes and gets dressed, soaking in the soft warmth of a hoodie.

He moves on to the little kitchenette, to the mini refrigerator, and pulls out and opens a can of Pepsi. He sits at the kitchenette's island.

Next, he pulls out his notebook and finds the page from over a year ago, when Fury recruited him, and writes in Russian: asked Carter for a transfer to SSR, early '45. Knew about/scarred of abilities - Krausberg. He draws an arrow from "Carter" to a couple of lines about an earlier memory of arguing with a Peggy Carter about what he thought might have been Steve.

He keeps the notebook out and retrieves the folder of maps, as well as his beat-up tablet.

He powers on the tablet and sees that he was right, earlier: he'd slept for god damned 49 hours. For a little bit, he gapes at the screen, making sure he's both reading the time properly and correctly recalling his last memory of looking at the date and a clock.

He just hadn't realized he trusted Natasha and Wilson enough to sleep that hard or for that long. He hasn't, since the last time HYDRA iced him.

Since the helicarrier, four or five hours every other day or so is what he considers to be a gift, although what he usually manages is one or two hours here and there. If the nightmares don't wake him, the fear of waking up to HYDRA does.

_Forty-nine hours._

Maybe he missed knowing someone had his back. Maybe it's nice to have Natasha here, even despite Wilson.

Just maybe.

The sound of the shower running wakes Sam. He lays awake, not so much waiting as not being able to go back to sleep.

The shower shuts off, and the footfalls that quietly pad outside Sam's bedroom door definitely belong to Barnes.

It's only been more than two days, since Barnes was awake. More than two days, since he and Natasha could even _start_ looking for Steve.

The feet of a chair scrape against tile floor. A bag unzips, then falls to the floor. A can _pops_ and _fizzes_ open, its metal bottom _clinking_ against the tabletop.

After that, only silence, until Sam picks up on the sound of traffic outside: the occasional horn and screeching tires. He notices that his eyelids are cold but not heavy.
The thoughts in his head whirl and speed around, back and forth, back and forth, about anything and everything: what his family thinks about him being gone for so long. If his mom's okay without Dad. If his clients will be in good hands. What HYDRA is doing to Steve. If they'll be able to find him. If Barnes is what Natasha thinks he is. How long it will take. If they'll survive. If -

Barnes coughs, dry and just once.

Sam blinks and realizes: he's not tired, won't be able to sleep for a few hours, and doesn't want to be in this dark room anymore.

Even if Barnes is out there, and even if Natasha is still asleep.

Sam gets out of bed, pulls on a pair of new black sweatpants, and walks confidently to the open living room/kitchenette.

Barnes doesn't look up or acknowledge him. He's got a can of Pepsi on the sole bare spot on the counter; otherwise, it's lined with maps, a spiral notebook, and a glowing tablet.

That's fine.

Sam goes to the mini-fridge, more behind Barnes than Sam really wants to be, and pulls out a bottle of water. He's halfway to the living room, intending to flip on the TV and sink into the sofa, when Barnes speaks.

"Earlier, you asked me 'why now.' I thought it was fairly obvious."

Sam stops walking. There's a red-hot lump of anger in his stomach. He pushes forward, because if this whatever they're doing has any chance of working, it means working with Barnes.

"It's not," Sam answers, tightly controlling his tone. "Not to me."

Barnes huffs out a sad-sounding laugh and mimics, "'It's not.' Do you know what it's like, to have everything go as absolutely wrong as it possibly can?"

Sam first thinks of Riley, of the war, but then of the flight from DC to Berlin with Steve. The same words. The same thought. Even the same mannerisms, every now and then.

"You tell yourself that it'll never be you. And then what's the worst that could happen. And then that you'll find a way out, or someone'll come and save you. That it can't get any worse. That it still can't get any worse. That you'll die at some point, and then you'll be okay, but, sur-pri-se, you can't do that, either. Do you know what it's like to lose more than you ever even knew you had?"

Sam looks down. Barnes never looks up from the map, and his tone is mostly flat and unemotional, the same kind of tone he's heard a hundred times at the VA. It's a defense mechanism, not a personality trait.

"No."

"I do. And now Steve. The sooner we find him, the less he loses."

Despite understanding of all that—or, at least, being able to hear Barnes on all of that—he still has to ask: "Are you his friend? Are you really all in on this?"

Finally, Barnes looks up, straight at Sam. There's an unmistakable shine in his eyes. "We were like brothers. He's the best person I've ever known. And I'll do anything to bring him home."
Sam sucks in a cold, deep breath, the kind that sends shivers through all of his insides. This is it, that moment where he actually **believes** Barnes is the person Steve spoke so much about. The moment where he believes that Barnes and Steve are lifelong best friends.

"**Shit,**" he breathes.

The ensuing silence is awkward. Barnes goes back to his maps, and Sam is left standing there, with a sweating bottle of water in his hand.

"So... You're kinda obsessed with those maps."

For a long moment, Barnes doesn't respond, until: "Something isn't right."

Sam dares to walk over to the table and sit across from Barnes. He sets the bottle on the table and clasps his hands together, the knot of his fingers resting on the cool tile tabletop.

"Any idea what?"

Barnes shakes his head and sits back. Brows raised, both arms loose in his lap, he looks vulnerable. "None at fucking all."

Sam leans back in his chair, unconsciously mirroring Barnes' body language. He can still see the map: all of the plots throughout Europe and Russia, recognizably the HYDRA bases Barnes had hit back in 2014. "But you think it's something to do with Russia?"

"Maybe?" He sounds like infinite frustration and runs both hands through his short, damp hair. "Some memories are easy; most of them are jumbled messes that don't fit together. It's just...something."

"Something to do with Steve, or...?"

"Something that feels like it could be. It feels..." Barnes trails off, clearly frustrated. Sam doesn't push him. He's seen this a hundred times. "For two years, I've been doing what feels right, not what I know is right. I don't know anything."

Sam chances another dare: "What **were** you doing for the past year?"

Barnes' eyes flick up at Sam. Hesitation bleeds from his face, before, in an instant, it turns to resolve. "I gave this up. This killing. These guns. This violence and this life – I stopped."

**Wow.**

"I didn't know that. Neither did Steve."

Barnes' nod is infinitesimal, and that hesitation comes back. "I'm sorry for trying to kill you. I... remember what I did. And I'm glad that Steve has you as a friend."

Sam wasn't expecting that. For as much as he's railed against Barnes for the past two years, he never wanted to hear those first seven words.

"I appreciate the apology," Sam says, "but you don't need to be apologizing for HYDRA."

It's a surprise even to himself: he believes those words. He's just not saying them to make Barnes feel better.

All Barnes says is, "Okay," before turning his attention back to the maps. It's frustrating, but it's a
textbook deflection. That's okay.

"You know, I've known Steve for two years, and I've never gotten the sense that he really appreciates being here. I get that same sense from you."

Barnes doesn't answer. Sam can see his eyes drifting over the map, and he's not even sure the guy is still listening.

"Okay," Sam says. "Let me know if I can help. With the map."

Barnes, at least, nods, and that's more than they had a few days ago.

Natasha's anonymous intelligence leads them to a base in the northern mountains of Italy. It takes two days to get there, both by car and on foot, and what they find is a tiny numbers station, carved into the base of a green, tree-covered hill.

Its female operator has been shot dead, a clean bullet to the back of the head. Her body has long since reached the dry decay stage of decomposition. Although she's been dead for well over a year, her headphones are still clamped to her skull.

"Was this you?" Natasha asks Barnes.

He shakes his head. "No. I didn't know where these stations were."

He leaves an implication hang in the air: I would've.

"Wait, what is it?" Wilson asks. He's touching equipment: a speech/morse generator, a signal jammer, and some equipment that Barnes doesn't recognize. A lot of it is older than he would have expected.

"It's a numbers broadcasting station," he answers. "It sent out coded and encrypted broadcasts to HYDRA cells and operatives."

"Who killed her, then?" Wilson wonders.

Barnes shrugs. "HYDRA, probably. Her knowledge of multiple cells was a liability, especially after Insight."

Wilson blows out a breath of air. "They turned on their own. That's so nice."

Barnes looks at him, vaguely amused. "I was kill on sight, or so I was told. They cleaned house. No liabilities."

That earns him a look from Natasha; she doesn't voice whatever she's thinking.

He can guess: You reported in? And he lets her think it.

"So, what bullshit intel told you to come here?" Barnes asks, and not so nicely. He's tired, hungry, his right shoulder still hurts, and he's not interested in wasting time chasing a defunct radio tower.

It doesn't faze her. "Intel."

"'Kay."
It takes a day to get back to civilization, another to reach Sondrio, and the better part of another to hike to the backcountry near Gran Zebrù. It's 95 fucking degrees, and, if there's one thing Barnes hates (though he definitely hates more than one thing), it's the Italian fucking backcountry.

Natasha's coordinates for a supposed HYDRA research installation lead to a small, gray boulder.

Barnes bites his tongue and swallows a litany of mean words. His left arm whirs, the plates shifting; sometimes, when he's upset and careless, it does that.

"It's a rock," Wilson points out.

Natasha shows her frustration: she glares at Wilson and then stares at her store-bought GPS.

It's not that Natasha's intel has been wrong these past two times; it's just been dumb, Barnes thinks. And it's not really a hunch or a thought that makes him do what he does next: it's just a matter of being thorough and needing to get some aggression out.

He squats down, grabs the rock with his left hand, and rips it upward. Like a canopy. Like a car roof. Like a lot of things.

The rock goes flying, rusted hinges tearing away from it and tumbling down a long, dark shaft carved into the ground.

No one says a word. The three of them stand over the hole, peering into its darkness.

Finally, Barnes asks, "What intel told you to come here?"

And, of course, Natasha only answers, "Intel."

"But it's definitely HYDRA?" he asks.

She nods.

He didn't expect anything more. He pulls out his scoped CZ-75, the one with the flashlight on the barrel, checks to make sure the light works, holsters it, and announces, "'Kay. I'll check it out."

The shaft is circular, and the walls a coarse concrete. The light from Sam's flashlight has long since blended in with the circle of fading sunlight at the top of the shaft. Under his right hand, the shaft's metal ladder rungs are thin, corroded, and brittle.

Ten rungs ago, one crumbled under his left hand. He's resigned to this getting a little painful, but, unless this shaft is stories upon stories deep, he'll be fine.

He takes the rungs slowly, one at a time. One, then another. One, then another. One, then another. Flakes of rust sprinkle into his eyes, and he blinks them away, annoyed.

"How are you doing?" Wilson calls down, the echo of his voice blending the words together.

"Fine," Barnes answers. His voice echoes further and further down. "Really?" he whispers to himself.

Curious, he lodges himself against the walls of the shaft, taking his weight off of the rungs. He pulls out his CZ-75 and flips the light on, shining it down.
It's total darkness. He can't see the bottom.

He was never convinced that going back up would be a viable option, but, now, he's not so sure that going all the way to the bottom is any more viable.

Barnes holsters the sidearm again and activates the blue light on his watch: it reads 10:35:03 and counting. Ten minutes already.

Five more minutes, he thinks, and then it'll be time to reassess and re-plan.

Carefully, he steps back onto the ladder, and then reaches out with his right hand.

Sometimes, during the bad times, he thinks that all of his lifelong luck ran out, when he turned twenty-nine. Sometimes, like right now, he's downright fucking *convinced* of it.

The rung under his right boot gives out. And then the one under his left gives. He doesn't have any part of his body on the ladder. He falls.

Under his thin t-shirt, the wall tears and scrapes the skin on his back. Instincts kick in, and he reaches over with his left hand and digs his metal fingers into the concrete.

The longer he falls, the deeper they dig into the wall. He can feel the friction vibration in his neck and chest, with pieces and chunks of concrete stinging against his face. He's not slowing down, he realizes: he's tearing right through the wall.

It doesn't so much matter. He plunges into dark, frigid water and goes down, down, down, down.

His first and only thought is to kick back up and catch his breath, until his left shoulder *clangs* against something metal. He twists around and grabs onto that something metal – and discovers that it's not a ladder rung.

It's a circular handle, attached to what feels like a metal door. He maneuvers into a stronger position, grabs the handle with his left hand, and braces the rest of his body with his right hand. He pulls, then pulls hard, then pulls harder.

The door tears away from the wall, chunks of saturated rust knocking into his face. He lets go of it just in time.

The water rushes against him, pushing him through the door opening. He lets it.

It's dark and cold. The air is dry. He stands, the dirty, old water from the shaft up to his knees, and then his calves, and then his ankles, and then just the tops of his boots.

He draws his handgun and flips on its powerful light. He sees that he's at the end of a fifty-meter long, narrow hallway, with an open door at the end. The dark gray, concrete walls are lined with heavy, gray metal doors spaced about three meters apart.

Out of curiosity, he kicks one of the doors open, water splashing onto his face. He shines his light into the room, and finds that it's more accurately described as a cell: *maybe* three by three meters, with walls that are almost bare.

Manacled chains hang from eyelets screwed into the concrete. The concrete is gouged: four shallow lines scratched into the wall.

A pile of bones lie below the chains. Short, blonde hair is still attached to the cracked skull. Like
the numbers station woman, this skeleton is probably only two years dead.

HYDRA left this place quickly and didn't take any of their prisoners with them.

He's seen it before.

He backs out, closes the door, and moves on. He's gotta get to Natasha and Wilson, before one of them decides to go down that emergency shaft.

Barnes walks down the length of the hallway, reaching the same open doorway where the water had escaped. The metal door, hanging half off of its hinges, has a black "4" painted on it.

There are stairs that go up and down. He shines his light down and sees damp, concrete steps. They go down as far as his eye can see.

He chooses to go up, ascending the stairs quickly and ignoring, for now, the doors marked "3" and "2."

The stairs end at "1." He easily opens the door and finds the same type of hallway as in "4." Only, this one has two keypad doors along the walls.

The one on the left is dusty. The one on the right isn't.

*It'll take just a second.*

He kicks open the right-hand door, shines his light into the room, and instantly sees it.

Steve's shield.

"Hey!"

Barnes spins around, aiming the CZ-75 at the voice. His heart is pounding, and his legs are burning with adrenaline. A light burns into his eyes.

"It's us; don't shoot!"

It takes him far too long to recognize Wilson's voice. When he does, he lowers his weapon.

He hears footsteps and sees a light bobbing up and down. Natasha is right behind Wilson.

"You okay? We figured you fell and found a better—"

"Steve was here," Barnes interrupts. He's ashamed at how much his voice shakes, at how much panic he feels. "His shield's in there. I haven't—"

It could be his body. It could be HYDRA's—

Natasha's fingers wrap around his shaking hand. He lets her keep them there.

"Ready?"

Barnes sinks to his knees, reverently picking Steve's blue-and-red shield up from the floor. The paint Barnes runs his right fingers over is scratched and scorched, but the metal is as smooth as ever.
Natasha doesn't talk about her own feelings, and doesn't even know how to feel right now. It's their first lead, an early lead, but Steve's not here. Not anymore.

Also: Steve's sneakers, the ones he'd complained and complained about and then ended up wearing all the time, are five feet from the shield, laying by a lab table. There's blood on the inside of the left one.

She looks away from Barnes and shines her light at anything but him and anywhere but the shoes. The room is a high tech medical lab, with medical technology dating to at least 2014. Three silver autopsy tables are bolted to the ground in the center, surrounded by lab tables, sinks, and storage cabinets.

Sam bumps her shoulder, and, when she looks at him, gestures at a door on the far left wall. Natasha shoots one last look back at Barnes, in time to see him turn the shield over, and then follows Sam.

"There's blood."

He leads her through the door, to the next room over, and then to a tiny, dark concrete room, with a heavy steel door, no windows, and no lighting fixtures. It's no more than seven foot by seven foot, and the term "room," by and large, is an understatement. It's a prisoner's cell, nothing more.

The blood Sam had referred to is large, flaking swaths smeared across the floor. It's hard to deduce the pattern of the blood; possibly a leg wound, and it would fit with the bloody shoe. Natasha bends to one knee and reaches to pull out her phone.

The phone she'd left behind in a hotel room in Annecy, France.

She closes her eyes and sighs away a burst of frustration.

"Here."

It's Barnes. She looks over her shoulder and sees that he's holding out his own phone, one she hadn't known he had with him. She takes a moment to think about where he's been hiding the phone all this time and then takes it.

It's a fully operational SHIELD variant of the Starkphone, one only carried by high-level field agents. With it, she scans the blood, and, seconds later, the source is confirmed: Rogers, Steven G., Capt. (SHIELD).

Her stomach drops.

Barnes lets out a long breath.

Sam swears.

Natasha closes the program and hands Barnes the phone. He takes it, and she stands.

"At least we know he was here," Sam says. "The question is, where did they take him next and when?"

"The blood's not that old." Barnes' eyes meet hers, and he doesn't look away. "Maybe three weeks."

Natasha breaks eye contact first, turning to look at the cell again. There are very little clues, only bare walls, the blood, the shoes, and the shield, which is strapped to Barnes' right arm.
"If that's right, this is the first place they brought him," Sam says.

"Right in and right out," Barnes adds. "A transition point."

"Does that seem right to you?" Natasha asks.

Barnes shrugs. "It doesn't seem wrong."

Natasha nods and closes the cell door: clang.

Click.

"What was—"

Neither she nor Barnes give Sam time to ask the rest of that question. Natasha grabs Sam's arm and pulls. Barnes takes up the back, pushing Sam, but only until Sam realizes what's happening.

When he does, they've just reached the hallway. It's another fifty meters to the hidden cave entrance, and then ten meters up a wide elevator shaft that doesn't have power.

Sam's wings extend: he wraps one arm around Natasha's waist, and grabs Barnes' metal arm with his free hand, and then they're flying. Low, at first, and then higher as they approach the elevator shaft, but –

The wings are rated for 500 pounds –

And it becomes immediately obvious that the wings can't provide enough thrust –

Until Sam screams: "Stop it—No!" –

Then, they're shooting into the sky, like a rocket –

When the base explodes into a blinding, searing orange fireball, slabs of concrete and metal shooting into the air. The fireball climbs and climbs, growing impossibly bigger and bigger, as if it's chasing after them.

Natasha feels the heat through her shoes and shields her eyes from specks and slivers of debris. Her ears ring, loud and high-pitched.

Sam angles higher, gaining speed, only because –

Barnes.

The fireball turns to dark smoke.

"Put us down. Put us down, now."

"I am, I am, I am," Sam quickly advises. "I am."

"Put us down."

"I am."

Neither of them are talking to each other, not really. They're just mindless words.

Natasha looks down.
The base is a deep, blackened crater. Charred, leafless trees, barely more than sticks in the ground, dot the destroyed landscape. Pieces of concrete debris—some slabs, some rocks—and mounds of dirt are all that's left, besides the stick trees.

There's nothing left.

Sam's feet touch the ground. She stands on her own, ears full and still ringing, and tears away from him. Putrid smoke attaches to the back of her throat.

"He fell back down—"

She can barely hear Sam.

"He—"

A concrete slab lands three feet from Sam's shoes. In comic unison, both she and Sam backtrack its trajectory, to where Barnes is sprawled on the ground, protected by Steve's shield.

He coughs and sits up, face bloody, shirt barely there, left arm charred.

"Fuck" is he all says.

It will be a twenty-five mile hike to Sulden, an out-of-season ski resort town. Before they set out, Barnes puts on a t-shirt and zip-up jacket from his backpack and wipes away the blood on his face with his old one.

It's only a gash on his forehead, overlapping the one from the helicopter blade. It's nothing serious, and it's even stopped bleeding. It barely hurts. In contrast, a patch of skin on his lower back feels tight and sore, and, when he touches it, his fingers come away wet, light red, and sticky.

"It's burned," Wilson points out, as if Barnes hadn't already figured that out.

"It's fine," Barnes answers, and wonders why Wilson cares. He throws his dirty, torn, and charred t-shirt onto the ground, picks up Steve's shield and his pack, and starts walking toward Sulden.

"HYDRA'll be here. Let's go."

They have no choice but to hike it out tonight, no stopping. HYDRA won't miss that one of their traps got tripped.

Natasha doesn't say a word, but she pulls ahead. He can't read her body language well enough to know if she's upset.

Wilson keeps even pace with Barnes, and, not even five minutes into their hurried hike, asks, "Did you know you'd make it out?"

The answer is "no." He's surprised that he had, let alone with nothing more than a gash, a burn, and a wrote-off t-shirt. "You wouldn't have" is the answer he gives Wilson.

"It's not your choice."

HYDRA is likely sending in WG-22's packed with troops. They could be fifteen, maybe even ten minutes out. Maybe less. The very last thing Barnes wants is to face HYDRA here, in unknown
territory, while all three of them are burned out and exhausted.

Regardless of all that, Barnes stops walking, struggles to control the sudden rage boiling in his chest, and turns a calm glare at Wilson. "Yeah, it is" are the only three words he can think to say.

Wilson stops walking, too. When he talks, it takes every bit of will-power and restraint Barnes has learned over the last two years to keep his left arm quiet. And to not punch the fuck out of Wilson's face.

"Whatever HYDRA's doing to him, it wouldn't be as bad as finding out you got killed. I lived with him for a year; trust me. It's the only reason I'm— You can't die."

Thing is: up until now, since Zurich, it hadn't been so bad with Wilson. He'd thought they'd made some modicum of progress that night at the hotel, and then for the past couple of days, traversing northern Italy and working together peacefully.

Now, it's pretty clear that, to Wilson, he's only as valuable as his worth to Steve. In the space of a second, a hundred retorts fly through his mind, like "go fuck yourself," "I'm not his fucking pet dog," "do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?", "I don't live to make Steve Rogers happy," and "what part of you thought that it was a good idea to say that?"

He settles on four words designed to inflict the greatest amount of damage: "You sound like HYDRA."

Barnes doesn't stick around to see Wilson's reaction, or to continue the conversation. He starts walking again, resisting the urge to run, and brushes past Natasha.

"I just meant…"

Barnes' hearing is pretty good. He gains distance on them both, but he hears their words as if he was standing just a few meters away.

"What was that?" Natasha.

"I meant—"

"Last year, I went to one of your PTSD groups. There was a soldier who talked about killing civilian children. You didn't judge that person. You talked through it. You were incredible and amazing. What is it about him that shuts that part of you down?"

"I meant that he should take care of himself."

"The sick thing is that I honestly think you believe that. Let's get going."

He stays far ahead of them, wondering and wondering and wondering if he really wants to be a part of this, or if he'd be better off going alone. And wondering and wondering what would be best for Steve. He doesn't know.

Ten miles out, in the thick darkness of the Italian night, Barnes throws Steve's shield at the uppermost portion of a tall tree; it lodges into the thick trunk. No one asks why.

We're coming for you, he thinks. Just hold on.

When they arrive in Sulden, it's hours past nightfall and raining hard. Not one of them has said a word.
Barnes makes a bee-line to the first vehicle they see, yanks the door open, and hotwires the thing, before either Wilson or Natasha think to get a word out. They don't hesitate to get in.

"We could've—"

"HYDRA's coming" is all Barnes says.

"I didn't know you knew how to drive," Wilson says.

Barnes completely and totally ignores that dumbass comment.

He drives the two hours to Trento, ditches the car five blocks from a decent-looking hotel, and books any room available. He intentionally doesn't go anywhere near the TV and the inevitable news coverage of a strange mountain explosion.

His shoulder hurts, he's hungry, and he's wet and cold. Wilson looks ready to drop: deep lines under his eyes, a dullness in his face. Natasha is too quiet.

Before they each try to go to sleep, he asks, "We catch a train to Germany, tomorrow? Check a place out?"

They both nod, but probably only because they're too tired to argue.

Natasha is reading a thick glossy magazine, slouched low enough in her seat that she can rest her feet on Barnes'. Barnes has all but melted into the wall of the car, arms wrapped around his stomach, left hand hidden under his right bicep, his gaze distant out the window.

Sam, sitting next to Natasha, looks down at his tablet. Looks at the digital letters of the 1,000+ page psychology book and is unquestioningly bored—and feeling awkward.

He closes out of the book and scrolls mindlessly through the apps, over and over again, until he realizes what he's doing and opens Angry Birds. What the hell.

He's on Level 12, not minding if he passes a level with one star or three, when, finally, one of them talks.

"Where did Captain America learn to hotwire cars?"

Barnes looks over at Natasha. "What?"

Natasha doesn't repeat herself. She looks at Barnes expectantly, the smallest hint of a smile in the way her lips twitch.

It's clear that Barnes heard the question. At first, he looks confused, but it's not long before his stare turns blank and distant, and he becomes expressionless.

"That was easier than I'd thought it'd be," Natasha whispers to Sam.

He shakes his head, torn between watching Barnes and respecting that the man is having an unexpected memory.

But then a smile breaks across Barnes' face, and then Barnes laughs, and then he puts his right hand over his face and slides down a little in his seat.
It's the first time Sam's heard him really laugh; it sounds good. The smile's not bad, either.

"Well?" Natasha probes.

He looks at her, hand dropping and smile fading but not disappearing completely. "Nazi Germany."

"That's what he said."

She goes back to her magazine, and Barnes goes back to his window, and Sam begrudgingly goes back to his tablet.

Two hours later, Natasha is asleep, squished against the cabin wall, head resting on her bent arm. Her magazine is on her lap.

Barnes is reading a paperback.

Sam is bouncing between Angry Birds, a journal, and a map of Europe, and what he thinks is that he's too tired to figure out HYDRA's mind games.

"What do you do?" Barnes suddenly asks.

Sam looks up at him, surprised. He's still leaning against the cabin wall, like Natasha, and his book is still open in his hand.

"I'm a licensed clinical social worker, looking about getting a degree in clinical mental health counseling. I mostly help veterans. Most of them have PTSD - uh, post-traumatic."

"I know what it is," Barnes interrupts. He sounds neutral, not anything of the snappish irritation he's carried with him for the past few days. "I wouldn't've guessed that."

There's a barb in those last four words. A built-in booby trap. Sam intentionally avoids tripping it.

"I wouldn't've guessed that you know as much as you know."

Barnes looks at him, confusion written all over his face.

Sam smiles a small smile. "You're a lot more modern than Steve. And I don't know what you don't know."

Barnes sighs quietly and rests the book, pages down, on his thigh. "I did more than just shoot people. And I can't afford to not know things."

That was more of a response than Sam ever expected. Clearly, Barnes is open to conversation, and Sam's not going to waste the opportunity. "Okay. Surprise me."

Barnes' expression turns to skepticism. "Surprise you?"

"Yeah."

"All right, you didn't know I knew how to drive? Even though I drove you to France? I'm rated on most modern Soviet military cargo planes, as well as the C-5, C-17, and the WG-22, or what you know to be a Quinjet. And that's just what I remember."

Sam stares, a little speechless. He's a pilot. And he wonders, despite himself, what kind of hell it was to have HYDRA teach him how to fly—what sort of margin for error there could have
possibly have been. "I'm surprised."

"Clearly."

Barnes picks up his book and starts reading again, apparently just as soon done with a conversation that he'd started. Sam panics, thinking that he's wasted the opportunity to clear the air and maybe—just maybe—make a connection.

"I'm sorry, for how I said what I said, back in Italy."

Connection: failed. Barnes' face all but turns into a block of ice. "I'm not talking about that."

"Okay," Sam acquiesces. He doesn't give up, though. "Surprise me again. Something not military."

Barnes looks up, over the book, and glares.

"I'm trying to get to know you. That's all."

Barnes sighs and puts his book down. He opens his mouth, shuts it, completely freezes, and then, finally, finally, says: "I like to cook. I like cooking shows. Like Rachael Ray in the morning. Not the celebrity part."

Sam snorts. "Rachael Ray, man? Really?"

"What? What's wrong with Rachael Ray?"

There's a little bit of hurt in Barnes' voice. Sam almost feels bad.

"Nothing." Sam shakes his head. "Look, I don't know where you're living, okay, but, if you're in the U.S., check out the PBS channels. You'll like those cooking shows."

"Fuck you," Barnes says and then goes back to his book.

Sam stops himself from laughing, though barely. "Seriously, can I ask you one thing? And you don't have to answer?"

Barnes looks over the top of the book.

"Are you afraid? Of your memories?"

Barnes shakes his head, and that book lowers just a little bit. "I'm afraid of what I don't know."

"Did you know that Rachael Ray sucks?"

Barnes' expression sours, but Sam gets away with the comment, or so he thinks, until he hears the tell-tale shifting of Barnes' left arm.

"Don't you shift your fucking plates at me, Man."

Barnes' eyes don't leave the book, but he says: "Watch yourself."

Sam stops pushing, this time content to return his attention to Angry Birds. He ignores a sense of regret, though, because if this version of Steve's friend is even a fraction of what he used to be, then Sam gets it. He finally really gets it.
Twelve Day Interlude

Chapter Summary

Germany’s a complete bust: an abandoned base, its floors, consoles, and smashed computers covered in half-inch thick dust. No one’s been here for years.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

Germany's a complete bust: an abandoned base, its floors, consoles, and smashed computers covered in half-inch thick dust. No one's been here for years.

Sam looks to Barnes and sees, of all things, fear on his face.

"It takes one," Natasha says. "Just one."

The next five installations, spread out between Natasha's and Barnes' intel, are equally a waste of time. Two more in Germany, one in Liechtenstein, and two in Austria: twelve nonstop days, and nothing to show. Not a whisper of HYDRA.

Back at the first German base, Barnes had replied to Natasha, "There's more than you think. That could take a long time."

Prophetic, and terrifying.

In those twelve days, Sam has learned things, like:

Natasha likes magazines and spends most of her time on the glitzy advertisements. Barnes will pick up the same magazine and spend twenty minutes reading all of the small-print articles.

Natasha will eat anything, anywhere, anytime. Barnes is a picky eater, insomuch as he'll eat anything, but only if it's good.

Barnes likes Pepsi but not Coke. Natasha only drinks water and coffee.

Barnes doesn't sleep often or well, but, when he's finally tired, he's done. Natasha sleeps every night.

Natasha's feet smell bad after a day. Barnes, like Steve, takes longer to start smelling. (And, when Sam pointed it out once, Natasha rolled her eyes, but Barnes just nodded and said, "Yeah, I remember that.")

Barnes doesn't pick up after himself, because he thinks housekeeping only gives him more, if it's on the floor. Relatedly, Natasha's aim with empty Pepsi cans is atrocious.
Barnes likes 90's rock; in particular, after Sam cycled through his own personal playlist for the fourth time straight, the first song Barnes put on was "Interstate Love Song." Sam learned that the lyrics are not, in fact, "feelin' like I had a mustard shake."

"Fucking asshole," Barnes said and kicked his seat.

"What? Those are the lyrics! Not my fault you like weird shit."

"Children. I will pull this car over."

"Good," Barnes said and kicked Sam's seat again, harder.

Considering that they'd been in said car for over fourteen hours straight, Sam learned that pulling over was a good thing.

Sam's also learned other things: heavier things, things that weigh on his mind, things that sometimes chase after his dreams.

Things like:

Barnes has scars on his legs. Long, ivory worms carved into the back of his left knee, slit into the side of his left ankle, and snaking all the way up the back of his left calf. A mess of waxy scars stretch and disfigure the skin from his right ankle up to his right knee.

He has long, hair-thin scars that wrap around the left side of his back to his chest, and the same kind of scars that crawl all along his spine; Sam's imagination runs wild with those. The stretch marks and contracture scars on his left shoulder, the ugly border between flesh and metal, steal Sam's breath.

"Just fucking ask," Barnes finally snapped, around the ninth day out of twelve, the first day Sam saw the shoulder scarring. Barnes was wearing only blue boxer-briefs, steam from his too-long shower coalescing around him. His hair stood in damp spikes, and the smell of hair cream hung in the air.

Sam hadn't meant to walk in on him, but there they were, Sam a wide-eyed, breathless mess, eyes locked on Barnes' left shoulder.

All of his questions evaporated. He noticed a new scar: a nearly invisible, thin white scar over Barnes' sternum.

"Are you afraid of me?" Barnes asked. There was no bluster or confidence in that question; Barnes, of all people, sounded scared.

Sam didn't know the answer to that question, not right then. Yes. No. Sometimes. Less and less, as the days passed. He decided he wasn't ready to answer it, and so he plowed forward, shooting off questions as they reformed in his mind.

"The scars on your legs?"

"Wear and tear. Not sure where the burns came from."

"Your chest and back?" For some reason, Sam thought those all must be related.

Barnes swallowed, and something—just something—briefly flashed across his face. "Experiments. I don't know what."
"Your arm?" As soon as he asked, he realized how dumb it sounded. "I mean— Did you lose the whole thing, when you fell? Does it hurt?"

Barnes stilled, eyes growing distant. "No, and yes." He blinked, the distance fading. "I lost about up to the elbow. They took the rest. Anything else?"

Sam felt numb and lightheaded; empathy, sometimes, was a real fucking son of a bitch. He shook his head.

"Are you scared of me?" Barnes asked again.

It'd been just seconds, since he'd decided he wasn't ready to answer that question. A lot had filled those seconds.

"I'm scared for you."

He meant it.

In the end, though, all Sam had learned for sure is that Natasha and Barnes don't know.

On another train to somewhere, anywhere, Barnes comments, "There was a bank in DC. Maybe Maryland, I don't know. HYDRA had a... I don't know. A set-up there. It's where they wiped my memories, after Steve realized who I was."

His eyes are distant, but his expression is worried. Sam is enthralled, in a way that disgusts himself.

"We're looking at all these old places in the middle of nowhere, but he could be in the middle of Paris. Or Milan. Or Berlin. Or anywhere."

Natasha clenches her jaw, Sam sees. "There's no intel for that."

"There's no intel for fucking anything," Barnes retorts.

Sam's learned that Barnes isn't quite the person Steve talked about: the calm, ever positive rock, who never got angry, and always had everyone and himself under perfect control (P.S. DON'T FORGET: BEST PERSON EVER). He actually gets irritated often and snaps people's heads off—proverbially, speaking.

"The intel says HYDRA went to ground in their older, mostly Soviet installations. The ones SSR never knew about, and the ones that weren't overly used during the modern SHIELD years. That's the intel."

"And you believe it?"

Sam's learned how to defuse these kinds of situations: "Why did they wipe your memories?"

Natasha and Barnes both shut up and look at him. Barnes works his jaw, hesitation all over his face. Sam doesn't think he'll answer.

"Because I was an idiot and told them that I remembered Steve. That's why."

Sam absorbs his own surprise, then those words, while Natasha just stares. He says, "I'm sorry they did that to you."
Barnes' screws up his face and loads a grenade into his verbal rocket launcher: "Don't fucking...*therapy* me."

"'Therapy' you?" Sam questions. Sam's so far gone tired and demoralized, that he's not sure if he's joking with Barnes or baiting him.

Natasha is still staring. "He never knew that. No one did. That might have changed...things."

In the space of that moment, ashamed heat explodes in Sam's cheeks, his own words bouncing around in his head: *"He's not the kind of person you save. He's someone you stop."*

In the ensuing silence, Barnes looks out the window, into the night. He licks his lips and says, "I wanna go somewhere. It's not a good idea. You don't have to come with me."

"Where?" Natasha asks. "And why?"

"It's near Jesenice, Slovenia. I left something there."

Sam doesn't hear. He's lost in his own thoughts, circling around all the things he's learned.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

The base near Jesenice is overgrown with weeds, grass, and vines, and seems to have been abandoned years ago. The walls are rusted dark orange, and the sound of slow drips of water bounce between the rounded, metal walls. It’s like all of the others.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One

The base near Jesenice is overgrown with weeds, grass, and vines, and seems to have been abandoned years ago. The walls are rusted dark orange, and the sound of slow drips of water bounce between the rounded, metal walls. It's like all of the others.

It's altogether normal, except for the dead bodies that are older than the overgrown vegetation – old enough to be skeletal. Their skulls are cracked in a very distinct way.

It wasn't HYDRA deciding that this base was a liability. Rather, Steve's shield was used to kill them.

Natasha looks at Sam. He looks resigned, not even bothering to keep up with Barnes.

Barnes, who knows exactly where he's going and only has his weapon out because, well, you don't walk into a HYDRA base of any sort without having your weapon out. He holds it, like he doesn't think he's going to use it.

"What's going on, Sam?"

Sam raises both of his eyebrows and shrugs. "We were here last year. It was one of the few bases we hit, before he did. Steve left stuff here for him. Photos, a letter, things like that. I'm guessing Barnes didn't take it. Regrets that, now."

Natasha lets out an uneasy breath. "I don't like being separated. Let's catch up to him."

It doesn't take long to do that. The base is linear and not all that large. There are only three sections: the long entrance way, a server slash computer room, and a barracks with a moldy, black mattress and shelves of rusted rifles and handguns. There's no secondary egress point, a surprising thing.

Barnes is in the computer room, next to the remains of a destroyed computer tower. He's hunched over the computer table, completely still, except for his hands. It looks like he's smoothing something out – probably that letter Sam mentioned.

And then – "Shit." – spoken loud enough that Natasha can hear it.
Buck –

I’ll make this as short as I can. I was wrong. I told you that you’ve known me your whole life, and that’s not right. I’ve known you my whole life. I don’t remember a time before you. I don’t remember a time after you.

There’s seventy years between us now. I don’t know what you remember, or what you don’t remember, and all I can do is hope that you’re remembering something at least somewhat good. But I think if you weren’t, you wouldn’t be doing what you’re doing.

When you remember March 22, 1944, stop. You’ll be ready, and you’ll see. I hope you’ll be ready to come back. I hope you come back. There isn’t a world without you in it.

-That Little Guy from Brooklyn Who Doesn’t Know When to Back Down

Steve was never a writer. He was a painter, a sketcher, someone who could visualize the world in beautiful ways, and he hated writing.

"I can't bend words, Buck," he would often complain. "Colors're... You can do anything with colors."

And Bucky would shake his head and look at his book. "No, you can do anything with colors."

He can't believe Steve left this letter here, for HYDRA to find. He can't believe he left this letter here, knowing HYDRA would find it. And use it.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?"

Barnes turns and sees Natasha and Wilson by the entrance to the room. He looks down and folds the letter into thirds, slipping five photographs into the fold.

"Nothing," he says, walking toward them and the door. "Let's go."

Wilson doesn't say anything, and Natasha only gives him an inscrutable look. He ignores both of them, preoccupied by the letter and the idea that HYDRA read it and used it.

Are using it.

Using Steve against him.

That preoccupation turns to anger, at HYDRA and even at himself. If he'd kept going after HYDRA this past year, they would have left Steve alone.

"Barnes-"

"Not right now," he snaps.

The rest of their egress is made in silence. There's only one way out of the base: through the rusted, round tunnel, with dirty, stagnant puddles and two years of dead, crackly vegetation on the ground. Every footstep echoes, and he can hear himself breathing, hard and fast.
They near the opening, sunlight streaming through. He shields his dark-accustomed eyes, the letter and photos in his hand.

It's quiet.

He stops so abruptly that Wilson slams into his back. Barnes sticks his left arm out, blocking either of them from walking past him.

There are no birds chirping. The drone of insects is much less than it should be. In the far, far distance, he hears an idle hum.

The meadow is still. No people. No animals. No movement.

Wilson sucks in a breath, and, before Wilson can get a word out, Barnes snaps, "Don't talk."

He listens, picking out the distant hum again and filtering it through his knowledge base.

It clicks: more than one grounded WG-22, their engines idling. Waiting.

"HYDRA's here," he says, taking a single step back into the darkness of the tunnel. He puts the letter and photos in his back pocket and draws his sidearm. He just now notices that Wilson's hands are on his shoulders. "They just got here. Two jets toward the east, with a definite ground component."

"Okay, we go back down; find another way out," Wilson offers.

"There's no other way out," Natasha says. He hears anger in her voice. "It's a kill box."

He had just been about to say the same thing. He only has one viable idea.

"You two fly out. They're after me, not you."

Behind him, there's silence. He turns and sees that they're both just staring at him.

"What? Go."

"We've had this conversation," Natasha finally says.

"No," Barnes argues. "It was my idea to come here. This is on me. Go."

Wilson is shaking his head, non-stop. Natasha looks more and more angry.

Barnes turns back around, toward the entrance and the meadow. The car is about six hundred meters out, across the meadow and at the edge of the small forest. It'll be a risky run.

He doesn't see another way.

"Wilson, take the air. If you see'em, kill'em," Barnes says, hoping the fake confidence in his voice hides how unsure he is.

"You got it."

He turns and looks at Natasha. "We've got the ground."

There's a small smirk on her face. "You sound like Rogers."

He takes a breath and just nods, thinking at both of them, Please just be safe.
And they're on.

The moment Barnes exits the tunnel, Wilson blasts off behind him, spiraling into the eastern sky.

He and Natasha begin their sprint across the meadow, side by side.

Eyes on the forest, HYDRA knows how he thinks, and he's ready to admit that he's lost sight of how HYDRA thinks.

Twenty soldiers, covered in ghillie suits the same color as the green meadow, rise from the long grass, combat rifles drawn and ready.

Barnes doesn't miss a step. He holsters his sidearm and keeps running, then jumps high, feet first into the closest soldier. He twists his body into a tight, backwards flip and lands on his feet, close enough to the soldier to kick him in the neck.

Crunch.

The next one swings a serrated combat knife at him, and it's the easiest thing in the world to grab the soldier's wrist, snap it, catch the falling knife, and slit the soldier's throat. Blood sprays his face.

Barnes drops the knife and takes the soldier's rifle, before the soldier's body disappears back into the grass.


The rifle jams, and he drops it.

His next mark shoots and shoots, and Barnes raises his left arm to deflect the bullets at the same time he runs toward the soldier. The soldier panics and stops shooting, a reaction Barnes will never understand. With his left hand, he punches the soldier through the helmet, and that's enough to kill him.

An explosion shakes the ground. Barnes doesn't waste time looking for its source; with any luck, Wilson just took out a Quinjet.

He draws his CZ-75 and shoots the remaining three soldiers, while Natasha finishes her half.

When they meet back up, Natasha looks at him, appraisingly. "You good?"

He's tired of killing. Even HYDRA.


They reach the edge of the meadow, just when two Quinjets and Wilson blast overhead. It looks more like Wilson is keeping the jets busy, rather than taking them down. As long as they're busy.

Together, Barnes and Natasha breach the forest, only two hundred meters to go to the other side and the car. If only it was ever as easy as that.

A couple of meters in, the forest floor slopes sharply, and they slide down. After years and years of training and conditioning, his eyes automatically lock onto the black-clad shoulder sticking out from behind a tree trunk.
"They're here," Barnes warns, a moment before he launches himself into the air, flips in midair, and literally lands on the poorly hidden soldier.

He shoots him in the neck, straight down, and slams the butt of his gun into the head of the soldier who tries to surprise him from the left. With the soldier disoriented, he crushes the soldier's windpipe with the fingers of his left hand: the fist of HYDRA, or so they once called it.

He picks up a combat rifle and picks off soldiers, one by one by one, from the cover of the tree. Only after seven of them have fallen, does he advance further into the forest, walking calmly from fallen log to fallen log, not making the faintest sound, save for the bullets he shoots.

He picks and picks, kills and kills, thoughtless. It almost feels surreal. It entirely feels familiar.

Another explosion rocks the ground, much closer this time, but it doesn't shake his balance. He takes advantage of the distraction to kill more soldiers: a few up close, a few more who are further away, and a few even further than that.

He catches sight of Natasha; she's further ahead of him, nearly at the edge of the forest, and sees she's in no danger. Within seconds, she's killed the two soldiers in front of her.

He takes a moment to scan her side of the forest, from side to side, and then the middle, and then his side. There's no one left.

He checks the ammunition level in the rifle: it's good. He keeps it and follows Natasha out of the forest.

In the meadow, near their car, a tangled mess of a Quinjet burns on the ground. Two dozen more soldiers rise up from the grassy meadow, and all he thinks is how stupid. He looks up and sees three more Quinjets, all of them pursuing Wilson.

He could kill them all by himself, and he remembers doing that, once: during the war, a HYDRA unit and two helicopters surrounded him, and they were all dead within minutes. It was when he realized that HYDRA had put something inside of him that they would never let go.

Had made him into something.

He remembers how much he hates HYDRA.

He raises his rifle, ready to start shooting, when, all of a sudden, Wilson takes him by the armpits and lifts him into the air. It takes only seconds for Wilson to drop him on the back end of a Quinjet, with one comment: "Be scary, Man."

Wilson soars off, after another jet.

It's like a switch: the Winter Soldier controls everything again. He doesn't value life or feel fear. He sees long-term strategies, short-term tactics, and the best ways to kill: the fewest amount of moves required to achieve mission completion.

He walks the short way to the Quinjet's canopy and shatters it with his left fist. He shoots a bullet into the pilot's head. As anticipated, the second jet banks toward him, guns firing, but Barnes has already launched himself into the air. He lands on the left wing, ignores the explosion of the first jet, walks to the canopy, and kills the second pilot the same way as the first.

He sees Wilson shooting the engines of the third jet, and then sees smoke, and he leaves it alone.
He jumps from his jet and lands smoothly on the ground, just in time to kick a soldier into the jet's crash trajectory. He turns and easily executes five soldiers, one bullet each—bang, bang, bang, bang, bang—before any of them have anywhere near a chance to get a shot off at him.

He drops the rifle.

Except for the creaks of melting metal and plane debris hitting the ground, it's quiet.

Barnes takes a breath, blinks, and surveys the damage. The mangled, burning jets. The dead bodies. It reminds him of the helicarrier.

It-

It's like he's floating above himself. He can't come down.

"We are the only air support Captain Rogers has got-"

It reminds him of when he killed good people, because they were loyal to his best friend, and it reminds him that he was a key player in the attempt to kill millions and put HYDRA in power. It reminds him of when he felt accomplishment, after landing a through-and-through back-to-gut shot at a bad angle. When Steve collapsed.

"People are gonna die, Buck. I can't let that happen. Please don't make me do this."

The last Quinjet explodes, shaking the ground and rattling his teeth.

He blinks again. He comes down. He breathes.

The car. He wants to get to the car. He wants to tear out of his skin and get to the car.

Still in a half-panicked daze, he walks toward where Natasha is standing, and where Wilson decides to land. He has to move past them to get to the car.

As he moves past, Wilson reaches out for Barnes' arm. Barnes blocks the attempt and knocks Wilson's hand away.

"Don't fucking touch me."

"Bar-"

Without really thinking, Barnes slams his right palm into Wilson's chest and pushes him backward, until his back hits flat against the thick trunk of the nearest tree. He doesn't miss how quickly Natasha has her sidearm aimed at him.

"Barnes! Let him go!"

Wilson wraps his hands around Barnes' wrist: a terrible defensive position that provides minimal leverage. Maybe that's explained by the confusion—not anger—Wilson is radiating.

"What the hell?"

"Don't fucking ever use me like that again."

"Okay. All right. I'm sor-"

Barnes removes his hand from Wilson's chest and turns away. He deliberately walks past Natasha
and her shitty Glock-26. "Is this the trust you were talking about?"

She doesn't look contrite. He doesn't give a fuck.

He goes to the car, opens the back passenger door, grabs his bag from the backseat-

"I don't... This is what we do. What did I do?"

"Sam. Don't."

"But-

"Sam. It triggered him. It all did."

-and gives into his boiling emotions. He looks out to the countryside, just beyond the edge of the forest, then to the busy highway. He's already planning the best covered route to the highway, the easiest place to get a car, and the most secure way out of the city.

He doesn't need them.

He walks away from the car and them.

"Barnes!" Natasha yells. "Barnes! Damn it."

"Oh, no. That's not happening."

Barnes hears Wilson extend his wings, and then the unmistakable sound of Wilson in flight, the hum of the wingpack's thrusters moving closer and closer. He keeps walking and keeps pushing away thoughts.

Like how to cripple the wings. The best angle. The best weapon.

Like how to cripple Wilson. Which bones to break. The time it would take to do it.

Like how to circumvent Natasha. How he would outmaneuver her, and then advance for the kill strike.

He wants to rip out of his skin.

His dad took him hunting once, a few kilometers outside of the City. They laid traps, and, at the end of their day, one of the traps had a raccoon inside. It was bloodied and raw, clumps of skin and dark gray fur dried to the wire cage. The animal snarled and violently threw itself against the wires. His dad slipped the shotgun barrel through the cage and pulled the trigger.

"Sometimes, when they're trapped like this, they go nuts. No other choice: you gotta kill'em, for themselves and for the people they'd hurt. He'd hurt you, don't you see? Tear your skin off."

Wilson lands three and a half meters in front of Barnes. The wings retract. His arms hang at his side. Nonthreatening.

Barnes stops walking.

"I had no right to do that. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"Move."
"No. Fine, look, you want to go off by yourself, fine, that's your choice to make. But not here. HYDRA's all over, and they're after you. They're after you."

They've been after him, since the winter of 1943. Wilson doesn't know shit.

"And?"

Wilson laughs and shakes his head. "Seriously? Man, get in the c-"

Pain explodes in his right upper arm. He doesn't even have time to calculate the angle of attack or aim his weapon. In no more than a second, he becomes woozy and dry-mouthed and then-

Another spot of pain bursts in his upper right thigh. He tries to touch the spot with his left hand, but it's either too heavy or malfunctioning, because he can't-

Wilson tilts sideways, his face contorted into an ugly expression, hands out. Wilson tilts and tilts and tilts, until Barnes hits the ground on his knees, and then another spot of pain erupts on his right arm again, and he just feels really fucking sleepy.

He hears the hum of Quinjets.

He falls forward.

The grassy weeds are itchy on his face. He can't move his arms; they're too heavy.

He blinks, heavy, and then again, heavier, and then again, too heavy, and then dark. He can't open his eyes.

He hears noises, like voices, but they're slow, sluggish, and overpowered by a flood of white noise. He feels his body being dragged along the ground, grass tickling his arm and face.

HYDRA. It's always HYDRA.

He can't move. *He can't mo-

A heavy warmth flops on top of him. It smells like woody cologne.

Sam.

It's Sam.

There's two taps on his right arm, then a prolonged squeeze, and then the earth falls away, wind rushing against his face.

He still can't open his eyes.

Bit by bit, he loses consciousness.

He splintered, when, through the pain, he begged, "Pl-pl-pl-lease."

They asked, "What would you do, to make this pain stop?" and he begged "please," a broken word, over and over again. It wasn't enough.

He broke, when he finally said, "Anything."
They took him at his word, and he kept it.

With arc reactor technology powering his wings, Sam's arms fatigue long before his wings give out. He sets down in a heavily wooded forest, maybe fifty or sixty miles outside of Jesenice.

He lays Barnes against the trunk of a tree, kneels, and presses his fingers against Barnes' throat. He finds a sluggish pulse; Barnes' breathing is slow and shallow.

Sam doesn't plan to stay here for long. Fifty miles isn't far, and whatever HYDRA shot Barnes with is likely packaged with trackers.

He gets to work.

There are two eight-pointed, star-shaped, silver metal discs embedded in Barnes' posterior upper arm, barely a half-inch apart. The discs are each the size of a half-dollar coin.

Sam grimaces. They have to come out.

"Fuck."

He wraps his fingertips around the first star, digging the pads of his fingers into the metal, and gently, slowly pulls. The disc begins to slide out easily—and then keeps sliding, until, finally, Sam is holding the entire device between his thumb and index finger.

He holds it up toward the sky and examines it, his horror growing with every pivot in the sunlight.

Attached to each of the eight points of the star, there are thin, two-inch long hypodermic needles. Behind the needles, he sees tiny, clear plastic ampoules. All eight of them are empty.

There are sixteen more, between the other star in Barnes' arm and the one that Sam thinks hit Barnes' thigh. Sixteen.

He pushes the first star into the ground and quickly pulls the second one out of Barnes' arm. It's exactly the same: eight two-inch needles, eight empty ampoules.

Sam pushes the second star into the ground and hurries to Barnes' right thigh. He easily spots the glinting metal sticking through the dark wash of Barnes' denim jeans. He pulls it out and finds that it's the same as the others.

He has a sudden thought. It's worth the time it would take to do it.

Sam goes back to the tree trunk and tilts Barnes' limp body forward, until he's supporting the weight of his body with his own. Barnes' head lollops on Sam's shoulder. With his free hand, he slips the straps of Barnes' backpack around Barnes' arms and then throws the pack off to the side.

Carefully, he lays Barnes against the truck of the tree and is just about to dig into the backpack, when he notices something—something bad.

He waits and watches, for one second, then two, then three.

Barnes' chest doesn't move.

He's not breathing.
Quickly, Sam presses his fingers against Barnes' carotid artery. Nothing. He searches for a pulse, moving his fingers in a calm pattern, but there's nothing.

"Don't do this. Don't do this. Please don't do this."

Barnes is doing this.

Sam's instincts ignite.

He drags Barnes away from the trunk and positions him flat on his back. He begins chest compressions and rescue breathing, all the while thinking and thinking and thinking about how CPR is only a stop-gap, only there's no one coming, and he thinks and thinks and thinks about how he's seen Barnes fly off of a car, land mostly on his head, and not even have a scratch, and he wonders and wonders and wonders if he's about as forceful as an insect, bouncing uselessly off of Barnes' impervious body, and it's not going to work, it's not going to work, it's not-

He feels an electrical shock, hears the plates of Barnes' arm shift, and then hears a violent gasp, followed by rapid breaths. He sees Barnes' left hand make a fist, then sees his eyes open, just for a second, before closing again. He keeps breathing: rapid, loud, little breaths.

It worked. It motherfucking worked.

Sam falls onto his ass and hands. "Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Thank god. Oh, my god. Oh, my god, fuck."

That's about all the time he has left to waste. Hands trembling, Sam grabs the backpack and fishes around inside of it, until he finds Barnes' phone. He tries turning it on, but the screen stays black.

Then he remembers: they have thermal and fingerprint recognition systems.

He goes back to Barnes and wraps Barnes' right hand around the phone. It flashes on, and, to Sam's infinite relief, doesn't ask for a password.

SHIELD has an app for everything, and he easily finds the ones he's looking for: toxicology. He holds the phone over the puncture wounds and watches as an omnidirectional blue light emits from the phone and scans the coagulating blood.

The results pop up, labeled "abnormal findings": ketamine, methaqualone, unknown compound, unknown compound, unknown compound, unknown compound.

"Christ."

Sam saves the findings to the phone's memory and then puts the phone back into Barnes' bag. He gathers the bag and Barnes' limp body in his arms, thinking that Barnes looks heavier than he is, and lifts off toward Graz.

Sam doesn't notice a crumpled letter and a handful of black-and-white photographs fall out of Barnes' back pocket.

He's relieved to see the sun setting, to have the cover of nightfall. In an hour, by the time they're close to the city, it'll be dark enough to safely fly near an urban center.

Not even an hour and a half later, Sam leaves Barnes in the alley of what looks like a decent hotel on the city's east side and kind of accidentally puts a very expensive suite onto Barnes' credit card.
They're going to spend four days here. Sam doesn't think Barnes will mind the charge.

The hotel's front desk attendant is overly enthusiastic, taking at least twice as long as needed to get Sam the key card, and then wants to discuss hotel amenities and concierge services. He's so concerned about Barnes, he barely hears a word.

When Sam finally gets away from the desk, he has to stop himself from sprinting back to the alley. Barnes is still there: still breathing, still unconscious.

Although Barnes is lighter than he looks, Sam still struggles to carry his dead weight up the hotel's back stairwell and then down the long corridor to their room.

Sweat dripping from his forehead and saturating the front of his t-shirt, Sam deposits Barnes onto the sofa and pulls an over-washed, coarse white cotton blanket over him. It smells like bleach. At least it's clean, Sam thinks.

Through it all, Barnes doesn't so much as twitch.

Like nothing else, Sam wants to go back for Natasha. However, their rendezvous plan has always been to meet up five miles due south from the next mission site, exactly ninety-six hours after separation. Plus, he can't leave Barnes, not like this.

He can only wait it out and believe in Natasha, the most capable person he's ever met.

He knew what they were doing. He couldn't stop it. After a time-more than months, more than years, it felt like decades but maybe it was just hours-he just wanted it to stop.

He didn't care how.

He'd do anything just to sleep for more than two hours, and he'd do anything to never have another pain injection.

He'd do anything.

So, when they brought him to a large, brightly lit room, put a pistol in his hand, and told him to kill the two adults and three young children kneeling on the other side of the room, he didn't understand-

"It will stop, if you kill them. Don't you want to sleep?"

-why he couldn't even put his finger on the trigger. His entire body shook.

"They're just kids."

That's all it took: no going back, no changing his mind.

No amount of "no, please, I'll do it I'll do it I'll do it please" stopped them from chaining his lacerated, bruised-black wrist behind his back, or stopped them from injecting his neck with the clear liquid that made his body writhe and seize and burn, or stopped them from chaining him to the floor of the dark, minuscule cell, where he screamed and screamed and screamed and didn't sleep, for days or hours or months or years or seconds or decades.
So, when they brought him back to that large, brightly lit room, put the same pistol in his hand, and
told him to kill a different set of adults and the four young children kneeling on the other side of
the room-

"It will stop, if you kill them. Don't you want to sleep?"

-he blinked, cleared his vision as best he could, and killed the parents first.

The parents were handcuffed. The children were not.

The kids scattered, screeching and crying. They ran to the corners furthest from him, and huddled.
That wasn't supposed to happen.

"Why are they running?" he asked.

"Don't you want to sleep?"

He took shaky steps toward one of the corners, his legs not used to moving, and tried to ignore the
screaming and crying.

He just wanted to sleep. He just wanted it to stop. He didn't want to go back.

It was an older sister, huddled over her younger brother, but neither of them were older than seven.
She shrieked at him in a language he didn't know - it sounded like she was yelling about rugs - her
face twisted with terror and tears. Her eyes were green.

He had a gun in his hand, and he was aiming it at children, instead of all the better places he could
aim it and instead of doing all the better things he could do with it.

He turned the gun toward himself, but the man shadowing him caught and twisted his hand, until
the gun fell.

The Woman said to him, "You will not die. This will continue, for as many years as it takes. Don't
you want to sleep?"

His lacerated, bruised-black wrist was shackled behind his back again. The clear liquid that made
his body writhe and seize and burn was injected into his neck again. He was chained to the floor of
the dark, minuscule cell, where he screamed and screamed and screamed and didn't sleep, for days
or hours or months or years or seconds or decades, again.

So, when they brought him back to that large, brightly lit room, put the same pistol in his hand, and
told him to kill another set of adults and another group of five young children, who were kneeling
on the other side of the room-

"It will stop, if you kill them. Don't you want to sleep?"

-he blinked, cleared his vision as best he could, and killed the parents first.

The kids screeched and cried and scattered. Four of them huddled together in a corner. The last
stayed with the dead parents. A boy in the corner screamed, "Marek! Marek!" and a word that
sounded like "who's that guy."
He barely hesitated. The boy with the parents first. The four in the corner last, only, when he got to the fourth one-

The man who shadowed him put his hand on the gun: lowered it, took it. Held out a serrated black combat knife.

"Don't you want to sleep?"

He couldn't hesitate to take it, not without it all happening again, so he took the knife. He moved the three dead ones and used the knife on the fourth one.

He turned around, walked back toward the Woman, dropped the knife, and waited.

He splintered, when he begged, "Please." He broke, when he said, "Anything." He crumbled, when he took those lives.

