Project Regenesis

by FrostyEmma

Summary

Bucky breaks into Steve's apartment one night and holds Steve at gunpoint, demanding answers for a past he's only just beginning to understand. Though Steve manages to convince Bucky to come home to Brooklyn with him, events (and feelings) quickly spiral out of their control. Natasha warned Steve about pulling on certain threads, after all. The file she gave him reveals much deeper, more sinister connections to both HYDRA and the Soviet Union than either Steve or Natasha realized. And Natasha has her secrets, too.
Then the US government demands Steve take up directorship of SHIELD and track down the remnants of HYDRA. As Steve reluctantly pulls a strike team together, Bucky is kidnapped and brainwashed into becoming the Winter Soldier again. Now Steve must race against time to eradicate HYDRA and rescue Bucky before it's too late.

But even if he does, what happens when Bucky's past as the Winter Soldier becomes public knowledge?

Notes

All chapters are written, but they’ve been sitting on my hard drive for months. I guess out of a sense of anxiety, but it’s time to release this bird into the world before Civil War comes along and breaks all of our hearts. So… not Civil War compliant. (Unless it completely surprises me.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
The apartment was dark, and the soldier had no problems slipping inside through an unlocked window.

He had watched the apartment long enough to know that no one else was watching the apartment. Which meant that the apartment had possibly been abandoned. He didn’t think so, but it was possible that Captain America-

Steve Rogers-
you’re my friend
Steve-
I’m not going to fight you
It was possible-
It-
He steadied himself. Tried to breathe deeply. It didn’t work. His breaths were shallow, his hands trembled slightly, and-

And-


The soldier could wait.

He was very good at waiting.

Before long, Captain America was in the apartment, but it was a moment before he noticed the soldier standing in the room. He closed the door behind him and slid the chain home, then stiffened.

The captain wasn’t very observant, then. The soldier made note of that.

The soldier wondered if Captain America would even recognize him since he last saw him. His hair was greasy under a dirty baseball cap, his clothes had the look of a lot of hard use in a very short time, and the look on his face was anything but one of pleasant greeting.

But then the captain turned, and a look of - what was it? What was that look? A strange look came over his face and he opened his arms and started speaking - “Bucky? Oh thank God,” - and walked toward the soldier as if he would - as if-

He pulled out the pistol.

The Glock G17 Gen4 would not have been his first choice, but it was the most inconspicuous and efficient weapon the store had carried and it had also been the easiest to lift. And now he held it in
one slightly trembling hand - why was his hand trembling? That needed to stop. That needed to stop now, and he could switch to his metal hand, but the captain would notice that obvious weakness, and then-

And then-

And-

“Stop,” he said hoarsely. Unsteadily.

Captain America stopped, but he did not drop his arms. “Buck, it’s me.”

The soldier’s voice was as shaky as his hand, and that needed to stop, too. Needed to stop immediately. He had root beer barrels in his jacket pocket, and that would give him a rush of energy, but he couldn’t risk pulling one out. That would take too much time, and he needed to-

Finish the mission.

Talk.

Talk, then finish the mission.

He wasn’t sure.

“Sit down.” He waited while the captain sat in the same armchair that Director Fury had been sitting in when-

“Buck, it’s me,” Captain America said carefully. Calmly. “It’s Steve. You remember? I’m not going to hurt you. You don’t have to point the gun at me.”

**Buck**...

Captain America had called him that before, hadn’t he? Or not that, but something close to that. Maybe?

*you know me, Bucky, you’ve known me your entire life*

Stop-

Stop it!

*you know me*

“Stop it.”

Another strange look crossed Captain America’s face then, but he didn’t get up from the chair and he kept his hands raised. The soldier didn’t lower the pistol.

“You never… you didn’t say…”

Didn’t say what? What? The museum said lots of things, but Captain America hadn’t said very much at all. *You know me, we’re friends, I’m not going to fight you, you know me. You know me. Bucky. You know me.*

*you know me you know me*
He hadn’t said very much at all.

“You never said…” He licked his lips. “Your name. You never said that. The museum said that. You…” He shook his head. Swallowed, but his throat was dry. “You didn’t say that.”

Captain America looked blankly up at the soldier for a moment, then, “The Smithsonian. You went to see the exhibit, didn’t you?”

The soldier waited. He was very good at waiting.

“We all thought you were dead.” Captain America let his hands fall in a gesture of helplessness, and the soldier wondered why he would allow himself to look so weak in front of him. “I watched you fall. None of us had any idea there was even a prayer you’d survived.” He shook his head. “I swear to God, Bucky, I’d have gone down there after you if I’d thought there was even the slightest chance you’d made it. But I didn’t know. Not until the causeway.”

The causeway?

What causeway?

He almost asked the question, but decided it was irrelevant. Almost everything the captain was saying was irrelevant.

Maybe.

None of it made sense. None of the words made sense. Maybe Captain America was just babbling. Targets did that sometimes when the soldier was made to confront them directly. They would talk to him, or just at him, pointlessly and fearfully, as a way to prolong their own deaths. It never worked. The soldier never failed to complete his missions.

Until the helicarrier.

He could complete it now. He could pull the trigger and shoot Captain America right between the eyes, and then the target would be eliminated and the soldier’s mission would finally be complete. And then-

Then-

*you know me you’re my friend Bucky you’ve known me your entire life please don’t make me do this*

He breathed. Didn’t lower the pistol.

“None of that…” Again he licked dry lips. Tried to steady his breathing. “None of that is true. The museum is lying. Has to be lying.”

A very elaborate lie.

“None of that… that’s not how…” Something ugly twisted in his stomach then. “That’s not how…