He felt nothing: not disgust, not sadness, not relief, not happiness.

The Woman had a white blanket. She carried it past him to the corner where the four dead kids still bled, unfolded it, shook it out, and draped it over the bodies.

The Woman came back and passed him. The man took the knife from the floor, and they both left. The heavy, white door slammed and was bolted shut. He was alone.

He took the white, red-stained blanket that smelled like bleach and blood, curled up away from the kids, and slept, painlessly, for days or hours or months or years or seconds or decades.

He doesn't remember any of it.

Barnes is sitting up, blanket pooled in his lap, hands on top of the blanket.

"Finally. How're you feeling?"

Barnes doesn't answer. Doesn't move. Doesn't even take an extra breath.

Sam walks over to him and kneels down, putting himself at near eye level with Barnes. "Hey. You there?"

Barnes reacts with a single blink, and then sightless eye contact.

He's seen plenty of people get high. He's seen weed, ecstasy, cocaine, crack, heroin-all of it. He's never seen this. He'd do just about anything to know what those "unknown compounds" were in Barnes' blood.

He asks the first question that comes to mind: "What's your name?"

The response is a short string of words spoken in Russian, the tenor of Barnes' voice dropped low and hard, nothing like his usual mild tone.

Sam doesn't know Russian. He hears what sounds like "zima nerzsomethingbeety." That's definitely not Barnes' name.

"That's not what I asked you. Tell me your name, Man."
Barnes doesn't even blink. He just stares and repeats the Russian words.

Sam nods and forces a smile. "Okay. Good."

He squeezes Barnes' knee, stands, and quickly locks Barnes' gun in the room safe, for whatever that's worth. He's seen Barnes' work: crushed windpipes and crazy *Jurassic Park* Velociraptor levels of evisceration. Not having a gun just helps him be creative.

Sam goes back to the living area, takes a deep breath, and sits next to Barnes, thigh-to-thigh. He flips on the TV and leaves it on the first channel, which is airing the Slovenian version of "X Factor."

"You ever watch these shows? You know, to cap off your beloved Rachael Ray?"

As expected, Barnes doesn't answer.

Some of the contestants sing in Slovenian and a surprising amount of them sing classic songs in perfect English. "Penny Lane" is one of the songs, and though Sam tries to sing along, he realizes he never really knew the right words.

After a half hour, he can't stand the silence, or the way Barnes just sits and stares.

"Your name's Bucky Barnes, by the way," Sam says. "You were born in 1916. Grew up in Brooklyn, New York. You had two younger brothers and a sister who was only eleven months younger than you. You were married for almost four years, to a woman named Anna. From what I can tell, you know how to speak English, Russian, German, and French, but I'm sure you know more. You like food-not like whatever food, but food. There's a word they have for that now: it's called 'diva.'"

Sam runs out of things to say, just that quickly. He struggles for more and blurts out, "You don't like steering wheels, but you do like kicking people," before he thinks shut up, Sam, to himself.

He thinks of one more thing he knows: "You were a sergeant in the United States Army. You were an expert marksman. And you can fly planes."

And then a couple more things: "The other day, you told me that you like to cook. I didn't tell you that I like to cook, too. Now, I'm probably nowhere near the skill of the amazing Rachael Ray, but, you know, I'm pretty good. One of these days, okay?"

Barnes doesn't respond or react to any of it.

"I don't know what they did to you. What kind of drug they shot you with. But this-whatever this is-isn't you."

Sam wishes Natasha was here. She handles Barnes like none other, and she would know exactly what to do-and not do-in this situation. Compared to her, Sam feels blind.

He stops trying to find things to say. Even after a month, Barnes is still more of an unknown than a friend, and Sam can't say that he's not just a little bitter about that-at himself for freezing Barnes out at first, and at Barnes for not opening up more than absolutely required.

With one last look over at Barnes, Sam wraps his arms around his stomach and slouches down into the sofa. He closes his eyes for just a second. That second turns into hours.
He wakes up groggy and disoriented, with a headache and a crick in his neck. He wipes away dry bits of sleep from the corner of his eyes. It takes a few seconds for his memory to catch up, and, when it does, he looks over.

Barnes isn't there.

Sam's stomach plunges, adrenaline spiking. He jumps up from the sofa and walks to the kitchenette, by the hotel room's entrance. Nothing seems out of place or disturbed. Barnes' backpack is still by the door, right where Sam had left it.

Barnes doesn't go anywhere without that bag. He's still here.

Sam holds his breath and listens for noise: the shower, creaks of floorboards, snoring, or any sort of movement. He hears nothing. Not a sound.

Everything about this feels wrong. His instincts urge him to go for the gun, the one he'd put in the safe. His brain reminds him of how much Barnes has done for them, and of the possibility that the guy is just sleeping in a nice bed instead of on a decent sofa, but his instincts are screaming.

Something isn't right.

Silently, he walks down the hallway, from the living room and kitchenette to the two bedrooms. The bedrooms are on opposite sides of the hallway, the open doors precisely across from each other.

Sam stops and listens. Nothing.

Directly in front of him, there's a small curtained door to the balcony. It's not all the way closed.

A pit in his stomach, Sam pulls it open. Mild, warm air rushes into the hallway; it smells like fresh-baked bread. As far as his eye can see, there are red roofs atop gray and yellow buildings.

Sam looks to his right and sees Barnes. He's standing at the rail, hands clenched around the thin black metal. He's staring, eyes wide, at the red rooftops.

"Barnes, you okay?"

Barnes blinks, but that's it. A single blink.

It finally registers that Barnes' left arm isn't covered. His t-shirt only covers a bit past the blacked-out red star. Anyone looking will see it—and that's how word gets around.

"Barnes, hey, get inside or put on a jacket. You don't want people to see your arm. HYDRA's everywhere."

Barnes' jaw twitches at the word "HYDRA" but he doesn't respond, and Sam doesn't think twice about wrapping his hand around Barnes' left bicep and pulling a little bit.

"Come insi-"

Barnes' right hand smashes into Sam's left cheek, slamming Sam into the building's coarse brick wall. He lands hard on his ass. Sharp pain crawls through his sinuses, and he can't see for many moments. A creepy-crawly slithers down his face: blood.

When he can see straight again, Barnes is gone.
Sam pushes himself to his feet, wobbly, and steps toward the door. He peers down the hallway and sees Barnes standing between the living room and the kitchenette, with his back to the balcony.

Heart racing, Sam creeps down the bare wood hallway, every step like an eternity. A slat of wood creaks under his left shoe, and Barnes' shoulders draw up. Sam slips into the main bedroom and all but dives to the small closest. He yanks open the door and puts his hands on the white, electronic safe.

Barnes is pounding down the hallway, not even trying to be quiet.

Sam's hands are shaking. Tours in the Middle East, firefights in the sky, and missions gone so far wrong it was like the world would never be right again - and it's this, this that makes his hands shake.

He doesn't have time to open the safe and grab the gun. Instead, he picks it up and presses his back flat against the wall, parallel to the door, just two or three moments before Barnes darts into the room.

It's comical, almost, the way Sam slides behind him. Like a Scooby Doo episode. But that's what he does: slides behind, turns, and sprints down the hallway, toward the kitchen and the entrance, carrying the safe like a football.

If he's a wide receiver, then Barnes is a cornerback, and a damn efficient one. Sam feels Barnes' left shoulder dig into his back, and then he feels the pain of the hard floor: against his knees, elbows, and forehead.

The safe skitters across the floor.

Sam scrambles on his hands and knees toward the safe, reaching for it. Before his fingertips brush against the hard plastic, Barnes grabs his left leg and yanks him back.

Sam's palms squeak across the hard wood floors, his fingernails sliding helplessly across the waxy surface. He can't get even a bit of traction.

Barnes steps over him and goes straight for the safe. He doesn't have the combination, and there's no way-

Barnes rips the safe in half. He grabs the perfectly loaded gun, before the damn thing can even begin to fall, and throws the bottom half of the safe at the window.

CRACK.

"Bucky! Bucky. Stop. Stop."

The only thing his plea accomplishes is earning a deadly, calm look from Barnes. Sam recognizes that look. It terrifies him.

Sam scrambles to his feet and decides to go for his wingpack. Against the Winter Soldier, it's the only advantage he has.

He makes the run for it, toward the kitchenette, but he doesn't even get close. Barnes grabs the back of his neck, icy metal fingers digging into his muscles, and throws him face-first against the nearest wall.

Sam doesn't have time to recover. Barnes flips him around, wraps his left hand around his throat,
and aims the CZ-75 just inches from Sam's face. He closes his eyes.

*It's over.*

Except, it doesn't end.

Sam can barely swallow, but Barnes' grip is surprisingly not tight enough that he can't try to stop this.

He opens his eyes and looks past the gun, only he's not sure if the murderous look on Barnes' face is any better than staring down the barrel of a gun. It might be the same thing, in fact.

"HYDRA has Steve. HYDRA has him. If you do this, then they'll keep him. I know you don't want that. I *know* you don't."

He still isn't dead, and Barnes' grip on Sam's throat actually loosens, so Sam keeps talking.

"This isn't you. This is what HYDRA does to you. This is the power they think they have over you. *But they don't.* You're James fucking Barnes, and you have amazing fucking hair. I don't know if I've told you that before."

The calm look turns to bewilderment. The gun is lower than it was just a few seconds ago, and Barnes' left hand drops away from Sam's neck.

Sam doesn't dare move. "You're Bucky Barnes. You're my friend. You've saved my life at least twice now. And I've saved yours. We're *a team."

Barnes squeezes his eyes shut and brings his free hand to his head. Sam's not sure what's going on. Please please please please.

Barnes steps back and turns away. He doesn't so much drop the gun as toss it away. Even from behind, Sam can see the quick, heavy way his chest rises and falls, and he watches as Barnes walks to the opposite side of the room and sits on the floor, back flat against the wall, head buried in his arms.

*Holy shit.*

Sam slides down his own wall and pulls his knees up. He waits for the adrenaline to fade and for his hands to stop trembling; it takes a damn long while.

When it finally fades, he actually looks at the room. It's trashed: splintered windows, cracks in the floor, dents in the drywall, and a destroyed safe.

"You're paying for all this shit, by the way."

It hurts to talk, and he rubs his hand over his throat. It's tender, and he can only imagine what it looks like. He touches the right side of his face and finds flaky, dried blood and a sting of pain above his eyebrow.

He doesn't expect Barnes to answer, but, a minute or so later, a hoarse, small-sounding "'Kay" comes from Barnes' side of the room.

Sam breathes relief.

And he realizes: this is a fork in the road. Whichever way he jumps will define not only the rest of
their mission to find Steve, but quite possibly the rest of his life. It's an easier decision than he would have expected.

Sam leverages himself up and walks over to Barnes, then sits down next to him.

"No, don-"

"Don't start. I told you: we're friends. Even when you're an asshole."

He means it.

He sat in the far corner, wrapped in the white blanket, waiting and sleeping and mostly fearing. He hoped they would just let him die in here and rot away, like the bodies on the other side were rotting away, but he knew that wasn't going to happen.

All he cared about was not going back to the other room and not having another pain injection. He would do anything to stay away from there.

And he did.

The Woman drew lines on his right forearm, said things like "this body belongs to me" and "I will do with it whatever I choose," handed him that same serrated knife from before, and told him to cut along the lines-deeper there, shallower here, slower, faster. Afterward, she gave him a clean set of clothes, a shower, and medical attention.

When she told him to mutilate another living person with that knife, and said things like "this mind belongs to me" and "it will do whatever I tell it to do," he cut the person however she instructed, for what the clock said was hours. Afterward, she gave him real food and a real place to sleep.

He didn't think. He didn't care.

One day, a man came, instead of the Woman. The Man inserted an IV into the top of his right hand, asked questions, and sporadically injected medications into the IV.

He didn't so much care about that, not when he could barely take his eyes off the syringe kept away from the rest, on the corner of the table, marked "CIV4-CRH" in bold, black letters. He recognized those letters. His stomach twisted, and he could feel the phantoms of pain.

"What is your last pleasant memory?" the Man asked. "It's not a trick. You may be honest, without repercussion. But you must answer."

Becca came to the base, en route to her own, dressed in her nurse's uniform. He hugged her hard, broke out the "shot glasses"-metal tin cups, as it were-and, between them, Steve, and the rest of the team, nearly emptied the still, drinking and laughing into the night.

He answered, "When my sister came to Azzano."

"You are close to your sister?"

People joked about how alike they were. It just wasn't okay, though, for her to hang around him and Steve so much, once they got older. They were men, doing whatever men did. She wasn't. But they were only eleven months apart, and they were close like Andrew and John were close, no matter what their dad or their neighbors or whoever said.
He answered, "Yes."

"What do you want the most? Home? A certain meal? A day outside?"

None of those things. He only wanted one thing—the one thing that still gave him a fraction of hope.

He answered, "To die."

"What do you fear the most?"

He was looking at it: the syringe.

He answered, "That."

Until that point, the people and things the man asked about were figments of another lifetime. He answered all of the questions, for hours and hours and hours, because his answers didn't matter: no one was coming.

Except, he was wrong about that.

Four people came, dressed in all black, with United States flags on the arms of their jackets. One said "Sergeant Barnes," like it still meant something, and one of them handed him a pistol and said, "We're getting you out of here today." The language sounded weird, the words foreign to his ears.

"How long?" he asked, but the one who gave him the pistol just looked at him, confused, and answered with more weird-sounding words, "I'm sorry, Sergeant. I don't know what language that is. You're going to be okay."

On the way out, his body numb and his mind detached, two of the Americans dropped, their heads bursting into red mist. The other two yanked him around a corner, just a few meters from where the Woman was waiting.

He aimed his gun at her and pulled the trigger. It clicked, empty and unloaded, and she killed the last two Americans.

He dropped the useless gun, sank to the floor, pulled his knees up, wrapped his arms around himself, and closed his eyes. He could already feel the pain and see the darkness and feel the metal collar around his neck and the metal ring around his wrist and he could already imagine how the sleeplessness and isolation would twist his brain into mazes.

He didn't ask or beg; the Woman didn't allow him to speak, and maybe, maybe, maybe, if he showed her-

She deactivated his left arm, shackled his unbruised, healed wrist behind his back, injected his neck with the clear liquid that made his body writhe and seize and burn, and chained him to the floor of that same dark, minuscule cell, where he screamed and screamed and screamed and didn't sleep, for days or hours or months or seconds or decades.

It all started again, like it always did. He killed the kids, but all of them with a knife, this time. He did whatever the Woman asked him to do, to himself and to other people, like burning his own arm without making a sound, until she told him to stop.

The Man came back, with the same IV line inserted into the same spot, with the same syringes and medications injected at sporadic moments, and with the same separated syringe marked "CIV4-CRH."
The man asked the same questions, but they were difficult to answer.

"What is your last pleasant memory?"

He thought and thought, digging through the maze of so, so many errant thoughts. He couldn't focus.

He answered, "I don't know."

The man repeated the question, and he felt panic, eyes drawn to the syringe. He had to answer. He had to find something. He had to.

He couldn't control his breaths, and his body shuddered, and his right hand was shaking, and cold prickles crawled up his neck, and-

"I simply need an answer." The man's hand moved toward the syringe.

A memory came, and he couldn't afford to be ashamed. He answered, "When I killed the people in the room. Again."

"Why?"

He answered, "I didn't go back to the other room."

"Are you still close to your sister?"

All he remembered was dark hair and a nurse's uniform. He couldn't hear the sound of her voice, or see her face, and her name - her name - he didn't know her name - He momentarily squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw, thinking and thinking and thinking, but he came up with nothing, except that his chapped lips hurt.

He answered, "I don't know her name."

"What do you want the most? Home? A certain meal? A day outside?"

Home is a place called the City, with busy streets and tall buildings and a thin, short blonde kid. He doesn't think that place exists anymore. He doesn't remember food-not the smells, not the taste, not anything. Outside is something he doesn't like.

What he wants the most is to never be in that room again and to never see that syringe again. The only way he gets that is to-

He answered, "To be good."

"Doing what?"

He answered, "What I'm told to do."

"What do you fear the most?"

That one was easy. He looked at the syringe and then back at the man.

He answered, "Failure."

The questions continued, for hours and hours and hours and hours, along with the sporadic injections that didn't hurt.
Every day – maybe; it seemed like every day – the Man came, and they did the same thing: injections and questions, for hours and hours and hours. Sometimes, the Man left him there, sitting in the chair.

He sat in that chair, at that table, his right arm extended out, the IV cannula slipped into the raised vein on the top of his hand. Behind him, there were quiet, foreign footsteps, and then - the sensation of a cold metal barrel against the skin of his neck.

"Identify yourself."

The words sounded strange; the accent, monotone and harsh. It wasn't what was usually asked, yet his response was automatic: "The Winter is abiding."

"Yeah, see, I don't speak that fucking Commie shit."

The barrel pulled away, but not by far. The footsteps circled around him, a lanky black-clad figure in his periphery, until the barrel was aimed at his face. He stared ahead, at a distant point.

The gun lowered.

"Barns?"

He didn't recognize the voice, and he didn't dare look at the face, let alone ask why he was saying random words. He sat still and calm.

"Jesus christ, it's been eleven years. Have you been here... Holy shit. Barns? It's george lacy. Do you remember me? Barns? Fucking sweet bean christ, what the hell have they done to you?"

The last part was a whisper, but he remembered that. Fucking sweet bean christ. Another phrase came to mind: 90 Day Wonder.

"I'm getting you outta here. I've gotta whole team. We've got you. Christ, you don't look a day older than the last time I saw you. Well, a little paler. A little tired."

It was a trick. It was always a trick. It was the Woman, trying to make him stumble, like last time, like always.

"C'mon, sarge. Eleven years is long enough, dontcha think?" He came around the table and held his hand out. "We're gonna get you home. Get you back to your same ol'fuckface self. You're gonna be okay. I swear to god, you're gonna be okay."

The Woman overestimated him. After everything, he didn't still hope or dream, let alone about things like this.

He ignored the outstretched left hand and looked at the pistol in the man's right hand. "That," he said, the word stilted and forced, and he thought it was the same, weird language that the man spoke.

The man smiled and handed him the pistol. He took it and stood. The man turned his back on him and headed toward the door.

"Bet you're ready to rip the faces off these hydra pric-"

He lowered the gun, and then dropped it. The blood splatter on his face didn't bother him. The sound of gunfire echoed from down the hallway, but that didn't concern him.
He went back to the table and sat down. He didn't think about how else he could use the pistol. He didn't feel, or think, or worry. He simply waited for instruction.

He doesn't remember any of it.

Barnes dries off and puts on his last set of clean clothes. Before he puts on his black hooded jacket, he peers at the back of his right upper arm and finds sixteen scabbed puncture marks: two sets of eight, in star patterns. It tells him that HYDRA has a functional R&D department somewhere.

He puts the jacket on, takes a steadying breath, and goes out to the living area. He'd so much rather not.

Sam is leaning over the kitchen island, tapping away on the tablet Barnes is letting him borrow. (After the afternoon they just had, what was he going to say, "no"? He told him the password.)

He's nervous and wholly shaken. Since the helicarrier, he's been on a decent path, a clean one, and he's been in control of his mind. That streak broke today, after more than two years, and he doesn't know why. All he knows is that HYDRA shot him full of drugs, and they worked.

"Where's Natasha?" Barnes asks, pleased that his voice is close to normal, instead of a crackly, tight mess.

Sam looks over, and the set of his eyes tells Barnes that they left her behind. "She told me to get you out. We rendezvous tomorrow at 1932."

_Not worth it. Not fucking worth it._

Barnes doesn't comment that Sam is leaving out a lot of "if's." _If_ HYDRA doesn't have her. _If_ she's still alive. _If_ she's not injured. _If_ she can make it to the rendezvous point. _If if if if._

"I'm not mad, but I need to know what happened."

Barnes sticks his hands into the pockets of his jacket. He feels like pulling the hood up and hiding, if not just completely leaving and saving Sam the trouble. He settles for dropping onto the sofa and slinking down as far as he can.

The blanket next to him smells like bleach. It turns his stomach and send waves of dull aches through his forehead; he quickly bunches it into a ball and tosses it into a corner.

"Do you not like blankets anymore? Really?"

He ignores that comment and answers the first question: "I didn't entirely recognize you. I'm sorry."

"So, every time you broke programming and killed a bunch of HYDRA handlers, that's what it was like?"

That statement freezes him. He doesn't know how Sam knows about that. He doesn't intend to ask.

As if Sam read his mind, he supplies, "Steve read your file."

There's a lot coming at him, all at once. He doesn't want to be here anymore. He's about ready to leave, when he sees the dent in the wall, where he'd nearly killed Sam, and he remembers: _you owe_
him more.

Only - he'd joined up with Natasha and Sam to help, and also to keep both of them safe. Instead, he's been nothing but a liability. A big part of him thinks that what he owes them is to leave. A smaller part is hanging onto Natasha's words, from after that night in Annecy: trust us to back you up.

"There's a file?" Barnes asks. Inside his jacket, his hands are fists. The right one is sweaty and so tight that his fingers ache.

"Used to be. Steve burned it."

Great.

"Okay. And no. I didn't give them time to talk me out of it."

Which means: he came really, really close to killing Sam. He doesn't know what made him not pull the trigger, because, any other time, it would have just been over. He doesn't ever hesitate to kill, let alone spend time carefully weighing options.

Sam nods. "I looked up what 'zima' means. Do you know what nerzsomethingbeety means?"

His heart skips, and he suddenly feels lightheaded. Though mangled, Barnes recognizes the word. Still, he manages to reply, "That you suck at Russian."

Sam doesn't bite. He says he's not mad, but he's not shitting around.

"It means, 'the winter is unbroken.'"

The words don't mean anything to him, not when Sam mangles them, and not when Barnes himself says them. They have meaning in specific situations, to other people. They're a muscle memory, one he'd thought he'd put to rest.

Stupid.

"I asked you your name, and that's what you told me."

"Okay."

His throat tightens. It's all crashing down, like Natasha said it would.

"They drugged you up pretty good. You were completely out cold for over two days. I did a toxicology scan, and it showed some drugs that not even SHIELD recognizes. It also showed ketamine." Sam gestures to the tablet. "Ketamine is known to induce catatonia, memory loss, and temporary psychosis. It wasn't you."

Or: it all goes back to the two Quinjets he destroyed, after Sam decided to drop him on one. He remembers thinking of ways to kill Sam and Natasha, right before he got shot. It could be that he's been fooling himself for the past two years.

He doesn't tell Sam any of that.

"Okay," he says, instead.

"Okay," Sam answers, and, just when it looks like Sam's done, Sam asks, "Did you know that stuff-those words-were still in your head?"
His gut is broiling, and there's an irritating stinging in his eyes. "No." The word comes out as a cracked whisper.

So fucking stupid.

"After I first met you, I told Steve that you weren't the kind of person you save. I told him to stop you."

That doesn't offend him. He's just not sure what Sam's point is, though.

"I'm sorry for that. Genuinely."

"Don't be," is on the tip of his tongue. He's learned Sam well enough to know not to say it. Instead, he says, "Okay."

"Okay," Sam answers. "Just to be clear: we're still friends, and I support you. No matter what."

What Barnes thinks is that Sam is stupidly naive and what he says is, "Okay."
May, 1944. They have eight months left, before the start of seventy years.

"Your ma is the best, Buck," Steve says. He takes one cookie from the tin. *One.* Bucky resists the urge to roll his eyes and just kind of smiles.

His mom really did send the best packages, because they weren't just for him. There were enough to probably feed the entire platoon, let alone their howlin' pocket of it.

Back at Krausberg, Bucky would write sickly sweet letters in his head, ones he'd never put to paper, let alone send. One of them said something like "you took care of my friends when we had nothing and the best parts of me come from you." Way too sweet.

"Yours would be proud, Steve," Bucky says. "She'd be so proud've you."

Steve shrugs, and he's not in the mood for seriousness. The war is suffocating, all sides pressing in against them, so much left to do that the world feels endless and tiny at the same time, and Steve is soaring. Bucky can barely breathe.

"Yeah, but she wouldn't've sent cookies, Buck. I mean, *cookies.*"

Bucky shakes his head, leans back, and crosses his arms around his chest. He looks up, way high up at the starless sky, and watches gray slips of clouds pass by. The rest of the guys say it's too cold to be outside and "are you two geniuses crazy?" It probably *is* too cold-well, not for Steve-but, these days, Bucky doesn't so much feel it.

"She would've."

Steve stays quiet for a while, and that's okay. Bucky closes his eyes and enjoys it: the quiet, the crispness, the company.

When Steve speaks again, the fun is gone from his voice, and he's the sort of quiet that means he's nervous: "Phillips thinks Zola did something to you."

Bucky's eyes snap open. He's got chills in his arms.

"Did he?" Steve presses.
"Zola did alotta shit, Steve."

"You know what I mean. That Zola did something that... I don't know. Changed you." A long pause. "You pulled the door handle off the M3 yesterday."

"And?"

Steve huffs out a laugh. "Yeah, yeah, that thing's ready to buy the farm, I know. But, Buck... You'd tell me, right?"

Bucky looks over and finds that Steve is already staring at him, expression so quintessential, ever-worried Steve that it's hard to remember that Steve is Captain fucking America and they're 6,500 klicks from home.

For a single moment, Bucky thinks about it. But that's all: a single moment, a single thought, one that just might've been able to change it all.

"You know I would."

"Do you think HYDRA will be there?" Sam asks, as if Barnes knows all of HYDRA's plans and capabilities.

So far on this trip from hell, he's been blindsided around every corner. He doesn't know jack shit.

"I don't know" is all he says.

Sam drives on toward Eisendorf and the Niedere Tauern site, the highway asphalt smooth under the car's tires.

This is the last one on their nonexistent list. Barnes can think of dozens more places, but they're ones that he'd destroyed last year. And then there are all the bases and installations that he doesn't know about, and he knows that, even despite HYDRA destabilizing when SHIELD disintegrated, there could be dozens and dozens of operational bases.

Like they always said: cut off one head, and all the fucking other ones show up.

"Are you okay?" Sam asks.

Barnes doesn't move his head from the window. The Austrian countryside blurs past.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Steve."

"I've been thinking, too. That even if we don't find him now, or this month, or this year, that he'll be—I don't know. Look at you."

Barnes sits up straight and glares at Sam. Sometimes, Sam says the dumbest, most naïve shit. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I'm not saying we give up. I'm just saying – we've only found that one base. If it all goes to shit,
and if it goes the worst way possible, what's the worst case scenario?"

Barnes could laugh; he really, really could.

"Last night, I almost killed you, because that's what I'm programmed to do: to kill and kill and kill and kill and kill. You really think that that's not a worst case scenario for him? Do you get it?"

Sam shakes his head. The steering wheel creaks under his fingers. "I'm just worried, that by the time we find him, he won't be him. But you're still you, even after all those years. Maybe I don't get it. And maybe I don't want to."

Those last two statements are the absolute fucking truth.

"Get it through your head now: he's not gonna be the same person. Even now, right now, that person's gone."

That person on the helicarrier and in Krakow and walking into his apartment with the woman Natasha called Sharon – that person is gone. And he'd had so many fucking chances to stop it from ever happening.

"Every day we don't find him, he'll be more gone. And don't you fucking use me as some point of inspiration bullshit or hope - I would've really liked to've died in '45. I don't want to be here, or to be this shitty fucking person."

"You're not a shitty person."

"Just fucking drive."

"I'm glad you're here."

"Don't therapy me."

"I like your hair."

Despite himself, he smiles, and tries to hide it by looking back out the window. Sam's face is reflected in it: looking at Barnes, smirking for a moment, before it fades, and he only looks worried.

"I just want to say, though, that you're wrong. You're not programmed to kill, because, if you were, I'd be dead in that hotel room, and Steve would be dead on that helicarrier. We're alive, because they couldn't bury you. And that's all I've gotta say."

_They buried enough for long enough_, he thinks, without saying anything.

"And if I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be here with you. I wouldn't be anywhere near you. And that's all I've gotta say."

He still doesn't answer, and, this time, Sam stays quiet.

Maribor to Eisendorf takes about three hours. They park at the lodge of an out-of-season ski resort, its roof slanted and its shutters painted dark green, and pull their gear out of the backseat of the car.

Barnes isn't sure what they going to find here, or how long it's going to take to get there. They planned for the worse and brought a tent, sleeping bags, and food, all purchased in Maribor. Barnes shoulders all of it, while Sam carries their regular packs, his wings, and water.
They head out on a grassy green ski path, all south and all uphill toward the first mountain ridgeline.

The hike to the rendezvous point with Natasha is only five klicks, over what topo maps indicate isn't too terrible terrain. While Barnes is certain that Sam has been through much worse than an autumn hike in the Austrian mountains, he keeps close watch of him, making sure he's not breathing too hard or falling too far behind.

Sam's steps are sure and quick, and he has no problem keeping up. Even by the time they reach the fork in the path, which marks the ascent to the first ridge, Sam could just as easily be sitting on a couch. He hasn't even taken a sip of water.

Together, they easily climb the ridge, following the flat ski path, and then reach a brief plateau, which leads to a 400-meter descent over flat, green grass and sprinkles of conifers.

Any other time, the view around them would be breathtaking. Deep blue skies framed by snow-tipped peaks, with green-covered mountains surrounding them on every side. Barnes looks for other things: jets, helicopters, snipers, any sign at all of HYDRA.

He sees nothing alarming. He doesn't trust it.

The descent is steep but less than treacherous. Sam slips only once, but easily catches himself. Their boots have excellent traction in the dry weeds, firm grass, and flat gray rock.

At the bottom, Sam takes a swig of water, sweat beading on his blue-scarfed neck.

"You okay?" Barnes asks.

"Walk in the park."

They keep going, following the same pattern of ascents and descents. Sam doesn't stumble again, and he manages to go shoulder-to-shoulder with Barnes the entire way. Barnes respects that.

Near the top of the final ridge, Barnes draws his sidearm and aims it at a yellow four-wheeler. Sam follows suit, although Barnes can sense Sam's hesitation, and he can guess what Sam's thinking: it's just a four-wheeler.

They approach it together, in an unspoken standard two-person formation. Sam lowers his weapon first and reaches out toward the left handlebar. He unloops a gold chain from it and shows it to Barnes.

It's Natasha's arrow necklace.

Sam smiles. Barnes doesn't voice his own relief.

"She's here," Sam says, before pocketing the necklace.

"She's smarter," Barnes notes, referring to the four-wheeler. "And dumber." Referring to, of course, her obviously having gone down to the valley by herself.

Sam smiles wider.

They descend into the last valley: a quiet, grass-covered, conifer-laden dip between mountains, with a wide, blue-gray stream down the eastern side and an enormous, blue-gray lake at the southern rim.
He's seen it before. The same blue sky. The same trees. The same stream, and the same lake. The base is underground: damp, cold, dark, with the distinct, overwhelming smell of mildewed earth.

It takes only about ten minutes for them to carefully step and skid down the descent. At the bottom, Sam drinks more water, and Barnes looks for more threats.

Birds chirp. A brown chipmunk scrambles up a tree. The breeze rustles through conifer branches, carrying the scent of pine. His heart skips, and he doesn't know why.

A branch snaps.

Sam drops the water and draws his sidearm, a second after Barnes has his aimed.

"Hold fire."

Natasha steps out from the tree line, maybe fifty meters away, her hands up, chewing bubble gum. She has a gun in her right hand and dark lines under her eyes. Her face looks thinner, pale. Like she's been running her ass off for four days.

They lower their weapons, and her arms drop to her sides. Sam runs up to her and looks like he wants to go in for a hug, before he remembers that it's Natasha.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." She looks past Sam and locks her eyes on Barnes. "How are you?"

He shrugs. "We're standing on top of a HYDRA base, with absolutely no back-up, while we exchange pleasantries. I'm good."

Sam looks at him, face slack. "You… You didn't mention that before."

Natasha just chews her gum. "Remember that dick conversation we had?"

Barnes nods. "How are you?"

"I found a tunnel."

A half a klick into a thicket of conifers, a moss-covered concrete tunnel is built about four meters into the ground, with a metal-gated arch carved into the concrete of the southern end. Through the gate's metal bars, he can see that the tunnel is pitch black.

It doesn't look at all familiar to him. It's not the main entrance to the base, but it just might do.

Barnes drops the gear he's carrying, jumps into the tunnel, rips the metal gate out of the concrete, tosses it behind him, and flicks on the light of his CZ-75. He shines it down the tunnel and sees only two things: concrete walls and darkness.

Surprise.

Sam suddenly lands behind him, and then Natasha thuds down behind them both.

"The last one didn't go so well," Barnes mentions.

"That's why you're going first," Sam comments.

Barnes ignores that, rolls his shoulders, and steps inside the tunnel. What he notices first is that the
concrete is new – nothing like the typical crumbling, pitted concrete first poured decades ago.

A light pops on behind him, and he realizes that Natasha has a flash light. The extra light only confirms his thought: it helps show the light gray walls and the smooth floor.

The tunnel is wide and spacious, not typical of the bases built before the War. It's built for taller, thicker statures.

"It's an active base," Barnes says.

Mentally, he goes through how he's armed: his CZ-75, always, in his hand. His black combat knife, always, on his right side, under his shirt and jacket. His left arm, his best bet, always.

He knows that Sam is armed with at least two handguns, and probably more. Natasha always has two handguns, as well as those painful little discs she likes to throw. He knows she has more.

Otherwise: kill and take.

The floor slopes downward, subtle but perceptible. Gradually, the temperature drops.

To his left, behind the wall, he hears steady, rushing water. That's strange. The stream should be nowhere near this tunnel, and the lake is on the other side of the valley.

He shines his light at the left wall, looking for signs of condensation or water infiltration. It looks dry.

*There's a pipe.*

He thinks and thinks. His memories go no further than waking up, breaths made of ice, frost on his skin, in a dark, cold, mildewed room. He doesn't remember what the base was like: how big it was, what else it was used for. Strange, though, that it was built by a lake – that's a purposeful burden.

"Are they cooling something?" Sam asks.

Natasha answers: "It's a datacenter. Underground, water-cooled. It's newer. Intel suggested a place like this, but no one could pin it down."

She's likely right. It's not what it was when he was here, but it makes sense now.

They walk the length of the tunnel in silence, hearing only the rushing water and each other's quiet, echoing footsteps and breaths.

They come upon a thick, gray steel door, with absolutely no handle or way to open it. The hinges are on the other side. It's an escape tunnel only: no entrance.

Barnes shines his light directly on the seams, first the top and then down the sides. There's a fraction of space between the door and its steel frame.

He hands Sam his CZ-75. "Hold this."

It's a door meant for egress only, which means that it likely opens inward, instead of outward. He might be able to pull it open.

Barnes digs the fingers of both of his hands into the sliver of space between the door and the frame. He doesn't get very far with his right fingers, but his left ones don't feel anything, and he shoves them as far into the gap as he possibly can.
"Stand back."

He gathers energy in his arm, shifting the plates until he can feel the tension in his neck and chest, and then he pulls, as hard as his arm can.

It can pull pretty hard.

The concrete splinters, a diagonal gash climbing up the wall.

Bolts *creak, creak, creak*, then snap, metallic *cracks* echoing through the tunnel.

His fingers dig into the metal, deeper and deeper, and then he's in fucking trouble.

The door swings open, and he sees a black-helmeted, black-clad person, waiting for them, and *he's stuck in the fucking door*.

Natasha throws Sam backward, pushes Barnes and the door into the wall, and leaps at the HYDRA soldier. He sees her rip the helmet off, wrap her hand around his mouth, and knife the person in the back, hilt-deep.

He stops watching and worries about getting *unstuck from the fucking door*.

"Clear," Natasha calls.

Sam takes a moment to reflect: "I remember when you got stuck in the road."

Barnes pops his fingers out from the door, by way of taking out a handful of the steel. He pulls the chunk off his left hand with his right, drops it on the ground, and rolls his shoulders again.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Barnes says, and steals his gun back from Sam.

Sam just smiles.

They join Natasha in a cold, dimly lit, concrete room. There's only one body on the ground: the soldier who'd been waiting for them, and he's bleeding out, chest still, eyes open.

"There's gotta be more," Barnes says.

He moves past the body, Natasha beside him and Sam behind them. He sees that it's a security room: racks of weapons line the far wall, and, next to that, a floor-to-ceiling bank of flat-screen monitors showing high-def, live security footage.

Natasha was right: it's a datacenter. At least ten of the monitors show footage of rows upon rows upon rows of blinking server racks. The other monitors show what looks like a battery room, a mechanical room, a room with water pumps and pipes, and then barracks.

One of the monitors shows the entrance to the tunnel, and another shows the three of them looking at the monitors. Five of the monitors are black: they show nothing.

None of the monitors show HYDRA. Barnes thinks that's weird. It's not right.

"I don't think Steve's here," Sam says. "I think this is all data."

Barnes sees Natasha nod. He shakes his head.

"These aren't showing everything," he says. "Let's take a look around."
Weapon aimed, he advances out of the room and into an inexplicable, wide open, brightly lit area. It's at least 100 meters across; on the far side, there's another door: wide, steel, with a hatch handle. This room hadn't been on the monitors.

To their right, there's another steel door, with a keypad entry. To their left, a wide opening to another room. From that room, he hears the unmistakable sounds of pumps and flowing water.

Out of curiosity, he heads that way, weapon still aimed in front of him. He can't shake the thought that none of this feels right.

He enters the open room, Sam and Natasha behind him, and sees that it's another empty, brightly lit area. There are three keypadded doors: to the left, right, and directly in front of them.

The doors are sealed airtight.

Sam and Natasha pass him, and he turns around, back toward the opening. There's a funny pattern in the gray-painted concrete near it. He walks to it and reaches out, first with his right hand, but then –

_Breathe, Soldier. Breathe._

Instead, he extends his left hand, curled into a fist, and fits his knuckles into the depressed, splintered concrete.

He sucks in a desperate breath, throat dry, lightheaded.

He knows this room.

"Are you—"

Sam coughs, then coughs again, and then coughs harder and harder. Natasha grabs his arm and starts pulling, but it's too late, they're both too far in, and he does the only thing he can do to save them.

He darts out of the room, a half of a split second before a metal, airtight door slides out of the wall and _slams_ into the other side, sealing Natasha and Sam inside.

He can hear the lake water pouring in. Or he remembers it. He's not sure.

He doesn't have time to figure it out.

He runs toward the hatch-handle entrance door and a group of twelve HYDRA soldiers pouring in from it. Between six of them, he empties his entire clip. Six of them drop, and he sees fatal hesitation in the other six.

A couple of them shoot, but he's too quick and too close. He jumps and grabs one of their rifles, swinging around to kick another soldier in the neck. One hand on the rifle, he draws his knife with his free hand and slits the neck of his new rifle's last owner.

He drops the knife and rapidly slams the butt of the rifle into the helmet of another soldier, once, twice, three times, before dropping to the floor, on his back, and shooting the closest three.

He hears voices outside. There's more.

That's okay.
Barnes springs up to his feet and grabs the last soldier standing. He pulls the pins on two of that soldier's utility belt grenades and kicks the screaming soldier out the door, into the rest of his unit.

"Oh, my god – get them off – get them—"

The dual explosions shake the concrete walls. He ignores the screaming.

For now, they're occupied.

Barnes runs back toward the door to the tank room—that's what he used to think of it as, and the thought of it sends his heart scampering—and knows that Sam and Natasha don't have any time at all.

He's almost there, when something annoyingly painful hits him square in the back. He's propelled forward into the metal door, and he tries to extend his left arm to catch himself but it doesn't move. It throws off sparks.

At the last moment, Barnes twists and hits the door with his right shoulder, instead of his face. His gun skitters away. Although he leaves a dent in the door, he's not hurt.

He stands and turns around, toward the entrance. Before he can even see who or what attacked him, a horseshoe-shaped metal device hits his right wrist, clasps into a circular cuff, angles upward and latches high onto the metal door. It's strong enough to lift his body upward; his feet don't even touch the floor.

He pulls against the restraint, uselessly. His left arm is still sparking, immovable and limp at his side.

A single man walks forward. Brown hair. Mid-40's, maybe. His face is covered with deep red, waxy burn scars. He almost looks familiar.

"You haven't been thinking straight. I'm here to bring you home. All is forgiven."

The voice and the specific accent triggers the memory: Rumlow. He's a HYDRA loyalist, through and through, but nobody important. There's little chance he knows where Steve is being kept – but there's still a chance.

Barnes doesn't even bother answering. He keeps pulling against the restraint. The metal bites into his skin, and he pulls harder. A part of the restraint pulls away from the door, just a sliver, and then slams back in place.

It's magnetic.

He keeps pulling.

He can hear the rushing and pounding of the water, behind the door. He knows better than to think things like it can't end like this, because he knows more than well that it can.

Rumlow smirks. He rips open a velcro compartment on his TAC vest and pulls out a syringe of clear liquid.

"Look at you. You can't even talk. Because HYDRA owns you. You're a very valuable piece of property, you know. You wouldn't think it. You've been like a mouse in my maze, scurrying around, trying to find your pellet, thinking you had freedom. But HYDRA is the only freedom. You miss it, even if you don't realize it."
Rumlow keeps moving closer, that syringe still in his right hand. He's totally involved in the whole hail HYDRA spiel.

"And your fucking friends are already dead. Don't feel bad; you won't remember them tomorrow. You're coming home. I hope you're excited. We are."

Rumlow extends his left hand toward Barnes' leg, presumably to hold it down, but doesn't seem to expect two things: Barnes kicking the syringe out of his hand, and Barnes breaking his trachea with another well-placed kick.

Rumlow goes down, choking and hacking, face instantly an inflamed, swollen red. He coughs blood. He's no longer a problem.

Barnes dislocates his own wrist. He drops only a centimeter, the weight of his body supported by his carpal bones. It's excruciating, but he knew it was going to happen, and he doesn't make a sound.

In a single, fluid movement, he twists both his body and his dislocated wrist around, so that he's faced square with the door. He draws his legs up, plants his feet on the door, and pushes, pushes, pushes, pushes, until the magnetic restraint breaks free and he's suddenly back-flat on the floor.

He springs up and takes the few short steps to where Rumlow is gasping, both hands on his throat, eyes wide. Barnes reaches down, takes Rumlow's ear piece, and puts it into his own ear.

The words being said over the comm are the best he's heard all week: "Alpha Three, Omega Two. Do you copy? I repeat, Alpha Three, Omega Two, do you copy?"

Barnes remembers this: HYDRA's two-level verification system. He can easily get past the first, and, if HYDRA is still HYDRA, the second level is a joke.

He answers: "Omega Four, Alpha Six. The Asset is contained, and the targets have been eliminated. Hold position, and close the spillway."

HYDRA used to call it "the spillway." If he concentrates enough, he can hear the voice, the one that always ordered it. He hopes the guy on the other end can close it; he remembers that it used to be remotely controlled –

"Alpha Three, confirm and verify."

"That's a fucking order. Close it now."

"Underst-"

He should have walked away. Or put a bullet in Rumlow's head.

Rumlow slashes Barnes' right Achilles tendon. His leg buckles, and Rumlow drives the knife deep into the flesh right above Barnes' knee.

Barnes doesn't scream. He rises, pulls the knife out of his leg with his bleeding right hand, and throws it behind him. He looks down into Rumlow's bloodshot eyes and asks, "Hey, Brock – can you swim?"

Rumlow's eyes widen. Barnes spares a smile, kicks Rumlow in the face, and strips Rumlow of his TAC vest, utility belt, and weapons. Rumlow doesn't even fight. Barnes tosses it all to the far northeast corner.
He limps to that corner and orders Omega to open the spillway room door. This time, they don’t even argue.

In the moments before the water rushes into the room, he tries to move his left arm. Instead of smoothly whirring, it grinds, the plates uselessly shifting out of sync. He can’t lift it or use it, but at least it’s doing something.

The surge of water doesn’t come. The door makes a metallic scraping sound, and only a little bit of water squirts through.

It’s jammed.

Every second is a death sentence for them.

He limps back across the room, his right foot bearing weight only because it has to, and digs the fingers of his right hand into the slim gap between the wall and the door. Blood drips on the floor, mixing with the brownish water; his hand and wrist hurt tremendously.

The door budges only minimally.

Upper body strength won’t be enough. He takes a breath, steels himself for what he’s going to do, and then just does it. He wedges his back against the hinge-side of the concrete frame, keeps a tight hold of the edge of the door, and pushes against the other side of the frame with his right leg.

Willfully, he refuses to scream or cry out; he won’t give Rumlow the pleasure of that weakness.

The key is to not think about the intense pain, or the way it feels like the muscles and tendons in his wrist, knee, and ankle are tearing, or how the skin is splitting wider and wider.

A sick voice, only a feeble whisper, says not my body not my body not body not my body; the thought that he’s simply damaging HYDRA’s goods make it easier to push against the doorframe and pull the door toward himself.

The door shifts toward him, only a bit, accompanied by the sound of metallic scraping. Barnes grinds his teeth and puts every part of himself into opening the fucking door.

Abruptly, it slides open, a wall of water rushing through. Already off-balance, the force of the water knocks him onto his back, dirty lake water gushing over his head. At the last moment, he holds his breath and doesn’t fight its torrential force.

It violently sweeps him toward the open entrance, and the side of his head smacks into the corner of the entrance's concrete frame. He goes dizzy for a moment, and he feels Rumlow's ear piece fall out.

The rest of his body is driven against the wall by the water. It's not a terrible place to be; he stays there, calm, letting the worst of the water pass, before standing and drawing his handgun.

Outside, the screams have turned to groans and a lot of cursing. What's left of Rumlow's unit is in a wonderful position - for him.

With calm, deliberate steps, he walks outside, into early dusk. There are six soldiers, all of them in disarray: some wet, some hurt, some helping, all of them surrounded by several of the burnt, disfigured bodies of those he’d killed earlier.

He wastes no time: aim, shoot, and walk. One dies. Two turn toward him, weapons drawn. The last
three also turn toward him, take one look at his arm, and run the other way. He kills the two, picks up one of their AR-15’s with his right hand, and shoots the fleeing three in the back of their heads.

Briefly, he wonders which one had been Omega the Fucking Dumbass, who hadn't realized he wasn't talking to Rumlow.

Quelling a rising sense of panic, he pushes the butt of the AR-15 into his right shoulder, levels it toward the obvious sniper nest between two conifers midway up the valley wall, peers down the scope, and takes quick, accurate aim at a camouflaged woman.

A much more capable rifle is aimed back at him.

The nest is 540 meters out, just pushing the range of the AR-15. Wind speed is on his side, but he questions his accuracy when rapidly aiming and shooting with an injured, single hand.

He takes the shot, and steps back, twisting his body just a degree sideways.

Less than a split second after the camouflaged woman's body drops out of the tree, her bullet *plinks* against the left side of his upper chest—the part that's been grafted with impenetrable metal. It knocks him back a nominal amount, and the flattened bullet drops to the ground. All he thinks is that it was a terribly shitty shot to start with.

Scanning the rest of the valley wall, he's confident that it's clear. Two units and an overwatch: sounds right, and they're all dead.

And, then: it's quiet, except for the droning of cicadas, crickets, and frogs. A mosquito hums in his ear. A couple of early fireflies light up in the near distance. The sun dips lower, and he looks up at the darkening blue, starless sky.

"That one's Orion, Buck. Do you see it?"

Suddenly lightheaded, he drops the AR-15 and puts his hand on his chest. He doesn't know why, or what he's looking for, but he expects something that *isn't there*. The feeling passes as quickly as it came, and the whisper of a memory drifts just out of his reach.

He doesn't have time to worry about it. Natasha and Sam are still inside, and he doesn't even know if they're alive. Rumlow's still in there, too.

Barnes draws his CZ-75 again and heads back inside, dreading what he's going to find.

Rumlow is crawling on hands and knees, toward the northwest corner of the room, toward his gear. Barnes shoots him in the back of the right knee. Rumlow collapses, twisting so that he falls onto his back. His face is deep red, and his breaths are ugly, desperate.

Barnes ignores him, and enters the inner room.

It's empty.

They're not there. He looks side to side, perplexed, and then he hears it: the quiet hum of Sam's wingpack.

He looks up and sees them. The back of Sam's wings. Sam's head, legs, and arms hanging limp, only his limbs wet. Natasha's hair and arms. They're only two and a half meters above him, near the center of the concrete ceiling.
He remembers that Sam's wingpack is powered by Stark's arc reactor technology; they're not coming down, until Sam decides to bring them down, and they can't wait that long.

HYDRA will send more.

It occurs to him to simply shoot Sam down, but the wings are too valuable to lose. He thinks he can overpower their lifting ability, if he grabs onto them. That's a significant "if."

He walks backwards, giving himself to room to run, and then does just that: sprints as fast as he can manage, launches off of his left leg, pushes off the wall with his right, twists in mid-air, and grabs Sam's closest wing with his right hand.

All three of them crash to the wet, concrete floor. He sees Natasha roll off of Sam's chest and flop to the ground. Instantly, he realizes what's going to happen. Without Natasha's weight-

Sam goes back up to the ceiling, hitting it hard, face-first. Barnes doesn't let go of the wing, and he goes up with Sam, his weight supported by his sliced, mangled wrist, blood streaming down his arm. He won't be able to hang on for very long.

A single moment is all he needs to devise a hypothetically workable plan. He'll need to be fast.

He swings his legs up and wraps them around Sam's torso, his right leg on top of his left. His right leg burns, and his ankle is feeble. Without time to waste, he uses his core to pull himself and his fucking useless left arm up, and then quickly deactivates the wingpack with his right hand.

Simultaneously, the wings retract, and he and Sam fall. The wing slices Barnes' right upper arm, and he lets go of the pack, ensuring that he lands directly on his head, with all of Sam's 86 or so kilos right on top of him.

It's annoying. The cut from the wing hurts more than anything else.

He rolls Sam's limp body off of him and sits up, left arm whirring and grinding for no reason at all. He checks Sam's pulse and finds a strong one, and then makes sure that Sam is breathing. His breaths are slow but even and deep.

He stands up and limps the short way to Natasha, finding the same thing: strong pulse, slow deep breaths. There's a bruised gash on her forehead, from when she fell, but it's not a bleeder, and the swelling is minimal.

They're both alive. Dread lifts from his shoulders.

It's going to be okay.

Now.

Now, he can really deal with Rumlow.

As normally as he can, he walks back out to the primary room and finds Rumlow crawling again, right hand extended out toward the utility belt. The grenades.

Barnes steps on Rumlow's hand, easing the weight of his body into that one point. Rumlow's purple, scarred face screws into pain, fear, and rage. Barnes latches onto the fear.

"Are you afraid?"

He didn't expect Rumlow to try to answer. He expected what Rumlow does: drag his left hand
through the water, toward the grenades.

Barnes steps back, off Rumlow's right hand, and shoots his left. Rumlow doesn't cry out, only squeezes his eyes closed and contorts his face more. Blood seeps into the water.

Barnes kicks Rumlow onto his back and puts his booted foot on Rumlow's neck. He presses lightly, but even that draws an extreme reaction of belabored, wheezing breaths and wide, desperate eyes.

"Where is he?"

Rumlow actually smiles and crackles "our puppet, like you," his voice so quiet and the words so distorted that Barnes just barely makes them out.

He tells himself that they're just words, and they're just words designed to elicit an emotional response. It's been just over a month; there's nothing HYDRA could have done by now, to make those words true.

Barnes shoots Rumlow in the left kneecap, feeling nothing at the way Rumlow writhes, back arched. The smile on Rumlow's face disappears, though, and that's cause for satisfaction.

A feral feeling inside of him uncoils. It's raw and vicious, and it knows that Rumlow will never give Steve up. It could still happily spend a few hours pretending otherwise.

"There are no prisoners with HYDRA. Just order. And order comes from pain. Lyang always said that, right?" Before Pierce, Lyang. Before Lyang, Petrovic. Before Petrovic, Petrescu – not to be confused. He knows why HYDRA wants him back. "Are you ready for yours?"

Rumlow opens his mouth, as if he has words to say, but those words dissolve into another shaky smile. He clenches his teeth and convulses, foam bubbling from his mouth, eyes instantly unseeing and dim.

It's not so much of a loss.

Barnes holsters his sidearm.

The only thing he wishes he'd done differently is park closer.

But, before he leaves with Natasha and Sam, he throws three live grenades into the server room, and he feels a little better about things.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

The United States Army, by way of the Strategic Science Reserve, put the world’s last known super serum inside Steve’s veins, and Steve managed to have a thought in his head that included the phrase “when it’s over.”

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One

The metal handle of the M3 dug into the middle of his back, but he leaned there anywhere, twirling a standard-issue knife between his fingers.

"Is it everything you always thought it’d be?” Bucky baited, because it'd been that kind of a day. He was out of cigarettes, too.

If Steve heard the bite in his tone, he ignored it, and gave a typical gee-whiz answer of, "Not really. It'll be nice, when it's over."

_When it's over._

The United States Army, by way of the Strategic Science Reserve, put the world's last known super serum inside Steve's veins, and Steve managed to have a thought in his head that included the phrase "when it's over."

He wondered how far Steve could possibly take that thought. "Yeah, it will," Bucky answered, and kind of smiled a shitty half-smile. "Ever think about what home'll be like?"

Steve smiled: genuine, wider and brighter than ever before. "It'll be home, Buck."

Bucky looked at him, expressionless. The knife kept twirling, and it was fucking amazing how easily it came. How easily everything came these days. It was terrifying.

He nodded, stayed quiet for probably too long, before tearing in, "Is that really how you see it going?"

He looked over at Steve and took a real, real hard look at him. At a person who, after a year, he still didn't sometimes recognize. He wanted to say, _You wasted your whole fucking life on this war._

Steve huffed out a deep, tired-sounding breath. "Just say it."

Not a fucking problem.

"You think they're your friends. That Phillips has your back. That Carter's gonna be waiting for you in some dance hall back home. You're a god damned weapon – the kind they don't know how to
HYDRA's got the same problem, and he's got the same target on his back.

"Buck—" Patronizing.

"They're never gonna let you go."

Steve conceded, as light as air, "Maybe."

Bucky pushed off the M3, pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head, put himself right dead in front of Steve, and gave him wide, crazy eyes. "What the fuck?!"

Steve shook his head, smiled, and put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "C'mon, stop."

"'Maybe'?!"

Steve's eyes were downcast, awkward in how he wouldn't look at him. "Maybe I like it. Doing something with my life." Steve finally looked up, anger written all over his face. "Besides getting sick. Besides – picking up cans with Little Timmy. Besides being a burden."

Bucky had been fighting this for more than twenty years. "You were never a burden. You're SSR's puppet, is what you are, and you don't get it."

Steve's head tilted, skepticism swallowing the anger. "You're a bad liar. I appreciate your concern; you know I do. But I don't need it. I can make my own way."

"Jesus fucking Lord, you're never gonna change," Bucky breathed, and he was done. Over it. Had it right up to here and so far past. "I'm gonna take a piss."

As he moved away, Steve grabbed his right arm and pulled back a little. Bucky turned, eyebrows hiked, and waited.

"We're gonna go home," Steve said, entirely like he believed it.

"Sure we are," Bucky answered.

The only thing he wishes he'd done differently is everything.

Booming, echoing sounds of loud bass music pull Natasha from twisting, maze-like dreams - mixes of whimsical fantasy and frighteningly life-like scenarios.

Natasha blinks her eyes open and rolls her tongue around her dry, sick-tasting mouth. She swallows thick phlegm. It's a horrible way to wake up and, coupled with a stabbing headache and generalized sense of unease, she's already in a poor mood.

The last thing she remembers is the HYDRA installation, near the lake; the door of a concrete room slamming shut; invisible gas hissing from the floor; and then water rushing into the room. She remembers Barnes slipping out of the room, at the last possible moment. And then she remembers-

She's not sure.
She lays still, while her eyes adjust to the dark room. She hears Sam's distinctive snoring, only a few feet away from her, and the loud groaning of a window AC unit.

She smells musty linen, carpet deodorizer, and the lingering odor of old cigarette smoke: it's the all-around, unmistakable smell of an inexpensive hotel. Not a HYDRA prison cell. She turns her head and finds a window, its heavy drapes pulled close.

Natasha gets out of the bed, her bare feet and pressed into thin, threadbare carpet. She's otherwise still clothed: partially damp, crusty clothing, with the left wire of her bra digging into her armpit. Although she feels disgusting in every way that counts, her curiosity outweighs her need for comfort.

Even in this cheap hotel, the two-bed room is walled off from the rest of the main hotel room. The hinges of the door squeak open, the bottom of the door scraping against the carpet.

It only takes a few steps for her to find Barnes, his back to her, sitting in front of a sofa and an old, boxy TV, and it only takes a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the light.

His hair is matted and unclean, and his shirt is still damp in places. Pieces of dried dirt stick to his skin. Natasha knows well enough by now that Barnes values hygiene, is obsessed with his hair, and tends to be a creature of comfort, sometimes ridiculously so.

So. Something is wrong.

She steps closer and sees that he's only wearing a t-shirt and black boxer-briefs, with something white wrapped around his right ankle. He's bent over his right leg, fiddling with something in his left hand.

The smell of blood hangs in the air.

She looks at his right hand, limp at his side, and sees more dried, flaky blood than she does skin. Natasha stares only for a moment, before walking right up to him, squatting down, and grabbing his right arm.

His right wrist is darkly bruised and lacerated, all the way around. Veins on the underside of his wrist are busted, and there are very poorly sewn sutures just below his palm. None of it is bandaged, let alone cleaned properly.

"You mind? This is hard with only one hand. And this hand isn't that great."

She releases his arm and looks at the wound in his leg, the one he's suturing with what looks like a crudely bent dollar-store sewing needle, and then at the bloody white towel wrapped around his right ankle, just somewhat aware that her mouth is gaping open.

"What happened?"

"Rumlow. How are you?"

"Fine. What happened?"

"He's dead."

"Barnes."
"I'm busy."

Natasha drops from the balls of her feet to her knees and unwraps the towel, gently and slowly. Dried blood sticks to the cotton fibers, and she takes care to avoid tearing any of the clotting. When the towel is all the way off, she stares at where his Achilles tendon has been slashed, inches below where long-healed, burned skin begins.

This has to be a nightmare. Has to be.

"It's not cut all the way through. Put that back."

She wraps the towel back around his ankle, fully intending to grab a fresh one and something cold, except she has a pounding, aching headache, is ice cold numb all over her body, and she-

She's in a bad place. She didn't think it could get worse, but then, here he is.

"Is there a reason you let yourself get this hurt? All the time?"

It's an unfair statement. She knows it is.

He doesn't even look at her. He keeps lacing that atrocious needle through the skin of his upper knee. "You and Wilson don't exactly operate smoothly. I'm still getting used to the inadequacy."

She ignores the dig and his choice of names and instead peers closer at the blue thread he's using. It's thick and decidedly made of cloth. "Are you using upholstery thread?"

"It'll be fine."

"Bar-"

"I'm tired, and I just want to get through this. Go away-"

His left arm makes a grinding sound, and she watches the plates shift discordantly. His fingers lock up, mid-stitch. He briefly closes his eyes, then takes the needle into his right hand, but it's marginally more useful than his left.

It just keeps getting worse.

"What happened to your arm?"

"EMP. I think."

She nods and holds her hand out. "Stop being an idiot and give me the needle."

He does, and all the fight drains out of him. He lays down on the carpeted floor and puts his right arm over his eyes. Every now and then, his left arm grinds.

She finishes up his knee, stomach turning every time she forces the sewing needle through his skin. "It's not going to hold."

"It'll heal fast enough."

He'll be lucky, if the thread holds long enough for him to limp to the bedroom.

Natasha can't tell if he just doesn't care, or if he genuinely believes this is an acceptable standard of care. She wonders.
"What would HYDRA do?"

At this particular moment in time, tact ranks low on her list of priorities. She doesn't care if it pisses him off.

It does.

Even with his arm over his eyes, she can see his eyebrows go down, and his tone of voice is angry. "What?"

"How would HYDRA take care of these wounds?"

His tone becomes sardonic: "A doctor..."

"Did those doctors use upholstery thread, no anesthetic, no antibacterial cream, or even a band-aid?"

He sits up, plucks the needle out of her hand, struggles to his feet, says "I could've just left you there," and limps away, toward the bedroom and Sam's snoring. She doesn't follow or chase, argue or plead.

She's tired.

Of all of this.

Sam takes the easy way to the roof: the stairs and a surprisingly unlocked door, unlike Barnes, who undoubtedly scaled the outside wall.

"Fire escape, actually," Barnes says.

"Same thing."

"No, it's not."

Barnes is sitting at the south edge of the roof, maybe two feet from the edge, smoking a cigarette. Per his job description, Sam shouldn't have a problem with heights, but he kind of hates tall buildings and the vertiginous ledges that come with them. Regardless, he sits down next to Barnes and just doesn't look down.

"You really feel safe up here? They could have snipers."

Barnes makes a face-the same one that Natasha makes, when she thinks someone (usually Steve) is being an idiot. It's a little disconcerting to see it coming from Barnes.

"How's your...everything?"

Barnes shakes his head. "I'm fine."

He doesn't look fine. He's pale, and the always-present dark circles under his eyes are darker and deeper and hollower. He looks run-down and at the extreme end of exhausted, just like Natasha.

"Where are we?"
"Amstetten, Austria."

"How far away is that, from where we were?"

"Almost 400 kilometers. We cut up toward Vienna, changed cars there, and then cut back over."

"The last thing I remember is that gas coming out, seeing the water, and then grabbing Natasha. Didn't really expect to still be here. Or here. Thank you."

Barnes blows out smoke from his cigarette. "Glad you two are okay."

"Are you?"

Sam makes a point of not looking at all the places Natasha said he was hurt.

The last third of Barnes' cigarette arcs over the edge of the building, tiny embers dimming in the night.

"They're coming at us hard. It reminds me..." Barnes stops suddenly. For just a second, a burst of panic rushes through Sam's body-maybe there really is a HYDRA sniper-but then Barnes finishes his thought. "It reminds me of the war. They're never going to stop. They've never stopped."

Sam remembers what Steve said on the plane: if Barnes wasn't so good at what they had him doing, they would have just killed him. Even now, after everything, that's still true.

"You have friends. You have us."

"And so they're targeting you."

Those words chill him. Without expecting an answer, Sam asks, "What's it like? What they do."

Barnes runs his hands over his face, then through his hair, and then back over his face. Sam wonders if the metal hand hurts when he does that, or if he's used to it, or what. Maybe someday it'll be okay to ask the thousand and three questions he has.

"I don't remember a lot of that. Everything else is coming back pretty easily, but not any of that. I think that means it was pretty bad."

"It'd have to be."

Barnes shakes his head, dismissively, and Sam finally looks at the damage that Natasha had only described as "he doesn't care; why should I." The bruised, badly stitched cut around his wrist; the careful way he has his right leg stretched out; the red bleeding through the gray fabric of his sweatpants.

"Your knee's bleeding," Sam says.

"I don't care."

"You have to" is the only thing Sam can think to reply.

"No, I don't. It's fine."

"You know, you make it hard, sometimes."

"Okay."
"Okay," Sam breathes.

Barnes tells them to drive to Prague – not because there's something there, but because it gives them more distance from HYDRA. After Prague, it will be somewhere else, and, after somewhere else, it will be a different somewhere else.

Natasha won't say it, but she fears: Steve will become Barnes, lost to them, despite years and years of searching and intelligence-prying. HYDRA's superior that way.

Sam drives, Natasha beside him, and Barnes in the backseat, back pressed against the passenger side door, a tablet cradled in his hands.

Natasha watches the scenery pass by: blurred swoops of green and brown, the varied colors of speeding vehicles. She doesn't listen to the '70's rock Sam has playing on low.

"Why don't you have some huge SHIELD crew?" Barnes asks, suddenly.

He was bound to ask, at some point or another. There's no point hiding it. "We're still not sure who can be trusted," she answers, not taking her eyes off the window.

"Really." His tone bleeds skepticism.

"Sam, can you pull over at the next rest area?" Natasha asks.

"Suuuuuuuuure," Sam answers, and says nothing more.

He's a smart man, and even smarter when, thirty minutes later, he parks the car and peels off toward anything but them at the rest area.

In the parking space, the open back passenger door separates her from Barnes. His bare right hand and black-gloved left hand rest on the top of it. Even in that position, she can see that his wrist is still red and inflamed.

"Are you saying we can't trust you?" Natasha asks.

"SHIELD still exists, in some capacity. So, something must be really wrong on your end, if I'm your best shot. Even Sam – he's not SHIELD. It'd be helpful to know why."

Natasha swallows, and decides. "The agent who helped HYDRA take Steve. She stood up against Rumlow, against HYDRA, during Project Insight. She was loyal and trusted. They got to her."

His entire demeanor changes to deep concern-and shock, even. "They're brainwashing what's left of your agents?"

She nods. "So. You worked for Nick. We figured you'd be amenable, especially with Rogers involved. We...didn't maybe count on HYDRA having the same plan."

"You know about Fury."

Natasha tries not to smirk. "I'm technically your handler."

"Oh, yeah? What's the job description like for that?"
She lifts her shoulder and answers honestly. "Making sure you're safe. Facilitating a positive relationship. The goal has always been to get you voluntarily on-grid."

He snorts and laughs sardonically. "Okay."

"I enjoyed those nights on the rooftop, at the restaurant. It wasn't about SHIELD."

Not entirely.

"It's always about something," he counters.

Natasha doesn't have a good response to that, and so she changes the subject. "What's your plan? Our plan?"

He shakes his head, and his hands disappear from the car door. "I don't have one. There's nowhere else I know to go. They have operations inside skyscrapers, in every country. All the ones I knew about, Fury took down. And all the other places I knew about, either I took down, or we've already hit. He could be anywhere. You know that."

A pit forms in her stomach. She doesn't show it. "Are you giving up?"

He does show it: an intensity she hasn't seen from him in decades. "I'll tear apart every building in this world to find him." He pauses and searches the air for a moment. "That's my plan."

"That's a bad plan."

Even worse: she believes him, every word.

"Then go home. Do your intel shit. I don't care."

"Bar."

"No one came." His voice is low and calm. "I remember that: no one ever came. Whatever they did to me, it didn't matter as much as that. I don't care what it takes. I'm finding him."

For just a few moments, she's thrown off-kilter. "Let's just get to Prague, and figure out something from there."

His non-reaction is to look off to the right, toward the cluster of buildings. Sam is walking toward them, brown paper bags clenched in his hands.

"Food!" Sam announces. "Even your stupid fancy food, Barnes."

Barnes makes a face and pushes away from the car. "It's a rest stop." He starts walking toward Sam, saying, "I'll be back."

Natasha watches him for a moment, noting the very slight way he limps, before reaching out for a bag of food. "Fancy rest stop food. Thanks, Sam."

"You're all dicks," Sam answers.

At the restroom, there's a line six deep. Inside his jacket pockets, Barnes makes fists of his hands and settles in, putting little weight on his aching right knee and ankle.
He visually scans the area, searching for threats; nothing and no one jumps out as particularly
dangerous or out of place. He eavesdrops on conversations and hears only the superficial and
mundane.

In front of him, there's a short, pudgy, bald man who smells like he needs a shower. To his right, a
restaurant. To his left, a floor-to-ceiling, engraved map of Europe and Asia, with "1915" carved
into the black, speckled granite of the map.

Barnes ignores the map and stares past the back of the pudgy man's head. Then down the line of
people. Then to his right, through clear windows, at the small restaurant where Sam had grabbed
food. Then back at the man's head.

He's laid still for days, in sweltering heat and frigid cold. He's settled on the tops of 100+ story
buildings for hours and hours, without wavering. He's led patient missions and lived in insufferable
conditions.

And it's this, this six-person line, that makes him restless.

He rolls his shoulders and sighs, relief lasting mere seconds.

He looks back left, at the map. He traces the lines and borders of Spain, France, Switzerland,
Austria-Hungary, and the USSR, thinking both at once that the map is grade school familiar—a
memory talks about state boundary alignments before the First World War peace treaties, and
another memory can list all the ones that came after-and completely fucking wrong.

At the USSR, he looks up, up, up – to a small crescent-shaped island between the Barents and Kara
Seas, by the northeastern tip of Novaya Zemlya.

Restlessness flips to adrenaline, and he runs—runs—back to the car. He doesn't care if people see
him; he doesn't care if people talk; he doesn't care about anything except for that fucking island.

Natasha and Sam see him coming and look past him, instantly defensive, hands going to where they
keep their sidearms. He ignores them and all but dives through the open car door and into the back
seat, grabbing his backpack and unzipping it open.

"Are we going? What are we doing?"

"Barnes?"

His earliest map dates to 1935. The thin paper tears in his hands, before he crumples it into a messy
ball. Nothing on it matters, at least not nearly as much as what's not on it.

What's not on it is exactly what he's been looking for—for months.

"It's a fucking island."

In a big room on the 23rd story of a nice hotel in Prague, Sam watches Barnes cleanly devour half
of an entire pizza, before they've even scrolled through four digital maps of Russia.

1915, 1916, 1917, 1918: the island is on all of them.

Natasha pulls up more and more years, confirming that the island exists on each one.
1919, 1920, 1921, 1922.

Sam eats a slice of pizza; Barnes tears through two more. He's got red tomato sauce on the corner of his mouth.

1923, 1924, 1925, 1926.

It'd be smarter to go backward from 1935, Sam suddenly thinks, while he eats another slice to Barnes' two. Maybe it's okay to go slower, though; maybe this is where Steve is, and it's okay to be sure.

1927, 1928, 1929, 1930.

"Are you eating all that?" Barnes asks, pointedly looking at Sam's pizza.

Barnes is in a weird mood: almost jovial. Almost. It's a lead—and their last.

"No, go for it," Sam says, though he quickly grabs slices three and four out of the box.

Sam doesn't miss the healthy weight Barnes has put on, especially the added fullness in his face. He looks like the person in all those old videos and photos.

Sam eats another slice and looks at the tablet. Natasha is scrolling through myriads of maps, all dated 1933.

The island isn't there.

"Before World War II?" Sam asks out loud.

"Less noticeable than getting it off the books during or right after. Impressive, though, if it's not something natural," Natasha answers. "Barnes, what do you know about this place?"

He swallows and shrugs. "That it's HYDRA. And then as much as you."

Sam wonders, though he already knows the answer: "Can Tony get current imagery on it? And before anyone answers – it's an incredibly bad idea to walk up to a Hidden HYDRA Island that's been mysteriously missing for eighty years."

Barnes, with crusty red sauce still on the corner of his mouth, snarks, "I don't think we'll be walking."

"Really," Sam deadpans. "Wipe your mouth."

Barnes hesitates, confused, then runs the back of his right hand over the red sauce spot. "Oh."

Natasha answers Sam's original question: "We can get Stark to help. But we risk tipping off HYDRA. If Steve's there, he may not be, by the time we get there. And it's also an incredibly bad idea to go there."

Sam slides up onto the cream-colored cotton-upholstered sofa, sinks into the cushions and pillows, and closes his eyes. He's tired – and worried. Either way, Steve there or Steve not there, this island is their last shot, and it's a horrible one.

He hears the pizza box close, and then Barnes' voice: "If I let you guys use some of the gear I stashed near Ныда, we can go, right?"
"You stashed a *fucking boat* here?"

Natasha's not sure why Sam is so surprised. She's certain that Barnes has similar caches just about everywhere around Europe and Russia.

The boat in question is a 1960-something go-fast boat, typically used by smugglers, stored safe and sound in the three forested kilometers from the shore. It's propped atop three thick logs and was formerly hidden underneath a camouflage tarp and dead tree limbs.

Barnes doesn't answer. He's under deck, doing something. To Natasha's ears, it sounds like he's rearranging rifles and vests, and she doesn't need to wonder about how much gear he has stashed here.

"He stashed a boat here."

"I can see that," Natasha responds.

"Watch out."

It's not really a warning: empty, crusty cans of food come flying out of the cabin, about a split second after Barnes finishes saying "out." Natasha glimpses a few of their labels and is really glad that Sam can't read Cyrillic, as she's sure he would have objections and questions about their former contents.

Now, she's only waiting for the inevitable question, as Barnes tosses more cans.

"Did you *live here?!""

And, oh, there it is.

A laptop flies out of the boat. Natasha doesn't ask.

Barnes finally emerges. "Yeah. For a little bit."

"When?" Sam asks.

Barnes ignores the question. "This thing can go about 130, in calm water. It'll take eight or nine hours to get to the coordinates. We can be in the water before sunset."

"You think we should be out there at night?" Natasha asks.

"It's September; there's no ice. I say we get near the coordinates in the morning and see what it looks like from a distance. Go from there."

Natasha nods in agreement; she likes that plan, except for one major thing. "We'll be out of gas within 200 miles."

Barnes gives her an inscrutable look. "HYDRA modified this one for a range of about 850 miles, as far as I can tell. We'll get there. But: it's pretty much a one-way trip."

Not really. She knows Barnes' thinking. If HYDRA's there, they'll be able to steal transportation. If HYDRA isn't there, then they'll be able to call in a jet from Stark. Either way.

"I say we go now," Sam says.
Tension bleeds from Barnes' shoulders. "All right. We'll get the boat down to the shore and go. There's room for two down there" – he nods to the under cabin – "and alotta blankets. It gets cold."

It gets cold for her, and colder for Sam. Even buried under four thick blankets, and even with her body wrapped around his, and even wearing the thick parkas they'd bought in Prague, Sam shivers for hours, and Natasha's fingers and toes grow numb.

Sleep doesn't come at all, even with the thankfully calm sea beneath them, and the consistent, smooth humming of the boat's engine.

The hours drag and crawl. She's tired but not. She thinks of Steve, and of HYDRA, and of what part of him will still be left when—if—when they find him. She thinks of Barnes, and his spirit that HYDRA had once so clearly broke. She thinks of herself, for a moment and only that. She thinks that Steve can't become them.

We'll find you. We'll find you. We'll find you.

With those three words a mantra, an uneasy, dreamless sleep finally finds her, but only the kind where she can still feel the cold, the bumps of the boat, and the hum of its engine. It's the kind of sleep that makes her more tired.

It's the kind of sleep, where she's instantly awake the moment the engine cuts out. She opens her eyes to the dark of the cabin, her face pressed into Sam's parka. She listens to his breaths: steady, deep, quiet.

Until: "Nat?"

She untangles herself from Sam and rolls away. It's only the floor – no seats or bed – and it's easy to crawl away. Stiff and achy, she makes her way to the frigid outside.

The sun is just rising. The sky to the north is gray, but, to the east, the bright orange sun is just peaking over the horizon. Blue water stretches as far as her eye can see: no islands, no rocks, no ice, no other boats.

Barnes hands her a pair of black binoculars. The idiot isn't wearing a hat, and his hair is sticking up in frozen chunks. His fingers, though, are pink and warm.

"Have a look due west," he says. His breath is a white puff of air. "We're about 70 klicks out."

She presses the binoculars to her eyes and doesn't adjust the settings. She easily finds the island: blurry, small, but definitely there, and –

Natasha holds her breath and focuses her eyes better.

A dim, gray haze hangs over the island; it doesn't look like regular fog. There are clumps of buildings: some of them solid brick towers but more of them appearing skeletal and abandoned. In addition to the buildings, there are metal-esque structures, ones she can't identify from this distance.

It's not the buildings or structures that concern her.

A bony, airy dome encircles the entire island, eerily reminiscent of the Beijing bird's nest: white girders twisted into triangles that climb and curve over the island, all of them connecting over the center, or so it seems.
"Is it a Faraday cage?" Barnes asks.

Natasha doesn't pull the binoculars away. She's impressed that he knows what a Faraday cage is. "Has to be."

Definitely HYDRA.

She keeps looking: for life, for people, for anything threatening.

There's nothing.

Natasha hands the binoculars back to him. "There's no one there. It's abandoned."

"No. That Faraday dome's still working. S'gotta range on it, too," he says and nods toward the GPS taped to the boat's dash.

SEARCHING FOR SATELLITES.

That doesn't make sense.

But they don't have a choice: it's worth a look, and they'll need to dock there anyway.

"Let's gear up," she says.

Barnes never comes unprepared. He has at least a dozen AR-15 and M4A1 tactical rifles each, with plenty of ammunition. He has two black M21 sniper rifles. He has dozens and dozens of handguns: SIG Sauers, Smith and Wessons, Berettas, and even MP-443 Grachs. He has grenades. He has tactical vests.

"It's all HYDRA's. I took everything."

Twenty klicks from the island, they all three gear up. Natasha doesn't comment that Sam, with gray bags under his eyes and his wingpack strapped to his back, takes five grenades, an AR-15, three Beretta M9s, and a TAC vest, while Barnes grabs a paltry M4A1 and a SIG Sauer.

"You kill, and you take. Kill and take."

Natasha has her own handguns and has no use for assault rifles; the Grach is a nice item, though, so she takes one of those. She hopes to keep it.

"Ready?"

Natasha picks up the binoculars. Sam nods.

On the southeast part of the island, Barnes navigates the boat between jagged, dark gray boulders, the surf lapping against the boat's hull. Its bottom scrapes against the hard sand and polished, moss-covered stones of the shore.

They're on.

Just past the shore, the terrain angles upward: a stout, rocky hill of green ground cover, arctic alpines, and sharp edges.
All three together, they quietly make their way up the hill, taking careful, planned steps. Her own thoughts loop around two things: watching for enemy activity and willing Steve to be here.

The absence of singing birds and droning insects is subtle but palpable. The island is soundless, in a way that most of the world isn't. But it's not empty.

They crest the hill, and Natasha sees in person what she had only glimpsed through the binocular lenses.

A dense fog hangs low. The Faraday dome stretches above their heads, its white girders more dirty-gray up close. Skeletal buildings rise into the sky, their rusted-orange iron girders exposed and hollow; four other buildings are brick and solid—and three of them windowless. The fourth has a strip of spidered, narrow windows along its top-most floor.

In the distance, what reminds her of massive radio, satellite, and microwave towers shadow the landscape, with multi-story mooring brackets next to them.

The more inland they venture, the more deteriorated the buildings become: some are simply corroded wall-to-wall, others are strangely charred, and still others have crumbled to their first few floors, leaving heaps of concrete debris and slivers of sun-bleached metal scattered along the jagged, cleft gray asphalt.

Deteriorated, Soviet passenger vehicles dot the cityscape—but, oddly, nothing overtly military. Natasha notices at least one other curiosity: no glass or personal items are among the debris, only concrete and metal. No one lived here—but, strangely, it looks like no one really worked here, either.

As if he's read her mind, Barnes says, "It's a cosmodrome," only he sounds perplexed. That's not what any of them had expected to find. "I mean, it looks like Baikonur. Hold on."

Natasha looks back at him and sees that he's breaking their informal formation, heading off toward a tall hill made of broken concrete slabs and twisted girders. She and Sam both stop to wait for him.

Sam looks bothered, his hands too tight around the AR-15 clipped to his vest.

"What?" she asks.

"It's just creepy. And I've seen creepy. This is, like, creepy creepy."

Natasha smiles and watches Barnes disappear behind the hill. "You bring us to such nice places," she says, loud enough for Barnes to hear.

He doesn't answer, but she can hear him scrabbling around the debris pile.

Sam adds, "I mean, this is some serious sputnik shit."

A reverberating, flat metallic bang comes from Barnes' direction.

Sam all but jumps out of his skin, spinning around and aiming his rifle. Natasha puts her hand on the barrel, lowering it. She's concerned more about Sam than Barnes: this is nothing like Sam.

"Are you okay?"

Sam nods, fast.

She decides to give Barnes some time to find whatever he's looking for; he can more than handle
himself, and she hasn't seen any indication that this island is in any way inhabited.

Natasha looks around, noting the finer details of the timeworn buildings, like the faded Cyrillic writing on two or three of the buildings, too much of it missing to be able to read. The faded union hammer, emblazoned on a red, metal star, at the top of one of the brick buildings.

"Sputnik" isn't the wrong word to describe this place.

Suddenly, Sam shifts, aiming his rifle down the road, at a building that's too far away to assault. Reflexively, Natasha draws her handgun. She's unsure at what they're aiming.

"Did you see that?"

"No. What?"

"It was a person. All the way down there. Went behind the building."

Natasha hadn't seen or heard anything. She knows she would have—and Barnes, too. She turns and looks at Sam; the first thing she notices are his eyes. His pupils are blown wide, his irises eclipsed.

Something is –

Sam extends his wings. "I'm engaging."

"Sam!" Natasha yells, but it's too late. He's already shooting into the air, blasting toward the tall, windowless, brick building.

"Barnes! We have to get Sam. Something's wrong."

Barnes doesn't answer.

"Barnes!"

Nothing.

She's torn: follow Sam, or find Barnes.

She chooses.

"I mean, this is some serious—"

Barnes blinks his eyes open. His right shoulder is screaming, the rest of his right arm numb. He pushes his upper body up with his left arm and drags his uncooperative right arm through gravel and chunks of concrete.

"It's not you I usually worry about," he mutters, before he realizes that he's talking to his arms, and wow. "Shit."

He shifts his weight to his hips and sits upright on the ground. There's a weird feeling on his face; when he feels it, he finds rocks and dust embedded into his right cheek. He wipes it all away.

His lips are chapped.

His throat is dry.
He has a headache.

*Dehydration.*

He looks up. Through the Faraday dome, he sees that the sun is too far west. He checks his watch: 1724. He blinks, shakes his head, and looks at it again: 1725.

He's lost seven and a half hours. A pit of panic pops into his gut, but he pushes it away.

Prickles attack his right arm, and he ignores them. He stands up, legs strong and not shaky, and readies his M4A1. Rifle aimed, he walks back around the debris pile. He'd only wanted to look at part of a destroyed satellite, to see the writing on it, but that doesn't matter to him anymore.

The island is as quiet as it had been this morning. He visually sweeps the landscape: closest first, then further, then further toward the block of buildings, then further out toward a curved, barren patch of land, and then furthest out, where the launch pad moorings and radio-like towers stand.

Nothing.

No one.

He wonders.

He wonders if they would have –

The panic is back. He's not so good at pushing it away.

He walks back toward the shore, that tendril of panic growing bigger and whispering things.

*They left you.*

*No one will ever find you.*

*It's a prison.*

*You'll starve and die here.*

*They left you. They left you. They left you.*

Barnes reaches the rounded cliff of the mossy hill. He looks down, stomach in his throat, because he knows, he fucking knows, that they –

The boat hasn't moved. There's no weight in the front. They're not there.

Barnes turns around. They have to be in one of those buildings.

*For seven hours?*

That's not good. It's pretty fucking bad, actually.

*They're dead. You brought them here, and you let them die.*

Barnes takes a deep breath and better settles the rifle against his shoulder. That voice isn't his; it's HYDRA's. And he knows: this is a bad, bad place, like the munitions town near Krakow.

He needs to get Natasha and Sam and get the hell out.
They're already dead.

Barnes walks back the way he'd just come, toward the debris piles, rifle aimed. Every part of him wants to run, to find them now, but his training stops him from doing that: a calm, considered walk is better than a quick, careless run.

It takes him five minutes to make it back to the pile he'd investigated. He inspects the ground and notices a twisted, smashed tuft of grass. The chlorophyll is only hours old. One of them turned hard on their heel here.

He continues down the road, avoiding building debris and potholes. As he walks, he thinks that these buildings didn't come down on their own. He thinks HYDRA brought them down, purposefully. Maybe, once upon a time, someone else had come looking for their stupid, secret island.

No one ever came looking for you. No one cared.

That voice is back. He replaces it with his own: So, why not the others, then?

Five hundred meters in front of him, four brick buildings still stand, undamaged: three short, brick buildings, no more than ten stories tall, and the fourth: a rectangular, brick tower, at least thirty-five stories tall, with windows only along the uppermost floor.

It creeps him right the fuck out.

Don't be in there.

He keeps walking, boots crunching on broken asphalt: seeing no one, hearing nothing. Along the ground, there are no more signs of activity –

But Sam could have flown. Maybe with Natasha. But: if it had been an emergency, they would have flown back to the boat, not into the heart of unknown territory.

Okay.

Sam would have flown, and Natasha would have pursued. He wouldn't expect Natasha to leave a findable path. The only question is why Sam, who's typically not overly reactive, would fly into this territory, and why Natasha, who is also not overly reactive, would go with him.

Did they see something?

He reaches a fork in the road. The left veers off toward the middle and back-end of the island, to the launch pads. The right leads to the four brick buildings.

Instinctually, he goes right. Left feels wrong.

The buildings are precisely laid out: two on one side, two on the other, neither set having anything wider than a city alley way between them. The taller one is on his right, east of the shorter building.

He stops and stands in the open, concrete square between the four buildings, and he doesn't know what to do. There are still no sounds, no movement, and no activity. Nothing to go on.

HYDRA has them.

You've lost everyone you care about.
He ignores that very realistic scenario.

Sunlight gleams off of something metal laying near the entrance to the tall building. He walks to it, focusing his eyes on the faded asphalt and tufts of grass, and kneels down.

Unmistakably, it's Natasha's gold arrow necklace.

He picks it up and sees that the chain by the clasp is broken. Pocketing the necklace, he looks up the length of the building, daunted. He stands and draws his CZ-75, making sure the light still works.

*Don't go in. Don't go in. Don't go in.*

He climbs a set of crumbling steps and pushes the rusted steel door open with the barrel of his gun. Flashlight aimed, he goes in.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Instincts on alert, he stands still, and observes. His brain, ninety years conditioned to zero in on the slightest movement and barest discrepancy, notices the break in the pattern of a far, shadowed wall.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

"Sir. About Barnes."

A beat. "What about."

"I went on ten, twenty missions with him. Saved my ass every damned time. He..." A deep breath. "He was more like Rogers than like any of us."

Phillips rolled his eyes and didn't turn around. The back of the tent was more interesting than anything that ever came out of Lacy's mouth.

"By that I mean – he didn't need to sleep. He hardly needed to eat. He could run for days. He took shots that no firearm and God's own human could make. HYDRA did something to him, before I came. And, with respect, we're all fuckin' ignoring it."

Phillips turned around, schooling his expression. "Rogers never saw any of that," he said, as dismissive as could be.

Lacy shook his head and licked his lips, like angry people sometimes did. "Rogers... Rogers saw what he'd seen for twenty-five years. And the rest of them ain't gonna disrespect Rogers by admitting it."

Phillips stretched the tips of his fingers out, digging the pads into the metal of his desk. He leaned over, just slightly. "So, what, fine: HYDRA pumped him full of the same shit we pumped Rogers with. He worked for us for nearly three years, all in all. Did anything we asked. What point are you trying to make, Lieutenant?"

"That's not what I was saying. I'm saying, Sir, that he's alive."

All the data in the world said it: Rogers could've survived that fall. Not prettily so, but survived, nonetheless.

Door handles. HYDRA teams. Impossible shots. Days without sleep or food or water.

Rogers was blind as a bat.
"He had faith in me, like no one else. He taught me things, that no one else would bother with. I'm alive, because of him. And, god damn it, Sir, those're favors I need to—"

"Stop talking. What are you proposing?"

Lacy's face lit up, like an ugly, scrawny Christmas tree a week before Thanksgiving. "A SAR team. Me and mine. Keep it secret."

There's no data to say if Rogers could've survived that fall and four days thereafter.

"It's enemy territory."

"It always is."

"It's damned cold."

"I've gotta nice, warm coat."

"And he might not be alive."

"And he just might be."

"He's one person. One. You're willing to risk it – your fancy degree, your wife, your boy?"

"We leave no man behind. And he's my friend."

God damn it. Respect was not something he wanted to give this moron.

Phillips looked away, off to the side somewhere. If Barnes somehow fell into HYDRA's hands, so help them all. "There's word of a possible HYDRA installment out that way. Take your men and go check it out. Details to follow. Dismissed."

Lacy smiled and saluted (horribly). "Yes, Sir."

HYDRA didn't put on any airs, when they built this place: the entrance is a narrow hallway without interior doors or windows. It's nothing but a gray concrete floor, a low concrete ceiling, and two red brick walls. Round, circular light fixtures hang from the ceiling, just barely with enough clearance for his head.

It's cold and smells like mildew, like all the rest.

Weapon and flashlight aimed ahead of him, he walks down the length of the hallway, to the only visible door: like most of HYDRA's other installations, a commercial, rusted, gray steel door.

He shines the flashlight down: flakes of rust are scattered on the floor.

With his left hand, he pushes the door handle down and pulls the door toward him. It scrapes open, leading to a stairwell with only one set of options: up.

Silently, he climbs the concrete steps, sweeping his light across the steps for any clues. There are none.

After taking at least twenty stairs, he expects a landing, and a door to the second level. The stairs
just keep going: no landing, no door.

A bad feeling appears in his gut.

He keeps climbing and climbing, until, finally, he reaches a landing and an unmarked door, but only that. No more steps.

The building has at least thirty stories.

He pushes the door open and finds another straight, narrow hallway: brick walls, concrete top and bottom.

He enters it, sweeping his light across the walls. He sees a couple of steel doors along the way.

He opens the first. It's a mechanical room, full of pipes and pumps. He leaves it.

The second is a radio room, filled with old, dead equipment from the 1940's. He leaves it, too.

The third room has a yellow toilet and a rusted orange sink.

He goes to the end of the hallway and into the next stairwell. It only goes up.

*What the fuck.*

He climbs up and up and up, and, just like before, comes to a single landing, a single unmarked door, and nowhere else to go but back down.

It opens to another hallway: exactly the same, but with only two doors – a door at the end, and a door in the middle.

The middle room is empty.

He goes to the stairwell: only up.

It's the same for the next *ten stories*, and all he can think is that he's missing something huge: no one constructs a building made of single hallways and a couple of rooms, and no one puts that building on an intricately hidden island.

On the fifteenth story, it all changes. The stairwell opens to a wide hallway, the floors and walls made of warped mahogany wood. A secretary's desk sits a few meters from the stairwell, a Continental typewriter still perched on the corner, next to a black, rotary phone.

Behind the desk, there's a black door to a windowed office, the gray blinds still pulled; inside, the floor is littered with yellowed paper, its print too faded to read.

It's all so fucking surreal.

His light dims.

At this moment, he can't think of anything worse than being in this building without a light source.

He doesn't remember if Natasha or Sam had grabbed a flashlight.

*Shit.*

He gets his ass going.
Down the hall, past dirty windows and broken blinds, into the stairwell again. This one only goes up, but it keeps going up, even after he comes to a landing.

On the landing, he pulls open the door and shines his light into a massive autopsy room and morgue. Skeletons rest on a few of the tables, yellowed tags looped around the bones of their big toes.

He closes the door and goes up another story, wanting nothing more—nothing more at all—than to get the fuck out of this building.

Another story, another open floor – a laboratory, with blood-crusted vials, syringes, and all sorts of shit he doesn't have time for.

He goes up and up, clearing every floor, and still finding no sign of Sam or Natasha.

Twenty.

Twenty-one.

Twenty-two.

Twenty-three.

Twenty-four.

On twenty-four, he kicks open an interior door, and he freezes at what he sees.

Server racks, floor to ceiling, wall-to-wall, lights flashing.

Fans, blowing air.

Flat-screen monitors, power lights orange.

Cameras in the corners, their little red dots –

A motion-activated flood light blinds him.

And he knows.

They've got a half hour, tops, before HYDRA is all the fuck over this place.

Barnes slams the door shut and sprints up the next flight, and then the next, and then the next, and then the next, and then –

The door pulls open to frigid air and moonlight. Top floor.

His flashlight dims lower, and he turns it off.

Instincts on alert, he stands still, and observes. His brain, ninety years conditioned to zero in on the slightest movement and barest discrepancy, notices the break in the pattern of a far, shadowed wall.

The shadow moves.

SLUNK!
Sam draws his knees up, arms covering his ears, and doesn't move. He bites the arm of his parka, digging his teeth into the down-filled sleeve.

Dark tendrils glide and crawl around him: slinking over his legs, slithering up his arms, worming down his neck. Its bitter, cold path bites his skin.

It won't go away. It won't go away. It won't go away.

He squeezes his arms tighter around his head, a vice, and bites his sleeve harder.

Please go away.

A high-pitched clank echoes through the room. Sam's eyes dart up, pinpoint focused on the door, and wants to yell out, "No! Don't open it!" but it's too late.

A vortex of dark specks bleed into the room, their path curving high into the air before swooping down low, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, coming closer and closer and closer -

SLUNK!

He presses himself further back into the corner, flattening his back tighter and tighter into the wall, and buries his head under his arms, his knees as close to his chest as possible.

Maybe –

Maybe they won't see him. Maybe they'll go away.
In his mind's eye, he sees them swooping closer to him, just inches away, before they swarm over him and leave bitter, cold needle pricks all over his body. A scream lodges in his throat; he bites his tongue, tasting blood.

*Thud, thud.*

*Thud, thud.*

*Clack.*

He dares look up, with only his eyes. A shadow is near the door—closed now. It's kneeling down, its bleeding black hands holding a rifle on the ground. Then it straightens and reaches towards its middle and—and—and—

Unzips its skin.

The skin flakes to the ground, bursting into black smoke.

He tastes vomit and swallows away putrid chunks of a meal he can't remember.

*Thud, thud.*

The shadow moves, creeping toward the middle of the moon, until it's not a shadow anymore.

*Thud, thud.*

Black pants. A black shirt. A silver metal arm. Smoking, swirling blackness where its face should be.

His heart – he can feel it, faster and faster and faster, skipping beats, over and over and over again. It's the Winter Soldier.

Adrenaline surges into his paralyzed limbs.

It opens its mouth, nothing but a dark, swirling hole, and releases a shrill wail. A spiral of swooping, black specks shoot from its mouth

Sam opens his mouth to suck in a breath, his lungs demanding air, but he clamps his mouth shut and covers it with his hands, before the swirling vortex of black specks can get inside.

He hides his head again, tensing against the bitter, cold needle pricks all over his body.

*Thud, thud.*

*Thud, thud.*

He's coming.


His legs won't fucking *move.*

His tiny breaths are stuck in his lungs, and his whole body burns and soars at the same time, tense and *stuck,* and Sam looks up—

The Winter Soldier is sauntering—that dead calm walk—toward him.
The Winter Soldier skitters from sight, then reappears again a split second later, feet closer, tendrils of smoke and specks of black wafting behind him.

He doesn't know what compels him to move, but he moves. He crabwalks backward, his shoulder brushing against the coarse concrete of the wall.

His breaths are stuck, and his throat is so lumpy and tight that he feels like he's choking.

The Winter Soldier blinks out of sight and then back in, closer still, again.

Sam inches backward, and backward, and backward, until cold air blasts against his back, and his fingers find a sharp ledge. It slices into his fingers. He doesn't care.

The Winter Soldier blinks closer, swirling and smoking and –

Sam stands, legs tense and shaking. A muscle in his inner thigh seizes. The heels of his shoes crunch against glass.

He's out of steps. Out of places. Out of time.

His lungs hurt; his throat, a wet, wrung washcloth.

The Winter Soldier extends his hands, palms open, black specks oozing from skin and metal, and keeps walking.

Sam decides, and, in that instant of decision, he feels calm. He shifts his weight back and falls into the thin, cold air, weightless, eyes closed.

He's falling, falling, falling.

Something hard and solid collides with him, then wraps tight around him.

Sam opens his eyes and sees the swirling black of the Winter Soldier's face, framed by the gray sky.

It doesn't matter.

"Deploy your wings! Sam! Your fucking wings!"

His wings are broken, torn apart. He remembers the Winter Soldier doing that.

The Winter Soldier's grip tightens, and Sam's world turns upside down: the sky disappears, replaced by the ugly image of the debris-ridden ground.

The Winter Soldier's legs twist around Sam's, and his arms wrap around Sam's head, smothering Sam's face into his upper chest. The last thing Sam sees is the moonlit, ugly ground rushing closer.

He hears the crunch of metal and shattering of glass. He feels the instant the Winter Soldier's legs and arms go limp, and he's awake for the fleeting spark of clarity that whispers Barnes.

The pain comes next: a sharp, crawling pain through his neck and into his head. A dull throb in his left knee. An uncomfortable tightness in his chest. A high-pitched ringing in his ears, both of which feel like someone has shoved cotton into them.

He coughs and breathes at the same time, trying to find enough breath to calm his body and feed his maze-like brain.
When he opens his eyes, he sees black fabric. It smells like plain detergent. And hair cream.

_Barnes._

He rolls off of the Winter Soldier and lands hard on the ground. He stays there, flat on his wingpack, and stares straight up the building, up to the cloudy, starless sky.

The air is bitterly cold. Every breath is ice in his lungs. His fingers are numb. His eyes are heavy. His muscles throb, drained to exhaustion. The hard dirt on the ground smells musty, like an old cellar.

Every little detail brings him closer to himself. The fear fades, and the twisting, maze-like turmoil in his head gradually clears, until, suddenly, it's almost entirely gone—only to be replaced by paralyzing horror.

_You killed him._

He looks up the building, up the thirty-some floors, and remembers that he jumped—_he jumped—from the top, with no intention of using his wings. He remembers Barnes jumping after him, grabbing him, and screaming at him to-

"No."

_You killed him._

_He trusted you._

_He tried to save you._

_You killed him._

Sam struggles to his feet, ignores the twinge in his knee.

There's enough moonlight for Sam to see that Barnes is motionless, encased in the crumpled metal of the top of a car. His left arm hangs off the edge of the car, elbow locked. Blood trickles down the twisted remains of the windshield. Sam can't see if he's breathing.

He steps towards Barnes and puts two fingers against Barnes' neck.

Barnes' right hand immediately comes up, fingers wrapping around Sam's wrist.

"I'm fine," Barnes grunts. He's breathless, and he's blinking his eyes like he's trying to focus his vision. "I'm fine. Shit."

"No, you're – Are you? Are you okay? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You should've let—"

Sam can't finish that thought, not in good conscience.

"Thank you," Sam says, instead.

Barnes ignores him and slowly moves his shoulders, groaning, a distant look on his face. Then, he starts to sit up, the metal of the car creaking as his weight lifts away.

Sam grabs Barnes' left wrist and helps pull him up. Only, Barnes goes for the whole nine yards. Sitting up isn't good enough, no, he has to _stand:_ grabs onto Sam's shoulders and leans the bulk of his weight into Sam's body.
Sam has no choice except to all but drag Barnes off of the car, back-stepping one, two, three, four unsteady steps, as Barnes' weight plows into him. Sam steadies them both, arms wrapped all the way around Barnes' torso.

He smells blood, then he sees it: coating the right side of Barnes’ neck, down underneath his shirt.

"You okay? You got it? Are you…?"

Barnes takes his weight back and stands solidly on his own. There's still a distant look in his eyes. "I'm fine," he breathes.

"You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," Barnes all but shouts. He turns, looks at the building, and lets out a loud, deep breath. "Shit."

"What?"

"HYDRA's coming. Where's Nat?"

Sam blinks. "What?"

Barnes turns back around and looks at Sam. "I triggered cameras, and they know it's me. They're definitely coming. Where's Natasha?"

Sam swallows, and a voice in his head – you left her behind. You lured her here, and you left her to die.

He knows what those thoughts are. They're the same thoughts that –

"Sam! Where is she?"

"The other building. She tried to – I tore her necklace."

"I don't care about the necklace. Which building, Sam?"

"Northwest."

"How far up?"

"I don't know."

"You use your light?"

"What?"

Barnes grabs Sam's AR-15 and switches the light on, then back off. "Did you use this at all?"

Sam shakes his head. Because you're a coward, and you left her—

He pushes that voice away. He's gotta keep it together, this time: he doesn't have a choice.

"No. No. I flew to the top. I didn't use it."

"Kay." Barnes unlatches the rifle from Sam's TAC vest. "I'm getting Nat, and we're getting out. Get back to the boat. And don't you dare go back in that fucking building."
"What about you? We can't afford for you-

"You just tried to kill yourself!" The expression on Barnes' face is the most emotion Sam has ever seen from him. Ever. It's pure intensity, concern, and conviction.

"You're not going back in. Back to the boat. Give me fifteen minutes – that's it. If we're not there or if HYDRA comes first, you leave, get distance from this fucking dome, and call Stark."

Sam steps forward, right into Barnes' space. "Not happening."

Barnes shoves his phone—pulled from somewhere—against Sam's chest. By instinct alone, Sam takes it.

"Happening. Go."

Barnes turns and sprints off, toward the entrance to the northwest building. Sam watches him, mouth open, and thinks about throwing this stupid phone at Barnes' stupid head. And it'd be just as useful: without Barnes' thermal imprint, it won't –

In the middle of that thought, Sam actually looks at the phone. Its screen is cracked, and the back of it is dented, but it's still operational and unlocked, ready to go.

"God damn it."

Barnes tears into the northwest building, not an ounce of hesitation in his entire body. In his head, he keeps a countdown of how long they have – at least seven minutes has already passed, since the time he triggered the cameras to now. Fourteen to go.

Fourteen.

It's not a lot.

He throws away everything he knows from his training and sprints down the concrete hallway.

With his rifle's light bobbing up and down, it's hard to see what the inside is like. From the pieces he can glimpse, it looks a lot like those first fourteen stories of the other building.

He reaches the stairwell within seconds and flies up the steps, not bothering to aim his rifle or make sweeps. He opens the landing door and shines his light down the corridor. It's empty, with four interior doors to check.

He clears each room and moves on: another stairwell, another floor, another set of rooms that don't have Natasha in them.

Ten minutes.

He's only on the third floor.

Shit shit shit.

At that moment, it becomes a foregone conclusion: they will engage HYDRA here. It's not a maybe or a could be: it's the only certain future.
He focuses on finding Natasha. He'll deal with every other problem, once she's safe from whatever it is in these buildings that make people crazy.

*She's dead.*

Like Sam, digging his fingers into his own head, too scared to walk and too hopeless to fight. Like Sam, who picked death.

*She did too.*

Barnes pushes those thoughts away and *focuses.*

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh floors are the same: nothing.

There aren't that many left.

He dashes up the stairs and opens the door to the eighth floor.

When he was twenty, Anna took him to Shakespeare Garden in Central Park. It was almost like stepping back in time. The black luminaire, where his mom fixed his collar. The leaning, red tulips lining the cobblestone stairs. The brass drinking fountain, where Becca split her lip. The sunlight filtering through the cherry blossoms the same way as they had twelve years earlier. He hadn't been there in just that long, but *everything* was distinctly familiar enough that it became a warm feeling crawling through his chest – "I forgot I'd ever been here," he'd laughed.

A cold feeling crawls through his chest.

A corroded prison gate scrapes open. He steps past it, sweeping the rifle's light over the secretary's desk on his left. It's cluttered with radio equipment. He remembers its attendant had brown hair, too thin to curl or pin up, and waxy burns down her neck. He only saw her once.

Behind that desk, a heavy steel door, not as imposing now as it had been then. He pulls it open and finds an unfamiliar room—big, with only this door, and a mirror.

He shoots the mirror, watching the two-way glass shatter into slivers that crunch and grind under his boots.

The room on the other side is…

His eyes sting.

He remembers the far corner. He remembers the bodies that he'd made there.

He remembers the dirty, white, blood stained blanket in the corner, where he slept most times they let him sleep.

He remembers the table. He remembers sitting there, answering questions until he couldn't find answers.

A needle prick stings the top of his right hand.

A charred black skeleton nearly blends into the floor, and he can't keep the light still enough to see anything except blackened bones.

*Why would they…*
He climbs through the broken window, stepping into a room he hasn't been inside for –

He doesn't know how long.


He remembers the light above the table always swung back and forth, like it's still doing. The foundation's off, he remembers thinking and thinking and thinking, until he couldn't think anymore.

In the right corner, close to him, there's a door. He opens it and leaves this room behind, lightheaded, dry mouthed, heart beating still and calm *because it had to.*

It opens to a corridor, dotted with prison gates at four intervals. He forces them all open, remembering how long it would take a woman to open them, always forgetting which key did what.

He turns a corner and sees a wide corridor, lined with heavy, windowless doors.

Left side. Four down.

He remembers.

Then, these two hallways and that fourth door on the left were the entire world.

He touches this throat with his left hand and is surprised that he can't find the collar that made it hurt to swallow. He can still feel it, heavy and tight around his neck.

The door grinds, age-rusted hinges scraping open. He doesn't realize he's not breathing.

His light darts across the far wall of the room, his right hand uncontrollably shaking.

Between the trembling swaths of light, he sees a chain hanging from the center of the ceiling. Shackles limp on the floor.

He can feel needle pricks all over his neck, with phantoms of unbearable pain racking his entire body, crawling up his legs and into his stomach and into his arm. He remembers having hopes of one day being free enough to wrap his arms around himself, or, better, smash his head against the concrete wall, until -

*Step, step. Step, step. Step, step.*

He turns, flashlight aimed at a silhouetted woman standing just a few meters from him.

He feels paralyzed, hot breath clogged in his constricted throat.

It's her. He doesn't know who "she" is supposed to be, but-

Leathery, skeletal face. Black, curly hair. USSR uniform. Scars crawling up her legs.

It's her.

His breaths come in uncontrolled, panicked waves. He thinks of turning his gun on himself, but that same thought brings a memory of trying that once, twice, three times before and it never, ever working in his favor, and it always, always working in the worst ways against him, and -

An image in his head shows her laying face up, brown eyes open and blank, blood covering her
chest - *Lacy* - but that's wrong.

She's here.

It's her.

She takes a step toward him.

Fearful, he steps back-and she hadn't told him to do that, and that's enough, it's enough, it's a bad enough thing to do, that she's going to -

He crumbles.

He drops his rifle, sinks to the floor, pulls his knees up, wraps his arms around himself, closes his eyes, and hides his face on his knees. He can already feel the pain and see the darkness and feel the metal collar around his neck and the metal ring around his wrist and he can already imagine how the sleeplessness and isolation will twist his brain into mazes.

*Step, step. Step, step.*

He remembers.

*Step, step. Step, step.*

He's never left. He never made it out. It's all been *her-*

*Step, step.*

The entire world is in these two hallways.

*Step, step.*

Her fingers comb through his hair, nails brushing along the skin on the back of his neck, and he holds himself tighter, his left hand an ugly vice around his right wrist.

The two bones snap. He doesn't let go.

She puts her hands on either side of his head and guides it up. He looks past her, into the darkness of the hallway, and finds an arbitrary focus point, so he doesn't have to see her skeletal face-so thin it may as well as just be white bone-or at the hollow, swirling black holes, where her eyes and mouth used to be.

Maybe he looks the same way.

She says words, her voice high-pitched screams and her words incoherent, as she caresses his hair and face.

He wants to flinch and turn his face away, but he remembers that he's not allowed to do either. Instead, he controls his breaths, exactly like she's taught him:

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.
Чёрный.

He focuses on how the syllables sound in his mind and on making his breaths fit within them. Soon, his mind clears, and then shuts down, so much so that it doesn't matter what she does to him. It's all hers, anyway.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.

"Subject Seventeen - if that room is all you can think about, then that's where I'll keep you. Nothing of mine is so useless as to be afraid. Are you useless?"

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.

He's only as aware as he needs to be. He knows when she puts her hand on his left, and he lets her move it away from the broken bones. He knows when she slides his rifle into his left hand. He knows when she tugs upward on that same hand, and so he stands and goes with her, through winding hallways and down narrow stairways. He doesn't pay more attention than that; only his breaths are important.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.

He's not afraid.

Black-clad wisps of shadows surround them. He lets them.

The Woman screams in his face, her mouth a swirling, black hole, and her words only screeching sounds.

This is a test, like always.

He's not afraid.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.
She shoots the shadows, never letting go of his hand, pulling him around rooms and hallways. One by one, the shadows fall to the floor in wispy, smoky piles.

More shadows come.

She keeps screaming and shooting.

He's not afra—

An explosion rocks the floor. Shards and slivers of concrete blast against his face. His ears ring. He feels frigid air; it's blowing against him, powerfully, and –

A silver blur kicks him in the chest and then he's falling, falling, falling.

He slams into the ground, breath knocked clear out of his lungs. A drowning feeling crawls through his sinuses and slices through his brain, so deep that he doesn't think the pain will ever go away. He coughs and sucks in arctic, dry air.

Eyes open, he blinks and sees a sliver of stars, between a brief break in the clouds.

"Look, there's Orion, Buck-"

The silver blur shoots out of the building, a red-haired woman in his arms. A small voice whispers Natasha and Sam, only that's not right—they're not here. They've never been here.

Except -

The blur-definitely Sam-lands a few meters away, and the red-haired woman-definitely Natasha-stands shakily on her own. Sam trots over to him, sticks out his hand, and says, "I'm not even sorry. On your feet; let's go."

He doesn't take Sam's hand. It doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense. "Are... Are you real?"

"English, Man. English. Let's go. I need one of you to fly a jet. HYDRA blew up the boat."

He still doesn't take Sam's hand. He looks up at the building; smoke is pouring from a hole in the bricks, licks of fire popping in and out of view. "You set it on fire?"


HYDRA's always been here. Sam and Natasha shouldn't be, and he doesn't unders-

Sam grabs his left arm and forcefully yanks him up. Once on his feet, Sam pushes him from behind, the opposite way of the shoreline. Natasha follows, silent.

The route Sam leads them on is lined with black-clothed bodies wearing tactical vests, AR-15's and M9's scattered along the ground. A hazy memory overlaps those bodies: black-clothed men with United States flags on their shoulders, their bodies riddled with bullet holes. HYDRA operatives scurrying around the building, destroying files and machines. Being led outside for the first time in years, raw sunlight scorching his eyes.

"You're gonna be okay. I swear to God, you're gonna be okay. Bet you're ready to rip the faces off these HYDRA pric-"

He steps away from Sam's guiding hand, turns around, and trips over a body. He goes down on his
knees and stays there, staring at the burning building through a sudden flurry of snowflakes.

He remembers Lieutenant George Lacy - fresh off the boat in February 1944, armed with an Economics degree from Whitman College, didn't know shit. But he listened. A couple of grueling, tense missions out, and Bucky didn't so much mind the man.

He remembers shooting Lacy in the back of the head-brains, blood, and fragmented bones on the concrete floor. The burned skeleton.

He remembers walking past the dead body of the Woman, realizing what her body meant, and wondering if it was all still a trick-if Lacy was real, if the Woman was really dead, if anyone had really come, if there'd ever really been a chance-

"-rnes! God damn it, get up!"

Puffs of snow and wisps of dirt pop into the air, coming toward them in a mostly straight line. Bullets. They don't mean much to him.

He feels lightheaded and unreal, a step removed from the world. He sees Sam's panicked face, feels Sam's hands on his arms, and hears Sam's words, but it all seems more like a dream than anything real.

Maybe Sam isn't real. Maybe it's all a trick, or maybe he crumbled in that room and maybe Sam and Natasha and even Steve aren't and have never been real.

Sam's hands tighten around his arms, and then the ground is meters and meters below him, cold air blasting against his face.

They land behind a black plane, its cargo ramp down. Sam pushes him up the ramp, and the inside of the plane is familiar.

It's not a plane.

It's a WG-22.

In another time, another dream, he sat strapped in a jump seat, eyes closed behind his mask, not a fucking thought in his entire head.

This time, he curls in the corner of the cargo bay door and the hull, pressing into it as much as he can. All the thoughts in his head are twisted and fragmented and there's too many-way too fucking many-twisting and fragmenting into circles and more circles and more circles and more circles and -

He picks a spot on the far bulkhead. It's a dent from a bullet. He falls back on the Woman's mantra, the only thing he knows, and breathes:

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.
Natasha sprints to the Quinjet, following Sam's trajectory through a white-out flurry of snow and a barrage of badly aimed bullets.

HYDRA can't see any further than she can.

She runs and shoots behind her, not aiming insomuch as spooking HYDRA's newest crop of cannon fodder.

She's simply glad that the chemical haze from that building is lifting. She feels more like herself with every step, every breath, every shot, and less like the girl in a brutal room called Red.

At the jet, Sam's waiting at the cargo door, a rifle in his hands. Natasha clangs up the ramp, sparing a half-second glance at Barnes (shit, shit, shit, she thinks), and goes straight to the cockpit.

She doesn't know that she has the time she needs, to get this bird in the air. She doesn't waste time thinking about it. Vaguely, she registers the sound of Sam's voice, talking to Barnes.

Natasha flips switches and primes the engines, doing fifteen-minute pre-flight checks in the space of a seconds. The GPS and SAT systems are on the fritz, but it'll still-

Bullets plink against the hull.

Natasha skips the last set of pre-checks, lifts the jet into the air, and pushes off into the sky, toward Russia and the Laptev Sea.

The radar isn't clear: it shows two other Quinjets in the air. And worse: a blue transponder light flashes in the upper left flight panel.

Kill or be killed.

Natasha maneuvers the aircraft to fly low as comfortably possible. Visibility is poor, and the water of the sea is dark, but it's their only chance. She takes it, and she lowers the aircraft to its lowest safe speed at this altitude.

It doesn't take long for HYDRA's two Quinjets to overshoot her. Immediately, Natasha increases air speed and altitude, pushing the aircraft faster than she should. A stall at this altitude will only result in one outcome.

In the forefront of her mind is the fact that Sam likely won't be able to move Barnes, not in the condition Barnes is in, and neither of them are strapped in. Her fighter training focused on using oblique planes, to stay out of the predictable and limited horizontal and vertical planes, but doing that will kill at least one of her own. It severely limits the type of air combat maneuvering she can do.

The jet climbs and climbs, the enemy jets inching closer and closer on her black-and-green radar
display.

The lead jet slows down considerably and shoots upward; it's an Immelmann turn, and Natasha can visualize the strategy of the lead jet and its wingman. The lead jet, though reducing airspeed, will gain altitude and complete a 180° turn, putting it above and behind her.

It will dive, then level out, head-to-head, and then lock and kill.

She lets the first two things happen.

"Sam, hold on!"

Sam's response is both a relief and a carte blanche: "We're strapped in; go!"

Natasha makes a rough quarter loop, putting the jet into a near-vertical climb. Her airspeed drops, and Natasha lets it, lets it, lets it, timing the turn just right – and then she inputs the rudder hard, before the jet stalls.

She sees the lights and barest outline of the lead jet, just before hers enters a smooth, flat turn, and then dives back to its original altitude, a solid 180° turn of its own, putting her precisely behind the lead, who overshoots her.

The missile guidance system locks. She fires, then banks.

The sound of tiny debris hitting the hull is confirmation enough.

She lowers altitude, matching that of the remaining jet, then banks hard, sharply crossing the enemy jet's flightpath and increasing her AOT. The enemy jet overshoots, and even that is far more than she could have ever hoped for.

She's about to kill a pitifully inexperienced pilot.

Natasha opens gunfire at the enemy's tail, strafing it as it tries to break away. The ignition of the fuel tank is blinding—but satisfying against the night sky.

She checks radar: clear.

"Are you two okay back there?" Natasha asks.

A beat passes. "Not sure."

Better than she expected.

She double checks their bearing: west, toward Finnmark. Only 850 miles to go, in a jet that, per the instruments, tops out at 1.9 Mach. So, thirty minutes, give or take. Not bad.

In the corner of her eye, the transponder light keeps flashing.

Natasha increases altitude, taking her time to climb to 45,000 feet, eyes on the instruments but mostly on the radar. Once at 45,000 feet, she increases to maximum cruising speed.

The radar stays clear. So close to the Arctic, there aren't waypoints or flight paths, and certainly no commercial flights. It's only them and the Quinjets that will most certainly be headed toward the area, coming after them.

Until then.
She flips on the autopilot, letting the flight computers take the stick, and unstraps from her seat.

When she turns around and looks in the cargo bay, she sees that Barnes is once again back in the corner of the bay. Sam is reaching for Barnes' right wrist, but Barnes sharply pulls away. She reads aggression in his body language and fear in Sam's.

She decides to risk it. If Barnes snaps, he could take down the jet.

"Sam, take the seat?"

Sam looks at her, thinks for a moment, and then nods. He pushes up from his crouched position and walks toward her, shaking his head the closer he gets.

"He's not good. Won't let me touch him. He's totally out of it."

Natasha gives him a half-smile. "Okay. Watch the radar, okay? Let me know if anything pops in."

Sam nods again and slips past her, into the cockpit.

Natasha observes, for just a few moments: the steadiness of his breaths, the slight shake in his right arm, and the way he's trying to dig the fingers of his injured right hand into his thigh.

Natasha walks the couple of feet to where he's sitting and crouches down across from him. He doesn't look at her: just at the floor, unwavering. She smells blood before she sees it: a swath down his neck, gouges on his arm.

She takes a leap: "James."

He blinks, and his eyes jerk upward, meeting hers.

"It's over," she says. "They don't have you."

"I don't know what's real," he whispers, voice a quiet crack, almost lost to the hum of the engines. "I don't know."

Natasha sits cross-legged in front of him, gently wraps her fingers around both of his hands, and pulls them into her lap. He doesn't fight.

She sees his right wrist is badly broken: a hand-shaped bruise and finger-shaped, bloody gorges ringing the swollen, broken capillaries. She remembers him in that dark hallway, imploding in on himself, clenching his right arm with his left. Much longer, and he might have torn his hand off.

His file had been very clear: he carries massive self-destructive tendencies. Crushing his right hand with his left, before HYDRA thought to deactivate his left arm. Biting off the skin of his first knuckle on his right hand, a scar he still bears, before HYDRA thought to restrain his right hand to his thigh. Digging his fingers inches deep into his thigh, before HYDRA thought to tie his right hand behind his back. All the ways he'd tried to die, from the early days all the way into the 1990's.

"Yes, you do. You do know."

He shakes his head, almost manic. "I don't know."

"That building was full of a chemical that made us—all of us—see things. Those things weren't real."

"No, it was a fucking memory!" he yells, feral anger in his eyes. "I remembered. That building is where..."
He catches himself mid-sentence, searches her eyes, and then withdraws back into himself. He pulls his hands out of her lap and wraps them around himself, broken wrist and all.

Words come to her mind: some of them good, some of them selfish. She says them all, just the same.

"There was a time, when you were the one good thing in my life. HYDRA took that. After I went straight, I looked for you, for years. And then you made it out, almost all on your own. Everything you are today, everything you've done for two years, is you. Don't lose that. Don't stop being a good thing in my life. Not again."

He looks at her, shell-shocked. He searches her eyes again. "What did you see?"

She takes a breath and decides to be vague; it involves him, in a way he may never remember, and, it involves her, in a way she doesn't want to be remembered.

"Something long past. But something I'd never forgotten. That makes a big difference. Can I see your wrist?"

He holds his right arm out, and she takes it, carefully supporting his wrist. The laceration from Rumlow is a scab; those bruises long healed. Now, both his ulna and radius are broken, obliquely. The ulna feels disjointed, and it will need set.

"It'll heal," he says, voice quiet.

"What's your point?"

He doesn't have an answer—at least, not a good one—as she expected. What he means but has learned not to say is that it's not worth her time to worry about him.

"Ready?"

Barnes lifts his left shoulder, a distance in his eyes that only seems to be growing deeper. She maneuvers the bones back in place, knowing from experience how excruciating it is, but he doesn't show even a fraction of it on his face. He's shut down, she realizes.

"Keep it raised up," she tells him. He silently complies, propping his right hand on the artificial bicep of his left arm and grasping his right elbow with his left hand. It's actually not that bad of a set-up.

Natasha stands, shifting her worry to Sam, who's in the cockpit of an aircraft he doesn't know how to fly. Before she relieves Sam, she says to Barnes, "You're the same person right now that you were yesterday. What you remembered, what you saw - it doesn't change you, unless you let it. It would be a shame, if you did."

When she drops into the co-pilot's seat, Sam looks at her and asks, "Did he snap his own wrist?"

She nods and looks at him, surprised to see that his face has taken on a gray, dull undertone. He looks sick. Hell: they all probably look sick. "Are you okay?"

Sam huffs out a laugh, which turns into a dry cough. When he moves, he does so stiffly. "I jumped out of a window of that building. He saved my life, then went in after you. Didn't think twice about himself. What can we do to help him?"

Natasha absorbs that information as quickly as she can, and replies, "Turn back time. Is that"
something you can do?"

"It'd be nice, right. I'd like to."

Natasha wishes she had a grin to spare. She doesn't; not after tonight. "Someone should be with him, though. He's in a bad place."

Sam visibly tenses. "You're better with him."

"Give yourself credit: you're good with him. And, also: you can't fly this. If we get picked up on radar, it's gonna get real fun."

Sam takes a deep breath, looks back at the cargo hold, and only says, "For the record, you and I have very different ideas of 'fun.'"

He walks away, and Natasha finds energy for that grin. "Okay, Clint," she mutters, wishing he was here.

Sam creeps back into the cargo hold, wanting more than anything else to be anywhere but on this jet above this ocean headed for anywhere but home. His head hurts; his neck might as well as be made of a broomstick; his ears are still ringing; there's a tearing feeling in the back of his knee; and his stomach is nothing but gross knots.

Worse than that, Steve wasn't on that island.

And he's looking at what HYDRA does to people.

Barnes is still in that corner, cradling his injured arm. It looks like Natasha set it back in place, at least. If Sam looks hard enough, he can see the faintest tremble in Barne's neck and right shoulder.

He walks closer, no idea what to do or say, and no idea if this is the new normal or just a terrible moment in time. He has no idea what Barnes saw in that building, and no idea what would make Barnes, the most lethally capable and decisive person he's ever met, stand in a room full of HYDRA soldiers and not fucking move.

"Barnes?"

Sam kneels down, face-to-face, and sees that Barnes is staring at the floor. The demolished look on his face and the tears on his cheeks are a very basic human language, and Sam can speak that, not a fucking problem.

Sam pulls him into a strong embrace, saying, "If you know anything, know that we love you. No matter what. We love you."

A month ago, he would never have said those words.

Sam expects Barnes to pull away, to maybe even strike out and escalate. He doesn't do either. Instead, he returns the hug. Sam doesn't complain about the tightness of Barnes' left arm. He doesn't comment about the tears making his t-shirt wetter and wetter.

Sam moves his hand up to the back of Barnes' head and finds a swollen lump and fresh blood. He remembers the blood swirling down the car's splintered windshield, and the coat of blood down Barnes' neck. Barnes had seemed fine then, but Sam's almost certain now that there's at least a
concussion in play—along with everything else.

Sam pats Barnes on the back and pulls away, shifting so that he's leaning against the bulkhead, on Barnes' right. When Barnes wraps his arms around himself, Sam sees the dark purple bruising along his right forearm—along with deep, finger-shaped, meaty gouges.

Christ.

Steve.

"We'll get that fixed up, when we find a safe place. Try not to move it."

Barnes barely nods.

Sam nods back at him, puts his hand on Barnes' knee, and tilts his own head back against the bulkhead.

It's not until he closes his eyes, that he realizes how tired he really is, and it's not until he relaxes, that he feels the deep aching in his muscles: his back, his neck, his arms. Sleep comes easier and stays longer than it should.

A combination of rattling and weightlessness wakes him. He looks around the jet, like the bare walls are going to provide some sort of answer to a question he hasn't asked.

"Nat?"

"We're landing. Sit still and hold on."

Sam looks over at Barnes. His eyes are open, and he's pale, with a slick sheen of sweat on his face. Sam looks closer at Barnes' eyes: his pupils are wide and black, with only a sliver of blue visible.

Shit.

The jet shudders and turns, the rear dipping low before the entire craft jerks once, then twice.

"We're clear," Natasha says, right before the cargo door opens. "Hurry."

Sam doesn't wait. Although his entire body is stiff, sore, and uncooperative, he gets to his feet and holds his hand out for Barnes.

"Hi," Barns says. There are light blue bruises under his blown-pupil eyes.

"Hi," Sam answers, trying not to let on that he's worried. Barnes might have more than a concussion. "Give me your hand; we need to get off the plane."

Barnes furrows his brow, blinking at some point behind Sam. "I don't feel good."

"Barnes, c'mon, we've gotta go."

Barnes looks up at Sam. "I'm tired."

"Sam, go!" Natasha shouts, still in the cockpit.

"I could use some help!" Sam shouts back, frustration bubbling up more than he usually lets on. Fuck it. He reaches down and grabs Barnes' left arm, then pulls up. Barnes doesn't budge a fucking inch. "Barnes, look, you can sleep, once you're off this plane."
Barnes blinks again, his eyebrows closer together. He looks around the cargo hold, side to side, top to bottom. "It's a jet."

"Pedantic motherfucker," Sam breathes. "Fine. Get off this jet, and then you can sleep."

Just like that, Barnes pushes himself up, happy to use Sam as leverage. Only: he turns another shade paler, and he tilts to the side, off-balance. If not for Sam's hold on his arm, he would have already fallen down.

"I don't feel good."

Sam guides him down the ramp, having to compensate for Barnes' uncoordinated gait. A blanket of dread settles over him.

It's more than a concussion, and it's his fault.

They're just two or three feet off the ramp, when Barnes tears away from Sam's grip, takes a few steps forward, drops to his knees, and throws up. Sam goes to help him, when Natasha suddenly pulls him back.

Natasha sticks a piece of paper into his hand, sprints back up the ramp, and hits the "close" button, before he can get anything more than a "what the-" out of his mouth.

Quickly, Sam uncrumples the note, straining to read the words in the moonlight: "Jet's tracked. Hamningberg, 150 miles due east, blue house, off grid. Wait for me for 72 hours. Go now; don't wait."

The jet lifts off.

Barnes keeps throwing up.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Bucky wasn't listening, not really. He was in southern Austria, on that hill, overlooking the unit and the base, and the girl came out of nowhere--

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Now they're using kids?"

Bucky wasn't listening, not really. He was in southern Austria, on that hill, overlooking the unit and the base, and the girl came out of nowhere--

"She was marked," Steve said. Steve didn't know it was the same mark burned on the inside of Bucky's left upper arm. "Definitely HYDRA. It's not any tactic we've seen before."

Bucky zoned out again. The girl came out of nowhere, with something in her right hand. It looked like a grenade: no pin, safety lever depressed. She walked toward the unit, so calm, and they didn't see her. She drew her arm back, like she was throwing a fucking baseball, only it was a -

Steve's elbow jabbed into Bucky's ribs. When he looked over, Steve raised his eyebrows and subtly jerked his head toward Phillips.

Oh, fuck.

"Sorry, Sir. What was that?"

Phillips just looked at him, inscrutable. "Captain, you're relieved."

Oh, fuck.

After Steve was gone and presumably out of earshot, Phillips started right in. "What happened?"

"She was going to throw it. I took the shot. It didn't go off."

Phillips frowned and nodded. "You okay?"

That was just a weird question. Bucky raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He knew he was giving attitude where it wasn't deserved and definitely didn't belong. After today, he was just having a hard time giving a shit.

She couldn't've been more than seven.

"It's my job. I did it."
Phillips ignored every word. "You're obviously not okay. What do you need? Time?"

Bucky almost laughed, and then wondered why he was even answering, when Phillips was clearly fucking having a one-on-none conversation with himself. "Don't really have any to spare, do we, Sir?"

Phillips crossed his arms over his chest and turned grumpier, if that was even possible. "We can't spare to lose you. You're the only sharpshooter we have actually worth a damn that hasn't been killed yet. Having you dedicated to Rogers' team is bad enough."

That "yet" part was a real nice touch. Bucky appreciated it.

"I'm fine, Sir."

And, again, Phillips ignored every word: "Lieutenant Lacy needs you—and my god, does he ever-next week. So. Take a day. Go see Gernhardt. Get yourself cleared."

If that was a joke, Gernhardt was the punchline.

(And not only because he was from Jersey.)

(And not only because he reminded Bucky of a high-pitched, hyperactive rat, the kind that scampered around Brooklyn's street gutters at night.)

Gernhardt asked, "You okay?" and Bucky shrugged, and Gernhardt pulled a stamp out of nowhere, punched a piece of paper with it, and said, "Yeah, you're okay. I mean, whatamI gonna do, say you're not okay? Fuck no. So, you're okay. Okay?"

"Okay."

The thing was: he couldn't get the girl out of his head. Her tiny chest torn apart. Her body on the ground, a rag doll. That fucking grenade, uselessly rolling out of her hand.

Most of these people here didn't see the shit he saw and didn't do the shit he did. None of them knew. Gernhardt didn't fucking know. And Steve...

That night, Steve asked: "Why's HYDRA fuckin' with you?"

From Steve, that was a surprising question. Steve was smart as hell but not always bright about it. He tended to look past things, so he could fixate on other things. But, this time, he'd zeroed right in: today'd been a test, and he didn't know what kind or why or how to get past the sickening dread rotting in his gut.

Bucky shook his head and lied, lied, lied. "Whatdya mean?"

"C'mon, Buck, don't make me say it. You know." Steve sounded frustrated and concerned, like was trying to run a race and the finish line wouldn't move up for him.

Bucky looked over at Steve, worried like, and just said, "I think they have a supply of shitty grenades. I think you got lucky."

Although Steve didn't look at all convinced, he turned his eyes down and nodded. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged and looked back at his book. "Just another person."

Steve sucked in a breath; for a second, Bucky feared he was having an asthma attack, but then he
remembered. "I think the war's getting to you," Steve said.

That did it. Bucky put his book down and glared at Steve. "I'm fine with what I did today. If you're not, that's on you. I know what I signed up for."

The implication, plain as day, was that Steve didn't. Bucky let it hang.

"Backing down" wasn't anything Steve knew how to do. He was the proverbial dog with a bone, only, when he buried the fucking thing, he usually ended up burying himself and everyone else along with it.

Not fair.

"The war's getting to you," Steve repeated. "I'm wo-

"Well, you brought a fucking flying pie tin to it," Bucky interrupted, letting a fraction of his anger show. "Are you sure you know what the fuck you're talking about?"

The answer was "no," proven by all of Steve's textbook-perfect, hare-brained, shoddy, everybody-fucking-dies plans of attack, which Bucky reviewed and corrected before he ever let Steve take them to Phillips and Carter.

Steve was smart but so ill-equipped for what they were out there doing—but he was learning, quickly, and getting better, every day. On most, better days, Bucky embraced that. On this day, today, he'd killed a little girl, because HYDRA'd made her do something horrible, and he-

"No, not really," Steve grinned, and just that small piece of decent patience wound Bucky all the way down. "But, Christ, Buck, I just asked how you were doin'."

All the anger and fight drained out of him, leaving him exhausted, and he leaned his head back against the fabric-covered pole of the tent. "It sucks, Steve. It sucks a lot. I'm sorry."

"Nah. You know you're still a good person, no matter what you do out there. You're still you. You know that, right?"

He wondered about that—all of it—on a daily basis. And—HYDRA was getting closer, and he knew—just fucking knew—that Zola wasn't going to forget that he was the seventeenth experiment and the first to survive.

"Yeah, of course," Bucky lied.

Steve at least acted like he believed it.

When he wakes up the first time, it's with a stabbing, incapacitating headache, and his entire body is a giant, inflamed ache. He keeps his eyes closed and listens, breathes, feels: a familiar male voice humming a song, old dust, and scratchy, thread-bare linen.

Safety.

He pulls a flat pillow out from under his head and wraps it around the top of his head, using his left arm. Every movement sends excruciating, searing pain through his right arm. After that fades, he finds that the pillow provides just enough relief, so that he can fall back asleep, so long as he doesn't move.
He dreams of nothing.

When he wakes up the second time, it's because Sam is poking him in the head and fiddling with his right arm. He slinks deep under the coarse top cover and gritty sheets, ignoring the smell of stale dust and the sound of Sam's "fine, if you die, I don't even care." He sleeps and dreams of nothing.

When he wakes up the third time, he doesn't remember having a headache, and he can't find a pillow. Instead of searching for one, he spends a handful of seconds looking for a window. He finds it, along with a slit between two halves of its curtains: it's dark outside. He turns over, feeling something hard affixed to his right forearm, and goes back to sleep, dreaming of nothing.

When he wakes up the fourth time, he turns back over and looks between the slit in the curtains again. He glimpses the best part of the day. He sits up, rubbing his eyes with his left hand.

His right forearm, he finds, is splinted with transparent medical tape and two long, pale wooden spoons. Which is weird -

-but the memory comes easily, as does a flicker of fear. Later, after Steve is safe, he'll let it defeat him, but never until then.

Barnes peels the tape from his skin and leaves the spoons atop a dusty bedside table. His arm is still sore and violently bruised, but the bones have healed well enough.

He slides out of the bed, skin gritty and unclean, bare feet on coarse, cold wood, and waits for his eyes to adjust to the dark. When it does, he sees the room is sparse, with only the bed and the table, wooden floors and wooden walls.

A tiny bathroom is attached to the room. The white, porcelain sink is streaked orange and dirty, black mold grows on the wooden walls, and, when he twists the squeaky water handles in the bathtub, nothing comes out of the faucet.

Great.

He goes to the hallway, and then down a flight of stairs. Under his bare feet, the wood-slat stair treads creak with every step. After the last step, he habitually finds the joist of the bottom floor, but even that creaks.

Despite the noise, Sam is deep asleep on a shitty looking gray sofa, wrapped in two brown blankets, snoring. The scent of hours-old, stale coffee wafts from the next room over, which Barnes finds to be a poorly stocked kitchen.

His feet stick to the thin, tan linoleum. A cheap white coffee maker sits on the gold-speckled, white formica counter, its power light lit orange and a battery pack behind it. Beside the warm, apparently nonfunctional refrigerator, there are three stacked boxes of MREs, an open case of bottled water, and two five-gallon jugs of water. In the cupboards, he finds expired cans of vegetables and soup, as well as disintegrating moth nests.

Barnes grabs a dusty, white ceramic coffee cup from the cupboard, wipes the dust out with his fingers, and pours a full cup of burnt coffee. He doesn't care how it tastes, though he winces at its pungent bitterness.

He leans against the counter, facing a small silver-metal-framed window, and thinks.

Natasha was flying the WG-22, away from the island in the Berent Sea. She set his wrist. She told
him his memories didn't change him. She-

She -

He remembers the jet lifting off, and Sam tugging him away from the LZ.

Barnes closes his eyes. She took the jet, so that HYDRA wouldn't track them here. For the second time, she's out there alone, because of him.

_Damn it. Why._

Outside the dull, grimy window, he sees a rocky shore, a mellow white surf, and blue-gray water. The sky is overcast and ringed by round, brown mountains.

_Where..._

He guesses the northernmost part of either Norway, Finland, or Sweden. Nowhere else quite makes sense. Natasha would have wanted to ditch the jet as quickly as possible, without putting Sam down in desolate, arctic temperatures or terrain.

Barnes gulps the rest of the coffee, like Bucky used to down shots of whatever kind of alcohol was available, gets dressed, and goes outside. The air is fresh, coastal.

It's cool and rainy, with spots of dark clouds above what he finds is a village of no more than thirty wooden houses, some painted yellow, others red, and some no color at all. The village is old, he can tell.

He turns and looks at the house he just left-what he's assuming to be a SHIELD safehouse. It's navy blue, two stories, wooden. Nothing special.

Nothing here seems to be special. There's no one in sight. It's a bad, exposed place to be, with nowhere to hide and nowhere to blend in. He doesn't like it, but there's not much of a choice. Natasha will be coming here, _if, if, if, if._

Hands in his jacket pockets, he walks the short way to a beach made of polished stones instead of sand and sits just centimeters from the gentle surf. He appreciates the sound of something bigger than himself. When he closes his eyes, it's almost like it could carry him away.

A drop of rain hits his shoulder. Then two. Then three. Then four.

The drops turn to a drizzle, and the drizzle turns to rain. He doesn't mind it, not at all.

It's where Sam finds him, when the sun is just passing the high point of the sky.

Sam sits down and hands him a silver MRE package. It's something like pizza, and then something less, when a FreshPax "DO NOT EAT" packet falls out of the sleeve.

"I know you hate this stuff, but there's nothing here. You've gotta eat."

A new memory stirs, a bad one, about HYDRA's response to his one-time refusal to eat, before they stopped caring if he ate. He rubs his nose, as if he can wipe away the memory and the phantom pains it brings, but he can still smell and taste seventy-some year old blood.

_Seventy._

Sometimes, that alone's enough to suffocate him, a crushing weight on his chest.
"Barnes?"

He finds a better memory.

"They used to call these Charlie-rats. The paper labels would fall off, and you never knew what you were getting, which was a load, because they were all the same anyway. I think I lived on biscuits, fake chocolate, and real shitty coffee for two years."

Is that all?

Sam laughs. "They've gotten a little better since then."

He takes a bite of the pizza and almost instantly regrets his entire life. "Not really." He's hungry, though, so he keeps eating it.

Sam laughs harder, but only for a bit. A silence hangs in the air, and Barnes simply waits for Sam to break it.

"Are you okay? You slept for a while. Had a decent head injury."

He remembers.

His default response, of course, is, "Sure, I'm fine." He doesn't know if he is, and he respects Sam's supportiveness too much to lie. The truth is that he's not sure how he is: maybe a little numb, a little past knowing how to handle memories.

"Remember when you asked, if I was afraid of remembering things?"

Sam nods. "Yeah, I do."

"I am now."

He looks out over the sea, mesmerized once again by the swells of water, and can still feel Sam's eyes on him.

"Wow. I just didn't really think rations were that bad, man."

Barnes looks at Sam, brow furrowed, and then it clicks. Despite himself, despite everything, he dissolves into laughter.

Sam pats his back, and then leaves his hand there, and that's okay.

Actually, it's good.

Sam's good.

Hour sixty-five comes and goes. There are seven left, until Sam doesn't know what to do.

He watches Barnes hold a can of some kind of soup into the stone fireplace, yellow-orange flames charring his silver fingers black.

"Does that hurt?" Sam asks.

"No."
"Can you feel the heat?"

"It doesn't feel anything."

"Nothing?"

Barnes shakes his head.

"How do you – I mean, you don't show it. It must be hard to not have any feeling in it and use it like you do."

"I don't really notice anymore. It's just my arm."

Sam can respect that, if not admire it. He decides to leave Barnes alone and picks up the dusty book he's been reading – though, honestly, if pressed, he couldn't say its title or remember what it's actually about.

"When Nat comes, I need to go to Stockholm. I have money and ID there."

Sam nods, unsurprised. "Okay."

A minute later, a steaming, ceramic bowl of soup plops down in front of Sam, on the dusty coffee table.

"You're losing weight. Eat."

It's not weight, so much as muscle mass. It hasn't gone unnoticed by Sam. Nevertheless, Sam picks up the hot bowl, says "thanks," and sees that it's some kind of canned beef stew, with dark orange carrots, mud-colored potatoes, and mushy green beans. It's not half bad – maybe a third bad.

He's a slow eater, always has been. He can turn a single French fry into a solid minute of eating. It hadn't served him quite that well during his tours, or any other time in life, really. Except today: by the time Barnes has heated up his own bowl of soup, Sam isn't even half done with his.

Barnes sits down in the velvet green chair across from the sofa. A puff of dust explodes into the air. Sam tries hard not to laugh at the indignant, disgusted expression on Barnes' face. He's not really that successful.

"This place sucks ass," Sam laughs.

Barnes just covers the bowl with his hand and waits for the dust to settle.

They eat in silence, Barnes tearing through his food, always like it's the last meal he's going to have for weeks and it could be taken away at any time. There's a syndrome for that.

_or, Sam corrects himself, he grew up in the Depression.

Barnes breaks the silence.

"What happened on the island?"

Sam chews a carrot. "What part?"

"The part where it was 1000 hours, and the next thing I knew it was 1730 hours."

Sam's spoon clinks against the bowl. He stares at Barnes, hard. "What?"
"You didn't know?"

Sam thinks back to that morning, so long ago: docking the boat, hiking up the hill, making their way through piles of rubble and debris. Barnes going off to check something out. A flat, metallic bang – thinking he was clumsy.

And then: a restless feeling all over his own body, like he had to run fifty miles just to get an iota of energy out. Seeing a shadow, maybe a person, move. Taking off after it. Running into that horrible first building, Natasha chasing him, chasing him, chasing him, grabbing him, grabbing him, grabbing him, until he pulled her necklace off, pushed her away, and got the fuck out. Flying to the tall building and hiding by the windows, for hours and hours –

Hot shame burns his cheeks.

Stop and focus, Wilson.

That flat, metallic, clumsy bang.

"Did you pass out?" Sam asks.

Barnes doesn't even blink. Barely breathes. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because there was a bang, from where you were, and then I saw something – that mist got me – and I didn't see you again, until… Until you know when."

"What happened before the bang?"

Sam takes a bite of soup, because he doesn't know what else to do. Barnes is freaking him out. "We were walking near the entrance. I said it all looked real Soviet."

Barnes cocks his head, just slightly. "Is that what you said?"

Sam scrunches his brow together and ignores Barnes' question. Instead, he asks, "Do you have a history of randomly passing out for hours at a time? I mean, you sleep a lot, sometimes, but that's all been pretty understandable."

He's sure he already knows the answer is "no." HYDRA made sure that their Winter Soldier ran like a machine.

For his trouble, Barnes gives him a look. Sam shrugs, but, despite Barnes' exasperation, he sees something in Barnes' body language. He's hiding something.

"What?"

Barnes leans forward and slides his bowl onto the coffee table, then leans back into the chair.

"There're words. I don't know what they are," Barnes says, voice quiet. Sam sees fear: a vulnerability he's rarely ever seen. "What exactly did you say?"

Sam blinks and concentrates. It feels like a long, long time ago, and he hasn't slept more than a few hours the past few days. He's past exhausted. "I don't know." Satellite, his mind supplies, and that doesn't make any – "Oh. I said it all looked 'real sputnik.'"

In hindsight, he probably shouldn't have actually said it.

Barnes slumps over sideways, eyes closed, his body somehow staying in the chair, but not by any
large margin.

Sam allows himself one steadying breath, and one swallow to get rid of his horror-cum-anger, and then stands up, puts his bowl on the table, and carries Barnes' limp, boneless body to the couch. He puts a pillow under his head and a thread-bare, moth-balled brown blanket over his legs and chest.

He takes his bowl of soup and his book, and sits in the dusty, green chair.

*Sputnik.*

"Fuck you, HYDRA."

*Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

Not even an hour later, Natasha walks through the front door. "You guys ready?"

Sam could laugh.

---

Sam drives, his entire body and mind screaming *no I don't want to no fucking god damned no.* Natasha stares out the window, blinking heavier and heavier. Barnes sleeps and sleeps and sleeps, still with that ratty blanket and decades-flat pillow from the safe house.

"He never had a chance," Sam says, out of the blue. It's the biggest thought in his head, one that he can't push away.

"He does now," Natasha answers. That's all she says, minutes before her eyes close, her head propped in the crook of her arm against the window.

He doesn't know where she's been, or where she'd ditched HYDRA, or why it'd taken her nearly three days to make it back to them. There are deep lines under her eyes, framing purple skin, and a dry sallowness to her face. Wherever she's been, it's been harder than how he'd had it, and that thought keeps him awake.

It takes nine hours to reach Kiruna Station in Sweden. They've missed the night train to Stockholm by three hours, and Sam drives to a small hotel of black wood logs and quaint white window trim.

He'd really thought Barnes would be awake by the eight hour mark. But, as soon as Sam stops the car to park, Barnes' thick, crusty voice asks, "Where are we?"

"Kiruna, Sweden. Nat's here."

On cue, Natasha twists around her seat and looks back at Barnes. "Hey. How're you feeling?"

Sam doesn't hear the response. He gets out of the car, stretches until his back muscles threaten to seize, and realizes that the only money they have is whatever they have in their pockets.

All their gear was in the boat. Even Barnes' backpack. Their passports. Their computers and tech. Everything. He'd *known* before, but, for some reason, it's not until now that the implications really hit home.

"Shit."

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the wallet he'd purchased in Zurich. He has enough
Euros for the hotel and probably for the train. If not, he's sure Natasha and definitely Barnes have funds available, from somewhere besides Stockholm.

He keeps his wallet wrapped in his hand, his wingpack in his other hand, and walks toward the hotel's entrance. Halfway there, Barnes trots up to him, shoulder to shoulder, and walks in stride.

"Before you ask: I'll never use that word on you," Sam says.

Without hesitation, Barnes answers: "If it stops me from killing you, you use it."

Sam looks at him, wondering and then realizing: it's the word HYDRA created to protect themselves from him.

Barnes glances at Sam and says, "I mean it. I'm glad you have it."

Unbelievable.

Fuck it: Sam doesn't even care what Barnes does. Sam extends his right arm and inserts himself into Barnes' path, turning as he does so. Before Barnes can decide how to react, Sam drops his pack and wraps his arms around Barnes' chest and back.

"I'm glad you're okay."

He feels Barnes' arm wrap around his back—maybe a little loose, a little unsure, but Sam's happy with anything.

"Cute, Boys. Real cute. Should've gotten a room first."

Natasha buys a room with a wad of cash and a smirk.

The room is one of the few left: only two beds, which is only an issue, until Barnes says, "You really think I'm sleeping? It's 1800. I'm gonna go buy some shit. What size are you?"

Sam shrugs, his brain gone for the rest of the day, and the urge to shower the only thing stronger than the beacon in his head flashing sleep, fucker, sleep, because his body is screaming you stink, fucker, you stink.

Before that shower happens, Sam sees Natasha hand Barnes the wad of cash, and then sees Barnes reach into the pockets of his black pants and pull out a gold necklace. She takes it.

"It's the only reason I found either of you."

Sam takes that shower, and then sleeps, until Barnes throws a bag of clothes on top of him.

"Let's eat and let's go."

The clock says it's 0730. Every part of Sam says bullshit.

They eat breakfast, wait around, eat lunch, and catch the eighteen-and-a-half hour SJ night train to Stockholm, in a cabin with six cornflower blue bunks.

Barnes hops onto the left top-most bunk, plugs in his new tablet, and gets to work doing something.

Sam doesn't ask. He's tired, still—even after a full night's sleep at the hotel, a good hot shower, a good breakfast this morning, and a good lunch this afternoon—and he rolls into the right-side bottom bunk, bone-weary. He closes his eyes and, almost instantly, his mind takes flight into a
light dreamscape.

"Do we have a plan?" Natasha asks.

Sam opens his eyes and struggles to keep them open.

"No," Barnes answers. "Nothing's changed since Prague."

Sam can see that Barnes' tablet is still on and that he's kicked his shoes off. The crazy pattern socks are new; Sam doesn't have the energy to read into it. Maybe they'd been on sale.

The train gently lurches, then slowly picks up speed.

*All aboard.*

"We need a plan."

"Let's sleep on it," Sam suggests, half because he's tired, and half because he's afraid that their only remaining plan is to go home and regroup.

"Agreed," Barnes says.

"Fine."

Relieved, Sam closes his eyes again, and instantly dozes off. Not soon after, he hears the creaking of a ladder, soft metallic thuds, and busy shuffling of cloth.

"What are you doing?" Natasha. Almost whispering.

"Getting my stuff from the cloud. Have to rebuild a lot."

*The cloud.* Sam still can't believe Barnes knows this shit.

They stop talking. Curious, Sam opens a single eye and looks up. Natasha's shoes are off, and one of her socked feet is in Barnes' right hand, his thumb rubbing circles in the arch of her foot, while she leans against the wall, his tablet in her hands. There's a complete lack of personal space between them, and –

*Oh.*

*OH.*

Sam rolls over, throws his arm over his eyes, and sleeps.

---

After the fifth or sixth hotel room, they all started to look the same. This one in Stockholm is no different. Even their routines are the same: Sam collapses on the sofa, remote control in his hand. Barnes goes to the kitchen, hunting for food. Natasha locks the room door and finds the bedroom.

Natasha drops her new pack and sinks into the bed, before flopping backwards and letting her muscles stretch out over the mattress. She even closes her eyes and lets her mind drift.

"Hey."

Natasha opens her eyes to the sound of Barnes' voice.
"Do you know this phone number? I've got twelve missed calls."

Natasha sits up and takes Barnes' outstretched phone. She doesn't offer that only three people have the number for Barnes' phone: herself, Fury, and Maria.

Through the splintered, dusty screen, she sees two things: twelve missed calls from Maria, and an outgoing message to Fury with the coordinates for the cosmodrome island.

"It's Maria Hill."

The calls either mean Maria's found something, or something is seriously wrong.

"I don't know her," Barnes says, without saying what he really means, which is, "I don't want to call her back. Can you?"

Natasha palms the phone in her fist, gets off the bed, and says, "Let's get Sam in on this."

In the sitting room, Sam is slouched on the sofa, flipping through channels.

"We've got a call from ops," Natasha announces.

He shoots up in his seat, remote tumbling to the floor. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Natasha calls Maria back.

"Sergeant Barnes, this is Maria Hill. You don't know me. I work with Nick Fury. I have info-"

"Maria."

"Oh. I tried calling you, and HYDRA answered."

"Yeah, long story. This is the only secure phone we have. What's going on?"

"We intercepted a phone call made to Wilson's cell phone. It was Steve - verified."

Natasha pushes away a rush of adrenaline and ignores a soar of hope.

"Do you have him?" she asks.

"No, the call was untraceable. We have a recording. Stark is trying to analyze it—"

"Uh, 'trying'? Doing!"

"Stark is 'doing' to analyze it, but, so far, nothing helpful. I'm forwarding it to Barnes' phone now."

"So far, actually, I've learned that you're fired."

Any other time, Natasha would roll her eyes at the antics, but her adrenaline is pumping. This might be it.

Ping.

"All right, I've got it. Hey, Sam and I need new passports. Can you get them to Stockholm – by courier in the café at Södersjukhuset, tomorrow, 12:15 p.m.?"
"Yeah. That's not a problem."

"Thanks."

The call ends, and she tosses the phone back to Barnes. It'll require his prints and thermal recognition to access the file.

"Steve called Sam's phone. There's a voice file you need to access," she says.

Barnes engrosses himself in the phone, revealing nothing in his expression—for once—and Sam simply leans back in the sofa.

"He's alive, at least," Sam says. He blinks, then looks perplexed. "How did she have the number for that phone?"

Natasha shrugs, more focused on thinking about what the recording could mean. It could be the intelligence break they've been needing for weeks.

"Are you SHIELD?" Sam suddenly asks, unblinking eyes pinned on Barnes.

Barnes isn't in the mood, and his attention is narrowly focused on navigating the phone and presumably accessing the file. "Yeah. You guys ready?"

He sets the phone on the coffee table, presses a button, and backs away, arms tightly wrapped around his chest.

The recording plays: Steve's voice raspy, clear, and loud.

"I don't know where I am. It's hot. Smells like rain, creosote. There's, uh, there're… I… It's hard to think. It's san—"

There are sounds like airplanes, great booming sounds, and then a scream. Static. Call: ended. The recording ends.

Natasha's stomach drops. It's barely anything.

"It's not a lot to go on," Sam says. "Hot, rainy, and creosote?"

Natasha wasn't going to be the first one to say it. But she adds, "Airplanes, too. There were airplanes in the background."

"Creosote's a wood preservative used to coat railroad ties," Barnes offers. "Might be close to a railroad."

Natasha and Sam both look at him, questioningly.

"I worked at a railyard, before the war," Barnes clarifies. "I heard the planes, too. Not well enough to put a name to them."

"Any ideas where, Secret Agent Railroad Engineer?"

Natasha smacks Sam in the arm.

Barnes frowns, focused intently on the map. After a few long minutes, he finally answers: "Kosrechnaya is a possibility, in Kazakhstan. Military airstrip, hot, trains. It was definitely HYDRA."
"How long ago?" Sam asks.

Barnes' eyes go distant, brow drawn tight. He's in another time. After a minute, sweat breaks out on his forehead, and his face drains of color. Natasha knows they've lost him, for at least the rest of the night.

"November '89. Please don't ask how I know."

Without another word, he gets up and heads toward the bedrooms. A door clicks shut. Natasha doesn't comment that it feels lonelier without him.

---

Early the next morning, Sam hears the tapping of fingers against a screen. He figures it's Barnes.

He's half right.

It's Barnes and Natasha, sitting thigh-to-thigh on the sofa, sharing a tablet with two tall cups of coffee between them. On his way to the kitchenette and the half-full carafe of coffee, he hears them talk.

"I feel it."

"That's good."

"No, it's not. I—I can't focus."

"It's three days to Atyrau. You don't need to focus."

Sam pours himself a cup of coffee and dumps creamer into it, until the coffee turns to a milky beige.

"Yeah, don't remind me."

He sits at the small, round table in the middle of the kitchenette, and digs through a brown paper bag marked Espresso House. He pulls out a plain, room temperature bagel and a packet of plain, room temperature cream cheese.

"Good morning, Sam," Natasha calls.

"Morning," he grumps, and then downs a third of his coffee.

It takes a few seconds for the taste to catch up: it's really good.

The bagel's just as good, and he eats it to the tune of sporadic screen tapping and otherwise silence.

When he's done, he makes another cup of beige coffee and goes into the living room, where Natasha is scrolling on the tablet, and Barnes is disinterestedly watching, his head resting on the back of a gray sofa. His eyes are puffy, the skin underneath them red, and Sam thinks he's been crying.

Sam sits across from them, pulls his legs up onto the chair, and asks, "You said three days to Kazakhstan?"

He sees Barnes close his eyes and shake his head, and, when he talks, he hears derision. "I have no
fucking idea. We already wasted two months."

"Hey," Natasha warns.

"We did."

Natasha ignores Barnes and looks straight at Sam. "It's a long shot. And, no, it's 88 hours by train."

Sam sips his coffee, first thinking that it tastes good, and then wondering how Steve will spend those 88 hours. His stomach turns, hot nausea creeping up his throat, and he's done eating and drinking.

"Passports at noon and then a train?" he asks.

Natasha nods. Barnes closes his eyes.

A rusted-orange, rectangular sign laying on the hard-packed, light-brown ground reads "Kosrechnaya." The Cyrillic characters are barely legible.

The chain-link, barbed wire perimeter fence is rusted and mostly collapsed. Barnes walks over its remains and enters a flat, desolate expanse of land.

He can see the airstrip: two runways, each two klicks long, intersecting into a long "x" shape. Their asphalt is sun-bleached gray, fissured, and dirt-strewn. Once, clockwork bombers, combat jets, and cargo planes landed and took off once every half hour.

He can see the skeleton of the hangar and, inside, a handful of wingless Tupolev TU-4's, faint red stars still painted on their vertical stabilizers. Once, the hangar had been packed with planes, wing-to-wing, each of their stars on each of their tails lined up perfectly.

He can see the foundations of the single two buildings that once stood here, what's left no taller than a half-meter. The first building had been administrative, training space, and barracks. He has fragmented memories of learning to read Russian and training KGB operatives, then leaving for a long while, and then coming back – in '89.

The second building had housed the munitions factory – rows upon rows upon rows of missiles and bombs for their planes and their army, with lines upon lines upon lines of dirty, thin women and men slipping through the narrow entranceway. He never saw them leave.

He can see the railroad: the dark metal rails and the rotted wooden ties. It doesn't smell like anything. It used to smell like creosote, and it used to remind him of memories he couldn't reach.

Like splinters in his left hand, always.

Nothing, now. All of it, gone.

Almost five days of travel, for this.

"You didn't know," Sam says. "He could've been here. Everything fits."

Everything fit decades ago, when the railroad was new and the planes were flying. He remembers it being hotter.
"It was worth a look," Natasha adds.

He'd told Natasha almost five days ago: he can't focus. He's chasing his own ghost, while Steve becomes one.

"Okay" is all he says.

They'd left the Lada Niva about a klick and a half southwest. In this cool 14 degree weather, and walking across the flat steppes of western Kazakhstan, it's a short, quiet walk.

Sam tries to put a hand on his shoulder, and Barnes pulls away. After everything—everything—he feels bad, and he says, "Sorry."

"It's cool."

It wouldn't be "cool," if he'd killed Sam two years ago. It's not cool that the two people he's closest with are the Winter Soldier's sloppy, loose ends.

It's a flat, easy drive back to the main road, and, from there, another five hours to get back to Atyrau.

Natasha lies down in the backseat, looking at things on his tablet, and Sam drives. Content to look out the window, Barnes doesn't mind the heavy silence.

It takes almost two hours for someone to break it, after Natasha seemingly falls asleep.

"What's going on with you?" Sam asks. "Ever since that phone call, you've been different. You barely said more than ten words on the train."

"I remembered something."

It's always something.

"Bad?"

It's always bad.

He chooses not to answer.

"So, is it more helpful, if we acknowledge that you've done some pretty awful shit, or is it more helpful, if we acknowledge that you're a good person who's trying like hell to be a good person?"

The steppes have given way to oil fields. He doesn't like this part of Kazakhstan. He'd much rather be north of Astana, in the woody, green flatlands. Actually, he'd much rather be home, with Steve safe, Sam barely more than a stranger, and Natasha an unlikely support.

"Are we not talking?" Sam asks.

"First one."


Barnes holds his breath and chances a look over at Sam. Sam is focused on driving, eyes on the road. Barnes looks back out his own window and doesn't want to be anywhere near either Sam or Natasha.
He's seen her scars.

"It's funny, though. In the past few weeks, those nightmares have changed a little. Instead of you killing me, I kill you—usually with a gun. Or Steve kills you—cracks your head wide open with his shield. Or Natasha kills you—blows your dumb ass up. So, let's just acknowledge that that happened, too – that we tried—"

"No. That was only because I—"

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. You didn't want to talk. That was clear. So, you shut up and don't talk. I'll talk. Those are pretty bad dreams to have. I don't like those dreams. I don't like remembering those couple of days. But, it's weird, because, despite all that, when I think about those days, I don't think of you. You're not that person. You never would've chosen to be, and you fought harder and longer against it than anyone could've ever asked. What that person did doesn't reflect on you."

Total bullshit. Total.

"That's a lot of people you're speaking for. You think you have that right?" Barnes asks, and he looks over again.

This time, he doesn't look away.

Sam's eyes never leave the road. "Do you?"

Barnes doesn't have any sort of direct answer for that. He tears down a different path. "You can only say any of this, because I didn't manage to kill one of you three."

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be here, either, if you'd done that. You would've eaten a gun."

Barnes isn't so sure about that. There are five other people he –

He digs his fingers into the elbow of his left arm, and shuts down that thought. If he goes down that road, he isn't coming back.

It's just funny, the way he can deal with some of those memories, like Lacy and those five people, while others—like bringing down a civilian DC-10, with a passenger list of 379 dead that he first saw five days ago, twenty-eight years after the fact—just fucking kill him.

"Look. I can only say that I don't want to lose my friend to someone else's ghosts. I don't want to see you drown like that."

"Then don't watch."

Sam's knuckles turn white around the steering wheel.

Sam drives back to the vehicle rental agency, outside Atyrau's sparkling glass-façade railway station. Natasha speaks in Russian to the smiling attendant and signs papers. Barnes is outside, keeping more and more distance from them.

Sam doesn't know what to do. Not anymore.

"Hey."
Sam blinks and looks up at Natasha.

"Ready?" she asks.

He shrugs, then nods.

"He's working through a lot. Just keep doing what you're doing."

Sometimes, it's like Natasha can read minds. It's scary.

"I feel like he's only getting worse. Like it's crushing him."

Natasha hesitates, just for a moment, then steps in close. People walk around them.

"He's getting closer to Bucky, at the same time he's remembering more about HYDRA. It's rough."

She hesitates again. "It's going to get rougher. I'm calling it."

Sam scrunches his brow together, confused. "Calling what?"

"The mission. We haven't seen any sign of Steve in two months. We're not doing him any favors, by exploring random bases that Barnes barely remembers. Just be ready. He's not going to like it."

Every single of her words twists his stomach into a tighter knot. "I don't like it."

She tilts her head, just so. "Sam."

"I know. I know."

"Are you ready?" she asks.

He nods and jams in his hands into his jacket's pockets.

Barnes is outside the railway station, sitting on a wooden bench, elbows on his knees. No one looks twice at his single black-gloved hand.

When they're only a few meters away, Barnes stands up and heads toward the railway entrance. It reminds Sam of the early days, in Spain, Zurich, and Italy, when Barnes seemed like he couldn't wait to get away from them.

Inside, it's weekend busy. Scores of people are moving constantly, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, and Barnes veers off to a lonely side of the station, close to the ticket counter.

When they join him, he asks, "Where are we going?"

Sam looks at Natasha.

"Bucharest," Natasha answers, then, despite the small ounce of relief on Barnes' face, plows forward. "There's a small airport just west of Cioacănești. It's SHIELD. We're flying home."

That ounce of relief bleeds from his face. Barnes looks at Natasha, then Sam, then Natasha.

"Really." It's not a question. It's a pissed off statement.

Natasha tilts her head, and the look on her face is warning enough. "We need to gather more intel. The voice recording barely gave us anything."

Barnes doesn't say a word. He looks at Sam.
"It's over," Sam says. Barnes doesn't react. "How much more do you have to give? They've torn you apart—"

That does it.

"You think this is anything?" Barnes hisses. "Do you know what they're doing to him? I can't stop looking. I won't."

"Neither are we," Natasha interjects. "We're out of ideas. You don't run ops without intel. You know that."

"Sure." Barnes nods and takes a step back. "Good luck."

He turns and walks back toward the entrance, shouldering his way through the throngs of people.

"Barnes!" Natasha calls.

In disbelief, Sam watches him pull his phone out of his jacket pocket, crush it in his left hand, and drop it into a blue trash can, all without missing a single step. Soon, he'll disappear into the crowd –

Fuck.

He thinks of everything HYDRA's tried to do to take Barnes down. How close they've come. How vulnerable he's been. How different he's been, since the cosmodrome and the phone call and all those terrible memories.

He loses sight of him.

Sam says to Natasha, "I'm sorry – I can't let him be alone. He's not okay."

Natasha doesn't say anything, and Sam doesn't wait: he dashes after Barnes, barely missing people, gently-accidentally hitting some others, until he's out the door and back in the sunlight and –

The street's busy. Car horns honk. People walk around him. A man shouts. The sun is low and deep orange.

And his friend is nowhere to be seen.

He stands there, staring at nothing, until he feels stupid and sits on a bench up against the building.

He doesn't know for how long. He doesn't realize he's looking for Barnes' dark blue jacket, until every navy blue and black jacket sends excitement and then disappointment rippling through his gut.


After a time, Natasha joins him. "He's not coming back here, Sam."

"I know."

"He'll come to us. He just needs time to get there."

Sam looks at his hands. "I'm worried he won't make it that far."

"He was just fine for two years."
"That was a different HYDRA. They've gotten stronger."

"He'll be fine."

Sam thinks those words are empty, a dull promise, but he doesn't say it.

Be safe.

"We can fly out from the airport here. It'll be a lot faster," she says.

Sam nods, and wonders where Barnes went.

On a seventeen hour commercial flight from Atyrau to JFK, with a layover in Moscow, Sam thinks of Steve, after Krakow. He stares out the window, wordless.

Five hours in, with twelve to go, the sky outside the plane has dulled to a dim, starless gray, with black slips of clouds passing under the plane.

"I think he hated me, near the end. I really think he did."

Sam leans his head against the fuselage, closes his eyes, and thinks, You were so fucking wrong.

Barnes doubles back in, waits out Natasha from the other side of the station, and buys a ticket for the earliest train available. He doesn't care about its destination.

It's a two-day high-speed train to Moscow, with changes in Kandyagash and Samara. He pays for a private cabin, then pulls his hood up, shoves his hands into his pockets, pretends to be asleep, and waits thirty minutes to board.

He doesn't know if he wants them to find him or not.

They don't.

On the train, he drops his backpack onto an empty, hot pink seat, drops himself into another empty, hot pink seat, and closes his eyes.

It's been fifty-eight days, and Steve could be anywhere.

Not a city. He would have mentioned it.

Hot, rain, creosote.

Nothing else stood out.

Airplanes.

It strikes him: Steve didn't mention seeing anything.

Sun blind, he thinks. He was sun blind.

The train lurches forward and begins its journey. He opens his eyes, looks out the window, and sees a freight railyard. He takes a deep breath, with his nose only, and concentrates on what he can smell.

*Hot, rain, and creosote.*

The train picks up speed, and the railyard blurs by, until it's gone.

*That's not a lot to go on, Steve.*

He kicks up the arm rest and lays across the two seats, right arm thrown over his eyes.

*Hot, rain, and creosote.*

He might have an idea.

---

Sam blinks, heavier and heavier, Manhattan's skyline never looking less appealing.

He'd thought that he couldn't wait to come home. Hear English. Eat a cheeseburger. Never see the seat of a train again.

But.

Steve is still missing – somewhere, anywhere, nowhere in the world.

Barnes is probably somewhere in Russia, circling HYDRA until he burns.

And he's here: in a Tony Stark-owned BMW, being driven through bumper-to-bumper Manhattan traffic, so tired that he can barely think.

"We're here."

Sam opens his eyes, not quite sure when he'd closed them. He looks at Natasha, then out his window, and he can't see anything except the plaza. It's blurry.

He opens the door, fumbling with the handle, and steps out into mild NYC air.

Natasha squeezes his arm and leads him to a black tinted glass door. He hears a *click* and then sees her push the door open.

The lobby is grandiose: expansive, tall, glittering. The floor is black granite, specked white, and so shiny that he can see his puffy, lined face in it.

He follows Natasha to a bank of elevators and sees her push the "up" button. As they wait for a car, he closes his eyes, finding instant relief.

"Hey, Sam."

His eyes snap open and he whips around, back toward the entrance, looking down the empty, wide hallway. There's no one. And definitely not –

"What? Sam, what?"

"I heard— I thought."
He'd heard Barnes.

"You need to sleep."

The elevator *dings*. The door slides open. Together, they enter the car.

"Is Stark – Tony – here?"

"He is. He won't bother you. You need to sleep."

She pushes the buttons marked 90 and 93. The elevator jolts, and then rises smoothly.

"Stark gave you an entire floor to yourself. He spares no expense, you know," Natasha says. He hears amusement in her voice.

"I'm sure," Sam comments, though he's really thinking that nothing sounds lonelier than *an entire floor* to himself.

"I'm on 90. You've got 93. Is that okay?"

Barnes would say *sure* or *okay*, and then just deal. He'd find something to do. Eat everything. Throw shit on the floor. Take a stupidly long shower. Do his hair.

Steve would stiff-upper-lip it. Sit on the couch with a pencil and paper and a TV show. Draw scribbles and make angry, disgusted faces at reality TV.

"I don't want to be alone."

"Ninety's pretty big. But I'm meeting with Maria for a while, to go over things."

Sam nods and looks anywhere but at the shiny elevator doors. "I just…"

"I get it."

The elevator stops at 90, and the doors slide open to an open-concept space that drops Sam's jaw.

It's *huge*. The living room *alone* is bigger than his whole DC apartment. The floors are dark hard wood, and the ceiling is tall and vaulted. The entire space is ringed by floor-to-ceiling windows, tinted dark.

"JARVIS, can you pull the blinds down?"

"Certainly, Natasha."

He's heard about JARVIS; hearing and seeing him is another thing. He watches a holographic image of black, wooden blinds appear over the windows, as good as if they were real.

"The windows are bullet proof and one-sided. I like them better when they're covered, though."

"Wow."

"It's just a penthouse, Sam."

"Yeah, but what do you do with all the space?"

"Ignore it, mostly. I don't live here. But it makes Stark feel important, and it's a nice place to crash, sometimes."
Sam shakes his head – at the size, at the opulence, at JARVIS, at her description of "a nice place to crash."

He plops down on a three-piece, cream sectional that (1) is bigger than his whole bed, and (2) probably costs more than his car.

"The kitchen should have food. You've got blankets and pillows on the couch, and two spare bedrooms. Are you good?"

He nods and wonders, "How are you not tired?"

She's walking back toward the elevator, and he doesn't see her reaction. He guesses a smirk. "Experience. I have to get some balls moving. Sleep."

The elevator dings, as he toes his shoes off and then says to hell with it and takes off his pants, too. He pulls an impossibly soft-but-somehow-still-firm throw pillow under his head, and drags a gray not-polyester-and-probably-not-cotton-either blanket off the back of the couch.

He's out within seconds.
Barnes takes a set of long, endless trains to Murcia, Spain. He sleeps in a cheap hotel, then loads his backpack with water and drives to the semi-arid plains and abandoned mines near Mazarrón.

The place he remembers didn't have an airstrip, and it didn't have a railway. It was a single concrete building, surrounded by tarp-covered patches of land and circles of precisely planted green shrubs, with at least five underground levels.

He doesn't know where else to go. Nowhere else is hot.

It's been decades, but, like with almost all of the other HYDRA bases and installations, this building's location is installed in his brain, almost like coordinates in a GPS. Maybe they'd programmed him like one.

Make a u-turn.

Recalculating.

Like Kazakhstan, the building is nothing more than a foundation. He walks inside of it, kicking long-dead branches out of his way and walking around mounds of green bushes. A snake slithers by, sideways and scared.

He walks through what could have been considered a lobby, down a hallway, and then through two rooms, where the elevator shaft to the underground levels had once been. It's poured concrete, solid, through and through.

He punches it with his left hand, to be sure.

He's sure.

He sits down, back pressed against the crumbling foundation, and drinks a water. He sits, until the sun begins to set, and then long after it's below the horizon and the temperature has dropped.

Hot, rain, and creosote.

Hot, rain, and creosote.
Hot, rain, and creosote.

There's nowhere else he knows to go.

He stays until sunrise.

HYDRA never comes, except later, in a Madrid hotel, in all the ways that they always will.

"Report on my property."

"My—Its left—"

She backhanded him across the face, his head whipping to the left.

Although he didn't flinch, or cry out, a tiny flicker of emotion slithered through him, overwhelming almost, and, for the shortest moment, his eyes stung.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два. Три.

Чёрный.

The wall was gray. It had unpainted lines, demarcating its concrete blocks. There was a deep crack—

"Look at me."

He did.

"Report on my property," she said again.

Suddenly, words weren't easy. He searched for them, struggling, and couldn't find the right words to say. He felt wetness sliding down his cheeks.

Один. Два. Три.

Красный.

Один. Два.

She backhanded him again.

Три.
Чёрный.
Один. Два. Три.
Красный.
Один. Два. Три.
Чёрный.

Something inside of him squeezed and burned. More wetness slid down his face.

"Subject Seventeen - if that room is all you can think about, then that's where I'll keep you. Nothing of mine is so useless as to be afraid. Are you useless?"

She deactivated his left arm, shackled his unbruised, healed wrist behind his back, injected his neck with the clear liquid that made his body writhe and seize and burn, and chained him to the floor of that same dark, minuscule cell, where he –

Didn't scream. He wasn't allowed to anymore.

The part of him that had once existed, the part that would have said something like "I'm already fucking in here; what's the worst you're gonna fucking do, you bitch?" and then screamed himself raw, was entirely gone. It wasn't even a memory.

The something inside of him didn't stop squeezing or burning, and the wetness didn't go away.

Outside, he heard the Man and the Woman talk, their voices and words twisted by echoes, but he didn't care what they were saying:

"You are destroying everything we have worked toward."

"I am solidifying everything we have worked toward. Listen."

"You have not performed the injection?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

"Regardless. If the subject destabilizes – everything is gone. You push too far. All this, over a word."

"A word, today. What else, tomorrow?"

"You allow perfection to be the enemy of good. We knew the emotional collapse would happen. The emotional aspect of the—"

"'Emotional'? When I am done with it, it won't have—"

"Don't be so naïve. It's still human. You push this way, and it will be more useful to us with a bullet in its head."

A rush of white noise filled his ears. A scream coalesced in the back of his throat. Behind his back, his right hand shook and shook and shook, painful against the bone-tight restraint. He closed his wet, stinging eyes, shut out the world, and focused:

Один. Два. Три.
In a Madrid hotel room, wrapped in a white down comforter, he wakes up crying. He pushes his face into one of the fluffy, thick pillows, and lets go into overwhelming emotion held over from decades not so long past.

In the morning, he doesn't get out of bed. In the afternoon, he still lays there. In the evening, he takes a piss and goes back to bed. He doesn't eat or drink, or shower or shave, or pull out his tablet and look for more options.

The next morning, the next afternoon, the next evening: the same thing. His stomach doesn't rumble, and his body doesn't beg for water. Maybe it's finally, finally done.

_I failed you_tumbles through his brain, over and over and over again, and he can't think of anything truer. All of his words, all of his bluster, all of his _I'll never stop looking_, ends here, in this ridiculous room.

He closes his eyes and forces himself to sleep, to maybe silence the self-made demons in his mind.

"I don't care how long you keep me in here. I don't care what you do. You can fuck yourself."

It was hard to sound threatening or strong, when he could barely stutter those words out of his mouth.

"Spoken like a man, who hopes people are looking for him."

It was a woman: bony face, scars up her legs, Soviet uniform. She spoke English well, though heavily accented.

"Sergeant James B. Barnes, 28, son of Mr. and Mrs. George Barnes, was killed in action in Austria on February 27, 1945, the War department has informed his parents. He was born on March 10, 1916. Surviving are his parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Barnes of Brooklyn; two brothers, Mr. Andrew Barnes and Mr. John Barnes, both serving in the United States Army; and one sister, Miss Rebecca Barnes, a nurse also serving overseas with the United States Army. He was preceded in death by his wife, Mrs. Anna Barnes of Brooklyn. Having served in dozens of campaigns against enemy forces with Captain America, his bravery and courage in action were highly commended by his comrades and commanding officers. He was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal and Purple Heart."

She held up a yellowed newspaper clipping, then dropped it. It flitted to the concrete ground, landing upside down.

"There is your hope."
That's not his hope. It doesn't matter what Phillips thinks, or what people back home think, because Steve will never –

She held up more. In the dim light from the hallway, he could see the large, blocky letters, and he resolved not to show her the way the rest of his life had just disintegrated.

"'Captain America Killed!' 'Captain America Sacrifices His Life!' 'Captain Steven Rogers – Who Was He In Life, Who Was He In Death? The Story of the World's Hero.' You are mentioned many times."

All of her papers and headlines flitted to the ground.

"And there is the rest of your hope. Da?"

The door creaked and slammed shut, strong, heavy bolts sliding into place. All of the light went with it. It was so dark, he couldn't see his hand, not even the fake one. All the better: no one could see him cry.

Except Steve, maybe, and he thought and thought and thought, Please don't watch any of this. Please don't watch any of this. Please.

Another set of days slip by, and it's everything Natasha said it would be: all at once, nowhere near okay, and nowhere near anyone he trusts.

The curtains are pulled tight, and he hasn't seen daylight in days. The sign hanging on the room's door handle says "do not disturb." He's only talked to one person: the front desk, to ask if he could stay for a few more days and to put it all on his card.

His CZ-75 is still in his backpack, and he wonders what would happen if he used it. If he ate a gun, like Sam had said. If they would ever find Steve. If Steve would ever know.

The gun stays in his pack, but maybe only because it's so far away and he doesn't want to get up.

He sat strapped in a jump seat, eyes closed behind his mask, not a fucking thought in his entire head.

POP.

"Shi—!"

A blast of air sucked the breath out of his lungs. Only then did he open his eyes. Across from him, three of the seats and the men strapped into them were gone. All that was left was the jagged metal of the torn hull and the cloudy night sky outside.

"Did we get hit?"

"Explosive decompression—"

"Sit still and shut up!"
Above him, metal groaned and creaked. He tilted his head up and watched a crack form along the ceiling, from cockpit to the cargo bay door. He knew what that meant.

The jet plunged.

"Jesus fucking Christ Jesus fucking Christ Jesus fucking Christ —"

"We're gonna die. Jesus fuck, we're gonna die."

They weren't wrong.

He relaxed and closed his eyes. The only thing he wished he could do was shut off his comm.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."


He opened his eyes. The sky was still dark, a thousand stars still bright. His head ached; his chest hurt; and his right leg felt burned.

In his ear, his comm crackled with static and blared high-pitched signal bursts.

He reached up and released his seat strap, falling onto the ground.

Face-first, he landed in carved, indented dirt drenched in fuel. He pushed himself up and followed the indentation with his eyes. He saw two partially naked bodies, skin split open, yellow fat and red innards melting into the torn open dirt. He saw metal debris, and then the burning, mangled body of the jet.

In his ear, words coalesced, barely, their meaning eaten by the static.

He fell onto his ass and found that he was nearly fully clothed: missing the mask and part of his right arm sleeve. His pants had melted into his right leg, from the top of his ankle to just below his knee. He pushed on his chest, where it hurt on the right side, and felt his ribs give. He found blood on his face.

Orders were to stay with the jet. That's all he was supposed to do. He laid back down, on his back, and watched the sky. Watched his breaths, little white puffs of air, sink into the night. Listened to the simmering of the burning jet, the crackled words and screeches from the radio, the shrieking moans of one of his teammates, the howling of some kind of animal in the distance. After a while, tasted blood and heard his own coughing.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

From eight rooftops over, he took a clean, good shot at the head of a wealthy man having breakfast with his two children. Blood, brains, and bone bled into a bowl of milk.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

Night vision goggles strapped to his head, he parachuted to the roof of some palace, six men behind him, and shot everyone: soldiers, dozens of women, three children, and the target. They blew the building, collateral damage a bonus, not a concern, and then bled into the night, invisible.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

From the ground, he took the shot at a jetliner and didn't even watch the impact. He and his team
were gone, before the jet bled its bodies and luggage.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

Deep inside a cold HYDRA base, he was told to kill one of the girls, and he did. "Be brutal," they said, and the room bled red.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

Alone, he parachuted to a wooded area and slipped into a secluded mansion, sidestepping security forces, cameras, and alarm triggers. He found the bedroom of his target, hid until she was alone, grabbed her tightly from behind, and suffocated her, in complete silence, her breaths bleeding away.

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

Atop a seashore cliff, he could see for kilometers and kilometers. He could see the winding road, marked by a green sign reading "Pacific Coast Highway," and he could see a billboard for something called Star Trek VI. He could see the two targets minutes before he jumped onto their car, punched through the windshield, and bashed the first target's head into the steering wheel. The second target screamed. The car crashed, and both targets bled and bled and bled, and their faces were –

"...w're you doing, Sar..."

Fucking Stark.

He didn't blink, and he didn't move his gaze from the scope. He was a little annoyed by the distraction that cut into his observations and calculations. It'd taken five days in Very Fucking Annoying Terrain to get to this target area, way ahead of the rest of the unit, and something as little as Morita's very well-intentioned question could lay it all to waste.

"Sarge?"

Bucky maneuvered his left hand to his really small SCR-536; one of fucking Stark's irritating inventions that actually almost mostly worked.

He was tired and hungry. Every fucking bug this side of Carniola had bitten the fuck out of him. Every fucking thorn bush had grabbed onto him, like little tiny magnets. He smelled like Gerald Englewood's armpits and ass, not that anyone except Steve would know what that meant, and not that he said any of that anyway.

"Stop talking."

He slid his left hand back onto his rifle, at ease with the metal and the grip. He knew this gun better than he knew anything else, anymore.

"Okay, 'cause Cap's snapping his cap."

("I am not.")

About a month ago, Bucky's exit strategy hadn't quite gone as planned, to the lovely tune of ten HYDRA soldiers and two HYDRA helicopters surrounding him. When Steve and the men came looking, all they found were nine dead bodies, two crashed helicopters, and a particularly pissed off secondary HYDRA platoon.
When Bucky arrived at the rendezvous site thirteen hours late, all he found was the unit's poorly hidden M3 but at least there was a medkit, a place to sleep, and a lot of time to think of pretty lies about how he'd "done that. What the hell, Bucky? Shit, I don't care; I thought you were dead! Again."

Contrastingly, Phillips had stared at him, the After Action Report in his hand, silent and unreadable, until: "You expect me to believe this fucking nonsense?"

"Yes, Sir," Bucky answered, evenly, hands clasped behind his back. "I do."

Phillips sighed and sat on the edge of his metal desk, fingers pinching his nose. "Son. Be real honest. Do you know what was done to you at Krausberg?"

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, but Phillips cut him off, loudly: "Because something was fucking done."

There was a lot more frustration and concern there than Bucky ever expected to hear. It didn't crack his resolve. He had no idea what Phillips was talking about, and that's the story he was sticking to.

Because he didn't know. But something was done. Something horrible, that would lead to more kinds of horrible. His life would end: no going back, no going home, no "when the war's over."

"And I can't help you, unless you tell me."

"Sir, I have no idea what you're talking about," Bucky said, picture-perfect innocent and convincingly confused, he hoped.

Phillips tossed the report on his desk and waved Bucky away, fingers still pinching his nose.

Unlike Phillips, Steve took more umbrage with the "ambushed and completely cut off" part of it, and, when Steve was upset, people tended to listen, these days. Hence, the really small SCR-536, the first of its kind.

Bucky called it an unnecessary distraction. All the damn thing did was blast static into his ear, like a bad radio program. The closer the unit got, though, the better the static became. He at least had an idea of where they were.

He relaxed into the brush, laid his rifle on its side, and switched to his field binoculars. He kept his breaths steady. Through the lenses, he studied the apparently-abandoned HYDRA base. He wasn't buying it. He knew it was active. He knew from Krausberg.

"Sarge?"

Morita, again. Bucky wasn't sure how long it'd been, but the sun was setting. It'd be night, soon. It'd be cold. It'd be him, and only him.

He pressed the "talk" button, and kept his hand there. "Yeah."

"You ever been to..."

The radio fizzled out. Bucky remembered not to tilt his head. This shit was embedded in his entire being: stay still, stay steady, stay calm, stay still. American snipers were being picked off faster than they could be trained.
"Say again."

"...ver been...Death ...alley?"

For a moment, Bucky wondered what the hell Morita was going on about and, more importantly, why. But the lower the sun got, the more Bucky didn't so much mind. Tonight wasn't going to be any sort of ring-a-ding-ding; the temperature was already dropping, the breeze picking up.

"Barely ever left the City; are you nuts?"

"Well...hot as fuck, dry as...and deadly as fuck. The whole damn place can ki...ou in about six hours, and...not even mentioning the fucking skin-eating... But there's this one place—lace, Man- where the sand...ound like airplanes... call it the singing san... It's—"

Bucky was surprised the radio kept the connection as smooth as it did for as long as it did. He didn't think he missed anything important. He could piece together the missing parts pretty easy: weird shit in Death Valley. Got it.

"...there, Sarge? Static's shit."

"Why're you tellin' me this?"

"Dunno. ...like you miss home. I miss that place. ...is pretty fucked up."

The base was still desolate and lifeless. The sun was lower; the sky, burnt orange with splotchy, dark gray rain clouds. From somewhere further east, he could smell leaves burning.

Great.

A cold, windy, rainy night, a relative stone's throw from a HYDRA base, with some idiot burning shit a few klicks away. His favorite.

Despite himself, Bucky asked: "What'd it smell like?"

"Rain."

He wasn't sure he'd heard that right. It made no sense. "Rain? Morita, it's a desert."

"...reosote bushes, man. ...'ucking everywhere."
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

It’s a 49 hour train ride to Bucharest. It’s the only place he knows to go – the surest, fastest bet back to the U.S. He spends part of the time trying not to implode, before his dreams catch up to him, and he spends the rest of the time attached to his tablet, googling and googling and googling, chasing ghosts of memories of the people he’s killed.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

Barnes takes the quickest shower possible, shaves so quickly he probably misses a few patches of hair, gets dressed before he's entirely dry, grabs his pack, and damn near runs out the door. He checks out of the hotel, grabs four bagels and a free cup of coffee, and hauls ass to the train station.

It’s a 49 hour train ride to Bucharest. It's the only place he knows to go – the surest, fastest bet back to the U.S. He spends part of the time trying not to implode, before his dreams catch up to him, and he spends the rest of the time attached to his tablet, googling and googling and googling, chasing ghosts of memories of the people he's killed.

After hours and hours, he finally thinks to google *Star Trek VI*. It gives him a year. He googles "Pacific Coast Highway AND 1991 AND car accident," and his answer is the first result, and the second, and the third, and the fourth, and all the rest.

It brings down his world, again and again and again and again, so fast that he'll never be able to run from it quickly enough. It's enough to turn Steve against him. It's enough to turn Natasha and Sam. It's more than enough to turn himself.

Not so long ago, he committed to never letting his memories defeat him, at least until Steve was safe. He's reconsidering the definition of "safe" and wonders, seriously, if "close enough" counts.

He puts his hand on his backpack, where his CZ-75 is loaded and ready to go, but doesn't open it, and spends the rest of the long, long train ride drowning in the past.

In Bucharest, he rents a black sedan and speeds northwest, toward the commune of Ciocănești, windows up. Outside, it's sunny, blue skies, and a mild, cool 18 degrees Celsius.

The city behind him, the landscape turns to fields of crisp ears of corn and golden wheat, dotted with green, sprawling forests. The road is narrow but quiet and smooth.

He guns it as fast he's comfortable, the speedometer climbing to 125 klicks per hour.

He's not sure what he's looking for, beyond what he expects to be a small airport and something not
overtly SHIELD.

He drives through narrow, wooden-fenced towns, adjusting his speed accordingly, and then down barren, asphalt roads, their edges lined by white dashes. The landscape shifts from crops to forests to meadows, back and forth, back and forth.

Ten miles outside of Ciocăneşti, he sees something hopeful in the eastern distance: a long strip of mowed grass lined by wind-stiff white-and-orange flags, a three-story terminal slash air traffic control tower, and a half-dome hangar made of tiles of square, colored glass.

Although the excitement rolling in his gut tells him to *speed up*, he slows down, taking his time to identify the route to the airport.

He almost misses it.

It's an unmarked road of trimmed, bright green grass, framed by a forest on one side and corn on the other. He turns onto it.

It's bumpy, and he takes it slowly, the tires of the car dipping into the soggy, soft ground. "Slow" isn't the appropriate choice here.

He pushes on the accelerator and tears down the path. After about three quarters of a klick, the path opens to old asphalt, grass growing between the cracks, and, then, another klick down the road, the brown, three-story terminal/ATC and the single runway.

It's an older building, with brown, metal siding and a strip of cloudy windows across the front. The end of the grass runway damn near runs right down the side of the building, before stretching diagonally in the other direction, behind and away from the terminal.

The asphalt road branches into a small, empty, unmarked parking lot, right in front of the terminal, and he parks in the middle of it. For a long minute, he sits in the car and observes.

There are no people and no planes. The hangar, a couple hundred meters behind the terminal, is shut tight. His is the only car in the parking lot. The only sign that the airport is still operational are the runway flags, not yet wind torn, and the carefully mowed grass of the runway.

The terminal's entrance-made of cloudy glass with a peeling black metal handle-is directly ahead of the windshield. He cuts the car's engine, swallows the yellow-tagged keys in the fist of his right hand, and gets out of the car.

He thinks the crisp breeze feels good against his face; the sun, warm against the back of his neck. He walks across the parking lot to the cloudy, peeling door, and expects it to be locked.

It swings right open, and he steps inside.

Instantly, he hears the high-pitched buzzing of old fluorescent lights, and he sees rows and rows of them bolted across the low ceiling. At least half of the bulbs are burnt black and nonfunctional. The floor is untreated concrete - but clean.

A row of cracked, brown leather chairs are placed against the wall in front of him. To his right is what passes for a ticket counter: a scratched, dented, brown wooden desk, with a black phone, a boxy computer monitor, and a silver ding bell, prefaced with a handwritten sign saying, "Inel pentru serviciu." There's a brown, wooden door behind it, with a scuffed, golden door knob.

He steps to the counter and taps the bell.
Dinnngg.

He waits, and waits, and waits, but no one comes. He turns away from the desk, back toward the door and the cloudy windows, and thinks that maybe –

"Heard you got mad and broke your phone."

Barnes stops mid-stride, turns, and finds the owner of the voice. It's been two years, but he'd recognize it anywhere.

It's Fury, stepping out from a small room with shit green walls. The brown, wooden door with the scuffed, golden door knob shuts behind him. Even inside, Fury's wearing dark sunglasses and, even in the mild, sunny Romanian autumn, he's wearing a black hat.

This makes twice now: twice that Fury waited him out and surprised the ever living fuck out of him.

Anymore, he's not so much worried about showing it.

"Oh, don't look so surprised. It's a SHIELD base. Who'd you expect?"

Barnes opens his mouth to reply, when Fury cuts him off.

"And don't say HYDRA."

"Wasn't going to," It really hadn't even crossed his mind. "How'd you know?"

Fury crosses his arms. "Romanoff. Put that little bug in your ear. Figured you'd throw a fit and run off and, finally, at some point finally"—Fury raises his eyebrows high—"figure out that you just might need them."

He can't argue that. None of it's wrong. "Can I fly to the U.S. from here?"

"Well, see, I don't know about that. Are you SHIELD?"

Barnes looks at Fury, trying to gauge anything, but he can't read him. So, he deflects. "Did you get my message? About the cosmodrome?"

Fury nods, face still. Doesn't say a word.

Fury wants an answer.

Barnes digs deep and asks, "That chance you talked about – the one you took worse than me. Who was it?"

Fury pulls his sunglasses off. Barnes stares him in his eyes – both of them. "You might know her."

Natasha.

"Few things in this world are black and white. For you, this one is: SHIELD, or not SHIELD."

The answer comes easy, much easier than it had two years ago. He says it, but he doesn't believe it. "SHIELD."

"Oh. Well, in that case, yeah, there's a plane for you here."
Barnes' first inclination is to find a good nest and wait one of them out: watch the building, follow Natasha or Sam after they leave the building, and intercept at a safe point.  

But, Christ, sometimes, there just isn't time for that. 

Stark Tower stretching above him, he presses the intercom button at the black-tinted, glass door, and waits with lead in his stomach and panicked fire in his veins. 

He glances up and doesn't see any sort of camera; that's a crock of shit, for sure. They're there. He looks back down.  

"Yes, how may I help you?" a male, British voice asks. 

"Are Natasha or Sam here?" Barnes asks. 

"Please hold." 

The hidden cameras are undoubtedly loaded with facial recognition software. He's on Stark's grid. Inside, he imagines a flurry of talk, or maybe red flashing sirens going off, maybe just an argument, maybe Tony Stark gearing up to become Iron Man and – 

"Welcome, Sergeant Barnes."

The door clicks open, and he pushes its handle. A lot is going through his mind, but, stupidly enough, his biggest thought is that he hasn't been a Sergeant for seventy years, and maybe they can just stop with that shit now. 

"Please choose an elevator. Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Wilson are waiting for you on the 90th floor."

Barnes walks to the nearest elevator, almost as if he's walking to his death. He notices how shiny the floors are; the white specks in the black tile; and how massive the lobby is, given that the building is no longer open to the public. He's alone, and he feels small here – really, really small. 

Once the elevator doors close, a green light from somewhere runs over his entire body, four separate times. He only has his CZ-75 and four knives, if that's what Stark's looking for. 

Except – the green light narrows down to his left arm, wraps around it, and turns red. 

"Please explain the nature of this device," the British voice asks. 

Really.

Barnes looks up at cameras he can't see – they're always in the corner – and wants to say, "Fuck you, Stark." But he can't – he needs to see Natasha, and he needs to see her now. 

So, instead, he answers, "It's my arm." And he feels even smaller. 

There's no other discussion about it. The elevator jerks a micron, just once, and then ascends so smoothly that Barnes can barely tell it's moving. The floor display panel tells him exactly where they are, with every floor. 

It takes forever to reach 90. 

The doors open to the entire suite, instead of the hallway he was expecting. He sees Natasha and
Sam—no one else—and steps out of the elevator.

Natasha looks at him, inscrutable, before turning her attention back to a slim black laptop.

Sam actually talks to him: "I'd ask if you were hungry, but I bet you're already pretty full. You know. From eating all those words of yours."

He doesn't answer.

He watches Sam get up from the couch, and he wonders why, because he can just go over there and —

Oh.

Sam's going in for a hug. The only way he knows how to stop that is to hurt Sam, so he just doesn't stop it. Sam's arms go around him, and Barnes, on age-old social instinct alone, puts his arms around Sam. There's a squeeze, and, then, Sam does some kind of weird slapping thing—that's new—and pulls away.

"Glad you're safe. Have some pizza."

Barnes shakes his head. "I just came to see the flight logs."

Finally, he has Natasha's attention. Still inscrutable, she motions him over with a jerk of her head and finally actually talks. "Have a seat."

Before he does, he just has one question: "Is Stark around?"

"In his lab," Sam answers. "Maria or Bruce might come around."

SHIELD Agent Maria Hill and the Hulk, his brain supplies. Neither people he really wants to meet, or see how pissed off at him they might be. Like Sam had been.

He nods, and then takes Natasha's invitation, sitting on her left. Sam is on her right.

Natasha already has the flight logs from Andrews pulled up. They're nearly three months old to the day.

She explains: "On paper, ten flights went out, between the time SHIELD lost Steve on CCTV and the time Rhodey managed to have the base locked down. One flight went out on camera that didn't have any papers or logs; we lost radar tracking over the Atlantic. It was on a flight path to Europe. Satellite pings picked it up along two arcs, like MH370. It's why we went to Europe."

As she's talking, he's reviewing all ten of the flight destinations, dismissing the ones that he doesn't think are linked to Steve. In the back of his mind, he picks up on "MH370," and thinks it's a potential issue, because he doesn't know what "MH370" is. He doesn't ask.

At the ninth destination, a flutter of relief ripples through his gut.

There's only one log, one thing, one anything that Barnes is interested in, and he points at it: China Lake NWC.

"O...kay?" Sam asks.

"That's a regular flight," Natasha says, shaking her head.
His next sentence just about kills him, because he—*he*, of all fucking people—should have known better.

"HYDRA doesn't leave trails it doesn't want followed," Barnes replies. "Europe—all of it—was a decoy and a trap. The airplane sounds on the phone? It's what they call 'singing sand' in Death Valley. Steve said he could smell rain—but that's the creosote bushes, all over the desert."

Natasha tenses, readying herself. He waits for it. "You're reaching."

Barnes lets out a breath, drops his shoulders. He knows he's right. He has to make sure that Steve is safe. He's gotta sell this.

"Did you know that there are bases out there that don't even have guards? Their defense is the remoteness: you can't find them, and, *even if* you can, you'll die before you get there. When the whole world is looking for you, where do you go?"

"And how do you know all of this?" Natasha asks, like she's sticking a worm on a hook.

This is where he's going to lose them. Even in his own head, it sounds ridiculous, but whatever: "Morita told me. During the war. He lived there. I remembered."

Sam leans back. "Not saying you're wrong." He holds up a finger and repeats himself: "*Not* saying you're wrong. *But* How convenient would it be, for them to take Steve somewhere *you* have an emotional connection to? And how convenient was that phone call?"

Natasha shakes her head, and, interestingly, Sam keeps gunning: "I've been saying this and saying this, Nat."

Barnes makes a face. "What emotional connection? I've never been there."

Natasha's eyebrow raises.

He adds: "...Maybe."

"Barnes." All it takes is the one word from Natasha, in the multi-faceted tone of voice that only she has. She's saying that Sam is right and that HYDRA knows him better than he knows himself.

"If you're right," Sam continues, "you know their play. You ready for that?"

Barnes crosses his arms around his chest, sucking in as much self-comfort as he can. "I know what they're doing to him." He means it to be a factual statement; it comes out more like a plea.

Sam looks down, and Natasha's face softens.

"Let's get Stark in on this," Natasha says. "See what he can find, before we get ourselves lost in our own desert."

Barnes' stomach plummets. *Stark.*

Barnes won't go near Stark. Sam doesn't know why, and he doesn't ask why. He shares a look with Natasha, watches her go, and sits down next to Barnes on Natasha's sofa.

"You're not going with her?" Barnes asks.
Sometimes, Barnes actually does work on his tablet. Right now, he's got a titillating game of Freecell going on it.

Sam shakes his head and flips on the curved flat-screen, gazillion inch TV. "Nah. I'm not part of that. I'm here for Steve, not SHIELD."

Barnes moves a stack of cards and frees the Ace of Spades. "He is SHIELD."

"Not as much as you'd think."

"Me too," Barnes replies. He doesn't apologize.

"He's got you."

Barnes tilts his head and moves his jaw. Doesn't say a word. Moves another stack of cards.

"Hey, you want to check out 93? It's my floor."

Barnes hesitates for a moment, before his shoulders drop, and he nods. "Sure."

"Bring your bag."

Barnes gives him a look but grabs his bag and follows Sam to the elevator. Inside, Barnes warns, "I'm not staying."

"I get that," Sam answers. He looks over, and, from this angle, the lines under Barnes' eyes are deep and dark. "When's the last time you slept?"

The elevator dings at Sam's floor, and the door slides open.

"Three days."

They step out together, and, like always, Barnes doesn't seem at all overwhelmed by the size or
luxury of the place.

"Are you tired?" He only asks, because it seems like Barnes is fading with every question.

His right shoulder lifts and he minutely shakes his head. "I can't sleep."

Sam nods, doesn't mention how completely wiped out Barnes looks and sounds, and leads him to one of the two unused bedrooms, also known as wastes of space.

It's the furthest one back, so Barnes will have the clearest line of sight to all ingress and egress points of the suite. The bedroom itself is half the size of Sam's apartment, has its own bathroom, and is only a couple of seconds from the fully stocked, massive kitchen. For a guy like Barnes, it should be pretty close to perfect.

"You can crash here, if you want, until we get the go ahead."

Barnes drops his backpack on a chair, his tablet still in his left hand, and just nods.

Sam's not afraid to ask: "Are you okay?"

Barnes nods again, wordless.

Back in Kazakhstan, Natasha had pretty much nailed it, Sam thinks. He can't say that Barnes seems any better now than he did then; if anything, Sam thinks the isolation has taken a pretty heavy toll.

"It's all catching up to you, isn't it?"

"Little bit." Barnes blinks, once, twice, and then looks at Sam. "Thanks for everything. I mean it."

Maybe it's because he hasn't slept for three days, all of which he'd almost certainly spent between cramped trains and crappy planes, but his eyes are dull. His responses are bare minimum thin. They're closer to Steve than they've been since the first two weeks of searching, and, watching Barnes, no one would know it.

Sam's seen this before, and he'd ignored it. Figured that person would snap out of it, was just going through a bad time, would find a way to be happy again. That person hasn't existed for a lot of years.

"I'm gonna—"

"Give me your gun," Sam interrupts.

Barnes' reaction seals the deal: it's a mixture of guilt and indecision, instead of outright anger and refusal. The man he'd met three months ago would have said: "Fuck you; I'm not giving you my fucking gun."

"I'm fine" this version of him says, as weak as a day old kitten.

"Then it's no big deal. In this building, with these people, you're the safest you're ever gonna be. Hand it over."

Just like that, Barnes reaches down, unzips his backpack, and pulls out the CZ-75 and its SOB holster. He hands it to Sam, butt-first, without another word. Then, he pulls out four sheathed combat knives and gives those to Sam, too.

Sam stares at it all for a moment, trying to balance the four extra, unexpected weapons. "Okay. I'll
be watching TV. If you're hungry, there's food. If you want to talk, I'll be here."

Before he's even five steps away, the bedroom door clicks shut. Sam goes to his own bedroom instead of to the living room, field strips the gun, and puts all of the pieces and all of the knives into a dresser drawer.

"Damn it."

Sam is drinking a beer, when Natasha texts him: got something. 98. Sam wonders if this can really be it, before he realizes: it has to be. He stands up, zips and buttons the fly of his jeans, pulls on his green shirt, and knocks on Barnes' door.

"Hey. They found something."

A second or two pass, before Barnes says, "'Kay."

Even now, after all this time spent together, Sam doesn't know if "'Kay" means "okay, you take care of it," or if "'Kay" means "okay, give me a second."

It's the second one. Barnes opens the door, dressed in dark jeans, a black t-shirt, and a black hooded jacket, his hair clean and his face shaved, and asks, "What'd they find?"

"Dunno. Let's go find out."

Sam doesn't miss the subtle way Barnes wavers, and Sam thinks of the gun and knives he'd hid in the other room, a day and a half ago, and he remembers the handful of words he'd heard Natasha say, on a jet above the arctic.

"You're the same person today that you were three months ago."

Barnes looks at him like he's an idiot - that same look that Natasha always has. Except, with Barnes, as Sam is slowly learning, it's bluster. And it fades from his face. "It doesn't feel like it."

"We're gonna get Steve. We're gonna bring him home. And you two can rebuild."

Barnes is less than convinced- and looks guilty. "It's not going to happen like that. I did something. Worse than the helicarrier."

Sam looks down and wonders if there's any kind way to say what he's thinking. There's probably not. He looks up and catches Barnes' eyes. "Genuinely - that's not a surprise to anyone. But Natasha, Steve, me - and a couple people you might not expect - decided to stand with you, knowing that. And now you stand with us. Let's get Steve."

His nod is infinitesimal.

Together, in silence, they take the elevator to 98, and Barnes follows Sam into what Stark calls the War Room. Sam's been in War Rooms before, but none quite like Stark's.

It's probably the only floor in the entire tower without any windows. It's brightly lit and chock full of the glitziest equipment and technology: transparent computer screens, holographic maps and mock battlefields, and a wall of thin-screen, curved monitors.

Natasha, Maria Hill, and Stark are standing by a giant holographic map in the center of the room.
All three look up and then back down at the map. Behind him, Sam can damn near feel the wave of tension rolling off of Barnes, and he realizes how rough this must be for him:

In the heart of SHIELD headquarters, surrounded by people he doesn't know, in the middle of a personal crisis.

"We think we found him," Natasha announces. She looks past Sam, at Barnes, says "Nice call," and then motions them both over.

Sam waits for Barnes to take that first step, and then that second step, and then he falls in line with him, shoulder to shoulder.

The blue-tinted holographic map is showing an aerial of what could be another planet: flat, brown ground, scarred by dry desert drainages and washes, dotted with specks of green joshua trees and bushes. The center of the image is a large area of what is clearly processed land: road scars and barren, clear sand, and, in the very middle, what looks like a small dry lake, bordered by green bushes.

"HYDRA screwed up," Maria says. "We tracked abnormal activity to this location. GPR of the dried lake shows nothing, when it should be showing a lot of something, meaning: it's shielded."

"The United States has plenty of secret bases out that way," Natasha adds. "It's confirmed: that's not one of them. It's several miles outside of anything China Lake is doing."

"Including weird desert yachts," Stark mentions. "Seriously. We found a yacht."

"What kind of abnormal activity?" Sam asks. So far: not really convincing. Nothing proves that Steve is there, only that HYDRA might be, and they just got done doing two months of wild goose chasing.

Stark's good humor bleeds away. "Classified." He looks right at Barnes as he says it.

Natasha and Maria turn glares at him.

More than two years ago, Stark set a vase of "star-spangled flowers" on a window ledge in Steve's hospital room: a ridiculously extravagant arrangement of flowers that Sam couldn't put a name to, all of them red, white, and blue.

"You didn't need to do that," Steve said, and he was still a little morphine blurry. "Thanks."

"Just flowers."

The door open, Steve stumbled through it: "Now I expect a fancy dinner."

Stark didn't follow. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "What were you thinking?"

Steve's face hardened, and Sam wished he wasn't sitting in a chair between Captain fucking America and Tony fucking Stark. Actually, he wished he'd gone down to the cafeteria, when he'd first thought about it fifteen minutes ago.

"I did my job," Steve bit out. "You're welcome."

"He's not your job."

"Don't. For once, don't."
Stark just nodded, in a way that Sam could interpret hours ahead of time. "I'm taking in SHIELD." He tilted his head. "He's my job, now."

The electrocardiograph monitor sounded its alarm, the screen showing Steve's heart rate too quick, even for him. Steve yanked the leads off his chest, and the alarm changed: too slow, too slow, too slow.

"You don't touch him. I fucking mean it: you don't touch him."

Sam was still learning Steve, still separating the man from the myth from the legend. Right then, he learned that Steve had a vicious dark side - or, at least, he sounded like he did.

And he wondered about what he'd gotten himself into with these people. Stark didn't show a flicker of emotion. "You don't know what he's done."

"Neither do you."

"Oh: I know enough. Whatever he was to you, to my father, that's not who he is now. He put you in here. Christ, have you looked in a mirror?" Stark's expression changed, to something like sorrow. "The person I trusted most in the world tried to kill me. I'm not saying it's easy. That it's ever easy. But, sometimes, it's god damned necessary."

Steve. Dog. Bone. "Then stop trying to take the easy way out. If you go anywhere near him, you and I will have a real god damned necessary problem."

Stark shook his head, turned, and left, not another word.

Steve picked up the call button device and pushed the button a few times. "I'm just warning you: Bucky's more important to me than anything and anyone else. The Avengers. SHIELD. Any of it. If you don't want to be a part of that, I won't blame you for leaving."

Today, Sam's been mired in that drama fest for years, and, until now, he'd hoped it was drawing to something of a close.

Before anyone else can get a word out, Barnes pipes up: "I don't care about this. When you get it figured out, just tell me where we're going and when and how." And he turns and leaves.

Maria raises an eyebrow high and tosses her tablet onto the hologram table. "Fantastic. Happy?"

Stark frowns deep and shrugs. "Not seeing the problem."

"He's an incredible strategist," Maria says. "He knows HYDRA. You really don't see the problem?"

"Not in the smallest god damned least."

Natasha, of all people, doesn't back Barnes. "We need to get a plan together, with or without him. Steve doesn't have time for this. Let's go."

Sam doesn't move.

"Sam?"

They're all here for Steve, and Natasha's right: Steve doesn't have time to wait for them to figure out their problems. He goes to the hologram table and gets started.
Barnes finds his sidearm and his knives in Sam's top dresser drawer, like where a teenager would hide his first pack of condoms and stack of pinups. He shoves them all in his backpack, grabs a pack of cigarettes and lighter out of the bag, zips it up, shoulders it, and gets the fuck out of Stark's tower.

"Sergeant—" The computer.

"Don't talk to me."

Outside, it's dark and cool, and he walks down the busy, lit sidewalk, until he finds a decent side alley. He lights up a cigarette, breathes in the musky, cold smoke, blows it back out, and focuses on calming down.

In his head, he does the math. It will take a Quinjet less than thirty minutes to fly to California. It will take one of Stark's private jets about four hours. It will take him, driving in some shitty rental car, almost two days, nonstop.

Leaving now, speeding off half-cocked down I-40, is the most selfish, horrible thing he could do to Steve, and he won't do it. Even as much as he wants to never go back in that tower again, and never see Stark again, and maybe never even see Natasha and Sam again, he'll do it for Steve.

Barnes drops the stub of his cigarette and lights up another one, then another, and another, and another, until there's only one left in the pack. He lights that one and smokes it as slow as the burn will let him.

He hears Sam's footsteps, long before he sees him become a shadowed, hooded figure at the edge of the alley, and long before he hears his hesitant voice.

"Kinda didn't expect you to still be here."

"Only for Steve. Are you guys ready?"

Sam shakes his head, and his hood falls down. "You, me, Hill, and Nat? Hill likes you."

Barnes thinks it's odd that she would. From the leak materials, he pegged her as a straight-laced, rules-bound, one-way-or-no-way type of person, one who took SHIELD very fucking seriously. A Phillips type. Also the type who lied to his face the first time he'd met her, and maybe, just maybe, he doesn't like her.

"If Natasha can't figure it out, then we're pretty fucked," Barnes mentions.

"We have it figured out. We'd just feel better about the whole thing, if you okay it."

Like Steve, all of those years and years and years ago.

And, like Steve, all of those years and years and years ago, the plan fucking sucks. Either Stark wrote it, or Natasha did it on purpose, to pull him in.

He looks at their aerials, and their plan of attack, and can't believe his eyes.

"If the point is to get all of us killed, then this is fantastic."

Hill bristles. Sam drops his head. Natasha smirks.
"Somebody decently high up at China Lake is HYDRA, and anything on their radar is instant failure." He feels stupid even explaining it, because it's *so fucking obvious*.

He strikes the part about parachuting down in China Lake's airspace: the dumbest fucking thing he's seen in a long while.

"The 'classified' tunnel you found is a kill box."

He strikes the part about entering the super secret base through the super obvious tunnel.

And their plan is dead.

"Okay. What do you want to do?" Hill asks.

"Look, everything you think you 'found' is something HYDRA was directly pointing at. They wanted you to find it. It's the same shit they pulled during the War." He looks at Natasha, pointedly. "You know this."

She shrugs and then brings up another aerial. It's the smallest town he's ever seen: a commercial building, three small other buildings, and a single car. No infrastructure to speak of, except for a strip of new, sun-bleached gray pavement. An island, in the desert, outside of the official test ranges of the U.S. government.

"How far out is that?" Hill asks. "When did you see that?"

"Fifteen miles from the lake bed." Natasha ignores Hill's second question and looks at him. "What do you think?"

"I think we hike in and go in killing," he says, without an ounce of shame or irony.

Stark's private jet takes them to a small airport in Las Vegas, one that doesn't ask questions about what Tony Stark's friends are doing.

There's a nondescript, beige, four-wheel drive SUV waiting for them. Just like in Europe, Barnes climbs in the back, Natasha drives, and Sam sits shotgun.

At the city limits, Natasha stops at a twenty-four hour big box store, where she and Sam buy three cases of water. From Manhattan, they'd brought three one-person tents, hiking gear, and a wrist-strap GPS that doubles as an emergency beacon – one press, and Stark and Hill will have a Quinjet to them within twenty minutes ("or it's free—like it usually is").

They'd also brought suitcases and duffel bags full of combat gear: firearms, knives, grenades, vests, clothing, night vision goggles, and long-range scopes and binoculars.

It's a solid hundred and fifty miles to the desert lookout point Barnes had selected, with no telling from the aerials and USGS topographical maps how far their vehicle will be able to make it. Natasha suspects that there will be a lot of hiking involved, in extreme temperatures, and she's not so much looking forward to it.

Natasha peers in the rearview mirror. Behind her, she sees early morning darkness and the dim screen of Barnes' tablet. Undoubtedly, he's memorizing topography and analyzing their best strategy versus his knowledge of HYDRA's best strategies.
As always these days, she feels better with him here.

"Everything I know, Bucky taught me. Everything. Do you know what I'd be without'em?"

Natasha tilted her head, and then shook it: no. In her mind, Steve Rogers was and had ever always been one person, Smithsonian exhibits and unauthorized biographies be more than damned.

"I wouldn't be a lot. Let's put it that way."

He took a bite of food. The fork left a pinprick of white dressing on the corner of his mouth, and, even across the table, she could smell the roasted tomatoes and raw onion on his breath.

"Give yourself credit. He wasn't whispering in your ear, when you took out Krausberg."

Steve laughed, closed his eyes, and shook his head. A closed-lipped smile stayed on his face. "You sound like him sometimes."

Natasha sipped her ice water, almost thinking about almost telling him. Nothing good would come of it. "How's Sharon?"

He lit up. Even after Europe going to shit, Steve was happier than she'd ever seen him. He had a place in the world.

"Sharon's gr—"

Sam turns on the radio, scanning through channels: skipping static, talk, and commercials, until he finds a station playing a song by the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"You okay?"

Sam leans back in his seat and nods. "Tired. Worried."

In Europe, Barnes almost never talked from the backseat. When he did, it was never with swagger or pretense. Today's a little different. "Don't be. We're gonna rip'em apart."

It was really the only option.

Hours later, the "Welcome to California" sign miles east with the rising sun, at the deserted turn off for Molina Springs Road—more like a stomach-dropping dirt road, winding down into sweeping, jagged canyons—they pull off to the side of the barren highway and change into tactical, lightweight desert camo.

It's already at least 80 degrees. Leave it to HYDRA to hole up in the least hospitable place in the United States.

"You sure picked a helluva route," Sam says to Barnes.

"Scared?" Barnes asks, a hint of a grin on his face.

He's in that same near-buoyant mood that had preceded the cosmodrome. Natasha's not superstitious, not in the least, but she can at least hope that this mission doesn't go the same way as that one.

"If I said 'yes,' would you hold it against me?"

"Only a little." He looks at Natasha. "You got this?"
Natasha smiles.

The thing about driving in the desert, especially the sandy sort of desert terrain, is that you go fast or get stuck.

Natasha floors it, tires tearing through silty sand and loose rock. For the first three miles, it's easy going: a flat road, soft but smooth, straight. Then the reality of the Mojave Desert hits.

Unexpectedly, the road veers sharply to the right - a curve that hadn't been on the topographical maps. Natasha cranks the wheel and plows on the gas.

Sam puts one booted foot on the dash, grabs onto the roof handle, and squeezes his eyes shut.

"Make a u-turn."

In the backseat, Barnes cracks up, a quiet giggle that Natasha can barely hear over the roar of the tires and spitting of sand and rock.

"You're back there laughing?!" Sam screeches.

"No."

The passenger-side wheels bounce over a curb made of boulders and rocky outcroppings, and the sound of a loud, metallic scrape from the underside of the vehicle reverberates through the SUV.

Sam's head hits the roof of the ceiling. "We should walk. Let's just walk!"

"We're on target; keep going. The map's old." Easy for Barnes to say.

Out the dusty windshield, the road ahead of them isn't a road at all: it's a steep decline made of jagged rocks and packed sand, and it looks like it goes straight into the bottom of a canyon. There's no stopping, and no turning back, and she keeps her foot on the accelerator.

The car bounds and hops down the decline, their bodies ricocheting against the insides of the car. Natasha waits for the sound of the tires blowing out, but that sound doesn't come-not yet, anyway.

They hit the bottom of the decline hard, the nose of the vehicle throwing sand onto the windshield as it hits the ground. The back tires skid through another patch of silt, sand and grit sprinkling against the SUV's body.

Ahead, a bleached, wooden two-post sign sits crooked in the ground, "Moorehead Pass" carved deep into the wood.

The plastic of the dash under Sam's foot cracks. "I hope you all get dysentery."

"What?" Barnes asks.

"Nevermind."

"Take a left at the next fork," Barnes says.

The next fork no longer exists: the right turn-off is a wall of boulders and hardened mud. The left is another abrupt veer down another fierce slope, and that crack under Sam's foot grows bigger.

Natasha doesn't blame him: not when she feels the tires lift off the ground, and not when her stomach turns weightless, and not when the undercarriage of the SUV clashes back against the
ground so hard her teeth rattle.

A tire *pops*, and the car lurches, just for a moment, before she regains control. Only so much longer, and they'll be forced to go the rest of the way on foot.

The slope levels off to a flat, rough path - Moorehead Pass, she assumes - the turns and curves easy to see ahead of time and nowhere near as sharp as the last two. The speedometer climbs toward forty-five, then fifty and fifty-five, the flat tire a loud, unmistakable *thwop, thwop, thwop* behind them.

In her peripheral, she sees Sam look out the side window, and then look down, and then cover his face with his free hand. "Oh my fucking God."

On her side, it's a canyon wall. On his side, it's a drop straight down into yellow desert and brown canyons. She focuses on not finding out exactly what's down there – even though, if another tire goes, the entire car is going to go with it.

She relaxes her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel-knowing better than to do that-breathes evenly, watches the road, and keeps her speed.

No one says a single word for the entire length of the pass. Five minutes stretch to ten to fifteen, and Sam is still covering his eyes with his hand, and Barnes is still tracking their progress with his tablet, and the tire is still insufferably going *thwop, thwop, thwop, thwop, thwop*.

Finally, the pass gives way to an open valley—Molina Spring, by the looks of the green bushes and shrubs—and the path, albeit vague, leads away from the roadway cliff.

*Thank god.*

Natasha parks the SUV away from the spring, behind a large, tan rock, and peels the stiff fingers of her left hand from the steering wheel.

Sam's door bursts open, and he's unbelted and kneeling in the sand, before Natasha even looks his way.

A wave of dry heat rushes into the car. It's not even nine in the morning, but it's sweltering.

Barnes leans through the space between her seat and Sam's. "Nice driving."

"You doubted?"

"No," he says – not a joke, not a tease, not anything except misplaced admiration. He cuts the moment: "We're just seven klicks out, with just about nine hours of light. I'm gonna gear up and head to the lookout."

Natasha nods, and, at the last second, thinks to say, "Hey. Nice mapping."

"We'll see," he scoffs. "Sam, get a water."

The way he said "water" sounded like the way Steve says "water" – all Brooklyn, all the time. Rare, from Barnes.

"Get me one," Sam groans.

Natasha pops the trunk, and, as she's getting out of the car, hears plastic ripping and then the sound of something hard hitting the ground.
"Thanks."

She walks around to the trunk, to grab gear and get settled. Their best case scenario for a timeframe was taking the base tomorrow night, which means setting up three of Stark's air-cooled tents in a shadowed, sheltered space.

Barnes takes a disassembled long-range, state-of-the-art sniper rifle out of the trunk. To her eyes, back at Stark Tower, she'd thought it was a nice piece, while Barnes might as well be pulling a dead rat out of a sewer, by the way he's looking at it.

While Barnes gears up – four sidearm holsters, she sees, which, for him is a lot; an ever-present backpack with water and long-range scopes; and a mini GPS, a literal lifeline in the remoteness of the Mojave – Natasha pulls out the tents, the box of MREs, and a few weapons, just in the unlikely case HYDRA finds them here.

"Drink more water, Sam," Barnes says.

Natasha spares a glance at his retreating back, as he starts his walk through the valley.

Of death, sniper rifles, and hundreds of paralyzed waiting games, this mission might be the worst.

Though he found a lucky, shadowed perch, well-hidden from any eyes trying to spot him, it's still at least 95 degrees, and the sun is still winding its way across the sky. Sweat dribbles down his neck, the t-shirt under his moisture-wicking camouflage sweater already sticking to his back.

On the positive side, it's a dry heat – no humidity. And that's about as positive as it gets.

Strewn stomach-flat across a patch of hard sand, Barnes peers down the scope of his rifle. It's a new model, not available anywhere but through Stark, and even Barnes has to admit: it's fucking nice.

The town is five miles out, a desert eternity – down the canyon and across a sprawling plateau made of shrubs, red cacti, short trees, and creosote bushes. The sand dunes from Steve's phone call are half a mile west of the town.

With the rifle's scope, he can see all of it with crystal clarity, from the peaks of the dunes down to the missing shingles on what he's referring to as Building 1 inside the town.

That commercial building from the aerials is a tiny post office: a single story, constructed of a square wood frame, with a wooden front door that's partially held up by a single hinge. On its front, the only letters that still remain in any capacity are "st" and "offi." The entire building itself is sun bleached gray.

The other three buildings are small houses, all of them one story and lined with gray, wooden siding and roofed with wood shingles, most of them missing. "Dilapidated" is the best word Barnes would use to describe them.

The two newest things in the entire town are the white SUV parked parallel to Building 2 and the small patch of new concrete in front of the Post Office.

And that's it.
Barnes settles in: relaxes his shoulders, finds a comfortable way to lean into the ground, and peers through the scope, waiting.

In the far, far distance, along a semi-major roadway named Springwater Road, he hears the familiar rushing of traffic: tires on asphalt, vehicles cutting through the dry air.

It doesn't take long for him to fall into what he calls a "zone." He's still fully aware of his surroundings, still fully focused on the town, and those are the only two things his mind is fixated on. It doesn't wander, worry, or think about anything else.

Nothing moves. Nothing comes. Nothing happens. It either means he's really fucking right or really fucking wrong.

The sun dips toward the horizon, and the temperature drops with it.

Barnes blinks and looks up from the scope.

Death Valley, despite its reputation as all sun all the time, only has eleven and a half hours of light in early October. They'd used three of those hours to drive from Vegas to Molina Spring.

Racing the sun and a sky that is turning from dark blue to purple to orange, Barnes picks up his rifle and repositions partially behind a group of red boulders. They offer a modicum more protection, just in case HYDRA has thermal surveillance capabilities here.

He doubts they do.

The thing about being out here is that, although it's remote, it's still mapped, and it still gets hiking traffic. The more surveillance, defenses, and reaction to that traffic, the more attention, especially in the Mojave.

He slips on a pair of Stark Industries night vision goggles; the landscape turns varying shades of green. The goggles are equipped with adjustable scopes, and although the range isn't as sharp as his rifle's scope, they're better than anything he's ever used.

Behind him, meters away, he hears Natasha's footsteps. "On your three."

She sits next to him, his rifle between them, and hands him a white Styrofoam cup that smells like MRE pasta, which is exactly what it is. Which is okay, because he doesn't care what it is: he downs it within seconds, and then downs four bottles of lukewarm water.

"How's Sam?"

"Good. Watching camp. It cooled down quite a bit, which helped."

It's probably a good 70 Fahrenheit, dry, with no wind. It's not bad.

He makes a confirmatory noise, not sure what to say.

"I think the desert reminds him of other places."

A pack of burrows comes into his line of sight: meandering across the plateau below them. He filters them out and visually sweeps the landscape: still clear.

"Can you promise me something?" Barnes asks.

"Depends."
"If..." He closes his eyes and waits for the green afterimage of the desert to fade away. "If I lose myself in there, promise you'll kill me."

He can't see her, but he can feel her, and he can feel that she doesn't move an inch: not a finger, not a breath, not a facial muscle.

Her answer is so much less than what he'd hoped to hear. "I don't make it a habit to kill my friends."

After all this time, and even after everything she went through, she still doesn't get it. He'd really hoped he wouldn't have to explain it.

"Neither did I. And then I killed my entire family, nearly killed you twice, and nearly killed Steve. Nearly killed Sam. I killed a lot of good people." He says it evenly, matter of fact. "Promise me."

Natasha eventually nods. "Okay."

He opens his eyes. The plateau is still quiet, empty. The town, still.

It's not enough.

"Say it," he presses.

He feels her body tense. "I promise to put a bullet in your head. And you promise me that when this is all over, you stick around. Don't run away."

That catches him off guard. It's almost as if his brain freezes: he can't think, and he doesn't know what he wants. He doesn't know what he has.

She's got one thing right, though: he's tired of running away.

He tells her about that last, horrible memory, the one worse than the helicarrier: four tiny words, breathed into the dry, warm air, each carrying so much weight that they could each break this mission in half.

"And?"

That's all she says. Doubt rips through him: maybe he still doesn't understand human norms. Maybe he hadn't said it right. Maybe there's something else he hasn't remembered.

"And what's your point?" she asks again.

"Well... That's it." He doesn't know what else to say.

"Okay. So. When this is all over, stick around, and don't run away. Promise me."

It doesn't make any sense. Maybe –

"You heard what I said, right?" Barnes asks.

Natasha huffs out a sad-sounding laugh. "I spent a long time, waiting for people around me to realize that I was a monster. Thinking that they just didn't quite get it yet. Some got it; most didn't. Then, after that long time, I realized that the ones who didn't get it were decent people, who knew when to forgive. You've got a handful of people like that around you. Don't waste it."

Like always, he hears her words but doesn't quite understand them. He figures it's like an
impenetrable glass wall: he can see what she means, he can hear what she means, but he'll never be able to be what she means.

He can't tell her that. But he has a question: a huge one. "Did you ever forgive yourself?"

Her head tilts up, and he can feel her take a deep breath. He follows where he thinks her gaze is and sees a clear sky full of a million pinprick stars: nothing like Brooklyn.

"Everyone has red in their ledger; you and I just have a lot more than others. It's the same color, same ledger, but..."

She trails off, and he waits for her to finish, but she doesn't. It must still be hard for her.

He turns her words over in his head, again and again, figures out the metaphor, and the only conclusion he comes to is: "But you can't erase ours. It's made of something different."

"The ripple is what gets us."

Throw a pebble in a calm pond, and the ripples of the water stretch for minutes. Frogs jump. Fish scatter. Fowl change course. Song birds fly away. Every infinitesimal water molecule changes course. That pebble becomes so much more.

"You learn to live with it, and then you learn that human beings can be genuinely decent, and then you learn that you might sometimes deserve that decency. You can't comprehend it right now—I know you can't—because you're still buried."

He thinks he's learning to live with it. He knows that people can be decent – Natasha, Sam, even Fury, and even Hill. Always Steve. She's right about the last part: he's nowhere near accepting it.

"You got any suggestions? Maybe a shovel?"

She lifts a shoulder, the fabric of her jacket brushing against his. "I had SHIELD. I even believed in it, after a while. Still do. It only wasn't easy, until it was. So, I'm asking that you stick around, until it's easy. Give yourself that chance."

"Maybe."

Part of it sounds good. Most of it sounds terrifying and awful and he fears the future she talks about.

"We'll work on that," she says.

They sit in mostly comfortable silence for hours, long after the light from the moon fades and leaves them in darkness.

Far in the distance, headlights on Springwater Road bob in and out of sight, the rushing of intermittent traffic more palpable in the night. He even begins to ignore it, until a pair of headlights don't curve away.

They keep going straight, closer and closer toward the town. Beside him, Natasha sits up straighter and pulls her own set of binoculars to her eyes.

He can only see that the vehicle is a dark-colored SUV traveling faster than normal, even for the Mojave. A firestorm of dust billows behind it.

Barnes reminds himself to breathe, to stay calm, to never let the adrenaline and the anxiety control
anything that he does. That's harder to remember, the closer and closer the SUV gets, and breathing seems impossible, after the SUV turns down the dirt path to the town. His fingers dig into hard sand, gouging pockets in the ground.

"Breathe," Natasha says.

The SUV eases to a stop, and they can see its left brake light shine bright red. It stops there, just like that, for too many moments—he can feel his heart pound and skip around—and then make a three-point turn, back toward the main road—and he can feel his heart fall, fall, fall.

"Shit."

"Wait. Look."

The SUV doesn't move forward: it jerks into reverse, then backs down the rest of the dirt road in a perfectly straight line, before backing up to the dilapidated, wooden post office. Four black-clothed people exit the vehicle: one goes to the post office's door, one stops at the wooden steps to the post office, and the last two go to the SUV's hatch.

And they start unloading black cases of ammunition stamped with red HYDRA symbols, brown boxes of food, and clear cases of water.

"Are you seeing this?" he asks.

"Sure am."

_He's in there._

It's like a gravitational pull, the way his body feels drawn to the building. He could sprint the distance in mere minutes and be inside that base in a handful of seconds, with enough ammo and rage and –

"Tomorrow night. Not until then."

He knows that: every bit of training, conditioning, knowledge, and experience tells him that. Don't rush in. Don't let your emotions rule you. Wait for the best time. But –

"He's in there. Right now, he's in there."

Six and a half klicks. That's it.

He feels Natasha's hand on his right arm, but he won't look away from the post office, the SUV, and the people shutting the hatch and walking into the building.

"We get one shot. Don't blow it."

_Success is my only motherfucking option; failure's not._

"You good?"

He tears the night vision goggles off his head, closes his eyes, and breathes in the dry, sandy air. When he opens his eyes, he can't see anything except the pitch black plateau.

"Yeah."

"Back to base."
"Base" is the three tents laid out in a loose triangle formation, next to skin-eating acacia bushes bunched along what should be better known as Molina Mud Puddle.

Natasha, Barnes, and Sam sit in the middle of the triangle, the dual glow of Barnes' tablet and Sam's laptop their only sources of light.

"We don't know what's in Buildings 1, 2, or 3. I would guess nothing, just in case civilians stumble through. It's gonna be a hidden entrance inside the post office, with minimal, if any, defenses outside. Too many people go missing, and too many people come looking."

Natasha nods agreement. "I don't see any benefit to an aerial component, but bring your wings, Sam."

"Already planning on it."

"So. We're going to walk right in."

Sam looks at Barnes and Natasha both: "It can't be that easy."

It's almost that easy.

The trek down the sloping canyons of Molina Spring and across the plateau itself takes less than thirty minutes and goes as smoothly as possible. As anticipated, it's open, perfectly normal desert land.

Even with his night vision goggles, Sam can make out every bush, plant, and rock. And he can see that there are no sentries, guards, obvious cameras, or traps to trip. There's absolutely no sign at all that they're advancing toward a HYDRA base.

On point, Barnes pauses at the edge of the town's asphalt, behind Building 2. In the distance, Sam hears the drone of tires blasting over asphalt, intermixed with the occasional sound of howling coyotes and singing crickets.

Barnes signals them forward. They're on.

They tear across the asphalt, weapons held at the ready. Natasha is only carrying her signature two small sidearms. Barnes and Sam are both armed with a handful of sidearms and an AR-15 each.

Barnes leads them up a set of cracked, wooden steps, the slats creaking under their feet, and then wraps his right hand around the round, gray knob of the entrance's door. He counts them down with a black-gloved hand in the air – three, two, one – and then scrapes the door open.

Rifle aimed, Sam slips in first, Natasha right behind him, and Barnes behind her. Clearing the building is as simple as stepping in: it's a single, square room, completely empty except for the left wall, which is lined top-to-bottom, side-to-side with brass PO boxes.

"Clear," Sam says.

He hears the wooden door creak shut, and then the sound of Barnes' quiet footsteps on the bare wood floor.

Barnes' rifle light comes on, shining bright swaths along the walls, then along the floor.
Sam pulls his goggles to the top of his head and flips on his rifle's light. The night vision hadn't missed anything: bare, black mold walls, a sand-dusted floor, and the wall of small PO boxes. He shines the light to the corners of the room, checking for cameras: none are visible.

Natasha walks up to the boxes, aiming a bright flashlight at each one, then to the very top of the wall, then to the floor, and then back up again. Sam follows her line of sight each time and sees what she's seeing without trouble: coarse sawdust and fine sand on the floor, and the tiniest of tiny gaps between the ceiling and the PO boxes.

"It's a façade," Sam says.

"Looks like it," Natasha confirms.

A third light joins theirs. "This looks familiar," Barnes says, a distinct distance in his voice.

"You said you'd never been here before."

Barnes shakes his head, eyes trailing all over the PO boxes. "I haven't. It reminds me of a place with safe deposit boxes. There was an access panel behind one of them, and a tunnel behind the wall."

_Seriously?_

It's not really a surprise, but Sam, even after more than two years, is still struck by the ridiculousness of the world that SHIELD and HYDRA exist within.

"There," Sam says. He aims his flashlight at one of the middle top boxes marked "21": its typeface—a bland, modern sans-serif—is different than the rest of the elaborate, serif numbers.

Barnes shoots him down: "Too obvious."

Barnes pulls his night vision goggles back down and flips a switch: probably to thermal, Sam thinks, and it's not a half-bad idea.

Almost instantly, Barnes steps forward, draws one of his knives, and buries the blade between the seam of Box 39 and its encasement. With a few shuffles of his left arm, he pries the face plate right off.

Behind it is a glowing, green fingerprint reader and a small, black lensed camera behind a circle of glass.

Barnes smiles wide at it, and then buries his left fist into the reader.

The wall of boxes jerks, wood shavings and sand alike sprinkling to the ground. A horrific metal _scraaaaape_ hurts Sam's ears, and he winces when the _scraaaaape_ becomes a long, metallic _groan_.

His eyes widen, when the middle section of the boxes slides upward, scraping and groaning as it goes. It opens to a deep, black hole the size of an elevator. And that's what it probably is: a pulley system and metal cables are attached to the bottom of the section that had just slid into the ceiling.

Sam, Natasha, and Barnes step to its edge, and all three look down, lights shining.

On a slow day with Barnes, there is no "let's sit tight and think about things." On a day like today, Sam's not sure what he expected, but it sure as hell wasn't what comes next.

"I can see the bottom. Hold tight."
Barnes lowers his rifle and steps into the shaft. He disappears from sight, falling silently into the darkness.

Sam hears Natasha sigh, and he takes that as his cue to wonder out loud, "Did Steve get it from him, or did he get it from Steve?"

CLANG.

Natasha only shakes her head.

"Shit" echoes up the shaft, at the same time a mechanical whirring reverberates up the metal walls. Sam shines his light up the shaft and sees the pulley gears shifting and cables moving.

"It's an elevator. It's going down," Natasha says. She puts her wrist to her mouth and says, "Barnes, report."

Sam hears the tinny sound of her voice in his ear, and then broken static.

Natasha's hand drops down to her side.

The gears and cables grind to a halt.

The sound of metal tearing and then semi-automatic gunfire fills the shaft. Sam has a pretty good idea of what just happened: Barnes ripped the top of the elevator car off and went to town on a handful of HYDRA soldiers.

Thump.

More gunfire.

Yells and screams.

Gunfire.

Natasha crosses her arms around her chest, a handgun in her left hand, and chews the side of her cheek. Sam swears to god that her foot taps a little bit, too.

"So… This wasn't part of the plan, was it?" Sam asks.

Natasha shrugs. "He could be quieter."

"Picky."

The elevator gears and cables spring to life again, the support system creaking as it pulls the elevator car to ground level.

The dented, silver doors split open. Blood spatter is splashed onto all three of the gray walls. Red puddles dot the floor. Barnes casually holds his rifle and looks at them impatiently.

"This thing says they have sixteen floors. We've gotta split up, staggered floors, every three. Sam, start one. Natasha, start two. I've got three. Let's go."

The sound of gunfire coming from above, Barnes figures there are HYDRA teams waiting on every
floor, at each ingress point.

Thing is: HYDRA became more organized during the past year, but although its numbers somehow swelled, their numbers *fucking suck*. They're inexperienced, undisciplined, and sloppy, making ridiculous mistakes. Far better mistakes had gotten many of their predecessors killed by HYDRA itself.

The group waiting for him on Three fits the aforementioned bill exactly, and he *almost* feels pity for them having to go up against him. Shoe, ant. Rinse, repeat.

Barnes leaves one soldier alive. Just one. He steps over the bodies of the others, watching for signs of life as he passes over each one. The live one is crawling away, inch by tiny fucking inch.

The hallways of this base are round crescents, made of gray concrete and metal beams. Red, blue, and green pipes run across the ceiling, interspersed by red, caged lights. Those lights are bright and blinking.

"Covert" is no longer an option, and that's okay. He's going to kill every last thing inside this place.

Starting with the crawler, already shot in both knees.

"You answer my questions, I put a bullet in your head: clean and fast. You go the 'hail HYDRA' route, and I'll leave you here, with a bullet in your gut. You already know they'll leave you behind."

He pulls the soldier's helmet off and only notices that it's a woman. He kicks her over, onto her back, and doesn't care to note her eye color, hair color, skin color, or anything else about her. She's HYDRA, and that's all that matters.

"Where is he?"

She closes her eyes, jaw clenched shut, and that's how it's going to be. He shoots her in the stomach, tears her ID swipe badge off of her tactical vest, and goes on his way.

"Two, clear," Natasha radios.

That was fast. She's likely tearing through people and rooms, as quickly as she can. Barnes wishes he could make this mission so impersonal.

Using the crawler's ID badge, he opens the first door he comes across. It's a supply closet. The next door opens to a washroom, filled with fixtures that remind him of Brooklyn – because they're that old. The urinals are yellowing, white porcelain with floor drains: the kind he grew up using.

Which means: this is more likely an old SSR base, rather than anything HYDRA built. That's good knowledge to have, as the SSR's base layouts usually weren't overly complex.

He moves on, finding an empty barracks and an armory, before choosing to turn left at a t-intersection. He finds another supply room and a server room, before hitting a dead end.

Barnes doubles back, walking to the other wing of the t-intersection, and finds only a stairwell.

"Three, clear," Barnes radios.

"You all know One's the worst, right?"

Barnes goes down to Six and finds another group of soldiers – a group that, obviously, are under orders to not leave their assigned post, otherwise they would have already gone after Natasha on
Five.

HYDRA must have been expecting a lot more of SHIELD to show up.

Like the first two groups, all of the soldiers are poorly trained, the next almost always worse than the last, and it takes mere seconds to kill all of them but one.

"Where is he?"

This one is male, overtly young, and fucking terrified. Barnes presses his boot on the kid's trachea. "Nein," the kid rasps, eyes wide.

Barnes puts more weight on the kid's neck and asks, "Is that German, or a floor number?"

"Floor. The ninth."

The kid dies, and Barnes takes his ID card.

He clears all of the rooms on this level. Just like the first, the hallway leads to a t-intersection. Down the left wing, he finds a mini briefing room—it's a mirror image of the one from SSR's London base—and another barracks.

In the right wing, next to the secondary stairwell, he opens the door to a staffed laboratory of people wearing white lab coats. He sees tables full of vials of blood and different colored liquid substances, as well as empty steel lab tables designed for humans.

Those tables and that blood fires rage through his body. He lets his rifle hang from his tactical vest and draws one of his combat knives.

He kills all of those he can see with that knife and is ready to leave the room, when the sound of quiet, restricted, frantic breathing stops him mid-step.

"No witnesses" and "leave no one" was HYDRA's rule. He's only following it.

He turns around, advances to a lab table near the middle of the room, and focuses on separating the sound of multiple centrifuges and the spinning of multiple hard drives from the sound of those breaths. He walks down to another lab table and stops again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a black shoe shift on the floor. The person is on the other side of the table, and he doesn't waste time walking around it, drawing his gun, and aiming it.

"Please."

It reminds him of so many missions for HYDRA.

"How many people asked you to stop?" Barnes asks.

"Five, clear," Natasha radios.

The person doesn't answer, and Barnes realizes that he doesn't even think of this person as human. Its hands shake, and it can't look him in the eyes, but it doesn't answer. He thinks of it like HYDRA thought of him: it.

"How many?" he asks again.

No answer. He doesn't have time for this.
"How many asked you?" It says it with a wavering voice, then squeezes it eyes shut and waits for the bullet that it gets.

Barnes walks away, back toward the entrance, and, as he goes, glances at the bodies he's made. The blood on his hands is the same as theirs; he's never argued that it wasn't.

He heads for the stairwell, ready to climb down to Nine.

"One, clear."

He rolls his shoulders, puts his hands on his rifle, and enters the stairwell, taking the steps one at a time, calm and slow. So far, he thinks that it's been too easy, and he hasn't forgotten that their leading theory is that the phone call from Steve was fake and that HYDRA lured them here.

The ninth floor comes with another group of HYDRA's walking dead. He doesn't bother asking any of them where Steve is being held. He drops his expended rifle and draws his new, Stark-issue SIG Sauer.

Nine looks marginally different than the others. It's still made of cylindrical, concrete walls, with the same colored pipes and flashing red lights along the ceiling. However, instead of ending at a t-intersection, it branches into four corridors.

The first room is another lab, but empty, its lights turned off. The second room is another armory, which he ignores. The third is empty: three gray walls, a floor, and a door. The fourth is an office: unmarked, sparse, with two four-drawer filing cabinets beside a scratched, black metal desk. It's the only room on the left side of the corridor, and that's odd.

At the intersection, he decides to turn left. Something else has to be inside that wall.

There's a single door, near the middle of the corridor, on the left-hand side. He swipes an ID card, but the reader flashes red.

For a moment, he debates bringing Natasha and Sam in on this. He can't justify it: not when a terrified kid who would say anything told him Nine, and not when all he's got is an extra level of security on a door.

He punches the door down and lets it fall onto the grated, metal door behind it, intentionally not flinching as it clangs, clangs, clangs down the vertical bars. It finally SLAMS flat onto the concrete ground.

Barnes walks over to the secondary door: metal, heavy, olive green. It's solid, except for the horizontal box of metal bars near its top, poorly encased between two panes of splintered glass. Five separate manual locks secure it.

With his left hand, he punches through the glass, grabs two of the bars, and pulls the door from its hinges.

He pushes it into the next room, drops it, and doesn't flinch when it SLAPS onto the floor.

And he walks into a dark, dimly lit cell block.

He holsters his SIG Sauer and draws his CZ-75, flipping on its flashlight. Both sides of the narrow hallway are lined with thick, iron doors, their seams lined with locks. The only accoutrements on each door are u-shaped handles and rectangular window boxes near the middle.
Four, clear."

Barnes walks the corridor, shining his light into each window box, going from side to side. The first five are empty. In the sixth, he thinks he sees a dark, hunched figure – broad shoulders, tall, built.

*Steve.*

He reaches out for the handle, the metal of his fingers *clinking* against the metal of the –

Glass *crunches.*

Barnes spins around, aiming his CZ-75 at the entrance to the cell block. The light illuminates a short man, backlit by the bright light of the outer hallway. Scraggly gray hair. Round glasses. Brown suit.

He puts his finger on the trigger. A loud, shrieking internal voice tells him to *run* and *get Natasha,* but there's nowhere to run. It's a dead end, and even if he could –

It's not until his right hand begins to shake that he feels full-blown, full-body panic.

"The Winter is home. How do you feel?"

For a single second, he thinks he can resist. He thinks he can pull the trigger. Before he even knows he's compromised, his arm falls to his side, CZ held loosely. His shoulders relax. He's calm.

"Eight, clear."

Those words mean nothing. The voice is unfamiliar. All that matters are the four words: how, do, you, feel.

"The Winter is welcome."

The man stands and puts both hands on Barnes' shoulders. "Good," he smiles, reaching up and plucking the ear piece out of Barnes' ear. "Very good. I have a mission for you."
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

There was something. Just something. Maybe a kind of restlessness in the way that he suddenly wanted to rip out of his skin.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

The man held up a monochrome photograph of a young woman. Brown eyes, brown hair with tight wide curls and an extreme side part. She was looking off into the distance, expressionless.

"Do you know her?"

There was something. Just something. Maybe a kind of restlessness in the way that he suddenly wanted to rip out of his skin.

"No," he answered.

"Her name is Becca. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. If I told you to kill her, how would you do it?"

So, she was a target. His body relaxed, and the restless feeling ebbed away. The storm in his mind cleared into quiet, still clarity. "Mission parameters?"

"High profile, extreme discretion. No one can know it wasn't accidental. There will be four other targets in the same location. Residential area. They're a family."

The man set the photograph of Becca on the metal table and pulled out a small stack of more photographs. Two young men with a strong resemblance to each other: both had brown hair, one had blue eyes and the other had brown.

"Andrew and John," the man said. The last two photographs were of an older man and an older woman. "George and Winifred."

The names hardly mattered.

He could have made it look like a murder-suicide, but that would have led to forensics, investigations, and news reports; there was too much risk. Slitting the throats would be too damaging and obvious. Strangulation would be a possibility, but it would be messy and too loud; the risk would be waking the family.

"How?"

"During regular sleeping hours, I would suffocate all of them with plastic and destroy the home
with a natural gas explosion."

The man smiled. More photographs came out, these ones of the interior of a house. A kitchen. A sitting room. Three bedrooms.

"The Winter is home."

His mind stopped. No more planning; no more thinking; no more strategizing.

"Close your eyes."

He did.

"Imagine the mission."

He did.

"Tell me about home."

He described the way he easily forced open the front door, with his left arm. How he stood in the foyer and listened. There was silence: they were asleep. The floors were wood slats, and they creaked. He stepped carefully over them, finding the quiet safety of the floor joists.

The young men were first, in the bedroom with two twin beds. There was a red aluminum Sigg water bottle on the nightstand. The men look too much alike, especially in sleep, and he didn't know which one he smothered first. It was industrial-grade plastic, designed to be quiet and to seal to the skin; he'd used it before.

"He wakes up," the man said.

The young man's eyes snapped open. His reflexes were fast, and his metal hand wrapped around the mouth, the nose, fingers locked around the jaw. Before the young man could flail, he was on top of him, pinning his legs. The young man's scratchy whimper wouldn't be enough to wake anyone, and the way he helplessly scratched and slapped against the metal arm wouldn't be enough to save his life.

He stared into the young man's blue eyes, watched as the life faded out of them. A name flickered to memory: Andrew Jackson Barnes. He didn't say it out loud, because it meant nothing to him. It was irrelevant.

_Fucking Presidents. What the fuck. Why'd Becca get off so..._

The other young man was next, the same way, only easier. He held the plastic taut, until it no longer moved with the man's vapid breaths.

He left the bedroom, and, one by one, killed the young woman, then the older man, and, finally, the older woman. He advanced to the bathroom, found the furnace, and loosened the gas line until he heard it _hiss_.

He waited thirty minutes. The odor of the gas became strong. He went to the kitchen, plugged in the toaster, and stuffed newspaper into the coils. He left the house and walked calmly down the sidewalk.

The house exploded.

"Open your eyes. How do you feel?"
"The Winter is welcome."

"Good. We'll begin again. The Winter is home. Close your eyes. Imagine the mission. Tell me about home."

And again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again.

The Sigg water bottle was there every time.

"Nine, clear."

Not that Sam's been watching the clock or anything, but it'd been ten minutes since Barnes was last on-radio. Barnes, who was easily keeping pace with Natasha clearing floors, and should have cleared Nine minutes ago.

"Barnes, report?" Natasha asks, tone clipped.

"Strike team. Neutralized. No sign of Rogers."

Sam breathes a little easier. A little. He sprints down to Ten, kicks open the stairwell door, and is prepared to start shooting, when he realizes there's no one guarding the door.

He steps into the hallway, stolen rifle aimed and ready, and advances slowly. He checks rooms as he goes, thinking that, for such a large and hidden base, there's not much in the way of staff.

_Did they evac?_

That's a panic-inducing thought: to be so close to Steve, only to lose him because they didn't get to him fast enough.

_It's not a problem, until it's a problem, Wilson._

At the t-intersection, Sam looks left and right, and still sees no one. He radios that in: "There's no one on Ten."

A beat passes. The radio clicks.

"Because they all came to Nine."

Makes sense.

Sam clears the doors on both sides of the T, radios it in, and heads for the stairwell.

"Twelve's clear," Barnes radios.

Three steps down, the stairwell erupts into a flurry of activity: rustling clothing, heavy boot soles on concrete treads, and the tell-tale _clink, clink, clink_ of rifles. It's coming from Nine and Eleven.

He doesn't even have time to radio it in. He extends his wings and blasts down the stairwell, kicking four of the soldiers in the head as hard as he can. He lands on the landing for Nine, and, as he retracts his wings, backflips over the remaining six soldiers, shooting mid-air. Three of them drop.
A bullet hits his right arm—feels like a through and through—and he has no choice but to ignore it.

His rifle jams, and he drops it in favor of two handguns, two weapons that always do the trick. The last of this group fall to the floor, and Sam sprints up the stairs – to find bodies rolling down the steps, Barnes waiting on the landing to Thirteen.

"The base is crawling. We should team up."

Sam holsters one of his sidearms, keeps the M9 out, loosens his shoulders, nods, and follows Barnes into Thirteen.

"Thanks, by the way."

Barnes shrugs.

The base is almost desolate now, like all of the European installations they'd cleared, and like the tenth floor. Sam still sweeps each room, taking each hallway slow, as he'd learned so many years ago during training. He doesn't comment on Barnes' complete lack of protocol.

Because Barnes isn't sweeping anything. He's not interested in the rooms, even though Steve could be in any one of them. His rifle is loose in his hands. His footsteps are too loud. He's not looking down corridors.

Thirteen is an odd-shaped level, with a four-way intersection instead of a t-intersection. The left branch has its own crossway, with four more hallways connected to that. It's the biggest level by far, which must mean it has a special purpose, but there's no one.

Halfway down the left branch, after Barnes once again ignores an entire room, Sam breaks his own protocol and whispers, "You sure you're okay?"

When he turns to look at Barnes, he's met with a skin-and-bone fist in the face.

Sam hits the wall hard enough that his head swings back and smacks the concrete. His vision goes black, and a stinging, crawling pain shoots up his sinuses. He struggles to stay on his feet, his knees weak.

"You're not needed."

Sam hears the words, spoken in a friend's voice, and, when he opens his eyes, the barrel of a handgun is inches from his face. Deja fucking vu.

Sam drops to his ass. His ears ring, and splinters of concrete rain on top of his head. The smell of sawdust and graphite burns his nostrils.

In the split second between pushing off the floor, digging his shoulder into Barnes' stomach, and crashing onto the floor, Sam thinks too easy.

This is the Winter Soldier. No one survives. There's something of Barnes still there, like last time; has to be, or else Sam would already be dead.

Sam grabs at the handgun in Barnes' right hand, but Barnes is faster: he smacks the gun into Sam's face, slams his booted foot into the side of his knee, and then punches Sam in the face.

Sam falls onto his stomach, head spinning. His knee is on fire, and his face feels big – swollen, broken, something.
Don't have time.

He rolls onto his back and is met with the barrel of that handgun again.

"Sputnik."

There's a flash of confusion on Barnes' face, but that's all.

It doesn't work.

He doesn't waste time wondering why.

Sam kicks Barnes in the groin, a straight kick up, and, oh, he knows how much that hurts. In the space of the instant that Sam has gained, he reaches up and twists the handgun out of Barnes' hand, and then kicks Barnes again, this time in the stomach.

Barnes stumbles backward and then drops to his knees, doubled over, silent.

Sam climbs to his feet, breathing heavy, takes a step back, his left knee inflamed and not so great at carrying his weight, and aims the gun.

"Sputnik!" he shouts.

Barnes looks up, his arms wrapped around his stomach. Pain is written all over his face – not something Sam is used to seeing.

Fuck.

"This isn't you," Sam says. Sharp pain shoots through his jaw. He tastes thick blood. "Barnes, this isn't you. It's HYDRA. I need you to come back. Steve needs you back."

Sam blinks, and he almost misses it. The handgun that comes from nowhere. How quickly Barnes raises his arm, aiming the gun down the side hallway, to Sam's right. The resolve on his face, when he turns his head, and pulls the trigger. It only takes a second, maybe even less.

A woman – Natasha – cries out. Sam can't see her.

Barnes’ lips twist into a smile. "It's always been me. Found Romanoff, by the way."

Sam shoots.

Barnes dives, taking Sam out at the ankles.

They fall into a tangled mess of arms, legs, and guns. It's an awful, awful place to be, and Sam focuses on gaining whatever leverage he can.

Barnes rises to his knees and telegraphs the oncoming punch; Sam lets him get as far as shifting his body weight, before Sam rolls out of the way, aims, and shoots.

Blood spills from Barnes' right side, just as his fist crunches against the concrete floor, but it doesn't stop him. He straightens, and Sam shoots again. More blood spills. Barnes hesitates, his eyes distant, face palming.

Sam uses the advantage to climb to his feet, shoulder brushing against the wall, and moves backward.
Barnes' hesitation lasts just that long. He stands up, shakily, and turns. He's got his left arm wrapped around his stomach, and a gun still in his right hand. There's nothing in his expression except for anger.

Sam hasn't lowered his gun.

"Don't make me do this," Sam begs, and keeps moving backward.

He backs into the intersection of the hallways. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Natasha. She's just a few feet away, standing on her feet, very much *not dead*. She jerks her head toward the other side of the hallway, the side he's already moving toward, the clear implication being: *get me a line of sight*.

"Barnes. We're *friends*," Sam pleads.

He takes two more steps back, and Barnes drags himself three more steps forward.

"Then why're you running?" Barnes asks.

Sam takes three steps. Barnes takes four.

"We're friends," Barnes says. His voice shakes.

"Hey, Bucky."

Barnes actually turns and looks, a moment before Natasha leaps and kicks him in the chest. Barnes flies into the wall, his handgun skittering along the floor, while Natasha flips backward and lands smoothly on her feet. By the time she lands, Barnes is struggling to stand.

Sam trots up to Natasha's side and aims his own handgun, thinking that Barnes might not be able to survive many more bullets. His stomach and side are pumping blood.

He needs medical attention, but –

"What do we do?" Sam asks.

Natasha raises her handgun and shoots.

Blood splatters onto the wall.

Barnes collapses, on his back, arms splayed. There's a bullet hole between his eyes: a perfect shot. Blood trickles from his nose and mouth.

She doesn't lower the gun.

"You..." Sam can't find the words. He stares at her, horrified. "It wasn't his... It was... He..."

There are no words.

For Natasha's part, her face is blank. Sam would like to think he knows her enough by now to see what he can only describe as *heaviness*. Blank heaviness.

She lowers the gun and walks to the body. She kneels beside it.

Sam shakes his head, struggling to keep control of himself. His insides are trembling.
Natasha peels a holographic mask off of the body's face, and then off of the body's left arm. The face belongs to a man who looks little like Barnes, and the man's left arm is flesh and blood.

Sam doesn't even blink. Doesn't breathe. Maybe just stands there, open-mouthed. The sense of relief is tremendous.

Natasha lets out a deep breath. "Wrong eye color. Barnes' eyes are blue. This guy has brown."

Sam licks his lips and takes a deep, deep breath. "Were... Were you sure?"

She tilts her head and lifts a shoulder. "He didn't sound or move like Barnes either. Also: I made him a promise."

Sam would like to say that he wouldn't've made that promise, but he remembers the highway and the helicarrier. He remembers that day. He remembers the trail of bodies throughout Eurasia: some killed quickly, others a little more creatively. He knows how dangerous Barnes can be.

He also knows how good Barnes can be. And he knows that Barnes didn't survive the last seventy years, to die either on this base or at the hand of a friend.

With Natasha's next words, every sense of relief drains from Sam.

"This is his comm. They have him."

He's vaguely aware. He knows he's in a room, and he knows he's not alone. He knows he has a handgun in his right hand, with another strapped to either leg and another strapped to the small of his back. He knows he has two knives on his belt, sheaths opposite each other so he can draw with either hand. Each handgun holster has a knife.

He doesn't wonder why he's here, or who he's here with. He doesn't think about how he's going to use those handguns or knives. He doesn't feel, or think, or worry. He simply waits for instruction.

"Paint something beautiful."

The three words broadcast over an intercom system, the distorted, male voice filling the room. The moment the words are heard, they're forgotten, but they've accomplished their purpose.

Barnes blinks, swallows, and sees Steve.

Steve.

He's wearing black combat pants and a black t-shirt. His face is sweaty and dirty, eyes sunken and dark. Deep, dirt-crusted, blackened slashes crisscross his arms, from under the sleeve of his t-shirt all the way down to the lacerated, bruised-black rings around his wrists. Barnes thinks he also sees burns.

His stomach twists. Too long. We took too long.

"Steve! Are you-"

Steve's expression turns from dull vacancy, to a flash of fear, to fixated hostility.

"Steve?" Barnes asks, though he has every idea about where this is going. He has no idea how to
play it. He reaches for his comm, but finds that it's gone. He doesn't remember losing it.

He doesn't have time to wonder. Nearly a split second too late, Barnes sees the nine millimeter and then the three bullets, raising his left arm just in time to deflect all of them.

Plink, plink, plink.

Steve has never been a weapons guy. He's all-shield and all hand-to-hand combat. In a gun fight, Steve will lose. Has lost.

"What'd they tell you, Steve?" Barnes asks, as he strides toward Steve. He's not afraid of Steve's gun. "What'd they make you see?"

He kicks Steve square in the chest, slamming him into the wall. He steps face to face with Steve, hand wrapped around the cheap ass Jennings piece of shit handgun. He yanks it out of Steve's hand, drops the clip, and dissembles the gun in less than a second. The pieces clatter to the floor.

"Find another way, Pu-"

Steve backhands Barnes across the face and kicks him in the stomach, hard enough to propel him backward across the room, into the far concrete wall. His Beretta drops and skitters along the floor.

Barnes hits the top of the wall, his head cracking against something metal on the ceiling. He bounces off and lands on his side, spits of gravel-and a speaker?-falling onto his back. He looks up in time to see Steve running toward him.

Even after seventy years (give or take) mostly without memories, there had still been something of Bucky Barnes left in the Winter Soldier. Some of his punches had been more like a bar brawl than an assassination attempt, and, when backed into a corner, he roared with the lack of control characteristic of a Brooklyn-reared twenty-something. Like now.

He launches himself straight at Steve, his left shoulder to Steve's mid-section, and knocks him to the floor. With Steve off balance, it's simple to flip him over and wrap his legs around Steve's arms, despite the wounds there.

"You were in kindergarten; I was in first grade. The first kid I punched out for you was Walter Murray."

Steve squirms and screams; kicks and tries to free his arms. On any other day, Steve probably had just the upper hand. Today, Steve is weak, and Barnes isn't going to let HYDRA destroy him.

"We've known each other since 19-fucking-22. We grew up two blocks apart. You gonna let it end like this?"

A burst of unexpected power turns the tables fast. Steve flips ass-over-head, and Barnes realizes too late that Steve is within hand's reach of the Beretta. He hears gun metal drag against concrete and twists the wrong way. Steve takes the shot, and it hits: a straight, clean shot into the top of Barnes' right shoulder.

It's excruciating. Seventy years of training and extreme conditioning kick in, and he doesn't scream, or let the wound slow him down. It can't.

Steve is back on his feet, aiming the weapon.

Barnes flips up and easily dodges a barrage of bullets. He circles back around, giving Steve enough
time to waste the entire magazine on bad, shaky shots. He jumps and kicks off the wall, slamming his left fist into Steve's face and twisting the Beretta out of Steve's hand with his right.

Steve reels backward with a scream, a sickly bruise already flowering along his cheekbone. When Steve looks back up, there's something more than contempt in his eyes. Desperation. Fear.

"On the helicarrier, you let me almost kill you," Barnes says. The pieces of the pistol clatter to the floor, like the Jennings. "I'll never forgive you for that."

Which is to say: Barnes still has no idea how to play this, other than to basically not die and basically not kill Steve. He can't let either happen. There has to be a way to cut through HYDRA's programming.

Steve had found a way for him.

It was seeing Steve's beaten, bruised face that triggered something. Not a memory, not knowledge, not anything except a feeling of disgust and wrongness. Enough to stop him, and enough to convince him that Steve might be a person worth pulling out of a river.

He doesn't know how to replicate that.

Steve rolls his shoulders, works his jaw, and slides into a loose defensive position. His right leg is trembling, and he blinks rapidly, heavily. It looks like sleep deprivation: a tool HYDRA uses to make a person's brain moldable. Barnes knows.

"Remember hotwiring that Mercedes in Frankfurt?" Barnes asks. "All we did was argue. It was pitch black outside, and the fucking 303rd was bombing the fuck out of us. We weren't even supposed to be there, and we were 100 fucking miles from the extraction point. We finally got it to start, and you-you fucking idiot-you drove it straight into a wall."

Despite everything, Barnes laughs through the last ten words. But just for the ten words.

Steve's eyes turn red, almost like he's fighting back tears, and he rasps, "that wasn't you," a moment before he strikes.

They trade a chaotic, complex sequence of punches and kicks, Barnes blocking more than attacking. He's not good at fighting not to kill.

It takes him twice as long as normal to react. Where his built-in reflexes tell him to stab, he blocks. Where those same reflexes urge him to drop and shoot, he kicks. He punches to shock, not to break something important, like a jaw, eye socket, or skull.

His right arm fatigues and stiffens too quickly, and it adds to his shitty reaction time. Steve lands a strong elbow strike to his forehead and follows it up with a kick to the side of Barnes' left knee.

Barnes accurately predicts that Steve's next move will be a simple front kick to the chest; he catches Steve's foot and intends to push him back. Steve counters with his other leg, twists in mid-air, and kicks Barnes across the jaw.

Barnes spins around, his left knee buckling. He catches himself with his left arm and pushes himself back up, but he's too late.

A knife blade slides into his mid-back. Steve's fingers wrap around his right shoulder-fingers forcefully, purposefully digging into the bullet wound there-pulls his shoulder back, and twists the knife.
Barnes cries out, catching a scream in his throat.

"Does it feel good?" Steve hisses, breath sickly hot against Barnes' neck. "Do you like it?"

He twists the knife again, and Barnes screams. He can't help it. It's agony, shooting up his back.

He hears Steve suck in a breath, and then Steve's hand is gone from his shoulder. Barnes turns and sees Steve backing away, hands clutched in his hair.

He uses the time to reach backwards with his left arm and pull out the knife in one smooth motion, crying out as he does so. Warm liquid slides down his back, trickling down his leg.

 Fuck.

It's deep. It's bad.

"Stop! Stop screaming!" Steve yells.

Barnes looks at the knife and recognizes it as his own. Steve must have grabbed it. He drives the blade into the wall, to its hilt.

"We laughed," Barnes says, short of breath. He pulls the other knife from the holster on his back and buries that one into the wall, too. "We sat in that fucking car, and we laughed until we couldn't breathe."

The knife from his left gun holster is next.

"It was March 22, 1944."

And, lastly, the knife from his right gun holster: he slams it into the concrete so hard, he feels the reverberation in his neck.

"There isn't a world without you in it. Come back, Steve."

By the time he's done talking, he's panting, wheezing, hot puffs of breaths all he has left. Steve has gone still, fingers clenched in his hair.

When his hands finally drop, and when he finally looks up, his face is wet and his eyes are rimmed red.

"Bucky," Steve breathes. His shoulders square, and he takes the few steps to Barnes. Barnes keeps his ground, more weary than hopeful. "You sound like you used to."

Steve swings, and Barnes drops straight to the floor, avoiding the punch. Steve's fist hits the wall hard, throwing his body off-balance. Barnes comes up under Steve's legs, carrying all of Steve's weight on his shoulders-and, fuck, it hurts-and springs up and forward, throwing them both to the ground.

They land in a tangled mess of arms and legs. The heel of Steve's boot crunches and twists against Barnes' right shoulder, and he screams again as he rolls away from him. He's not fast enough: Steve kicks him in the jaw once, twice, his neck cracking painfully.

Barnes pushes himself to his knees and is taken by a sudden cold sensation-like cold sweat, pinpricks through his body. He twists around and falls on his ass and hands, just in time to throw his hands up, drop flat on his back, and wrap his hands around Steve's right wrist.
"What if I cut you? Will it feel good? Will you like it?"

Steve's eyes well with tears, and he says the words like they're made of broken glass. Barnes doesn't understand what Steve is talking about, but he does understand that there is a very sharp combat knife about three inches from his face.

The plates on his arm reconfigure, drawing energy up and up and up and up, until he locks the elbow and then releases it, propelling Steve's hand and the hilt of the bloody knife held in it into Steve's face: crunch.

Steve reels backwards, groaning. The knife falls to the ground.

He doesn't know where Steve stabbed him again. He just knows that he did.

Barnes leaves the knife and pushes himself to his feet. He blinks, lightheaded and airy, a weird dry feeling in his mouth.

Steve is still stepping backwards, hand over his face, blood dripping through his fingers. Broken nose. Non-lethal.

He sees how this is going. He knows. He feels. Steve isn't going to stop; there's something more going on, something that Barnes failed to account for. And Barnes isn't going to last.

He knows the decision Steve faced on the helicarrier: it's really not a decision at all. He's not going to stand in this room and hurt Steve – not ever again. Which means.

Natasha and Sam won't let HYDRA keep Steve. He'll be safe. If he doubted that at all, he would do Steve a favor and blow his brains out right now. There's just one thing he can try to do.

"I walked into this base, knowing what could happen. I don't blame you. I'm not mad. I'm good with this."

Barnes pulls the Beretta from his right thigh holster and dismantles it, the pieces falling to the floor.

"Don't let HYDRA have anything more than they've already taken. Don't think about this."

He pulls and field dismantles the SIG Sauer from his left thigh holster. The pieces fall.

Steve wipes his face, smearing blood across his cheeks. The bridge of his nose is split, purple blooming around his eyes. "Trust me. I won't."

Steve advances quickly, telegraphing his move, like, hours ahead of time. Barnes doesn't block or dodge it, and Steve punches him in his left cheek. The right side of his head smacks painfully into the wall, pieces of chipped concrete falling onto his shoulder.

"Then finish it," Barnes says, the words and his tone intentional. "'Cause I'm with you, 'til the end of the line."

Two years ago, those words had stopped Barnes from killing Steve. Those words had carried him through rough times after the helicarrier, when his memories were still frozen and the Asset-out-of-Containment was still thinking in circles.

Today, those words get him punched again—he hears his cheekbone crack—thrown to the ground, and kicked repeatedly in the stomach.
"You've taken *everything!*" Steve yells between kicks. "You can't have that!"

Barnes coughs frantically, breath knocked from his lungs. Steve kicks again, harder, throwing Barnes onto his back, and then kicks and kicks again.

He sees gold strands of stars.

He can't breathe.

White noise rushes in his ears; it's all he can hear.

His body feels like it's on fire. It's a familiar sensation. He knows what's coming.

"Steve," he thinks he says. "Steve, stop."

If Steve answers, he can't hear it, but, surprisingly, Steve stops. Barnes rolls onto his stomach, left arm curled around his chest, and stays there, his right cheek pressed against the cool concrete floor.

The white noise diminishes. Steve is yelling. At first, the words don't make sense, but as his hearing clears, he can make out the words Steve is screaming.

"—going to kill you. I am going to fucking *kill you*!"

He remembers an endless time with the barest minimum of sleep and food, in a dark, windowless room, with his left arm useless and his right shackled behind his back. He remembers screaming and screaming, for so long that he believed he could shred the walls and crumple the building with his words, if he just kept-

He lost enough of himself in that room to count.

Steve's lost enough of himself here.

The edges of his vision are blurry and blackening. His chest burns; breathing is like swallowing liquid fire.

Despite that, he pushes himself to his elbows and knees, intending to climb to his feet. Suddenly, Steve is over him, and he stomps him back down, with a booted foot straight to Barnes' mid-back.

Barnes hits hard, and he groans, coughing. A weird, swimming feeling crawls through his sinuses, and the room spins. In his extreme periphery, he sees Steve walk away, toward the far corner of the room.

Barnes drags his left arm across the floor and rests his forehead on it. It's *cold*. He stays on the ground, hoping the dizziness passes.

Steve has gone quiet, or at least Barnes thinks so. He doesn't know what it means.

Steve stays away, long enough for Barnes to feel okay enough to push himself up and then onto his ass. When he moves, he feels a sick crackling in his chest. He cradles his right arm loosely against his stomach, held there with his left hand.

Steve is still quiet, back in the corner. The room is blurry, Steve even blurrier, and it looks like he's just standing there, looking at something in his right hand.

"I didn't mean what I said. In Krakow last year," Barnes says. It takes effort to project his voice into something thicker than a rasp. "I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."
He regrets that night so, so much. He would do anything, just to go back and stop himself.

Barnes pushes himself to his knees, and then to his feet. His body is forcing his breaths out quicker and quicker, and he can't control them. He takes a step, and the room spins. He takes another and another, his eyes focused on Steve. Steve, in the far corner, staring at...

Barnes stops, just a couple meters from Steve. He blinks and then blinks again, clearing his vision enough to see it.

It's the CZ. The one he'd had in his SOB holster. The one he'd forgotten about. The one he'd thought about and thought about and thought about using –

"Steve—"

Steve looks up, victory in his expression, and aims the gun. His hand is shaking enough that the gun rattles.

The storm in Barnes' mind clears into quiet, still clarity. He relaxes.

The gunshot isn't as loud as it should have been. He feels it in the way there's no breath left in his body, in the way the world tumbles out of control. He's on the ground before he knows it, his body prickly cold except for the warmth spreading through his chest.

A handful of words come to mind: the Winter is warm and fuck.

Steve stands above him, gun aimed. Barnes tries to say "it's not your fault" but all that comes out are violent coughs and what tastes like blood.

He doesn't hear the second gunshot, but he sees the world bleed black inside of a second.
March 21, 1944. It was a Tuesday night, quickly bleeding into Wednesday morning. Bucky had just accidentally dropped a full tin of cigarettes out of the plane: a lit match in his left hand and an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Fucking son of a bitch."

Steve cringed to stop himself from laughing. Yesterday, Gabe had bet Bucky that entire rationed tin of cigarettes that Bucky couldn't keep the one in his mouth for the entire parachute down. It was a dumb bet, not that it ever stopped them.

"You better be real careful with that one," Steve said. "Gabe's not gonna let those go easy."

"That's fine. I'll tell'em exactly where to find'em," Bucky said, and then he lit the cigarette and threw the match and himself out of the plane.

Steve laughed and followed, diving into the thick, gray cloud cover of the night sky.

There was a small HYDRA installation in Mannheim: a two-person job, a quick in and out and don't-get-caught-in-an-air-raid mission. Extraction was just 24 klicks south of the city, and Bucky was the only one who could even keep somewhat of a pace with Steve.

About sixty meters from the ground, as cloud cover broke and the city came into view, Steve looked hard. And then harder.

Rivers were missing. *Rivers.* And the *one* that was there? Was the wrong direction: east-west, not north-south.

*Shit.*

He wondered if Bucky had noticed. He couldn't even see him, not with a black chute.

After a few minutes, the city beneath him came into view: bombed buildings, roads blocked with debris, and, if he looked hard enough, movement – military vehicles and cars.
Steve landed hard on a pitted, asphalt road, taking several quick, extra steps to stop himself from falling. As he took those steps, he drew his knife, cut the cords of his chute, and launched into a sprint.

He ran down the street, noting that every building was pitch dark, and quickly ducked into an alleyway. He had to find Bucky.

In the middle of the night, in an unknown city, with nothing at all to go on. How long could it take?

Steve crept through the alley, quietly approaching its end, and listened carefully for any sounds: voices, vehicles, footsteps.

He hadn't really expected to hear anything so soon, but.

He heard grunts, shouts, and the unmistakable sound of multiple people being punched and kicked.

Steve ran toward those sounds: out of the alley, making a right-hand turn onto an empty street with boarded-up shops, and then down two blocks. He followed the sounds down another alley, until he came to another street, partially blocked by a roofless black Mercedes.

Bucky was standing in the middle of a pile of Nazis, his back to Steve. Cigarette smoke swirled into the air.

"Buc—"

Steve cut himself off. He looked up.

In the distance, he could hear planes: lots and lots of planes. Steve racked his brain, trying to think if he knew –

The sound of rapid, heavy footsteps grabbed Steve's attention. He turned toward them and saw Bucky running his way, the tail end of a cigarette hanging from his lips.

Steve looked up again: the planes were getting closer.

"Hey. Saw your 'chute. This isn't Mannheim. It's—"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. I know."

Bucky shook his head. "No, it's Frankfurt. The 303rd is coming." Bucky gestured upward. "We've gotta go."

Steve nodded again, thinking that, yeah, it made perfect sense, before he realized that those planes were still too far away for Bucky to have heard.

"You can hear that?" he asked.

Bucky gaped at him. "Steve. It's a fucking squadron of planes. Also: they're coming to bomb us. Let's take the car and fucking go."

Bucky threw his cigarette on the ground and didn't wait for Steve to agree. Steve spared a look at the pile of Nazis, counting at least eight, before following Bucky to the car.

"Fuck," Bucky exclaimed, and Steve saw him turn and look at the Nazi pile.

Steve'd known Bucky long enough to know what he meant by tone, not by words (which was
actually a word, singular, and that singular word was some variation of "fuck," a bad habit that had only grown expo-fucking-entially worse since the Army had gotten their hands on him). With Bucky, "fuck" could mean "great!" or "wow, I'm surprised" or "what I'm doing tonight" or "I'm bored" or "we're in trouble." It was all in the tone.

This time, Bucky meant they were in trouble.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked.

"The keys are somewhere in that," Bucky answered, pointing at the pile of Nazis.

Above them, the planes sounded like the Prospect Park beehive Becca had once kicked a ball into. A split second later, air raid sirens wailed and screeched, louder and louder, relentless and relentless.

They didn't have time to check pockets for keys-and, Christ, knowing Bucky, he'd spend more time hunting for a pack of cigarettes.

"I really wish we'd brought our air raid suits," Bucky said, a shit-eating grin on his face. Steve could hit him, sometimes, but, these days, it just wouldn't be fair. "I say we hotwire it."

Steve nodded and kneeled down by the steering column. Bucky pulled out a Daco-Lite and shined it underneath the steering wheel. They'd watched a gangster picture once, where the bad guys had hotwired a Mercedes-Benz. How hard could it be?

The first bombs hit: far west of them, but the ground under them shook, and Steve could hear the sound of buildings exploding. All things considered, those bombs were too close.

"Break the steering column," Bucky said, as calm as ever.

Steve did that, and then reached under the dash and yanked loose a wad of different colored wires. "Uh…"

Another wave of bombs hit, even closer. Steve heard slivers of concrete and brick rain onto the ground and even onto the hood of the car.

"Shit," he hissed.

Bucky leaned the Daco-Lite onto the bottom of the passenger seat, pulled out his knife, and crawled over the floorboards.

"What, are you hiding?"

"Only if you are," Bucky said, distracted. Steve watched him cut the tie holding the wires together and then started yanking on each one, his head almost all the way up inside the dash.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to see which wire does what. I don't know – go find the keys. And a cigarettes. And turn off that fucking alarm, Christ, like they don't know they're getting bombed?"

Steve rolled his eyes and didn't move a millimeter. "Anything else? A soda?"

"Scotch. Alottav it."

Another string of bombs hit, further out. The ground trembled. The glass windows in the buildings
around them rattled inside their frames.

Impatient, Steve popped his head under the dash and saw what the hell Bucky was actually doing. Which was: yanking different colored wires and cussing up a storm.

"What are you doing? – I can't see anything!"

"That's not my fault!"

"Yes, it fucking is, you're blocking the god damned light!"

Steve went to get up, forgot where he was and how tall he was, and banged his head on the underside of the dash. "Fuck."

"Language!"

Thing was: Steve could walk around the car and kick Bucky in the ass, and Bucky wouldn't know what god damned hit him. And then Steve would run all the way to Mannheim.

Bucky's knife plopped onto the floorboard. "Strip the reds."

Steve sighed, grabbed the knife, laid awkwardly across the two front seats, and stripped about a centimeter off each red wire.

"Okay?"

"Maybe the brown one?"

Another wave of bombs fell: like struck lightning that lit up a tree, crackling along the ground, and rattling windows, teeth, and hearts alike. The bombs were closer than they'd been all night – two, maybe three blocks away.

There was finally panic in Bucky's voice. "Strip the brown. Do it fucking now."

Steve did it fucking now.

Bucky crawled out from under the dashboard, his hair a frazzled mess, and pushed Steve into the driver's seat. He leaned over, took the two reds, crossed them together, and then touched the brown to the reds – once, twice, three times.

The engine turned over, the exhaust kicked, and they were in business.

"Fuck," i.e., "it worked, great job!", Bucky said, as he dropped into the passenger seat. "Let's go."

Steve nodded, put the car into gear, and slammed on the accelerator.

Like struck lightning that lit up a tree, crackling along the ground, and rattling windows, teeth, and hearts alike, Steve plowed the car straight into the brick building in front of them.

The car windows and windshield shattered. The hood crumpled, steam and smoke rolling from the engine compartment. The engine sputtered, then quit.

Steve was aware that his mouth was wide open, eyes saucers. He was aware that he wasn't breathing. He looked down at the stick and saw his mistake: drive, instead of reverse.

He heard laughter: quiet at first, then louder. "Oh, my fucking god!"
It was Bucky. His words were muffled. Steve looked over to find out why, and saw that Bucky was doubled over, his face buried in his hands.

He didn't know why Bucky was laughing. It wasn't funny. They were in the wrong city, in the middle of an air raid in Nazi Germany, likely to be killed by their own people, and, if not them, then by the Nazis. Their planned mission was toast, and their extraction point was completely out of reach. Nothing about this was funny.

Until.

"When you ride alone," Bucky giggled, the words barely discernible (Steve knew them from a ridiculous propaganda poster), "you ride with Hitler! Join a car-sharing club!"

Steve dissolved into his own laughter, light at first. He made the mistake of looking over at Bucky just as Bucky took his face out of his hands, and the sight of Bucky's red face and watering eyes was enough to do Steve in.

They sat in the totaled car, in the middle of an air raid, and laughed until they couldn't breathe.

It was March 22, 1944.

---

Bang.

Natasha and Sam jog to a halt.

It's closer than the last.

Bang, bang.

"Down the hall," Natasha says, running before she finishes her words. Sam's right beside her, step for step.

The corridor they turn down doesn't have any doors. Nowhere to go, except at the end, where there is a single doorway – a stairwell.

"Check out the floor," Sam says – and he points at the long, deep crack below their feet.

Natasha can see specks of fresh dust and crumbled concrete. It's new.

"We're right above them."

Within seconds, they've crossed the corridor and are pounding down the concrete stairs, taking the first door they come to, to yet another corridor.

This one has armed HYDRA soldiers in it: four of them, guarding a heavy, steel door.

Without taking a single step, Sam kills all four with his AR-15. Natasha looks at him: not impressed, not relieved, not anything more than regretful.

"I chose this," he says. "And my friends are in that room."

Or so they hope, Natasha thinks.
The door is simply locked: a thick, heavy, half-moon latch. It screeches, as Sam pulls it out of its shaft.

Sam puts his hand on the handle and counts down with his fingers: one, two, three -

He pulls the door open, boots scraping against the floor, and Natasha immediately steps in, weapon drawn and aimed.

It's what stepping into someone else's nightmare must be like.

The room is large and brightly lit. There are no windows, only reams of fluorescent industrial lights affixed to the ceiling. Small cameras with blinking, red lights are attached to each corner of the room.

The concrete walls are cratered with holes the sizes of bodies and littered with knives entombed to their hilts. Pistol parts are scattered all over the floor: bullets, casings, magazines, slides, springs, barrels. There are small pools of blood here and there, with droplet trails painting circles on the floor.

Barnes is...

Steve is curled up on the floor, back flat against the furthest wall, eyes closed. Barnes' CZ-75 is held loosely in his right hand. His arms look cut and burned, and the fingers wrapped around the gun are bruised and inflamed. His bearded face is beaten, near unrecognizable. He doesn't react to their presence.

It's the worst case scenario.

Natasha takes a deep, calming breath, and lowers her weapon.

"Oh, Jesus." Sam. "Is that..."

Sam doesn't finish his sentence. They both know.

"Get Steve. I'll get Barnes." Her voice is stronger than she expected it to be. She's seen worse; done worse. Yet, her stomach is in knots, eyes stinging.

There's a pool of blood under Barnes, his black shirt saturated. Natasha kneels, hand cupped over mouth and nose to block the overwhelming stench of blood and damp concrete. She brushes her fingers over his cheek, checking to make sure it's him.

It is.

She wishes it wasn't.

She presses her free hand against his inert carotid artery.

"Steve?" In her peripheral, she sees Sam approach Steve, with both hands out non-threateningly. She hears Steve move, the sudden intake of his breath, and the scrape of a gun against concrete. "Steve, on your left, Man."

She counts at least four gunshot wounds: three in the chest, one in the right shoulder. There are partially formed purple bruises on his jaw and cheekbones. His eyes are open and sightless, but there's still a shine to them. The blood on his lips is tacky, but not dry. His neck is warm. She fools herself into thinking that he might still have a chance.
"Sam? What are you... You're here?"

"Yeah. I'm here, Steve. We finally found you."

Natasha looks over. Steve is blinking tiredly, expression confused.

"Can I have the gun, Steve? I might need it."

Steve blinks some more, brow dropping. "What gun?"

"The one in your hand." Sam is total, calm patience. Like this is a common day occurrence.

Steve looks down and raises his right hand, as though the pistol held in it is the first he's seen of it. "I don't..." He hands it to Sam, who takes it by the butt. "I'm tired. Can I sleep?"

"Thank you. Not yet, Steve. We've gotta go."

Natasha doesn't waste any more time. "How long ago did this happen, Steve?"

He turns an eerily blank stare at her. The Steve she knows would be going ballistic right now; Barnes is his everything. "What?" He looks back at Sam. "Can I sleep?"

"How long ago was Barnes shot?"

Steve blinks, looks back at her, and the confusion clears into what Natasha would consider contempt. He looks at Barnes, his body suddenly trembling, and spits, "Not long ago enough."

She's at a loss for words. Sam looks at her, eyes wide, and shakes his head.

"Okay, Steve. We need to get you out of here. Can you stand? I don't want to hurt your arms."

Natasha looks back down at Barnes. His eyes are less shiny; the blood on his lips is darker; his neck is less warm. No chance. She shoves her grief away for another time and a better place.

"You're a good person. Better than you knew."

It's not a goodbye. She won't leave his body anywhere near HYDRA.

"Sam, help me-"

"Nat!"

Steve is suddenly close and grabs her upper arm. "A good person?" He snarls, face twisting. He reminds her of an injured, trapped animal. "He... He did all of this. He's HYDRA. He's always been HYDRA."

Steve looks past her, toward the door.

"Calm yourself, Steven."

It's a deep, male voice: kind, smooth, unexpected. It comes from the doorway.

Steve lets go of Natasha. His arms drop to his side, and his back straightens. "I'm calm."

Sam and Natasha simultaneously aim their weapons at the man, but Steve is standing in the way of Natasha's sight line. She sees Sam slowly move to attempt a clear line of sight of his own.
"Good. Think of home, Steven. What do you see there?"

Steve doesn't answer, but his body language changes. His chest freezes, and his shoulders lock up. His eyes search the air, and Natasha sees the instant he finds whatever he's looking for.

She slowly moves to Steve's left, knowing he won't notice-

"I see Bucky."

"What color do you see?"

Steve turns, ever so slowly, eyes going straight to Barnes' body. His face twists into slow-motion horror: mouth open, brow pulled impossibly tight, eyes wide.

"Good night, Steve-"

A shot cracks through the air, then another, and another, and another. The first had struck the man's neck; the three others, close enough to the heart to make it count. The man falls backward to the ground, motionless.

"No." Steve, voice cracking. "No. No. No. No. Can't be. It can't be."

Sam lowers Barnes' CZ and lets out a deep breath. Natasha doesn't miss the way his body trembles. "Fuck that guy. Seriously, fuck that guy."

Natasha sits down on the cold floor and watches Steve sink to his knees and put his hands on Barnes' face. He stares at Barnes' eyes and whispers, "Don't be blue. Don't be blue. No. No. No. No."

Natasha swallows and watches Steve press his hands into Barnes' chest wounds and make fists of Barnes' t-shirt.

"Bucky? No, please. Please, Bucky. Buck? Buck, please. I'll... I'll do anything. I'll do anything. Please. Just... Please. No. I'm sorry."

His body is shaking, face twisted unrecognizable, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Natasha looks down. She can't watch this.

"Please, please, please, no, please. No. Buck. Come back. Please come back. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Come back."

"Steve." Sam. Natasha looks over. "It's okay. We gotta go."

It's really not, and it really won't be, and, yes, they really should.

"Steve," Natasha says, but her voice is a dry crack. She's sick to her stomach, exhausted, drained. She wants to sit down in a dark room for an ugly cry of her own. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. "Let him go, Steve." Even to her own ears, she sounds emotionless. "He doesn't want you to die here."

Steve isn't listening. His fingers are tangled in Barnes' shirt, head pressed against Barnes' chest. He's crying so hard his chest isn't moving; she can hear his breathless sobs.

"We need to get out of here, and soon." Natasha stifles the awful sounds with empty words. "There will be more coming."
Sam nods, and his expression says "no, shit, I already said that." What comes out of his mouth is, "How are we moving Steve?

"That'll be the prob-

It's already too late. Distinct rustling and clinking metal comes from the hallway.

"Keep them away from Steve and Barnes?" Sam asks, already standing in a defensive position.

Natasha nods and quickly climbs to her feet, two handguns drawn and aimed.

Sam extends his wings, apparently deciding to make full use of the tall ceiling.

The man's bloodied, dead body slides backwards, at the same time a storm of HYDRA soldiers begin to enter the room.

The room is wide open, without defensive prospects. There's nothing to hide behind; nowhere to take cover; nothing to save them. Their ace in the hole is dead on the floor, and their other ace in the hole won't let him go.

Natasha shoots the first person through, and the first person becomes the first body.

Sam dives and nabs a soldier, shooting back upward. Natasha doesn't so much get it, but that's okay. She side jumps to the wall, pressing her back flat against it, and kicks the next soldier in the neck.

Sam throws his kidnapped, dead soldier into the next four through the door. In the ensuing chaos, Natasha steps away from the wall, aiming and shooting both of her handguns at once. She takes eight, before stepping back against the wall.

She watches Sam dive again, twisting and kicking two, his wings retracting. He punches one, kicks another, and pushes into the corridor.

Even though she tears away from the wall and runs toward the door immediately, she hears Sam's wings extend, hears him scream, and hears a barrage of gunshots.

Natasha reaches the hallway, in time to shoot just one last soldier.

At the end of the hallway, Sam's feet are just touching the ground, his wings folding into his pack. There are at least a dozen bloodied bodies behind him. He's breathing heavy, then heavier, and then releases one short, loud, wordless scream, neck strained toward the ceiling.

She wonders if it makes him feel any better.

"I'm good," he says to her. "Go."

Natasha doesn't think so, but she goes back into the nightmare.

She lets out her own heated breath and looks over at Steve. He's still wholly focused on Barnes, as though a violent shoot-out with HYDRA hadn't just happened. He has Barnes' head cradled in his hands, his forehead pressed against Barnes'.

"Bucky? Bucky, please. Please. Bucky. You... Please, please, please."

She can't do this.
She doesn't know what to do.

She just \textit{does}.

Natasha kneels down, knees against Barnes' chest, and speaks to Steve, not an ounce of power behind her voice: "We have to go, or we will \textit{all} die here."

Steve doesn't react.

"Steve."

Nothing.

"\textit{Captain}."

Nothing.

She hears Sam step back in.

"How are we getting them out?" he asks. Every part of him – expression, body language, vocal tone – says that he's finished. "We've gotta get the signal out to Tony."

Natasha nods; she knows all that. "Steve, can you carry—"

Natasha freezes mid-sentence. The plates on Barnes' arm shift, and his metal fingers make a brief fist.

Her eyes snap to his face, just in time to see his eyes blink, just once, and to see fresh blood trickle from his mouth. Quickly, she presses her fingers against his throat-and feels nothing except a small shock, almost like a static shock.

It doesn't take long for her to put together a theory. "You don't leave an irreplaceable, very expensive super weapon dead on a battlefield, do you?"

"\textit{What}?"

"He has a defibrillator in his arm. There's a hospital just east of here. Get Barnes there, now. Don't worry about anything else."

"You really think—"

"Don't ask! Go!" Natasha all but yells. "Steve, \textit{move}."

It almost feels good to knock Captain America on his ass, only she ends it by pulling him into a hug.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

It was only a month and a half ago, maybe. It was a long, sleepless night, on a long, endless train to Stockholm.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

It was only a month and a half ago, maybe. It was a long, sleepless night, on a long, endless train to Stockholm.

Natasha was snoring.

Barnes' phone and tablet were off, but his metal fingers lightly rapped against the mattress, a pattern that told Sam he was awake.

"What was the worst part?" Sam whispered.

More often than not those days, Barnes would answer. Sometimes, he would shut down for a while, and things would be awkward. But Sam had ideas in his head—nightmares—about what was happening to Steve, and he—

"How much I trusted them."

Those five words were like five punches to Sam's gut. He didn't have time to unpack that feeling, to figure out his own reaction and why he was having it.

Barnes unloaded: "I was HYDRA almost four times as long as I wasn't. I don't get — I don't get where I come from. I don't get how any of him is still here."

Holy shit.

Sam understood, right then, why Barnes didn't like to be called "Bucky." And the amount of disassociation packed into Barnes' words almost scared him. Almost. Because Sam still thought of Barnes as three people: the one before, the one during, and the one after.

"Nature, man," Sam whispered. "You are who you are, and no one can take that. You prove that."

"But I trusted them."

"It's called traumatic bonding. They needed you to trust them, because, if — no, you know what, when — you didn't, you were a threat. It's textbook. I can refer you to someone —"

"No. I like talking to you."
Not good. So not good. There were so many conflicts here, starting with the fact that the Winter Soldier, no matter who he was today, had still inflicted a fuck ton of trauma on Sam.

*Yes, I am the unqualified traumatic counselor for the person I am being traumatically counseled for. Do you take insurance?*

"I'm not the right person to help you. Not like that."

There was a long silence, filled only with Natasha's light snoring. "Okay," Barnes finally said. "But I trust you."

Sam didn't know how to follow-up on that. He just didn't know. So, he turned it into a joke and hoped, hoped, hoped it would just go away: "To what, *therapy* you?"


Sam heard those words and put it all together: the person terrified that he could trust HYDRA was learning and acknowledging that he could trust others. "All right. We'll just call it talking, then."

What Barnes usually said to end a conversation was "okay." That time, he whispered, "Thanks, Sam."

The night rode onward.

---

Five minutes into flight, Sam sees the hospital, and then the ambulance bay, and then little specks of people by a little toy ambulance – exactly in that order, about a second and a half apart.

Sam lowers altitude as fast as he safely can, without dropping Barnes' body. Because Barnes is limp and lifeless, and he doesn't know what Natasha is thinking. He doesn't know what *he's* thinking.

He lands in front of the ambulance bay. On touch down, a sharp pain shoots through his left knee, and it buckles. He goes down hard onto his right knee, struggling to keep ahold of Barnes' body.

He barely manages to do that. He catches enough of Barnes' weight to set Barnes safely on the pavement, making sure to protect his head.

"I've got you. I've got you."

All he can smell is blood. He looks down, and sees. A torn belt loop, black threads frayed. A faint, white scar below his right palm. Droplets of dark blood coagulating on the dirty metal of his left arm. Jagged holes in his gray shirt. A yellow-blue bruise, half-blossomed below his right eye. His eyes, dull. His chest, still.

"What happened? How long?"

Sam looks up. Two EMTs are already kneeling down, right by them, and another is sprinting toward them.

His training takes over, his brain and mouth working on their own: "At least three gunshot wounds. Fifteen, twenty minutes. Unresponsive. He has a defibrillator in his arm – it went off five minutes ago."
One talks into a radio: "White, male patient outside EMS Bay 3. Multiple GSWs to the chest, with massive hemorrhaging, full arrest, unresponsive. Requesting immediate trauma care. He… He's got a metal arm with an internal defib; unsure how to proceed with AED. Beginning CPR."

He watches the first EMT snap a cervical collar around Barnes' neck. Put an Ambu Bag over his mouth. Another try and try to stick an IV into the top of his right hand. The last, the talker, start chest compressions, hands bloodier and bloodier.

Then, a flurry of movement and people, and the only thing left is the blood staining the pavement.

Sam watches, until one of the EMTs blocks his line of sight. Her badge says Amina Faran.

Sam blinks and says, "We… We didn't think of that. CPR. We should've thought of that. We thought… We thought. Is he?"

"You got'em here. No matter what happens, you just remember: you got'em here. Let's get you some clothes and a sink, okay?"

He nods and follows her, hoping she doesn't take him too far. He doesn't expect it to be too long, before there's news.

Amina leads him into the ER, through a key-carded door marked "authorized personnel only," and then into a washroom with a deep, stainless steel sink.

"I'll be back with clothes, okay?"

Sam nods and says "thank you," a reflex, unthinking, always.

She leaves, and he twists the "hot" water faucet to full blast and shoves his hands under the stream.

Water splatters onto his tactical pants.

Barnes' blood swirls down the drain.

He looks up. There's no mirror. He knows there's blood – he can feel it drying tight against his skin.

Sam unzips his tactical vest and drops it onto the floor. He takes off his lightweight, black jacket and lets that fall to the floor, too. Even with the sleeves, his arms are coated in bright red blood – some of it dry, most of it wet and thick.

He contorts to fit his right arm under the stream of water, scrubbing with bubbly soap, steaming hot water, and his fingernails. He notices a fresh stream of blood coming from his own arm: that through-and-though bullet from the stairwell. Maybe, in a little while, he'll tell someone about it and get it stitched up.

Sam switches arms, washing mostly dried blood off of his skin and down the drain. The metallic smell of the blood, combined with the tang of the tap water, turns Sam's stomach, and he thinks about it too much for too long.

A warm prickle crawls up his throat, stinging his cheeks, and he goes down to his knees, hugging the tiny, clear-plastic lined wastebasket by the sink. He throws up half-chewed fettuccini from lunch and dry-mix scrambled eggs from breakfast, strings of phlegmy spit sticking to the liner.

Eyes closed, Sam reaches up and grabs a paper towel from the dispenser. He wipes his mouth, lets
it go into the wastebasket, and falls from his knees to his ass, back pressed against the tile wall.

All he can think is that Steve killed Barnes, one life taken and the other destroyed, and nothing will ever, ever be the same again.

He sits long enough to let his stomach settle, in no particular rush to leave the room and be told the inevitable news: too much trauma, too much blood loss, too much time. He opens his eyes and looks at his hands: the blood crusted under his nails and along his cuticles, the new, raw callouses from handling weapons for so long, and the gashes along his knuckles, from punching too many kids today.

_Bang!_

The wall behind his back rattles; it sounds like someone fell against it.

Sam thinks nothing of it, but stands anyway. He grabs another paper towel, wets it under the faucet that he'd forgot was running, and scrubs his face.

"What are you – No! No, do—"

Sam turns the water off. He holds his breath and listens.

A droplet of water trickles down his chin, under his shirt.

_Pew._

_Pew._

_Pew._

Without a doubt, he knows that he's hearing a silenced, low-caliber handgun.

_Shit._

In a moment, he knows it's HYDRA, and he knows that they're here to take Barnes' body, for whatever twisted reason they've concocted.

Sam draws the only weapon he has with any ammunition left: his Beretta M9. He has eleven bullets left in it.

_Shit._

He's gotta make it work.

He takes a deep breath, creeps to the door, cracks it open, and looks into the hallway. He sees three bodies sprawled on the floor: two wearing scrubs, one wearing an EMT's uniform, and he can tell that it's the woman who helped him. He doesn't see or hear activity.

Sam slides out of the room, weapon aimed, and walks past the three dead bodies. He heads toward the nurses station—a messy desk full of clipboards, file folders, boxes of gloves, and foaming hand sanitizer bottles – and sees two more bodies, slumped over the desk, bullet holes in their heads.

_It's not right._

Emotions threaten to overwhelm him. He has to push them away, just like in the Middle East, when he'd seen civilians and comrades alike bombed and burned.
On a hunch, he leans over the desk and picks up the handset of the landline phone. There's no dial tone. He sets it down and advances toward the dual rows of blue curtains: the emergency room.

There's no question in his mind about what he's going to find. He pulls back the first curtain and sees three more dead bodies; beyond that, a curtain with blood oozing up the fabric.

Sam presses on, toward the double doors and the arrow marked "emergency operating room."

He steps around the body of an environmental services employee, and then of another person wearing scrubs. All of the blood is fresh.

Through another set of double doors, Sam finds the entrance to the emergency operating room, a few feet to his left. The door to it is open. Weapon raised and ready, he looks around the corner, into the room.

It's damn near smaller than the one he'd seen at Al-Asad. He counts four black-clad soldiers and another person - maybe not military, wearing a nurse's scrubs - who is injecting something into Barnes' IV line with an abnormally large syringe.

Six people in thin, blue scrubs lie dead on the floor. He can't think about them.

Barnes' electrocardiograph is beeping. All of the numbers on the monitoring screen read too low.

*But he's alive.*

Barnes' right hand clenches, then his forearm lifts, just a few inches. One of the soldiers puts a gloved hand on Barnes' arm and holds it down.

Something a lot like rage skitters through Sam's chest.

The nurse keeps pushing medication into the line, slow and slow.

A steady alarm – *blipblip, blipblip, blipblip* – sounds. Numbers on the echocardiograph turn red.

Back-up isn't going to come soon enough. Sam's it, with eleven bullets for five people.

He makes the worst tactical decision possible and shoots the nurse first, and then the soldier with his filthy fucking hand on Barnes' arm.

A barrage of bullets aimed his way, Sam dives around the wall and slides to the ground. Bits of drywall and sheetrock rain over his head, bullets whizzing by his body. One grazes his arm, the pain no more than that of a sidewalk scrape.

Sam crawls past the barrage, then pushes himself up into a dash. In high school, he beat records for the 100 meter dash; he hasn't gotten any slower, not with Steve on his left.

10.5 seconds is still a long time.

He extends his wings and lifts off, the tips of his wings brushing the ceiling. He reverse thrusts, spins around, and guns it, back toward the operating room.

The timing is near perfect. Two of the soldiers slip out of the room, in formation. Sam clotheslines them both and brings his wings back in, landing and falling on his bad knee. He intentionally falls onto his back, spreads his legs, and shoots to kill the two soldiers.

And then there was one.
That bad knee has worsened from an annoying twinge to a painful limp. So, he limps back to the operating room, hugging the wall, and, on a mental count of three, turns the corner.

The last soldier is finishing the job: standing by Barnes' side, injecting the final drops of the syringe.

Sam unloads the rest of his clip into the guy's chest and watches him crumple.

He steps over bodies, one at a time, and limps his way to Barnes. His eyes are closed, saturated gauze packed into his wounds, breaths mechanical.

"Hey. They're gone," Sam says. "You don't need to worry."

Sam wraps his hands around Barnes' right hand. His skin is cool. But his fingers weakly curl around Sam's.

_He had a chance. They killed him._

Sam closes his eyes, tilts his head up, and breathes. Listens to the clicks and hisses, the rapid _beep beep beep beep_ of the electrocardiograph monitor, and the otherwise quietness of the dead hospital.

_Beep beep beep beep beep beep beep._

He opens his eyes and looks down, at blood-soaked white sheets, the splotchy blood covering Barnes' chest, the tubes and wires all over his body, the brace around his neck, and the blood-specked breathing tube in his mouth.

There's nowhere left to go. Nothing left to do. HYDRA's taken every chance.

"Thank you for being with us. Find peace."

It's not long after he says those words that the monitor flatlines, as he knew it would. Alarms screech. There's no one to turn them off.

It's not over yet. He expects HYDRA to keep coming, and he expects that they can go fuck themselves.

Sam pulls his hand away from Barnes', turns, and chooses one of the bodies on the ground. The AR-15 rifle is still held in its hand, and Sam takes it.

He sits on the ground below the operating table, back flat against its base, encompassed by the blood of his friend that they'd murdered.

Let them come.

Minutes and minutes pass.

_Beep beep beep beep beep._

Sam pops his head against the bottom of the table. He scrambles to his feet, eyes on Barnes instead of the monitor.

His left hand is a fist. The plates are shuffling. His eyes blink open. Sam has seen this before—in Slovenia.

Sam leans over the table, hand in Barnes' hair. His eyes don't track; they're listless and dim, like
he's not really there.

"Hey, stay with me. Barnes. Barnes?"

It's over, as quickly as it began. The electrocardiograph flatlines again, and Barnes' eyes turn dull and sightless.

There's a defibrillator in his arm, and it's still working.

Sam sucks in a shaky breath, stomach knotted, something more than anger shooting adrenaline through his body.

He sinks back down to the floor, back to his rifle, and grips it with white knuckles.


He waits. Minutes, he thinks, pass.

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeep.

He hears the plates shift.

He doesn't get up. He shuts his eyes and grips the gun even tighter.

Flatline.

Another minute passes.

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeep.

He presses his forehead into his knees.

Flatline.

It continues that way, for what feels like a long time.

Sam feels sick.

A door slams.

He stands, checks the rifle, and aims it at the door.

A flurry of quick footsteps.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

And then –

Natasha.

It's Natasha, Hill, and a medical team that damn near teleports to Barnes. Sam takes a single step away—but that's all.
He's not feeling the relief that he should. He doesn't trust this, not at all.

Natasha walks to him and puts her hand on his upper arm, though he knows she's really looking over his shoulder at Barnes. What he doesn't know is what she expected to find.

"There's a Quinjet out front – marked eleven. Steve's on it. He needs you."

Sam shakes his head. "What about—"

"You're Steve's closest friend, and you're good with him; stay with him. I've got Barnes."

He lives in a world of digital face masks, world-class master spies and assassins, super super secret agencies within super secret agencies, and twenty-somethings that are really ninety-somethings. Face value no longer has the luxury of trust.

"What's the first song Barnes picked out in the car?"

Natasha blinks. Falters.

Hill rolls her eyes and snaps, "We don't have time for this. HYDRA just took out an entire hospital of people."

Sam's stomach drops, and his shoulders tense with adrenaline. His grip on the rifle tightens. Hill is closest. He can slam the butt of the rifle into her head, and then, on the person pretending to be Natasha—

Natasha shakes her head and puts a hand on Hill's arm. "Interstate Love Song. You got the words wrong. He called you a fucking asshole. I threatened to kick both of you out of the car. I'm me, Sam."

Sam drops the rifle and breathes incredible relief.

It's over. For real.

"Okay, then. Quinjet eleven."

Sam boards the Quinjet and is near instantly accosted by a medic.

"He won't let us touch him. He has traumatic injuries. Can you... I don't know. Can you talk to him?"

"Man, just move," Sam snaps. He doesn't even feel bad.

Steve is sitting on the floor, in front of a jumpseat, hands slack in his lap. His eyes are open, but with a distant stare that Sam is familiar with. Privately, he calls it a stare of nightmares; most others call it the thousand-yard stare.

"Hey, Steve. It's Sam. Can I sit down?"

Steve doesn't react. Sam moves closer.

Steve's eyes are swollen red, sunken, and bruised black and blue. His nose is split at the bridge, freshly crusted blood above his lips and on his chin and neck. His left cheek is bruised purple. His
knuckles and all ten fingers are gashed, swollen, and bleeding. He's filthy and smells bad, though mostly like blood, burnt skin, and oddly Carmex.

"Steve? Are you with me?"

Like someone flipped a switch, Steve's eyes become shiny, and his face turns progressively redder.

"I killed the wrong one."

Sam doesn't say anything. Doesn't offer promises. Doesn't offer hope. The body lying on an operating table, inside HYDRA's ghost of a hospital, has no chance that Sam can see.

He suddenly thinks about what it was like, being on the SAR team that found Steve's body along the muddy banks of the Potomac. The heart-stopping moment, when it was just a body, and all the hope and promises in the fucking world dropped out beneath his feet, and all he could think was, *I fucking told you to stop him, Steve.*

Funny how life works.

"It was the wrong one." Steve's face reddens more, and the shininess has turned to quiet tears.

Sam finally puts it together: the Barnes look-a-like that Natasha had killed wasn't there just to stop them.

Sam sits next to him and carefully wraps his arm around Steve's shoulders. "Natasha killed the right one."

He doesn't know if it's the right thing to say. He doesn't think it makes up for the fact that "the wrong one" is dead, but he also doesn't know what "the right one" had done to Steve. He just really hopes he's not looking at it.

Sam doesn't, not in a hundred years, expect Steve's rasped answer of, "Does that mean I can sleep?"

"Yeah, Steve. You can sleep."

"But I killed the wrong one."

Sam looks at Steve's bloodshot eyes and the dark, gray rings under his eyes. Even through the bruises, dirt, and blood, Sam can see how thin and worn his face has become. He's not sure why the concept of "sleep" is even up for discussion.

"Steve: he loved you. He'd want you to sleep."

And Steve does, all the way to New York.

Natasha hands Sam a ceramic cup with her left hand; her right arm is in a black sling. He takes it, assumes it's coffee, and takes a big sip.

It's warm lavender tea. Sam swallows it, just to be polite, but snarks, "Are you trying to put me to sleep?"

"Yes. Go to bed."
"I'm gonna stay here. Wait it out."

Natasha shakes her head. "Steve's sedated, and Barnes has a long way to go. Banner and Stark and the world's top medical doctors are in there, for both of them. We're done, Sam. You look ready to drop."

"Please. You got shot. Again."

"And I'm ready to drop. We'll be the first to know. C'mon."

Sam figures he'll placate her: pretend to go to his floor-and that still just sounds weird-and then come right back down to the medical floor.

Except, on the way to the elevator, he messes up and says, "It'll just be a little weird, you know, being alone again after all these months."

He catches Natasha bite the inside of her cheek. "I've got sofas."

"Well, we like those, don't we?"

They sit together on the sofa, and Natasha flips on the TV to an early-morning repeat of some competitive cooking show.

After a while, Sam looks over and sees that Natasha is still awake, though blankly. He asks, "Do you think he's going to live?"

Natasha shakes her head "no."

That's what Sam thought. He doesn't ask any more questions, like why, or are you sure, or is anything going to be the same, or what are we going to do. He just looks at the stupid show and wonders where all of his thoughts scampered off to.

"The other team kinda seemed like the Dream Team, and we're like, the Bad News Bears. And the fact that we kicked their ass really has us going," a talking head on the TV show says.

He's bone-deep exhausted, and his eyelids feel like ice cubes, but he'll be damned if that doesn't make him laugh out loud.

"We were totally the Dream Team," Natasha says, a little bit like a drawl.

"No, no way," Sam answers. "That would mean we got our asses kicked."

"Sam." She says his name like he's a dumb fuck.

"Don't say it."

He didn't know the year. He didn't know the country. He knew the layout of a three-story, cube-like building; he knew the target; and he knew the mission.

The mission was complete. Extraction had already been requested.

"Secure the perimeter," he ordered, always in Russian. "Two hundred meters."
He had an eleven-man team, not including himself, all black-clad and lethally armed. They fanned out, muted footsteps fading into the night.

He walked the perimeter and killed them, silently, one by one.

When he was done, he ripped the mask off his face and threw it behind him. He tilted his head toward the dark, starless sky, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, for what he hoped would be the last time.


A mosquito hummed in his ear.

He opened his eyes, unclipped and dropped his rifle, and drew his SIG Sauer. The lights of fireflies blinked all around him.

He turned his SIG Sauer toward his chest, something more powerful than himself refusing to aim it where he wanted: the heart.

He pulled the trigger three times.

The world lurched sideways. For a few, endless seconds, he had a child's view of the rooftop sky -

"That one's Orionbuck. Do you see it?"

He followed the blonde kid's finger up to the sky, but all he saw were faint dots.

"Look, there's the shield," the kid urged, tracing an imaginary line. "There's Rigel. Do you see it now?"

"Yeah, yeah, now I can," he lied.

- surrounded by the infinite murmur of crickets and cicadas. He hoped it would be the last thing he would ever hear, the fireflies the last thing he would ever see, and the dim memory of another life the last thing he would ever remember.

"Bucky! Stop! You're safe! You're safe! We're not HYDRA. Romanoff and Wilson brought you here. You're safe. But you have to stop moving. Stop moving."

The only words he hears are "HYDRA" and "stop moving."

He can't open his eyes all the way; something is keeping them closed, and all he can see are bright, translucent shadows. He feels something rigid in his mouth and throat; he bites down on it, hard. His neck is in a restraint, and his legs and arms are being held down. His chest feels empty, loose, and a searing sort of painful -

"Get him anesthetized! Now!"

- and warmth spreads through his right arm, and he knows it, he knows it, he knows it, it's drugs, it's always drugs, and he rips his left arm up and grabs whatever he can find and it's a man screaming and screaming and screaming and he pulls the man toward him and flings him away and then he pulls the hard thing in his mouth and throat out as far as he can and he knows he knows he knows what it's going to do -

"Cut the balloon, extubate, and get an Ambu-bag."
High-pitched, screeching alarms go off, and he's only scared that he didn't have time to do enough.

_Don't wake up don't wake up don't wake up don't-

"His pressure's plummeting. He's hemorrhaging. Oxygen level is—"

Natasha wakes up on the sofa, Sam's socked feet resting on her stomach, to a gentle alarm.

"Good afternoon, Natasha. You asked to be notified, in the event of a change in status of either Captain Rogers or Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS says.

_Afternoon?

"Yeah, what's going on?"

"Captain Rogers is still asleep; his vitals are stable. Sergeant Barnes' condition is critical but stable, and he is out of surgery."

"He's alive?" Sam mumbles, mostly awake.

She almost forgets to say "thank you."

Together, they go to Medical.

"Steve shouldn't wake up alone," Sam says. "I'm gonna stay with him. You got Barnes?"

Natasha respects that, with trepidation. "He won't be the person you've known for two years. Can you handle that?"

"I don't have a choice."

"Kinda do."

Sam shakes his head and walks away. "Really kinda don't."

In all honesty. Natasha has a hard time believing Steve picked Sam up on a random, morning jog. He's a rare kind of person.

Natasha finds Stark, of all people, in Barnes' room. Even after everything, they still don't necessarily get along, and she's taken aback that he's here.

She pointedly ignores Barnes and focuses on Stark. She notices five black and blue circles around his throat and stitches along the left side of his forehead.

"What happened to you?"

"Uh, your friend here?" He answers, defensive. "He woke up in the middle of it. Managed to kill himself for a few minutes. That arm of his is something else entirely."

Rarely does Natasha let her horror show, let alone in front of Tony Stark. This is one of those rare times.

"Relax, he won't remember."
It's not that she thinks Barnes will remember; she's certain he has worse memories.

"He has a history," she says, carefully. "If he at all thinks this is HYDRA, he will do anything—" She loses the words, not wanting to betray Barnes' privacy but not wanting to see something terrible happen. "He'll do anything. Just a fair warning; not sure you're prepared for him."

Stark doesn't have a fancy comeback for that, only a weak, defensive, "We're not HYDRA. Not anymore. Not ever."

Natasha looks over at the bed, and, sure enough, sees that Barnes' right arm is restrained. His left one isn't; clearly, Stark or Banner deactivated it. That's an incredibly bad idea.

"The only thing he'll know is that someone turned his arm off, tied his other one to a bed rail—which, really? C'mon—and then drugged him so far down that he can barely find his way back up. And the only people who do that are HYDRA. What do you think is going to happen?"

Stark just gives her a tired look. He looks like he hasn't slept in about a day, which, for him, is nothing. She's seen him go far longer.

"I think if he doesn't stop tearing shit out of his body, he's going to die, and what I'm not prepared for is telling Captain fucking America that he brutally murdered his long lost best friend."

There's something more, something he's not saying. The thing about Stark is that it's always so obvious, when he's holding something back.

"There's video."

If time could stop, it would, with those words. Her throat dry, she asks, "Of?"

"Captain fucking America brutally murdering his long lost best friend. It's all Hill's team has found."

"You watched it?"

Stark's silence is confirmation.

Natasha finally looks at more than Barnes' wrists. There's a white bandage taped over his right shoulder and another down the center of his chest, along his sternum. The ends of two other bandages on his back slightly wrap around to his chest, right between where a clear chest tube is inserted. His eyes are taped closed, a nasogastric tube is taped to his cheek—the one that's not a gigantic bruise—and, of course, there's a breathing tube slipped between his lips.

It's difficult to see him this vulnerable and hurt. But he's breathing, his heart is beating, and he's safe.

"I didn't want him to be someone decent," Stark finally says, voice low. He sounds haunted. "I didn't think he could be."

Natasha doesn't have anything to say to that. Her thoughts are focused on that video.

"Okay, so, yeah. I'm gonna grab Banner and go over blood work. There's some pretty weird shit in both of their blood. The RN comes by every fifteen. You got this?"

Natasha nods, pulls Stark's chair to the side of the bed, and wraps her hand around Barnes' right, IV lines and everything else be damned.
"You've got this," Natasha says to Barnes.

Steve's asleep, rolled over onto his side, his back to Sam. Word is that he's as sedated as they come. As it is, the room smells like twenty kinds of creams and salves, and, as it is, from the little bit of skin Sam can see, he wishes he couldn't see it.

Sam cues up a playlist full of light jazz, docks his Galaxy, and lays down on a fanciful, too comfortable window seat, a magazine cracked open.

He flips past a glossy ad for a movie they were supposed to have watched, two days after HYDRA grabbed Steve.

"You missed Suicide Squad. If we're lucky, we can still catch it in the theater. Sound good?"

It gets Sam thinking: the next Harry Potter movie is coming out next month, and, Steve, albeit eyes-glazed-over during the first four movies, almost actually got into the last four of them. Almost.

"Next month is the new Harry Potter, and I know you're excited about that."

He doesn't know who he's trying to kid: as if Steve or any one of them is going to care about movies any time soon.

Sam drops his magazine on the floor, rolls onto his back, throws his arm over his eyes, and tries to shut down that line of thinking. There isn't a best case scenario that's going to happen, and the worst one already has. It's all about picking up the pieces, now.

Damnit damn it damn it damn it damn it.

"You're awake. Good."

He couldn't open his eyes all the way; something was keeping them closed, and all he could see was a bright, translucent shadow. He felt something rigid in his mouth and throat; he wanted to bite down on it, but he couldn't.

He couldn't move his left arm. His right arm was numb, and it hurt, and, when he tried to move it, a chain rattled and something hard bit into the thin skin of his wrist. He didn't care about the pain or the damage: he pulled on it, harder and harder and harder, more and more fearful.

"I don't understand you, Subject Seventeen. That's what your file calls you. Subject Seventeen."

It was a male voice. Older. Rough. He spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable. He didn't recognize it, but he feared it.

"You fell into a ravine, and we rescued you. You lost your arm, and we made you a beautiful new one. We gave you food. A bed. Clothing. Safety. And this is what you do: murder eleven of our best. Shoot yourself three times. You compromised everything."

Don't wake up don't wake up don't wake up don't wake up don't

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He remembered that—the killing, the shooting—but not any of the rest. And maybe–he shouldn't be afraid: maybe they'll kill him.

"There are those who think you have expended your worth. That you are no longer needed. That we should kill you."

Please.

"I don't agree. You're too good at what you do. I believe that you're simply damaged, self-destructive. The question is not: when do I kill you, but how do I fix you? How do I make you into what you. Should. Be?"

A strange feeling took over his stomach: twisted it, made it prickle.

"I believe it's simple, Subject Seventeen: wipe you, and start over, until we make you right."

It only takes seven hours.

Natasha falls asleep: feet propped up on the bottom of the bed, arms crossed, head crooked on her shoulder.

She doesn't see his right fingers move, or see them make a fist of the white blanket. She doesn't see his left shoulder lift a fraction and then drop back against the mattress. She doesn't see his right wrist pull and pull again against the tether restraining his right hand to the bedrail. She doesn't see his eyes move against the tape holding them closed, or his left leg bend.

She hears a metallic *PING! PING! PING!* – bolts tearing from their nuts and couplings. Then, a reverberating *BANG!* – the bed rail tumbling to the ground. Her eyes snapping open, she sees his right hand go toward his face, an open ended tether trailing behind, and she moves, as quickly as she can.

She catches his hand, before he can pull the breathing tube out. Both of his knees draw up, his back arching: he's ready to fight.

A shrill alarm is blaring: she guesses it's his heart rate, skyrocketing.

She hops onto the bed, keeping his right hand down on the bed with her knee, and brushes the fingers of one hand into his hair. She uses her other hand to tear the tape from his eyes.

She sees bloodshot veins and terror.

She runs her hand through his hair, again and again, trying to ground him, but his eyes dart erratically.

"Hey. Eyes up."

He listens. He searches her face, eyebrows drawn tight. Below her leg, his right hand shakes. His breaths are still mechanically composed. His left arm is still deactivated. He's powerless, in a bad way.

"Steve is safe. You're safe. But: you're hurt, badly, and we're trying to keep you alive. All of this is to keep you alive, and I know it hurts, and that it scares you, but we will never let them have you again."
He blinks, brow relaxing. The fear in his eyes flickers to firm familiarity.

She gives him a smile and takes her knee off his hand. "There you are. It's good to see you."

He reaches up and over, dragging his right hand up to his left shoulder, to her free hand. He clenches his fingers around hers, stronger than she'd expected.

She smiles again and doesn't let on that she just glimpsed blood seeping into the white gauze on his chest. He's torn something.

He looks up, moving his eyes around the ceiling in a half-circle, then back to her. Where am I?

"Stark Tower. Steve's here, too. He's asleep – like you should be. Sam's with him."

She reads relief in his expression. It doesn't last.

Barnes' grip on her hand painfully tightens, and his eyes dart to the right, behind Natasha. She turns her head, follows his line of sight, and sees his doctor, flanked by two RNs. The doctor is holding a syringe, and she'd bet a whole hell of a lot that Barnes is wholly zeroed in on that.

Natasha holds her free hand out: stop.

"He's in distress. We need to sedate and evaluate—"

Natasha shakes her head and will never forgive herself, if he doesn't make it back from this.

She looks down at him. He won't look away from the doctor: that panicked terror is back.

"James. Eyes." He hears her and complies. "Trust us to have your back."

His doctor hadn't listened. She's right beside them, at the IV stand, pushing clear liquid into his line.

Just that easily, his eyes dull, and he blinks and blinks, heavier and heavier, until one of those blinks bleeds into a boneless sleep. His fingers relax, pliable around hers, and his legs slide down the mattress, limp.

Don't die.

Natasha nimbly swings off the bed. "All yours."

"No shit. Get out. Now."

The look on Sam's face is just as clear as words would be: I think he's dead, or else you wouldn't be in here.

She tries to smile, but just can't manage that right now. "He's back in surgery. Woke up. Tore something. He's scared."

Tension bleeds from Sam's body. "Okay," he breathes. "How are you?"

Natasha shrugs with a shoulder. "It's hard. How's he?" She jerks her chin toward Steve.

He's on his side, wrapped up in blankets to his chin, and looks to be soundly asleep. His brow is
tight, his worry line well-defined. He doesn't look peaceful.

"Hasn't woken up. I think they have him pretty well under."

Natasha nods and doesn't care that she's showing her worry. "Might be a good thing. Hill's team found a video."

Sam stills, only his eyes moving, from the lump under the covers to her. "Do I want to know?" he finally asks.

She shakes her head. She'd watched it just minutes ago and genuinely wished she hadn't. It's also not something that needs passed around. "No. He's... He's not going to bounce back like Barnes always seems to. Are you sure you want to be in here?"

He drops his head, elbows on his knees, then looks back up. "He's my best friend. I'm sure."

Fair enough, for now. She's mostly certain a point will come, in a day or two days, where Sam's mind on that will change. There's a road ahead, and it's a horrible one.

"Okay. I'm going to talk to Banner, and I'll be back up, once Barnes is out of surgery. You need anything?"

Sam shakes his head.

She's almost into the hallway, when he pipes up with, "Hey. With Barnes. He's super keyed into scents. I think if you put something in there that wouldn't smell like HYDRA, he'd react better. And he hates bleach, and he hates white blankets. Music. He likes '90's rock. You've gotta ground him."

For a moment, Natasha's speechless. "Steve won't know what to do with himself, with you two being friends."

Sam doesn't smile. "I hope we can get to that point."

Banner's in his lab, almost where he always is. The array of flat-screen, curved monitors are filled with images, his lab table filled with swirling centrifuges and vials of blood. Today, he's that kind of a doctor.

"Hey, Big Guy. How're our boys doin'?"

He doesn't turn to look at her. "They're both higher than particularly altitudinous kites, if that's what you're asking. HYDRA's choice of drug is all of them."

Natasha steps up beside him. Steve, she can understand. "Even Barnes?"

Banner nods, glasses inching down his nose. He pushes them back up. "Not as recent as Steve. There's a weird marker in his blood that I'm still trying to isolate. Your friend Wilson mentioned that HYDRA injected him with something at that desert hospital."

She'd heard. If anyone can figure out what it is, it's Banner and Stark.

"He still alive?" Banner asks.
"Good." Banner clicks a few buttons on his computer, changing the images on three monitors to three separate x-rays. "You're looking at his right arm, right abdominal area, and his right ankle. There're bullets in each area. Not too old. Maybe two years. I'd explain how I know, but it's actually pretty gross."

There's not a lot of math involved in figuring out what that means. "He wouldn't have sought out medical attention, not back then. Not sure he would now, actually. Are they dangerous?"

Banner nods. "The abdominal one's still bouncing around, causing some tearing. His body heals it quick enough, but it could rupture something important. There's also the beginning stages of osteonecrosis in his ankle; slow, for now, but it's only going to get worse."

"They need to come out."

Banner tilts his head. There's a rub, and she already knows what it is. "We don't have consent."

He'd never know, is her first thought, and it's an awful one. Best intentions and the road to hell. "I'll —"

"Ask him about it" is on the tip of her tongue. Even the best case scenario is that he wakes up, sticks around long enough to be halfway healthy when he leaves, and then leaves. He won't agree to surgery.

"Before you think about it too hard, let me show you something."

"Well, doctor: you show me yours, I'll show you mine?" Even for her, it's a shoddy quip. She's worried, and, today, it's hard not to show it.

Banner laughs the way he used to, when they first met: like a man finished with the world. "Just his. And they're what nightmares are made of."

Natasha looks at the holographic display. The three x-rays of the old bullets are replaced by different ones. Admittedly, she's never been good at interpreting x-rays, but even she can see something that doesn't look right.

Most of the left side of his upper skeletal system is dark gray, as opposed to the off-white of the rest of his skeleton, and his left collar bone, sternum, and entire left rib cage are dotted with what look like screws.

"What's the dark gray?"

Banner snorts. "The human body, no matter how great your serum is, isn't meant to support that arm. Even HYDRA realized that the second he put any kind of extreme stress on it, it would rip apart from the scapula, or the collarbone, or his spine, and all their wonderful work would be for nothing. Especially if he tore his brachial plexus in half, which is pretty easy to do with that."

She assumes "that" refers to Barnes' left arm. Natasha doesn't want to hear the rest. As it is, she's already sorry she asked.

"So, to answer your question, the dark gray is a kind of flexible, organic polymer-metal composite that was bonded to his skeleton to reinforce it. Essentially, he was a very...lucky science experiment. If you want to call it 'luck.' Not sure I do."
Banner flips through more of the x-rays, continuing to do whatever it is that he's doing, and Natasha looks everywhere but at them.

"See, shit like this? This is why..." Banner squeezes his eyes shut, looks away, and squeezes the edge of the lab table—knuckles white.

Natasha freezes, picture-perfect still. Banner is very, very upset. She swallows, hyperaware of the fact that she is defenseless, even if he hasn't had an episode since the Battle of New York.

"This is why I have problems with the world."

Natasha moves her gaze back to the display and sees an x-ray of a spinal column. Each vertebrae is the same dark gray with the same small screws, from the occipital bone to the pelvic bone. It explains the faint, long, thin scars that stretch along his back; the frequent headaches he doesn't think he shows; and the way he tries to stretch his back, when he doesn't think anyone is looking.

Horrific, for sure. Yet, Banner's anger is not only misplaced but something she wants to head off—and not only to prevent a visit from the Big Guy.

He beats her to it.

"So. Back to that consent thing. You think he consented to that?"

Natasha bites her cheek. "I think this is different."

He looks at her, something like regret in his expression. "I think we already went too far. Ask him, when he's allowed to wake up."

She won't argue that. Banner has his opinion; she can't say she's upset to finally hear someone in Stark's pocket be supportive of Barnes.

"I will. And thank you."

Something in his expression changes. She can't put her finger on what, specifically, but something. And then he asks: "You still love him?"

Once upon a time, after New York and after SHIELD fell, Bruce was a confidant. Funny, how most of the team turns to him for calming advice, when he's the Big Green Monster in all their nightmares. Even funnier: he gives pretty good advice.

She looks down. Once, Steve told her it was hard to find someone with shared life experience. Barnes is close to both of them that way. "The idea."

Banner nods slowly and motions to the x-ray screen. "That thing you asked for, before all of this happened, it's almost done. Hopefully he lives long enough to see it."

Oh. She'd nearly forgotten about that little bug she'd put in Stark's ear. "Good. I'm pretty sure he'll love it."

She catches a smirk on Banner's face, before he turns away. "Or the idea of it."

The time just after Krausberg was near dream-like. He was lightheaded and nauseous, past exhaustion, with a stinging ache throughout his entire body that he didn't think would ever go
away.

On the table, it'd been skin-ripping, hands-shaking, screaming-his-throat-raw kind of pain. The kind of pain that created voices and made them seem real, and the kind of pain that created images and made those seem real, too.

Steve wouldn't leave his side, except for the fifteen or twenty minutes that he spent about nine meters away, talking quietly with Dugan, while Bucky completely did not give even a little tiny fuck about what or who they were talking about or why.

"They said you had pneumonia, about three weeks ago," Steve mentioned, gently. "Now I'm no doctor, but pneumonia doesn't usually go away that fast."

Sometimes—which, given that it'd been about five hours since Krausberg supposedly ended, "sometimes" was actually "most of all the time"—Bucky wasn't convinced that this was all real. Case en pointe: Steve was nearly two meters tall and had boobs bigger than Mary Ann Miller's and a guy had just peeled his face off and wow Steve was fucking huge and could jump really, really far.

"Buck?"

"Are you real?" Bucky asked. His own voice seemed far away, and the world was like a fucking zeppelin, only one that hadn't crashed yet.

Steve's face fell. And that, that right there, that was Steve. The face was Steve. But the body? Maybe the body was like that other guy's face, and maybe Steve was going to peel his body off and...

"I'm real, Buck. I swear to God, I'm real."

Well, as long as Steve was swearing to God, then Bucky believed him. "'Kay."

"Your ears're bleeding. Did'ya know that?"

Bucky thought about that for a second—a long second—and decided that no, he hadn't known that. Steve didn't seem to like that answer, so Bucky definitely did not, no way, no how, tell Steve that his entire fucking body hurt.

"What'd they do to you?"

A lot to do with needles and restraints, bright lights and hard tables, and old clipboards and scratchy pens. Words like "no one has survived this yet, Sergeant" and other words like "perhaps you will be the lucky one?" to which he replied "perhaps you'll suck my dick. By the way: Barnes, James, Sergeant, 32557038."

Bucky laughed. "Not suck my dick, that's for fuckin' sure."

Steve's eyebrows smushed together, and a smile pulled at his lips. "Well, Buck... Did you want them to?"

Bucky blinked and considered that question very briefly, before the zeppelin world floated higher, the pain became sharper, and he was completely unconvinced that he wasn't still strapped to a lab table.

Also, Steve's boobs were huge.
"Are you sure you're real?"

A little later, Dugan would say to him, "Good to have you back, even if you're higher than a fucking kite strapped to an AT-10 Wichita."

"That's pretty fucking high."

"It pretty fucking is."

When Steve wakes up, he wakes up alone in a dimly lit, huge room full of medical equipment. His body is buzzing with some sort of drug, and, when he looks at his clean fingers and arms, he sees that the wounds have mostly healed, leaving purple bruises and red scars.

This room doesn't look much like the HYDRA base. It doesn't smell like it. It doesn't feel like it. It actually reminds him of Stark's place.

He remembers – Sam. He remembers Sam.

And something else.

He wonders.

He pulls the IV out of his hand and kicks the bed covers down. He sees that he's not hooked up to anything else, which is odd, but at least it makes it easier.

He stands easily, his legs scarred red and sore but strong enough to carry him, and he walks to the door. He cracks it open and then slips out, avoiding the sightline of two nurses – and Sam, whose back is to him, talking to those nurses.

Steve follows his ears toward the sound of beeps and hisses. It's the only set that he hears, and he fucking knows—that it can only be one person, because he knows this is Stark Tower.

It's funny: days or weeks or however long ago, back in a HYDRA cell, he'd dreamed of this. Coming home. Sam. Safety. Relief. Home.

It's nothing like that.

Steve walks down a hallway, then another, and then stops outside a particular door, listening. Only one set of breaths is coming from inside the room.

Steve slips into the room, notices the strong smell of lavender, and checks the door to see if it's lockable: it's not.

Then, he looks at the person laying in the bed.

He remembers a bad dream: the kind where he made every wrong decision, based on twisted, wrong facts, but, in the moment, at the time, it all made perfect, rational sense.

It has to be a bad dream. He just hasn't woken up from it yet.

Because that person in the bed is fucking destroyed, and it can't be – can't be – can't be –

Steve steps closer, the tile floor cold against his bare feet. For the first time, he sees the terrible
scars and stretched, red skin, where the metal arm is fused onto Bucky's upper chest. He sees a swath of messy black paint where the red star used to be.

He sees plastic tubes and colored wires, a patchwork of gauze and bandages all over his chest. He sees light purple bruises on his cheekbones, across his knuckles, and under his eyes. He hears clicks and hisses and an unhealthy wheeze, every time Bucky's chest rises.

_He can't breathe on his own._

He hears muted beeping and looks at the wall of monitors: the heart rate matches the beeps. There are other numbers, but he doesn't know what any of them mean.

He remembers the bad dream: shooting Bucky once, watching him collapse, and shooting him twice more, because that was what he had to do, if he wanted to sleep, and if he wanted the pain to stop. He remembers watching the life flicker from Bucky's eyes, faster than it took Steve to blink, and he remembers that the dull, endless look in his eyes meant victory.

Steve doesn't understand how Bucky is alive.

Maybe it's not even him.

Steve walks to the other side of the bed, where Bucky's real arm is laying in a tuft of blue blankets. His arm is covered with clear tape and IV tubing, from the crook of his elbow all the way down to a heavily-taped needle in his wrist, with another stuck into the top of his hand.

Steve picks up Bucky's limp hand, the pliable tubes moving with it, turns it over, and looks for the long scar across Bucky's palm: it's been there since Bucky fell on a glass jar, when he was six.

Steve finds it.

He looks for the weird mass of puckered skin on Bucky's right pinky finger; it's been there forever. He finds it.

He finds the burn on the top of Bucky's wrist, when he'd pulled a metal pan from the oven, didn't pay attention, and seared the skin against red-hot coils. Bucky's dad had said "it's what you get for touching that shit," and Bucky'd rolled his eyes and baked half a dozen "fuck you" cookies the next day.

He finds the ripple of white skin on the bottom of his elbow, from when he fell off a fishing boat into the Hudson in 1942.

Steve glances over at Bucky's left arm and remembers all the scars on that one: the faded burn on most of his forearm from his mom's pot of boiling spaghetti (and the way Bucky always, always, always turned pot handles away from stove edges); the ugly, long scar from the jagged half of a whiskey bottle, cracked in half against a bar stool in Brooklyn's shittiest dive; and the HYDRA brand and handwritten, black numbers on the underside of his arm. All of it, gone.

Bucky's fingers curl against Steve's, and he unceremoniously drops Bucky's hand.

Those fingers are like a curled-up, half-dead spider, and Steve can feel the feather-light wisps of those curled-up legs crawling over his hand. He reaches down and scrubs his hand on the blue blanket, scouring away the vestiges of the tingle.

His hand comes away wet and red.

Steve stares at the color, watching its thin sheen dry into flakes, before looking down and trying to
find where it's coming from. With a single finger, he pokes Bucky's hand over and sees: the needle in his radial artery is poking out of the vein.

He notices other things: a patch of white, scarred skin over Bucky's first knuckle – he'd never had that. Long, razor-thin, pearl-white lines that curve across his ribcage – he'd never had those. Another raised, white line across the back of his neck that Steve can only see, because Bucky turns his head away, brow pressed together.

Steve watches his left leg draw up under the covers, his hip popping. He watches Bucky's leg just as quickly fall to the side. Watches Bucky's hand flail toward the breathing tube or the tube taped to his cheek—red droplets scattering across his skin—and barely touch his chin, before that hand falls back down onto the blanket. Watches his eyes open, a momentary sliver of blue; hears the shrill tone of an unhappy monitor; and then watches Bucky fall back asleep.

All said – it's probably really him. Except – Steve had watched him –

The door clicks open. Steve glances over and sees Natasha.

"Hey, Steve." She sounds like she's talking to an unbalanced person: cautious, careful, and slow.

Steve looks back at Bucky and comes back to his thought: he doesn't understand how Bucky is still alive, when Steve had watched him die.

"He was dead," Steve says.

Natasha steps in closer and holds out something dark gray and square. He looks at it, sees that it's a blanket, and ignores it.

"He was dead, Nat."

"I know."

She drapes the blanket around the back of his shoulders; it's big enough to go around his entire body. On habit alone, he wraps the soft, warm fabric in his arms and pulls it tight around his back and across his chest.

"He's not now," Natasha adds. "Modern medicine."

"What… Will he be okay?"

Natasha hesitates, and Steve knows: there isn't an answer to that question yet. Yet, as if any of this makes sense.

He asks a better question: "Is this real?"

He doesn't think it is.

Natasha smiles, an attempt to be comforting, and says, "Yeah. It's real, Steve."

He doesn't believe her.

He feels Natasha's hand on his shoulder. It's a conscious effort to not jerk away.

"It's been two days. He's already come a long way, a lot faster than any regular human. He heals like you. But he's still in serious condition. He fights the sedative, and he fights the equipment." Natasha lifts an eyebrow. "Probably why he's bleeding."
She reaches down for the call button remote – the same one he'd ignored for four days at some hospital in DC – but Steve grabs her wrist. She even lets him.

He doesn't want anyone else here with them.

"Steve. The IV needs to be fixed. Do you see where he's bleeding?"

He doesn't tell her that Bucky's bleeding because of him. It doesn't even matter to him. His mind loops back to the same thoughts: this has to be a bad dream, because Bucky was dead, and now Bucky's here, and it's not real.

"Is this real?"

Natasha pulls her wrist out of his hand and stands straight. "I can't prove to you that it is. You need to—"

Sudden anger flutters through him, enough of it that he doesn't know if he can control it. "That's not an answer," he spits, before brushing past her, banging the door open, and stalking back down the hallway.

Leaving the room doesn't do anything to salve the anger. It boils in his stomach, tendrils of it crawling into his arms and legs, and he could scream, scream, scream. He wants to break something: tear apart the world, turn this building into ash, and –

He screams and buries his fist into the nearest wall, over and over and over again. White sheetrock crumbles, dust and insulation coating his bruised fist, until there's a hollow hole. The blanket crumples at his feet.

The anger doesn't ebb. It flows. It blinds him with red, just like when Bucky had taken a drill and a butterfly bit to his –

*Kill him.*

Steve turns back toward the room, to the open doorway where Natasha stands. Her left hand is a half-fist, a silver disc held between her index finger and thumb. He sees her mouth move, but all he hears is a rushing, white noise in his ears.

In his peripheral, he sees someone approach, arm raised. Steve doesn't even think: he spins around with a brutal backhand and slams that person into the destroyed wall.

One of Natasha's discs hits him square in the back; his vision goes black, electricity searing every nerve, but not nearly as bad as when Bucky had electro –

*Kill him.*

He stands up straight, shakes off the pain, and looks at Natasha. She hasn't moved from the door to that room.

He walks closer to her and says, "Move," his voice a far-away echo inside his own head.

"Are you HYDRA?"

This time, he hears her.

They don't get it.
"He's HY—"

"You just knocked out Sam. What are you doing, Steve?"


He turns around, blinks, and sees.

Sam's lying in a pile of demolished drywall, his eyes open and blinking, with a flowering, bloody bruise over his right cheekbone. His right eye is deep red with broken blood vessels, and his hand drags through the sheetrock and dust.

"Sam?"

If Sam answers, Steve doesn't hear him. He's instantly focused on Stark, who just walked into view at the end of the hallway. On his right arm, he's wearing red armor – with a repulsor on his palm.

This isn't real. This proves it. It's a nightmare, and all he has to do is wake up.

"Quick question: what did my wall ever do to you?"

Wake up.


Wake up.

He looks at Stark, then Sam, then Natasha, and nothing about this makes sense. He has to wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up.

"Steve." Natasha. "You hurt Sam."

Wake up.

He can't wake up.

Something inside of his chest breaks, and he swallows a lump in his throat. He looks back at Natasha and shakes his head. "I— I don't know what's happening. I don't know why I—"

She nods, something like sympathy in her expression. "We'll figure it out."

Maybe –

What if it's real.

"Don't let me back here. Don't let me hurt anyone else."

Stark's armored hand wraps around Steve's upper right arm. "C'mon, Big Guy. You still like clothes, right?"

Steve doesn't fight, but he doesn't even know if Natasha ever answered.
Postlude

Chapter Summary

A little less than a year ago, on a similar rooftop in Washington, DC, he answered, “You know who I am, Romanoff,” and she answered, “You’re not what I thought you would be.” That’s still true, and she wonders how far he’s come since then.

Chapter Notes

See Chapter One.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam holds an ice pack to his right eye socket, drops into a chair, and stares at Barnes' tablet with his left eye.

He forgets what he was going to do.

His ears are still ringing.

He closes his eyes, centers himself, and remembers: music.

Sam hooks up to the Bluetooth speakers he'd put on the windowsill and cues up Stone Temple Pilots Radio on Pandora.

He thinks to say: "It's Sam, by the way."

He doesn't know if Barnes is aware, or if it's just weird timing, but the fist Barnes has made of his navy blue, never-bleached blanket relaxes. Which is a good thing, because the nurse had just fixed up the arterial line in his wrist, and the last thing Barnes needs to do is tear it out again.

"And, honestly, I don't know how you're not sick of this shit yet," Sam comments, referring to the music.

He props his socked feet up on another chair, leans back, and opens up a digital Rachael Ray magazine.

Usually, his thoughts would be focused on Steve, and how hard it is to be away from him, but, right now, after that, Sam's more than happy to (1) know that Steve is theoretically safe, and (2) be assigned to Barnes, which basically means making sure his hand doesn't wander.

Even though Sam would love to ask him if, after the helicarrier two years ago, he'd been as confused as Steve seems now.

"Okay. I've got Rachael Ray Every Day. The November issue with Thanksgiving supermarket shopping tips and leftover ideas. You know, you could cook, and I could get you to start watching NFL. My Panthers are having a hell of a year – tomorrow, they play the Patriots, and you know
they're going to stomp all over Brady."

It's not really what he's saying: it's that he's saying.

And so he keeps saying.

In 2004, Maria caught a private SHIELD flight from Paris to Bucharest: unexpected, quiet work for Nick. She was lucky such a flight was available.

At the hangar, some of the other agents saw her and did a double take, and, for a second, she thought something of it. For a second. Flight manifests were usually tight and didn't change, especially not so close to wheels-up.

When she saw Agent Mattingly across the hangar and shared a wave, Maria mostly forgot about the weirdness. Matt was good, reliable, and a friend insomuch as agents could be friends.

The plane was a wide-body business jet and, thankfully, very compartmentalized. Lots of room to work and lots of privacy. Maria settled into an empty seat in a nice, quiet corner that faced the door, pulled out her laptop, and got to work.

Agents filtered onto the plane, all of them quiet, efficient, and focused on settling. There wasn't much chatter. Maria just barely noticed them.

She noticed, however, when the atmosphere shifted: nothing tangible, just instincts at work. She sensed tension. Nervousness, maybe. She looked at the door, moving her eyes, not her head.

The person boarding the plane was an agent, clearly: standard black tactical pants, with a black hooded sweater zipped down enough that she could see a standard black t-shirt underneath.

It was just weird that his hair was long enough to be tied back; that wasn't regulation. It was a little weird that he was wearing a glove on his left hand—but not his right. It was especially weird that his eyes were glazed, like he was sedated, and that he had another agent at his right elbow, almost like he was being shadowed. It wasn't so weird that he looked weeks-long exhausted; good agents pushed.

He and the guiding agent walked a few feet behind two other agents, all of them headed toward the back of the plane. Matt boarded next, attention on the tired, weird agent, and, then, suddenly, on Maria.

She was just young and inexperienced enough to show her surprise, by way of shifting her eyes immediately back to her laptop screen. As if that wasn't obvious.

Matt leaned against the bulkhead by Maria's seat. Maria used a hotkey stroke to minimize all of her windows. It wasn't a lack of trust; cloak and daggers was the job. They all knew it.

"He's one of our coverts. He's been under for a while. Does fantastic work, but he, uh, had a pretty bad panic attack during extraction. We're thinking post-traumatic. Hopefully something he can work through. It'd be a shame to lose'em."

Maria nodded: made sense. "That's tough work." It was bad form to ask for details.

"It is. I've gotta get back to him. Was good to see you, Hill."
"You too," Maria answered.

Ten years later, that flight was put into extreme context: Matt was a HYDRA double agent, and the tired-weird agent was the totally-made-up-by-fringe-conspiracy-theorists Winter Soldier. The entire flight was HYDRA, a fact which Maria had been extremely blind to.

Although ridiculous, that knowledge has kept her awake at night far more often than she would ever admit, for nearly two and a half years. Even though Mattingly was killed, when Maria shot Insight-03 out of the sky. Even though the Winter Soldier is what Natasha Romanoff calls "one of ours" and what Nick Fury describes as "a surprisingly reliable asset. Just don't tell him I said the a-word."

Maria opens the door to the room he's in, smells an overwhelming lavender scent, and steps inside, closing the door behind her.

Natasha looks up and nods her head in greeting. "Hey."

"Hey," Maria responds. "He looks better."

His face has more natural color to it, and the awful bruises are now the barest green tint, nearly gone. The breathing tube came out a day ago. He's still covered in wires and tubes and still lightly sedated – lightly enough that the way he's sleeping, boneless and dead-to-the-world, is all him.

"He is. What's going on?"

Maria doesn't wait for Natasha to look up from her magazine. She tears right in. "You're his handler. What's your assessment?"

Natasha shrugs. Maria reads ambivalence. "I'm surprised he worked with Fury. He'll never agree to be a field agent."

"Do we want him to be?"

Maria is known for the hard questions. She doesn't care what people think. She cares about getting the job done right, with the right people, now more than ever.

There's no question that Barnes is physically able and intelligent enough to do the work. Trust has become less of an issue. Despite that, Barnes is still a cipher, and she needs to know.

She needs to erase the image of him in her head, the one of him with eyes glazed over, being led by HYDRA agents. She feels sorry for that image. She feels a twisted sense of guilt. Debt.

Silliness.

Natasha's shoulders draw back, almost imperceptibly, but she doesn't look up from the magazine. She even flips a page. "I'm not writing the assessment. He helped Fury, because Fury was helping him. As far as he's concerned, he just spent seventy years working for SHIELD. Is he wrong?"

Maria clears her throat and looks down. Natasha is a friend, insomuch as agents can be friends. "And if there's another New York?"

Natasha bites the inside of her cheek; always her one freebie tell. "Do you really expect him to fight for this world?"

Maria draws back. Of course she does.
"Don't be so naïve, Maria."

Barnes shifts: his head rolls to the opposite side of the pillow, his right arm flails and lands across his stomach, and his left leg draws up.

"He can hear us, by the way," Natasha comments, dismissive and suddenly cool.

Maria takes the hint and leaves, heading up three floors to try to find Sam.

He's in the cafeteria, sitting alone with an empty sandwich container and a half-empty bottle of Gatorade. He greets her with an uptick in his chin, and she sits down across from him.

"Hey," he says.

She asks: "What's your assessment of Barnes?"

Sam looks at her, blinking tiredly. "My assessment?"

Maria nods.

"I don't know. I mean... Now?"

It's obvious they're completely missing each other. Maria has no idea what Sam actually means by "now."

"Why?" Sam asks.

"SHIELD continues to be vulnerable. He's one of the few agents we can continue to trust. I need to know if he's field-ready."

"Okay, one, it's fucking weird that you consider him SHIELD. Two, I can't believe he ever worked with you guys in the first place."

Maria lifts a shoulder. "Freelance."

"Whatever." Sam shakes his head. "Look: I'll run with him any day. No one's got your back like he does. But he's got pretty serious issues to work out. You don't want him. Not yet."

Privately, Maria considers that Sam's description of Barnes could have—and probably still does—applied to nearly all of the original Avengers. "Issues" became much less of an obstacle, after New York. And even after the last three months.

"What kind of issues?"

Sam shakes his head, and the smile he gives her is tired. "Oh, no. See, so far, I haven't said anything he wouldn't say himself. You can ask him about his issues."

There's a wall, and she's just hit it. "Let me guess: he doesn't talk about those."

Sam smirks. "Nope."

Great.

Barnes' right hand goes toward his nose, for about the twentieth time today, and it's only 1430. Sam
catches Barnes' wrist, gently guides his hand back down to the bed, and keeps his own hand on Barnes' lower forearm.

Barnes' worry line deepens. He groans and shifts his legs, and then makes a fist of the bedsheets.

"I know you don't like that tube, but that's gotta stay there. It's not meant to hurt you."

The fist clenches, knuckles whitening. His left shoulder lifts off the bed, and that takes more control and thought and fear than Barnes should be having and/or feeling right now. So: definitely, absolutely the wrong thing to say. Sam changes gears.

"So, I'm reading a book about this kid who's trying to win a game, by finding a bunch of keys hidden around a virtual world. It's all about video games and culture from the '80's. Okay, so, I make it sound lame, but it's actually pretty good."

It's just that simple: Barnes' hand relaxes, his left shoulder drops still, and his worry line fades.

"Okay. Shut up and listen."

Sam begins reading from the book, trusting that a constant, friendly voice speaking about anything other than real life will be enough to keep Barnes docile.

He starts reading on page 29. When he hits page 95, he lays the book pages-side-down across his thigh, yawns wide, and stretches his arms toward the ceiling. Mid-yawn, he looks down and sees that Barnes is blinking tiredly.

"Sam," Sam thinks Barnes tries to say. And then his hand goes for the tube again.

"Hey," Sam says, grabbing Barnes' hand, "you trust me?"

He doesn't know why he's asking questions like he expects answers. Barnes' eyes are glazed, and he's barely there.

"You've gotta leave that alone for another day or two. Okay? Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Not here."

"Take it out" comes through loud and clear, and clarity, albeit brief, flashes in Barnes' eyes.

"Nope," Sam answers. "It helps dispense medication and feed you. You like food – remember?"

Barnes blinks, and both of his legs come up. His right hand sinks into the mattress, and, for a moment, it looks as if Barnes is actually going to push himself up. The effort doesn't last for long. Barnes sinks back into the mattress, blinking heavier and heavier, and then says the most unforgiveable thing.

"Hope the Panthers lose."

"Fuck you," Sam replies. "They won. 27-14 and it was glorious. Four sacks, two interceptions, and two forced fumbles – Oh. My. God. Glory like you've never seen."

Barnes doesn't hear it. He's asleep again.

Sam smiles, though, and thinks at least one good thing came of all this.

Besides the Panthers beating the Patriots.
Barnes drags his eyes open, through the familiar lull and pull of animal-grade sedatives and analgesics. His right arm feels weird, and he raises his head to look at it. It's covered in medical tape, plastic tubes, IV lines, and all sorts of sensors.

He's instantly light-headed, adrenaline spiking, and his mind goes instantly to kill.

There's a sudden sensation on his hand. He sees a pale hand wrapped around his fingers. He blinks and follows the hand to a black-clad shoulder, then to a bare neck, then to a blurry woman's face. Red lips. Red, curled hair.

*Carter?*


"Easy, Barnes. You remember me?"

The voice he knows. The adrenaline ebbs away. "Romanoff."

He drops his head back onto the pillow. Closes his eyes. Wraps his fingers around hers.

"We're back to that, huh?"

Barnes tries to smile, but he's barely hanging on to consciousness. He doesn't think he has to.
"What..."

"You're in Stark Tower, in Manhattan. You took three GSWs to the chest. Got stabbed a few times. Lost a lot of blood. Lost your life, for a minute or two. You're fine, now. Well, close enough to count. Did you know your arm has a defibrillator in it?"

"Not one that still works," Barnes says, and tries to shake his head. He ends up finding a much more comfortable spot on the pillow, and he keeps his head there. "Steve?"

Natasha makes a sound. She squeezes his hand harder. "He's here. Safe."

"Tell'em we're square."

"Tell'em yourself," she answers, right before he falls back asleep.

When he wakes again, he doesn't remember much of that conversation.

His most distinct memory is looking down the barrel of his own gun and not expecting to survive.

He does, though: not on a battlefield, or on a table, or in a chair, or in a cryogenic chamber. The room is dark, and the bed is warm. Manhattan's night-time skyline pulses outside the floor-to-ceiling windows to his left.

He cycles through what he remembers and comes up with a concrete room underneath Death Valley, with a specific mission to allow Steve Rogers to shoot him with a CZ-75 nine-millimeter handgun. It's followed by a dull, indistinct memory of Natasha holding his hand and saying Steve was safe.

"Are you really awake this time, or are we going to have another conversation that you won't remember? 'Cause, honestly, you're giving yourself a reputation."
Barnes looks over. Sam's sprawled awkwardly in a chair, eyes focused on the dim glow of a tablet.

"You..." His voice cracks. He tries again. "You okay?"

Sam looks up, an eyebrow raised. "Am I okay? Man, I'm still having nightmares about you."

"Oh." Barnes pushes himself into a sitting position. A sharp pain stabs through his chest, and he's near winded from just sitting. "How bad was it?"

Sam snorts. "As bad as it gets."

Not an answer. "What happened?"

The tablet's screen goes dark. "JARVIS, lights? Not too bright?"

"Certainly."

Sam leans forward, elbows on his knees. "Steve shot slash stabbed and killed you. Natasha made me take you to the hospital. HYDRA came, too. After a little while, SHIELD or whatever it is now came and helped out, brought you here, to Avengers Tower."

Somewhat hidden between the lines is a little fact: Sam saved his life. Before he can say "oh, she 'made you'; wow, fuck you," Sam says, "This is the third time we've discussed this, by the way, you giant asshole dick."

Barnes blinks. "How-"

"Nine days." Sam leans back. "I've only been sitting here for seven."

"Bet your ass is pretty numb."

"Oh," Sam says. "It is. And I'm keeping this list, you see, of everything you owe me. It's getting pretty long."

Barnes almost thinks Sam isn't kidding. "How's Steve?"

The thing Barnes likes most about Sam is that he doesn't bullshit. He doesn't live in a world constructed of a thousand lies. He tells the truth, no matter how much the truth fucking sucks.

"Alive, but not good." Sam stops there, looks at Barnes, sighs, and then says, "HYDRA really did a number on his head. He's still figuring things out."

Sam's bullshitting. He's not telling the truth, which means the truth really fucking sucks.

"Sam."

"No, Man, you just woke up, and-"

"Sam."

"You trigger him."

Barnes absorbs the multitude of implications contained in those three small words, heart and stomach sinking and sinking, all the while thinking...

"I'm sorry. It'll all-"
He had—still has—triggers. In the past three months, he's seen all of them: the word that renders him unconscious; the phrases that shut down his mind; and a handful of faces that, when seen, triggered fugue-like, instant obedience.

"What?" Barnes asks. "I mean, how?"

Sam presses his lips together. "He came to see you, a few days ago. A couple minutes later, he tore down a wall and knocked me out, all the while screaming that he was going to kill you."

He remembers tearing apart rooms and killing HYDRA handlers, usually without trying to escape and only sometimes thinking of taking his own life. It was usually just blind rage, nothing more and nothing less.

"I knew they could do that. I just didn't think... I... Fuck."

It's what HYDRA does, though: violates everything and twists the world. As if they already hadn't taken enough, they had to take Steve. They had to take that.

"He's got a real good doctor, though. And Nat's been with him a lot. She's good with him."

"Yeah. Yeah."

His mind is nowhere near a conversation with Sam, not anymore. He needs time to process.

"All right. If you want, I'll leave, give you alone time." Sam's incredible. "But there're rules, okay? You don't leave. You're not healthy. You've gotta stay, until your doctor says you can go. You've gotta trust us."

Barnes breaks out of his thoughts long enough to hear that and respond, "I'm not fucking stupid."

"Yeah, okay, well, I remember a time in Slovenia, when you wanted to run off, and, a split second later, HYDRA had you drooling on the ground. So, I'm going to say that what you just said is debatable."

"Fuck you!"

"Debatable."

"Whatever. You said rules? What's the rest?"

"No, that was it. Don't leave, trust us, and get healthy." Sam smirks, and tosses the tablet onto Barnes' lap. "That's yours."

Barnes looks down at the tablet and sees that something called "A Guide to Earth's Mightiest Tower, written by Iron Man, with a foreword by warmachinerox!1!" is open. He doesn't get it.

"I'll be around, if you need me. So will your super scary doctor."

With that, Sam leaves.

Barnes looks down at the tablet again, and then tilts his head back onto a mound of pillows.

_They took it, he thinks. They took everything._

He's not sure why he's surprised: he's the one who told Sam that they were looking for a man who no longer existed. He knew this could happen. He just never saw it coming.
"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," he whispers, and covers his face with both hands.

It's only then that he notices the cannula in his nose, its plastic lines running over his cheeks and behind his ears. And it's only then that he notices the hoard of IV lines and sensors taped and inserted up and down his arm and hand. He looks down and sees little plastic circles taped to his chest.

His right hand comes away oily, dirty, and itchy from the hair covering his unshaved face. He runs his hand through his hair and finds the same: oily, dirty. He sniffs once, twice, and decides that he can definitely smell himself.

He can't think like this. It's a distraction.

He figures he doesn't have very long to get to the shower, before someone comes after him. He gets to it.

One by one, he un-tapes and un-inserts hospital junk from his arm. Some of it bleeds, but not for long enough to worry about. He pops off the sensors on his chest—alarms start alarming—and then –

"What do you think you're doing?"

He looks to the door, bright hallway lights backlighting a female figure wearing a white lab coat.

"Taking a shower," he answers, surprised by how suddenly raspy his voice is. He clears his throat and pulls the cannula from his nose.

The woman walks further into the room, and then further still, until she's by his bedside, reaching up to where he sees a wall full of more hospital shit. She presses buttons that silence the alarms.

"Two gunshot wounds to the back. Poisoned bullets. Helicopter crash, with a head wound. Another head wound, when you nearly died in an explosion—"

He doesn't know her, but, despite that, he argues: "I didn't almost die. Wasn't even close."

She simply looks at him. Her eyes are brown; hair, light red, wavy. It's intentional: has to be.

"According to Mr. Wilson, you were overdosed with a litany of strange drugs—all of which are still in your blood, weeks after the fact, by the way—and then you did die in the middle of a forest—"

Barnes blinks. What?

"Then you were stabbed twice by Brock Rumlow, and then you fell thirty stories and cracked your head open. Did I miss anything?"

He's about to tell her exactly what she missed, when she beats him there.


He'd almost been on board with her, until that last sentence. Now, she could go jump off a fucking building, and he wouldn't think twice about her.

He pulls the heart monitor off his right index finger. He officially flatlines. "I'm taking a shower."
She centers her weight and crosses her arms across her chest. He ignores her.

Barnes kicks the covers down and see he's wearing a hospital dress. That's fantastic. And there's another hospital line. Running up his leg. All the way up to down there.

"Get your shit out of my dick."

A sharp pain stabs through the center of his chest. It almost steals his breath.

"Lay down."

A lot of rage is smoldering inside of him. Nothing, it seems, gets to him like being helpless and controlled. Surprise.

He takes a breath—not too deep—and looks over at her smug face.

"I've shot myself three times in the chest and was running a mission seven days later."

His face might mirror the surprise on the doctor's face. He doesn't remember remembering that. But it's true.

The mission sucked. He could barely breathe. On the way back to base, he passed out in the Quinjet—and didn't wake up again for years.

"I'm fine enough to take a shower. Get your shit out of my dick."

She doesn't make a move.

"I can just take the piss bag and go."

She stares at him for just a few more moments, before reaching into the pocket of her lab coat and pulling out a packaged syringe and a pair of latex gloves. She peels the package away, stuffs the wrapper in the pocket, and looks at him again.

"Lay down."

He sits back, sees where she's going with this, and closes his eyes.

"Before I get my shit out of your dick, you might want to know my name. Dr. Alicia Eicher."

He doesn't answer, doesn't say a word, doesn't flinch at the burning sensation, doesn't do anything.

"Your dick's all yours. Shower's to the right."

He swings his legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the sharp pain that runs up his back, and goes for it.

His bare feet touchdown on the cold, shiny floor, and he shifts his weight from the bed to his own two legs. They don't give, or buckle, or even wobble, despite the wave of wooziness that passes over him.

He takes careful, nauseous steps, one by one, another and another. He rounds the corner and finds a door, which opens to a pretty big bathroom: a sink, a tub, and a separate walk-in shower.

He slides into the bathroom, quietly closes the door, and finds a full-size mirror attached to the back of it. He wonders…
The hospital dress pools at his feet. He tears away white bandages from his chest, sternum, back, and side, and sees that they were covering raw, puckered incisions and half-dissolved black sutures.

He sees that they cut open his chest, all the way down, a paper thin incision line with two round scabs underneath it. He sees the three bullet wounds: large red pockets of damaged skin, with dark red centers. He turns and sees two stab wounds in his back: long, raised scars, almost healed.

Steve.

He gets in the shower and finds shampoo, body wash, and a nice razor, and that's all he could have—would have—asked for. He gets started and is all clean and almost done shaving, when knuckles rap against the door and Natasha's voice bleeds through the wood.

"Seriously. You had one job."

He steps out from the spray of water and responds, "Sam only told me I couldn't leave. Still here."

Natasha rolls her eyes and almost smiles. He knows it; he doesn't need to see it.

"How are you feeling?"

He rinses the razor, knocks it against the wall, and rinses it again. He starts shaving his neck. The longer he stands, the more and more tired he gets, and, even after nine supposed days, going back to bed is heavy on his mind.

"Can I have clothes?"

"Maybe. Are you going to cooperate with your doctor?"

He rinses the razor for the last time, sets it down on tiled ledge, and keeps the water running, even though he's done.

More than anything, he doesn't want to be in Stark Tower. He doesn't want to be surrounded by Steve's team. He doesn't want to be a room or a hallway or a story removed from Steve, unable to talk to him. He doesn't feel comfortable with any of this.

There's always a "but."

There's a faint ache in his jaw, although he can move it just fine. He rotates his right shoulder and finds that it's fine, too. He takes a deep breath and feels more sharp pains in his chest. Those pains are probably just muscular, superficial—but they will probably slow him down.

If he left now, and if HYDRA zeroed in on him, he'd likely end up captured. Sam had been right about that.

"Barnes?"

He twists the water handle. The water trickles to a stop. He steps out of the shower and grabs a huge, white towel.

The towel feels good. His eyelids feel cold and heavy.

"I'll stay for a few days. That's all."

The door cracks open, and Natasha's arm slides through, a green, cloth bag dangling from her hand.
He takes it and immediately sees his black sweatpants.

"She's not wrong, you know. Let yourself rest. No one will bother you."

Under the sweatpants, he finds underwear, gray socks, and a dark blue t-shirt. He starts to get dressed.

Natasha's not usually a chatterer, but, today, right now, she keeps going. "Thor's on Asgard. Clint's on a long mission—"

He hears the lie. He doesn't know, doesn't care what it is, but he hears it.

"—Banner doesn't want to bother you. Stark doesn't want bothered. Hill might come poking around. You know Sam will."

Barnes opens the door and hands Natasha her empty green bag. She looks tired; haggard, even.

"And Steve?" he prods. He doesn't bother pretending that Sam hadn't already told him. "What's Steve gonna do?"

She's steel. "Steve's not going to know where you are. The good doctor wants you in here for two more nights, just to make sure, and then, if you want, you and Sam can share a floor."

It's a testament to how tired he feels, and how tired Natasha looks, that he doesn't argue about being hospitalized for two more nights.

"And if I don't want?"

She shrugs with her left shoulder. "Any elevator will take you to street level. No one will stop you."

"Just like that?"

Two years ago, they all would have shot him dead.

A half grin appears on her face. "You're the one who told Fury that you're SHIELD. You're almost legitimate, these days."

"Almost."

Twelve hours later, Natasha comes back, bringing with her a cup of orange juice instead of coffee and a bagel with some kind of healthy spread on it instead of cream cheese.

He thinks about bitching but eats and drinks it all anyway, even before she's scrolled to whatever she's looking for on her giant tablet.

"Gotta minute?"

He shrugs. As far as he's been told, he has at least thirty-six more hours. He might plan to sleep for all of them.

She sits down next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and shows him the tablet. The image is clearly an x-ray of something.
"This is your abdominal area." She points at something small. "That's a loose bullet, tearing up your insides."

She flips to the next image. "This is your right ankle. That's a bullet. And the darker area is bone death."

She flips to another image. He already knows what it's going to be. "Your right arm. Two bullets."

"Indiga," he informs. "And?"

Natasha stands up, walks to the end of the bed, and sits down across from him. "Indiga. The base you destroyed in April 2014?"

He could laugh. And he does. "Your intel is total shit."

Her left eyebrow goes sky high. He could laugh at that, too, but he knows better.

"I went to Indiga to get back in with HYDRA, and they said 'no' with all those bullets. The base commander self-destructed the base. I didn't do that."

Natasha sets the tablet on the bed and clasps her hands together. She searches his eyes. "You really did report in?"

He nods. He's not proud of it, but he doesn't know what it could possibly change, at this point.

"Okay. You need surgery for those bullets."

Panicking, he reaches down and picks up Natasha's tablet. He just needs something to occupy his hands and something to look at, besides her.

"The arm won't be bad. You'll be asleep for the abdominal surgery; there's tearing that needs fixed, too." She pauses; that's a bad sign. "They have to break your ankle to remove the bullet. You'll be looking at least another week here—in the tower—and a couple days of limited mobility."

She's already talking like he's said "yes." His instincts scream "no." "Why didn't you just do it? You had nine days."

She shrugs, nonchalant. "Consent is important. If you don't, the bullet in your stomach could rupture something vital. You're guaranteed to lose your foot; might take another couple of years, but it will happen. Do the right thing for yourself."

He looks at his left fingers and thinks about how often he wishes he still had his real arm. About how often he's thought "I'd do anything to have it back."

"Fine. When?"

Natasha coughs, a split-second of surprise flashing across her face. "You're consenting?"

He tosses the tablet back toward her side of the bed and leans back into his pillows. "I'm surprised too."

Four days after that conversation, Barnes leaves a set of crutches and a walking boot behind in a room he never wants to see again, limps to the elevator, and presses "93."

"Sergeant Barnes, you have not been rele—"
JARVIS reminds Barnes of Gerald Englewood, without the smell: the kid who'd run after you, screeching about all the shit you'd done that was against the rules.

"Don't care," Barnes interrupts.

The cast is off, the incision running up the outside of his ankle is healed, and it's not agony to put weight on it: he's fine. Everything is fine, and he can't stay in that room another day.

The doors open to 93, and Barnes quickly sees that Sam is nowhere to be found. He's not sure if he's relieved or not about that. If Sam and, of all people, Natasha know how to do one thing, it's smother.

Barnes walks past the sofas and the kitchen, heading straight toward the bedroom he'd used before Death Valley.

Even though he's fine, he takes care when he sits down on the thick mattress. The incision in his stomach still pulls, and, though he'd never admit it, he can still feel exactly where he'd been shot by Steve.

He lays back, his legs dangling off the edge of the bed, and closes his eyes. Feels his back stretch. Pulls a pillow under his head, messing up the perfect covers.

Despite lying in bed for thirteen days straight, he's still tired.

The past three months have only been three months, and it's nice, maybe, to let the last couple of days here go slowly. Maybe.

When he opens his eyes, the overcast sky is deep gray, the sun lowering in the far horizon. It's been at least ten hours. He sits up, his back sore, and swallows against a dry throat. He listens and doesn't hear anything: not the TV, not Sam.

"JARVIS, where's Sam?"

"With Captain Rogers."

Everything almost worked out, except for that.

"How's… How's Steve doing?"

"Well. He has had three fewer violent outbursts today compared to yesterday."

That's not well.

"Is Natasha there, too?"

"Yes."

He has a sudden, overwhelming feeling of wanting to leave. To get out of this building. He feels sightless: trapped, enclosed, blind, powerless.

He wonders.

"Do you have to tell anyone where I'm going?"

JARVIS' response is immediate: "So long as you are not in danger, no."
'Okay." He thinks he sees the loophole there. "Please don't tell anyone where I'm going, unless I'm in trouble."

He won't be, but it's the loophole.

"JARVIS, where's Barnes?"

"He asked me to not say."

Natasha rolls her eyes.

It takes Natasha less than fifteen minutes to find Barnes, once she starts looking: the roof, below where Loki's portal had poured Chitauri into New York. He's been a sniper since he was twenty-six years old, and she knows from Clint: when in doubt, simply look up.

"Not scared?" she asks, by way of announcing herself.

"I'd sincerely love for'em to try."

So would she.

"May I sit down?"

He tilts his head, and says, "Sure."

She sits right next to him, close enough to feel the heat from his body. She holds back a grin and says, "You probably don't remember who I am."

Even in the dark, she can see his smile, though it doesn't ever reach his eyes. He shakes his head. "Where do I even start?"

She smiles and keeps it going. "Natasha Romanoff."

A little less than a year ago, on a similar rooftop in Washington, DC, he answered, "You know who I am, Romanoff," and she answered, "You're not what I thought you would be." That's still true, and she wonders how far he's come since then.

"Bucky Barnes."

He's come quite a distance, it seems.

"Oh, well, it's only about damn time," she says. "It's nice to meet you, Bucky."

"Don't get weird about it. It's still the stupidest fucking name. How's Steve?"

She stops smiling and looks down at her hands. "Physically, he's healing. The doctor doesn't expect much permanent scarring. Otherwise... Not great."

Barnes doesn't say anything. She hears the faint whir of his arm and wonders if he meant to do that.

She's at a loss for words, her usual straightforward bluntness a tool she doesn't want to use with him. Tact has never been something she considers a strength—not a weakness, but not a strength.

"I made an assumption, in that room," he finally says. "I thought they messed with his memories,
like mine. I thought he didn't know me. But he did. Only, he... I don't know. I don't know."

"I do," Natasha remarks, hesitant. She looks back out at the skyline, focuses on the blue and gold dotted lights of the Manhattan Bridge. "I killed a man, who was wearing your face and your arm and who was using your voice."

He whips his head around and stares at her. "A photostatic veil?"

Sometimes, it's easy to forget that Barnes was a top-level covert agent, and it's easy to forget that he doesn't have nearly the same modern hang-ups as Steve. "Yeah."

Barnes looks away. She can feel the tension in his body.

"All video of that was wiped. All the files were destroyed. He won't talk about it."

"Okay."

Natasha hates that word, especially when he uses it to shut down. What she needs to say isn't going to help the situation any. "You're a tremendous resource. You made it out, and you're doing incredible, mostly on your own. You're one of the few who can say that. You can help him."

She hadn't expected him to respond, let alone completely ignore what she said and intentionally derail the entire conversation.

"There isn't going to be a good time to say this, so: I'm not mad or trying to say that I regret being here right now, because I'd never want Steve to live with that, but I don't want to be brought back like that again. If I die, I die."

It feels like he just smacked her, out of nowhere. "Barnes-"

"I haven't had the luxury of that choice in seventy years. It's my decision."

"I'm not arguing," she answers. "At the hospital in Nevada, HYDRA injected you with another serum. Banner's still analyzing it, but he's pretty sure it's what saved your life."

His expression doesn't change: he's still looking out over Manhattan, completely blank. It's how he is, every time he's panicking.

That tact thing hasn't suddenly become a strength in the past half hour. "So, no, I'm not arguing. But you tried to kill yourself, eleven days ago, on an operating table. And at least eight times before that."

That gets a reaction. He glares at her, radiating anger. "None of you had a right to read that file. And it's my choice. And every one of those times was... You don't... You can't even imagine."

Natasha grinds her jaw, panicking a little of her own. "You're right. I'm not arguing. What I'm trying to ask is if you're asking me to help you commit suicide."

The glare hardens, and he doesn't look away. "I'm asking you to not rip my chest open and shove tubes all over my fucking body. That's what I'm asking."

She doesn't react to his aggression. It's her job to stay cool. "You'll want a DNR order, and maybe even a Durable Power of Attorney. I don't know for sure; I'm not a lawyer, but I'll help you figure it out."

She doesn't say that she's giving normal-person advice to a man who legally no longer exists.
He finally looks away, anger fading to annoyance to veiled vulnerability. "If I wanted to die, I
wouldn't be here right now. That's not what it is. Except when it comes to HYDRA, then, yeah,
that's what it is."

"You're giving HYDRA a lot of power," she says, without care about how he might react.

He doesn't react the way she expected. He just shakes his head and says, "No. I value myself more
than I value my life. Those two things aren't the same. Not to me."

Natasha understands that, but it scares her in a way that it really shouldn't. She smiles, then
laughs, and then says, "There's a chance I might be in the wrong business, after all."

He looks over at her, a faint look of confusion in his expression, but amusement there, too. "Oh, my
god, we all are."

"All right. You could do or be anything. Slate's clean. Ledger's in the black." She looks at him,
square in the eyes, a grin pulling at her lips. "What would it be?"

There's almost a smile on his face, and he doesn't hesitate. "Nothing. I'd have the quaintest cabin
you've ever seen-probably in the Catskills. About ten acres, with a nice little fishing stream, alotta
books, and alotta booze. A place HYDRA wouldn't be able to seem to find. And that's it."

Oddly specific.

"And, I would hope, that you wouldn't be a stranger," he says, looking her in the eyes.

Any other time, she would laugh and make fun of such an obvious pick-up line—even if he is really
quite good at them. This time, what's obvious is that he's just given her an important part of
himself—and trusted his life in her hands.

"That sounds nice," she answers.

"It would be."

He looks away, back out over the city, toward the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges. The sky is
turning light, from gray to blue to yellow.

"So, what's so special up here?" she asks.

"The sunrise. It's the best part of the day."

"Why?"

"It's another day since then."

Barnes has all of his clothes spread out over his made bed, and his open, empty backpack on the
floor.

He tosses out the pair of socks with holes in both heels, and the pair of underwear with blood
somehow all up the leg. He thinks it was the pair he was wearing at the cosmodrome. He tosses the
blue t-shirt with the tear along the shoulder.

The elevator dings.
"Sergeant Barnes, you have a—"

"Visitor," an unknown, female voice says.

Barnes’ hand goes to the small of his back, before he remembers: his CZ-75 is long gone, and he's not otherwise armed. Also: he's safe, or so he's been told a million times. He grabs his tablet off the bed, walks out of the bedroom, closes the door, and approaches her.

She stops just outside of the elevator, a hesitant smile on her face. She has curly, black hair, brown eyes, and is no taller than a meter and a half. She dresses well, in a brown skirt and pink blouse, with no jewelry.

"I'm Emma Russell." He knows that name: Steve's therapist. "Steve's therapist. Is now a good time, Mr. Barnes?"

He drops into a cream-colored chair, his ankle cracking, and wakes up his tablet.

"Sure."

No.

She stays standing, hands clasped in front of her, a thin, black tablet clenched in her left hand.

"I'd like to talk about your experiences," she says, an upkick in her voice telling him that she's very, very insecure about this.

Which is good. She'll be easier to shut down. "I don't want a therapist," he says, as cool as can be.

"No, no, that's not what this is. I couldn't be your therapist, even if you wanted. There's a conflict there."

"Great." Genuinely. "So..."

Her mouth presses into a grimace, which he thinks is supposed to be a comforting smile. She's really bad at it. "What can you tell me? Anything will help Steve."

He looks down at his tablet, plays with the screen.

"Look, I don't mean to tell you things you already know, but you are the only..." She stumbles and pauses, for a very long time.

He looks up. "Are you trying to say 'ex HYDRA agent' but are too afraid of offending me by actually saying it? Because I have enough self-awareness to know what I was."

She licks her lips, grimace-smiles toothlessly, and nods. "You're the only person—that we know of— with direct experience with this level of trauma, and who is both willing and able to discuss it. You're a survivor and an ally. Genuinely, your insight, no matter how big or small, will help him."

Fuck.

He looks back down at the table and scrolls through three entire screens of stupid apps that Sam installed. Games. Some stupid spy camera. One where all you do is zip and unzip a zipper. A simulated stapler thing.

God help him, he opens the stapler app and starts stapling, a finger tap at a time.
And he talks: "It took years, I think, for them to get to the same point with me as they did Steve, which took three months-and less than that for your other agents. Whatever they're doing, and however they're doing it, it's much more effective and streamlined than what I experienced. Most of which I still don't remember. I can't help you."

"And what point is that? That you were talking about?"

"A place where there's nothing left of yourself that still wants to exist."

The app chooses that moment to crash. It would.

"You know," she says, "you look tired. You've been through more than-"

"We're done," Bucky interrupts. He doesn't want a stranger's pity, and he doesn't want to talk about the last seventy years.

"Sure," she nods. "I just... Don't you want to sleep?"

That's a strange thing to ask. In that instant, contained in those five words, he decides that he doesn't like her. "You said you weren't my therapist."

"I'm not." She shakes her head, frowning, disappointed. She unnerves him. "Speaking as a friend? Rest is important for a healthy mind. And you seem tired."

Barnes tries hard not to sneer. "We're not friends."

Her smile is forced: tense and tight, nowhere near her eyes. He's hit a nerve. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Barnes. If you think of anything else that would be helpful for Steve, don't hesitate to contact me. Any input would be appreciated."

He doesn't answer, and she leaves.

"Sergeant Barnes, I apologize for not warning you earlier."

He looks at the elevator, sifting through a ton of thoughts and emotions, and finally says, "Don't worry about it, JARVIS. If Hill has time, can you see if she can stop by? Before I leave?"

"Certainly. As I can see that you are packing, I assume that you will be leaving soon?"

"Soon."

All of his clothes are still scattered across his bed, when JARVIS pipes up:

"Sergeant Barnes—"

"JARVIS, stop with the 'sergeant' shit."

He feels a little bad.
"Please," he adds.

"Certainly."

For a moment, Barnes thinks Hill has made time, but JARVIS dispels that thought, like a bullet through a glass window:

"Mr. Stark would like you to come to his lab on the 96th floor."

Barnes looks at his clothes, and then at his bag, and wonders if he could pack fast enough and get the fuck out, before anyone realizes what he's doing.

"Mr. Barnes, your response is requested."

A lump travels up his chest and settles nicely in his throat. He might as well get it over with: end this make believe world and get going, and live in a fool's paradise, thinking Natasha or Steve or Sam might come while HYDRA won't ever.

"Yeah. I'm coming."

With a last look at his bag and clothes, and a last useless wish that he could just leave, he walks to the elevator and lets JARVIS take him to Stark's lab.

He has a theory that, the more he doesn't want to be somewhere, the faster the elevator moves. Just as soon as he steps in, he feels like the damn thing is beeping at the 96th floor and opening its doors. It hadn't crashed to the bottom of the building, like he'd wanted it to.

He could puke. He really, really could.

His chest hurts. Maybe he could fake a medical emergency –

"And I thought Rogers was bad. You have to get off the elevator."

Barnes steps out of the elevator and listens to the doors close behind him. He blinks and finds Stark, who is sitting near the middle of the very big room, at the center of a half-circle table full of near-transparent, square computer screens.

The rest of the lab is full of black server racks, their small lights glowing lime green, along with various bits and chunks of machinery and computers. He doesn't see any sign of Iron Man: no suits, no gear, no nothing. He doesn't know what that means.

There's a black medical-like chair off to the side, under a turned-off, huge, circular light. He looks away from it as quickly as he notices it.

"Hi," Stark says, drawing out the "i." "You look sufficiently not dead. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

Stark crumples one of the screens in his hand and throws it behind him. It's the kind of tech a few HYDRA cells had, near the end, and he's less than awed by it. Stark leans back in his rolling chair, crosses his arms, and looks at Barnes.

"You look really uncomfortable. Like, really. Want a drink?"

Barnes shakes his head. "No, thanks," he remembers to say.
Stark pushes his lips together, nods, and then grimaces. "Okay. This is super awkward. So. I'll just get right to it."

Barnes' body stills. He can't breathe. He –

"I had a lot of looks at your x-rays, over the past week, two weeks, whatever. There's a lot we can do with that arm. Reduce the scarring. Nullify the pain. I had an arc reactor carved into my chest until a few years ago, and, now, you'd never even know."

Barnes breathes infinite relief, and then shrugs, trying to hide his anxiety. In any case, his arm is more of an ache, one he doesn't really notice until assholes point it out, and the scarring doesn't really compare to the massive fucking metal thing fused onto damn near half of his left side.

"No?" Stark's not bad at reading people. "Okay. Hologram?"

Now, that? That piques his interest. Despite everything, it interests him, a lot. "What kind?"

Stark smirks. "Thought that'd appeal to you. Have a seat."

The seat Stark gestures to makes Barnes' heart race. It's the same one he'd noticed a little bit ago, and he can't. He can't.

Wipe him. Start over.

Four words he hears in his dreams on too many bad nights.

Suddenly, the hologram doesn't seem as necessary, and the idea of hanging out in a lab with Tony Stark once again isn't so attractive.

"Nevermind. But thanks."

Barnes turns and his index finger is almost to the elevator button, when Stark pushes harder: "You sure? Doesn't have to be here. I'm mobile that way."

Barnes looks back, apprehensive. Stark spreads his hands, expression pure arrogance. A hologram is a strategic advantage he can't really justify passing up. Not with HYDRA doing its HYDRA thing.

They end up back on the 93rd floor, actually sitting on the floor, backs to the sofa, with Barnes' left arm propped on a coffee table. His t-shirt sleeve is rolled all the way up, bunched by his neck. It's an awkward arrangement, not that Stark seems to mind.

"This is incredible. Do you have any idea where they got this tech?"

Barnes is proud of himself for not rolling his eyes. He has less success with his words: "Yeah, they told me everything, all the time. It was fun like that."

Stark's hands stop moving, and he looks at Barnes. "Oh, so you have a personality? Good to know. Also: is this arm the first version, or was it switched out over the years? This can't be seventy-year old technology."

"I don't know," Barnes answers, irritated.

Stark doesn't seem to mind. Barnes looks over and sees panels of exposed, luminescent blue innards. Of all things, it reminds him of Nazarri from Belarus. He looks away and rests his head on the couch cushions.
"Hey, you want repulsors?"

"Want what?"

"Really? Nevermind."

Eyes closed, Barnes eases his back into the fluffy front of the couch, not totally relaxed but not a tense ball of nerves, either. Stark talks to himself; ooh's and ahh's at Zola's amazing creation; and does whatever it is that Starks do.

"You're going to lose power. Just a fair warning."

Barnes briefly lifts his eyebrows in response, and he's ready for the inevitable blast of pain that spikes through his right temple. The nausea. The dizziness. The familiar vulnerability of being one-armed and having dead weight on the other side.

"You felt that?" Stark pauses. "Holy shit, did they... Never mind. You don't know."

Well, actually, he does know: "There's chips in my head, to help control it." Stark keeps quiet, and Barnes feels pressured to add, "A HYDRA tech told me."

Stark clears his throat and doesn't have anything to add. Good.

Stark keeps working, and, eventually, reluctantly, Barnes dozes off, his body still exhausted and recovering. He dreams of nothing in particular, only snippets and blips of weird, nonsensical things, the way dreams should and used to be.

He doesn't know how long he sleeps, but he thinks it can't be that long. When he opens his eyes and looks over, Stark is still fingers-deep in the guts of his arm, with a stony focus carved all over his face. Stark's eyes briefly glance over at Barnes, before refocusing on the arm.

"Welcome back, Winter Princess."

Barnes ignores the dig and wonders when Stark will finally be done.

"Can I ask you something?" Stark asks. It's weird that he's asking permission.

Barnes shrugs with his right shoulder.

"Did you kill my parents?"

There it is. The reason he'd wanted to pack and run; why he wanted the elevator to fall almost a hundred stories; why he wanted his chest to betray and kill him; why Steve will never forgive him, and why Natasha and Sam shouldn't want to be around him, and why he will never, ever be able to live with himself. Why he wanted anything, anything, anything to happen to avoid this.

Barnes' stomach turns into a hot, curling knot. He forgets to breathe, although the answer slides easily off his tongue: "Yes."

Green and red and gold, all over. Glittering, shiny ornaments. November or December. There were film posters for Star Trek VI, so: early 90s.

They were driving on the Pacific Coast Highway; they were supposed to have been in New York, and their private jet was supposed to have malfunctioned on take-off. Bad intel, supposedly. Or, just another test. Whichever.
It was early morning, and Los Angeles sleeps. The highway was almost barren with only a few vehicles, and, from his vantage point, he could see for miles. He could see them.

He landed on their car's roof, shattered the windshield, reached through, and bashed Howard's head against the wheel. Maria screamed and raised her arms defensively over her head.

He jumped from the car and landed clean on the asphalt, about two seconds after the car failed to make a sharp curve and crashed head-on into the brown rock face. Afterward, he walked to the car, his only weapon his left arm, but they were both dead.

It was really that simple.

"It was supposed to be a plane crash. Their plans changed. So did mine."

He can't move his left arm. He has no weapon. He doesn't know if he would hurt Stark. He doesn't know if Stark plans to hurt him.

"Hmm." Stark nods and doesn't stop tinkering with the guts of the arm. "Were they really yours? Your plans?"

*Two targets, high-profile. Make it accidental.*

The only part of him that HYDRA trusted was his judgment. How to kill. How to be the machine that he used to be for Captain America.

"Does it matter?"

"Sorta does."

Barnes stares at Stark, who has Maria's nose and Howard's eyes. If Stark kills him, it'll be okay.

"HYDRA only cared if their parameters were met, not so much how it was done. It was less than five seconds. It was fast. Painless." And then... And then: "I killed my own family. My folks. My sister. My brothers. It wasn't... I liked your dad, during the couple years we worked together."

Barnes can't say any of it without tears, throat tight. *Fuck.* He squares his jaw and looks anywhere but at Stark, who doesn't say a fucking word. Stark just keeps tinkering.

"War," Stark finally says, evenly, "is a damned distasteful thing." A spark jumps from Barnes' left arm, and the whole thing comes back online, all at once. "Wiggle your fingers."

Barnes doesn't. He wants Stark to go away, and he wants this awful feeling in his chest to go away, and he wants it **all** to go away. He especially wants *this fucking arm* to go away.

He should have died in 1945. He should be a forgotten memory: history's footnote and a face painted on an exhibit wall.

"Hey." Stark whacks him in the right arm. "Hey. Look at me."

Barnes complies, moving only his gaze to Stark. He's pretty sure his expression is not a very nice one, and he wonders—just wonders—if Stark has any self-preservation instinct at fucking all.

"Okay. First: attitude. Second: no one in their right mind blames you. So. Wiggle your fingers."

The words go right over his head, in one ear and out the other. He doesn't know why his vision is blurry. Finally, he gives in, makes a left-handed fist, and looks over at the -
"Oh."

"He says 'oh.' Fucking wonderful. I'm appreciated. You should see your face, by the way. JARVIS, are you getting this?"

The metal is gone. It looks like real skin: pores, veins, hair, freckles, moles. The same scar he has on the palm of his right hand, from when he fell on a glass jar when he was six. The same weird mass of puckered skin he's had on his right little finger since forever. The burn on the back of his right wrist from his mom's oven. The ripple of white skin on his elbow, from when he fell off a fishing boat into the Hudson, the year before he deployed.

Barnes moves his fingers, looks at every side of his arm, and finally touches it. It feels like metal, but the image doesn't deviate, not even a little.

Stark sits back, pleased. "Visually, the program is entirely based on your right arm. I can write the scars out, but they tend to give it more realism, but whatever you want, I don't care. You shouldn't see a variance in the image; it's the highest speed processor currently-but-not-officially in existence. I'll keep up. Even with you."

Barnes wonders how he turns it- And there it goes, reverting back to shiny, silver metal. He can control the hologram like he controls the arm, and he doesn't even know how that's possible. He turns it back on.

"You put a lot of work into this," he says. "More than a couple days."

Stark smirks. "An itsy, bitsy, red-headed, kind of mean spider came up the water spout. Six months ago. I'd say you two could team up and be the World's Scariest Heroes, but you're actually not all that scary. At all."

Heroes.

Not exactly a word he'd expected to hear.

Barnes looks away from the arm and over at Stark. He doesn't see anger or hate or vengeance; he sees things he doesn't deserve. "Thank you."

"I meant what I said. No one worth a damn blames you. I don't. And it's not so bad having you around. You should consider staying."

Stark stands up and doesn't make any other fuss. He gathers his box of tools and heads to the elevator. It's more than a relief.

Except, with Stark, as Barnes is quickly learning, it's never quite that easy:


Stark disappears behind the hiss of the elevator doors, just like that.

Barnes stays on the floor, torn a hundred different ways between relief, despair, confusion, happiness, grief, dread, and two abstract thoughts: a red Sigg water bottle and not a big deal, Steve; kid'll live.
All of his clothes are still scattered across his bed, when Sam exclaims, "I've got pizza!"

It smells like pepperoni, double cheese crust.

Fuck.

Barnes sighs and goes out to the living room. Sam's already sitting down: socked feet propped on the coffee table, remote in his hand, pizza box in his lap.

"Dr. Phil's on. I hate watch this guy."

Barnes sits down next to him, grabs a slice of pizza, and immediately knows that he's not going to like Dr. Phil or care about if some strangers' marriage needs saved.

Three slices in, Barnes realizes that Sam's been way too quiet. He'll usually talk about anything, even if it's just making one-off comments about the show.

Barnes asks, "Why aren't you talking?"

Sam shrugs. "Because the only thing I've got to say is probably something that will just make you leave faster."

Barnes leans back, steels himself, and tells Sam to go for it.


Stay until it's easy.

They all think it's so easy.

Barnes shakes his head. "No."

Not when Steve can't be in the same room as him, and not when he's surrounded by people he barely knows. He's not a SHIELD agent and he's not an Avenger—and he never wants to be.

"Okay," Sam relents, just as easy as that. "Are you going after them?"

He'd love to. Absolutely love to. And, for Steve, he would. But, these days, he wouldn't even know where to start. And he has an idea that these people here would either stand in his way or stand by his side, and neither of those options are acceptable.

Barnes shakes his head. "Sounds like the DV base got taken care of. I don't know where else to go."

"Yet," Sam says, loud and clear. "If you remember something, will you go after them then?"

It's a fair question, and he gives it a fair answer. "I don't know. Probably."

Sam nods. "Okay. You leave. But you're a part of us now. And you damn well know it."

Yeah. He knows. It's why he's leaving.
Maria raps on the bedroom door. Barnes turns and looks at her, albeit briefly, and then keeps folding the few pieces of clothes left strewn on his bed.

"I heard you asked for me. I actually needed to see you."

"Okay," Barnes says. She's been warned about that word: his favorite. "Why?"

"I saw you, in 2004."

Barnes folds the last piece of clothing and starts carefully packing them into a black backpack. "Okay. Sorry?"

Maria crosses her arms and allows him a very small smirk. "No need. I saw you on a flight. If I had realized then, what it was, I would have stopped it. Would have stopped a lot, actually."

"No, you would've been killed, probably by me."

Maria doesn't address that. "Did they always sedate you?"

Barnes doesn't miss a beat: another shirt goes into the bag, followed by jeans. "I don't remember 2004. Where were we?"

"Paris."

"What month?"

"August." Memory is often triggered by sensory, and she isn't above indulging. "It was warm, muggy. Wet, with a lot of thunderstorms."

Maria never pretended to be eloquent, let alone descriptive. Something she said, though, trips him up: he has a folded black sweater in one hand and the opening of the backpack in the other, and he stops, maybe for two seconds, eyes still, and then keeps packing.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

He's lying. She doesn't care: lying is what they do.

"We're rebuilding SHIELD. Are you interested in helping?"

"You're rebuilding SHIELD with former HYDRA operatives?" Barnes asks, tone dripping with derision. "How'd that work out for you last time?"

Maria crosses her arms and smiles the smile that Stark calls "a horrific grimace." "You're not a former HYDRA agent. You were a prisoner of war—the longest-serving POW known to man, actually. You don't need to be an asshole about it. Are you interested or not? Before you answer, there will be conditions. A lot of conditions."

"Yeah, I'm sure, and no." Barnes laughs.

Maria's not afraid to push. He doesn't know that yet. "Fair enough. How committed are you to being called in as a last resort?"

He gives up a flash of annoyance, and the look he gives her is made of sheer irritation. She tries not to laugh. "Why?"

"We've lost Rogers, for the foreseeable future. That's a huge hit. You're a comparable advantage."
The time will likely come when we'll need you. I'm asking if we can rely on having you."

He rolls his eyes and keeps packing. "Sure. If the aliens come back, call me."

Maria hears the sarcasm in his tone and doesn't know if he realizes: she's going to be calling him, aliens or no aliens. Otherwise, she senses that there isn't much left to discuss, except for just one more question. It's Natasha's, and it's a good one. "Are you willing to fight for this world?"

He stops again. Blinks. And then keeps packing. "Most of it."

"Just checking."

She reaches into her the left pocket of her pants, pulls out a phone, and tosses it onto the bed. "Nick sends his regards."

He ignores it.

She begins to leave, feeling mostly okay about this conversation, when he says: "Steve's therapist."

Maria stops. "What about?"

"Do you trust her?"

"She's been thoroughly vetted. Thoroughly."

"Do you trust her?"

"Yes. Is that all you needed?"

He doesn't say anything else. She leaves.

So does he, or so she hears.

The motorcycle's wheels crunch against a mixture of dirt and gravel. Steve sticks his right, booted foot out and cuts the engine, parking the bike next to a black, mid-2000-ish-maybe Subaru Legacy.

The vehicle looks built for speed, not ruggedness, a curious thing in the middle of the Catskill wilderness.

Steve pushes his sunglasses to the top of his head, and exhales a breath he's been holding since he pointedly decided against pulling off 95 and making a bee-line back to Stark Tower.

Steve stands still and simply takes in the property. There's a one-story, brown log cabin, with a red shingled roof and a tall stone chimney. The windows and front door are trimmed red. To the side, there's a small, dark blue shed, padlocked shut. Tall oaks, their leaves a vibrant slow-gradient of bright greens to vivid reds, surround the entire property.

In late September 1935, they'd taken Bucky's folks' 1927 A-Model up near the Adirondacks. Bucky'd pulled off along the road, in a place where they could see for what felt like 100 miles.

The colors were like nothing he'd ever seen: glittering golds and rosy reds and so many shades in between, backdropped by a deep blue sky and rolling white clouds. It would be dumb to say his heart ached, because there was a lot more to worry about in life than pretty colors, but all he
wanted were his paints and a piece of any kind of paper. A scrap blowing along the road, even.

"Well, doesn't that beat all." With Bucky, it was never a question, always a grin and his low-keyed drawl, because he was going to take the world. "Check the back, Pal."

Steve looked over at him, saw the way his left hand tapped the outside door panel, and he knew. He twisted around and found an M. Graham watercolor set, a new pad of watercolor paper, and Andrew's red aluminum Sigg water bottle in the backseat.

Steve gathered all of it in his lap and just stared.

"It's a little chintzy, but y'know." Bucky lifted an eyebrow. "Might get the job done."

Steve shook his head. "You didn't have to do this, Buck."

"Yeah, well. Go paint somethin' beautiful, Steve."

Steve did, until it was nearly too dark to see, while Bucky read through an entire book. It wasn't until the next morning, back in Brooklyn, that Steve realized he'd left Andrew's water bottle along the road there, and Bucky just shrugged - "no big deal, Steve; kid'll live."

That was 82 years ago. Steve clamps down on a swell of emotion, on swirls of could-be's and should-have-been's and what-if's. He steels himself against the fear of the person he probably won't find here.

He walks up to the front entrance and knocks on the storm door, as if he needs to. If Bucky's hearing is anything like his, he heard the motorcycle miles ago. Just the same, Steve hears nothing inside.

He backs down the steps and circles around the back of the cabin. There's a composite-wood deck outside a single French door. A rusting stainless steel propane grill frames a chute of black soot on the exterior wall, near a partly melted red, plastic window sill. On the far side of the deck, there's an orderly pyramid of chopped firewood.

Steve exhales and buries his hands in the pockets of his jacket. The only part of this place that seems like Bucky is the car and the part of the cabin that he apparently nearly set on fire.

He stands still, looking around the area: at the trees, the gravel driveway, the patchy grass and dead leaves from a season ago. He listens to the colorful chirping of birds and the whistling of the breeze, the patter of a thousand leaves blowing in the wind. It's peaceful here.

Overhead, two geese honk, honk, honk, flying northerly in a low v-formation. Steve squints up at them, tracking their flight path with his eyes.

"There's a nice little stream," Natasha had said, a while back-not to him but within earshot. "I think he loves it more than anything else out there."

He's gotta find that stream.

He turns away from the cabin and scans the tree line. From where he stands, he doesn't see a good path to any stream, or even any sign of the stream. He follows the geese north, away from the cabin.

The driveway and clearing for the shed give way to a thicket of crunchy brush, layers of leaves and balls of green-sheathed walnuts, and a tree line that quickly thickens into a bona fide woods. There
aren't signs of activity: no snapped twigs, no shattered leaves, no worn footpath.

Regardless, he presses forward, taking care to not leave a path: a lesson he'd learned once from Bucky and twice from Rumlow, who'd *fucking known, the entire time*.

Steve pushes away unchecked rage. It's not the time. It can't be the time.

He power-steps up a steep, vine-coated hill, the treads of his boots keeping traction in the loose dirt. At the top, he finds rows of trees, their long shadows casting an eerie ambience. He looks up: the sun and blue sky are gone, replaced by overcast, gray clouds.

It's then that he catches the faintest whiff of burnt paper and tobacco. Cigarette smoke. He thinks it's coming from more east than north. He walks toward it.

No more than five minutes later, he intersects a distinct dirt trail, at the same time he hears the sound of flowing water.

The urge to sprint down the trail is strong. He resists it, and walks calmly down the trail.

The cigarette smoke becomes stronger, the bubbling water louder, all the while the pit in his stomach grows bigger. It's a nervous pit, built of excitement and fear.

When he enters a clearing on the flat, stony bank of a wide, shallow river, his stomach drops, disappointment as good as a punch to the face.

There's a man-wide shoulders, thin waist, lean legs but thick thighs-standing nearly knee-deep in the river, his back to Steve, left hand wrapped around a cheap black fishing pole and the other hand holding a smart phone up near his face. He has short, dark brown hair and is wearing a navy blue t-shirt and dark grey shorts. Cigarette smoke swirls into the air.

Could be, could be, could be - but...

Both of the man's arms are flesh and blood.

For a moment, Steve thinks of bothering the guy and asking if he's seen Bucky, but there's no excuse for drawing that kind of attention. Steve turns around and trudges back toward the trail.

"You just gonna walk away like that? Fuckin' jerk."

Steve freezes, a deep breath caught in his throat. The smooth drawl is all Bucky. He turns around, in time to see the flesh of the man's left arm fade into shiny, slotted, silver metal.

*Bucky.*

Steve's heart skips one, two beats.

"Hologram. You can thank Stark."

Steve doesn't think about where to start. He falls into a too-familiar, ball-busting routine: "You? Fishing? I didn't even know you knew what that was."

But that's so, so untrue, and the quick flash of confusion on Bucky's face confirms it. Steve doesn't know why he said it.

Bucky's dad used to take them fishing near Sheepshead Bay, Steve a tagalong to a trio of brothers. That ended in 1929, and, by the time the Depression was truly over, those simple times were a
"Yeah. It's not too bad. There's beer over there." Bucky nods toward a large cooler sitting in the river, covered in water nearly to its lid.

For lack of nothing less awkward to do, Steve walks toward the cooler, relieved to see a dry path to it. He passes a wooden Adirondack chair, with a book on the seat: Steinbeck's *The Wayward Bus*.

Bucky was always an obsessive reader. Steve's glad to see that hasn't changed.

*He's faking. It's a trick. He's-*

Stop.

Dread follows those thoughts. He's worked hard for this, and, after all this time, he thought it'd take longer.

Steve grabs two bottles of Guinness from the cooler and turns around. His breath catches, and he knows he has the dumbest expression on his face, but *Christ*.

Bucky's blue Nikes are dripping wet and *squish squish squish* as he walks toward the chair, fishing pole in one hand, half-smoked cigarette in the other. His color is far from the paltry pale it was on the helicarrier and even in Krakow; it's healthy, like he spends most of his time outside. From the front, his hair is a purposeful mess of cut-too-short cowlicks—not like how he used to have it, but not entirely different, either.

It's *Bucky*.

"You... Are you doing okay? You look okay."

Bucky shrugs. "There're good days and bad days and whatever days. Today's a day."

Steve swallows and nods, jaw set. "Yeah. Of course. I know how that is." He holds out a bottle of beer.

Bucky doesn't reach for it. His left arm goes around Steve's chest, and his right arm goes around the back of Steve's neck; for a split second, Steve is all fear and adrenaline, until he realizes that Bucky is hugging him.

Steve drops the bottles, ignores the crack of glass and fizzing of busted beer, and goes all in, gripping Bucky's shirt so tight it might rip. Steve doesn't see Bucky close his eyes and smile.

For so many years, this is all Steve wanted. Bucky's alive, and he's himself, and -

And. Steve's not.

When they finally pull away, Steve slides a hand to Bucky's chest. It's not hard to remember what it felt like: spongy blood, stillness, despaired panic. His world collapsing, again and again and again and again, so fast that he'll never be able to run from it quickly enough.

"Hey." Bucky's metal fingers wrap around Steve's wrist. It's almost like they burn his skin, and he yanks his wrist away. Bucky doesn't falter. "Don't do it to yourself. I'm *fine*."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Steve says. "I just..."

It's just that the last time Steve saw him, a tube was breathing for him and no one could—or maybe
would-tell him anything.

There just aren't words. Steve pulls Bucky into another hug. He soaks in his warmth, breathes in his scent, and savors the feel of Bucky's arm—he tries hard to ignore how the left one feels around him. He wishes it could last forever.

It won't. The last time Steve saw him, he ended up wanting to kill him. The time before that, he did.

Bucky pulls away, saying, "There's a storm coming. Let's get inside."

Steve wonders, for a couple moments too long, why Bucky cares about a little rain. He apparently loafs around in a river all day and used to spend days in the same spot, through all sorts of weather-

"I've gotten hit by lightning a few times. Yeah. Shit you don't think about, right?" Bucky goes around Steve, to the chair, and grabs the paperback book off of it. "Metal arm on a sniper: great i-fucking-dea!"

During the war, Bucky occasionally got on similar tears, with similar commentary and creative use of curse words. He could make the other commandos laugh until they were breathless; maybe it was even funnier, because, out of all of them, Bucky was normally considered the most placid and levelheaded.

He sounds so close to that.

_He's faking. It's a trick._

_Stop._

A glint of glass catches his eye, and he looks down at the broken beer bottles. One of the necks has pointed, razor-sharp edges. He wonders if the glass would be strong enough to cut into the fleshy part of Bucky's-

"Steve. C'mon."

Steve blinks. He looks over and sees that Bucky is at the trailhead, waiting. There's a voice inside, telling him to run as far away as possible: tear through the forest, sprint until his hands shake, get himself back to Manhattan, and forget this place exists.

Forget Bucky.

But there isn't a world without Bucky in it. And he can control this. He has to be able to control it.

"Is there a shortcut?" Steve asks, stepping toward the trail.

"You're so fucking lazy."

They start up the trail, side by side. In another time, Bucky would've wrapped his arm over Steve's shoulders. That doesn't happen.

Steve doesn't know what to say, and Bucky doesn't say anything, either. Just six years ago, they could talk about anything, for hours-

Only it hasn't been six years. It's been almost seventy-two, even though Bucky barely looks any older than he did in 1945.
"How many years has it been for you?" Steve asks. "I keep thinking it was all six years ago."

They pass the part of the woods, where Steve found the trail. He now sees that the trail snakes around to the southwest, and he realizes that it must start from the other side of the cabin.

Bucky blows out a breath and shrugs. "Um. Shit. More than six. At least thirty, maybe forty? It's all still kind of blurred together."

Those numbers floor him, and he asks, without thinking, "But you haven't aged?"

Bucky gives him a tight smile. "I don't know why, before you ask."

Steve thinks it's pretty obvious why. He doesn't say that.

He doesn't know what to say. They walk the trail together, in fake comfortable silence, until they reach the back of the cabin. Bucky leans his fishing pole against the cabin, drops the butt of his cigarette on the ground, and leads Steve around to the front door.

Before they go up the steps, Bucky stops and looks right at Steve.

"I should have said this a long time ago. I wish I'd said this a long time ago. I'm sorry, for everything I did—on the rooftop, on the highway, on the helicarrier. In Krakow. And thank you, for bringing me back. Because you did."

Maybe to other people, those words would mean more. And maybe ten months ago, those words would have made Steve's day, week, month, year, and entire life. Today, his heart knows that Bucky was never HYDRA, and that the person Bucky's apologizing for was seventy some years out of choices, but his brain sees and hears the man in a room under Death Valley.

"Oh, my god, it looks like soggy fucking pizza crust. D'ya wanna see it? Okay, yeah, so, it's a little gross. Prolly not, then, I guess? Okay. How 'bout we just keep going? I hope you like it."

Steve flinches, mindlessly wrapping his arms around himself. Under his jacket, there are still a few patches of smooth, waxy scars, where hair doesn't grow and the sun can't quite touch them.

Like always, Bucky's patient and considerate. He never pushes, until he feels like he has to. The other one didn't have that resolute demeanor, or the long crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

Steve's silence doesn't seem to trip Bucky up at all. He just pulls a key out of his pocket and opens the front door.

Bucky goes in first and holds the door open for Steve. Steve climbs the steps and walks into the foyer/kitchen/living room. It's small, but, to his eyes, modern— and probably what counts as nice these days.

Wood floors. High ceilings. Clean, granite countertops, with two bottles of wine—Natasha's favorite kinds, Steve notices—in a corner. Round, white dishes by the sink, neatly stacked in a dishrack. The appliances are stainless steel, and clean like Bucky always kept his things clean.

There's a gray, two-seat couch in the living room, in front of a flat-screen TV affixed to the wall; a screened fireplace; a coffee table; and a big, gray chair in front of the couch, its back to a large, bright window. Books are everywhere—not chaotic, just stacked everywhere: on the floor, on the coffee table, by the sides of the couch.

Bucky leans against the granite countertop in the kitchen. Steve moves into the living room, by the
couch and coffee table and books. He sees a stack of glossy magazines; the top one has Rachael Ray on the cover, and she's always reminded Steve of Becca. He wonders if it's the same for Bucky.

"How long have you lived here?" Steve asks.

"Almost two years. Kinda love it."

Steve nods his head and thinks about that.

About the year he spent looking all over Europe for Bucky and finding nothing but dead bodies, until that final night, when Bucky told him they weren't friends.

About the other year he spent wondering if Bucky had been recaptured or killed by HYDRA, or if Bucky had finally found a way to take his own life, or if Bucky was going to show up one day and be the person he used to be.

About if that person even existed.

"The town's small, out of the way from all the touristy shit. I know the people. Weird enough strangers come through, and people start talking.

"Oh, yeah?" Steve hedges, because he's too lost in his own thoughts and a scary, boiling anger to engage more than that.

"Yeah." Steve can all but hear the way Bucky is grinning; or, at least, the way he would've been, in another time. "You got lost three times and finally asked Susie Marie for directions."

Steve makes a face and lifts his eyebrows. He doesn't give a fuck about Susie Marie. "You're happy here?"

For a while, Bucky doesn't answer, and Steve fills the time by flipping blindly through a paperback printed in Russian.

God damn Russian.

"I'm done being a weapon. This is the only place I've found that doesn't flip that particular switch every five minutes."

*Because you haven't fucking looked*, Steve thinks. He says, instead: "You can work on fixing that, you know."

It's almost like watching a slow-motion accident. The rational part of him is screaming at him to *stop, what's wrong with you, just stop*. The angry, hurt, confused, unhealed part of him just wants to lash out, draw blood, and punch until there's nothing left.

*Stopstopstopstopstopstopstopstopstop.*

The silence lasts just a few seconds, but it stretches for what feels like hours. "I had 512 confirmed kills, as your overwatch. HYDRA didn't really have to work for it, you know?"

Steve stares past the Russian book, into another time, another place: a quiet battlefield at sunset, littered with the dead.

"Is it everything you always thought it'd be?"
Steve looked over at Bucky. There was something in his voice that Steve couldn't parse. He was leaning against the M3, deftly twirling a standard-issue knife between his fingers, and looked as casual as ever, though inscrutable behind dark sunglasses from some shop in London.

For some reason, Steve felt like the right answer was, "Don't blame me for this war." That couldn't be right, though, so, instead, he said, "Not really. It'll be nice, when it's over."

"Yeah, it will," and there was Bucky's ever-present smile. Most of it, at least. "Ever think about what home'll be like?"

Steve smiled back. "It'll be home, Buck." Because what else would it be?

Bucky looked at him, smile gone, expressionless. The knife kept twirling. Finally, he nodded, and, about two weeks later, a couple weeks before he turned twenty-nine, he was presumed dead at the bottom of a 100 meter canyon.

Steve didn't think, not back then, about what it was they were really doing. Bucky blew the back of skulls out, detonated hearts with a bullet, the most lethal and capable American sharpshooter by hundreds and hundreds of kills, even before the Winter Soldier. A weapon, called a hero.

Steve sets the book down, next to a stack of other books, some of which Steve hasn't even heard of yet. *The Catcher in the Rye, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Fahrenheit 451, 1984, Slaughterhouse-Five, Dune, 2001: A Space Odyssey, The Electric Kool-

What?

"What's The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test about?"

Bucky lets out a loud breath, almost maybe a laugh, and says, "I don't know; I haven't read it yet. What do you want from this, Steve?"

"I don't know," Steve breathes. He buries his face into his hands, palms pressed into his eyes. "I don't know."

He hears movement: barefoot footsteps, creaking wood floors until Bucky reaches the rug, and the soft rustle when he drops into the chair across from the sofa.

"How're you doin'?" Bucky asks, only the way Bucky can. It could be early 1943, the last time they were the same people they were always supposed to be. "After... After Death Valley?"

So, that's what Bucky's calling the whole thing: Death Valley. Not that Steve can think of anything better. It's been over six months, but it feels as close as last week.

"I'm doin'," Steve answers, palms still in his eyes. "It was only three months."

He hears Bucky take a deep, shaky breath. "They had you. It's not easy to let that go."

*You had me.*

Steve swallows, presses his palms in harder. It hurts, and he sees little green pixels and tan sprinkles float across the back of his eyelids. "They still do. There's just a gap. I'm working on making it longer."

"You're doing great, Steve. Real great."

"No. No, it's already started, and I can't... I just needed to see you. I just... Are we good?"
Bucky is quiet. Steve still doesn't look at him, but every beat of silence is another prick of red hot anger.

About a mile away, Steve hears the sound of a Quinjet, and then the distinct sound of Natasha's motorcycle. She found him out, sooner than he expected.

"We're good," Bucky finally answers, his voice shaky. "No matter what, we're good."

Steve nods and pushes back the sudden sting of oncoming tears. He still can't look at Bucky. "One day, okay? One day."

He hears a single, deep, shaky breath: in and back out. "One day."

It's not nearly enough, not after so many years.

He takes his palms from his eyes and quickly stands up, deliberately not looking at Bucky, and turns away. His heart pounds, and his hands are tight fists, his fingernails digging into his palms. When he opens his eyes, he's facing the kitchen, and the only thing he sees is a knife block.

"Steve?"

Don't you want to...

Stop. Stop. Stop.

"They're ceramic. They'll just break."

The storm in his mind clears, even as the still-sick part of him finds humor in the idea of a butcher knife crumbling against Bucky's rib cage.

The door is just to the left of the kitchen. Natasha's motorcycle is getting close. It's time.

"I gotta go, Buck."

He walks to the door, and, as he passes through it and into the crisp air outside, he hears, "Goodbye, Steve."

He almost turns back around.

"She's gonna die, Buck," Steve said. His face was blank, his tone even blanker.

"C'mon, you don't know that," Bucky protested. Those words were wrong, but he would die by them.

Steve shook his head and then pushed a loose clump of hair off his forehead. "You knew Anna was gonna die."

A pang of hurt shot through his stomach, and he took a deep breath to get rid of it. It was the same pang of hurt that came every morning, when he woke in a cold bed and an empty apartment, and the same pang of hurt that came every night, when he came home to the echoing silence of a broken future.

"No, I didn't," he lied. Pneumonia didn't always kill, but hers had been bad, and they'd both known.
"And you don't know."

Steve sat up, taking his elbows off his knees, his back cracking, and leaned back into the wooden chair. The skin of Steve's thumb was raw and bleeding, from where he'd picked at it for so long.

"Are there jobs?" Steve asked. What he didn't say was for people like me.

"You don't need one." What Bucky didn't say was no, you're as fucked as they come, because he'd never leave Steve to figure money out for himself. "You've got people."


Steve just shook his head and then put his elbows back on his knees. It wasn't good for his scoliosis, but Bucky didn't say that.

It'd been seven hours already, and then just another two, before the doctor came out and didn't need to say one filthy word. It was the same look Anna's doctor'd had.

Steve had a way of crumpling: no tears, no words. Just a stillness, blankness, and total lethargy. Bucky slipped his hand around Steve's arm and squeezed, just that much, just to let him know that he was here.

And he thought of her.

"You've always been so good to him." She could barely talk: tears running down her face, her lips pressed into a thin line. He'd never seen her like this before: Sarah Rogers was the strongest person he'd ever known. "I'm so proud of who you've become. Take care of my boy."

He nodded and nodded—"Always," he said—and meant it and meant it.

She wiped the tears away the back of her hands and almost smiled. She put her hands out, before she remembered that she was contagious, and they dropped to her sides. "From no one else, James."

It was the last thing she ever said to him.

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Central Park, New York. On Cherry Hill, just off 72nd, there's a winding row of benches: facing the Lake, the San Remo dominating the distant skyline, with a quaint horse-drawn carriage clacking and crackling along the circular, concrete path, toward the fountain.

Steve's charcoal pencil scratches over the textured, heavy paper of his sketchpad. The park is unusually quiet, and he can hear every sound: every bird chirp, every laugh, every footstep, every swipe of his pencil.

To his left, a man walks along the path, stride purposeful in a way that most aren't. He's got on dark sunglasses, a black ball cap over short brown hair, a navy blue jacket, and jeans. Steve files away the description, like he tends, and goes back to his sketch, unconcerned.

The man sits next to him. Takes his sunglasses off.

Steve doesn't even bother looking up from his sketch. "You mind?" Steve asks, irritated and unafraid of showing it. There're fifty other places to sit, and this asshole-
"Come with me."

Steve whips his head toward that voice, horrified. It's only been six days, and Bucky knows that-

"I'll hurt you. Leave," Steve pleads, anxiety and panic sending fire into his legs and arms. The pencil in his hand snaps in half. "Please."

"No, you won't. Come with me. Trust me."

Steve looks down and blindly focuses on the half-drawn ripples of the lake, the painstakingly detailed architecture of the familiar buildings of West Central Park.

Out of the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of questions he has, and of the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of other objections he could make, he asks, despite himself, "Where to?"

Bucky just kind of, sort of looks up in the air, shakes his head, and shrugs, "Anywhere. You and me."

Steve looks back over. He sees blue eyes - not brown. He reaches up and feel Bucky's face: soft skin and a night's worth of coarse stubble. It doesn't feel like a mask, not that a mask always means much. He asks, "You're you?"

Something like regret flashes across Bucky's face. But the way he moves his jaw, looks down, and then back up, and the way he lifts his eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders, that's - that's - "I can't prove it to you."

He just did.

Steve looks past Bucky, at the plain-clothed agent four benches over. There are at least two more, always. "They'll think you're HYDRA. You've built a lot of trust - don't ruin that, Buck. Just go home."

"You didn't give up on me. I'm not giving up on you. Yes or no."

The sun is setting, wispy gray clouds dimming the brilliance of vibrant green, spring leaves. In the calm surface of the lake, he can see the better part of a century, and, if he's careful, he can hear the sweet laughter and voices of two simple boys, before the world overcame them.

He wants those days back so, so much. Selfishly. So, so selfishly.

There isn't a world without Bucky.

Steve closes the sketchbook. "Anywhere, huh?"

Bucky smiles.

-end

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A month and a half later, Phillips dictated the next letter on his list, the ever-annoying clacking of typewriter keys following his every word:

"Dear Mrs. Elizabeth Lacy. I regret to inform you that, as of April 9, 1945, your husband, Lieutenant George Reginald Lacy, has been classified as Missing In Action behind hostile enemy lines."
There was no telling what'd happened. When it had happened. If it was the Germans or HYDRA or someone in between. If Lacy was just too inexperienced, and if he'd sent Barnes with him so many times for just that reason.

A week later, another name was on his list, and he knew that there was no one to tell. No next of kin who was still alive.

"Captain Rogers was close to Sergeant Barnes' family. He might appreciate the letter going to them."

It wasn't often that he let war—and the people lost in it—affect him. He'd seen war, and death, and loss. He'd made a good, long career of it.

"Thank you, Agent Carter. I don't know if you're aware: Sergeant Barnes' parents received word of their youngest son, Andrew's, death late last week. I don't know that they're still checking their mail."

Carter gaped, for just a second, and her eyes became shiny, for just another second, before she steeled her jaw, nodded, and left.

"I am fucking tired."

"Do... Do I type that, Sir?"

Phillips sighed. "No, you don't damn type that. Get out. Come back when you've got your head on straight."

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The first night in Brazil, the rattling of a handgun wakes him from a feather-light sleep. He rolls over from his right side onto his back and blinks upward.

His own gun is aimed at his face.

In the living room, Sam snores loudly.

He simply reaches up—always with his right hand—and twists the gun out of Steve's grip.

It's not difficult, and Steve doesn't fight—only whispers feather-light apologies: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't control it."

Bucky slips the gun under his pillow, next to the only other one they have, and simply says, "Go to sleep, Steve."

"No. I'm going to hurt you. I'm sick, Buck, and I'm-"

"You're not sick," Bucky says, intentionally keeping his tone of voice even and factual. "SHIELD is still compromised. Someone there was making you sick. I'm sorry - that I left you there for so long. Okay. Sleep, okay?"

Bucky closes his eyes and rolls over, his back to Steve, but Steve doesn't move. He just takes a ton of little breaths and blows them back out; it sounds like he's wanting to say something, but keeps
deciding not to.

"Steve?"

"Do..."

Everyone always expected small, skinny, sickly Steve Rogers, with his dead dad and working mother and no siblings and not a lot of friends, to be timid and shy. No one ever expected his strong voice, or his resolute strength, or his stubborn resolve.

Steve Rogers was never timid or shy, and he never stumbled over his words. He was a fucking incorrigible spitfire.

And, yet.

"Do you... Do you wanna go up to the roof? Like when, you know, like when we were kids?"

Bucky doesn't hesitate, even though he really wants to sleep. It's been close to a week, since he has. "Yeah, sure. It'll be fun."

The stars are clearer than they've been in a long while. To Bucky, they look exactly the same everywhere in the world: glowing dots and specks of white. If he thinks too long about what it all means—that, really, he's the speck—he ends up going down a bad, bad path, the one Natasha and Sam are always so worried about.

"That one's Scorpius."

He follows Steve's finger up to the sky, but he's not even looking.

"Look, there's the stinger," Steve urges, tracing an imaginary line. "You see it?"

His chest is tight with anxiety, and phantom pains shoot through his body. It's almost like he can feel the bullets and the last couple of seconds of life leaving his body. These words—this half-assed tradition from decades ago—hurt, and he wonders, just for a moment, he wonders, if Steve knows—

"Yeah. Yeah, I can see it," he lies, breathless and hoping Steve doesn't notice.

He hates this. Every second of it. But Steve is smiling and relaxed in a way he hasn't been since 1945.

It's a small price.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading this far!

Edited to add: Check out the sequel, The Drowning Wasps, found on my Works page.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!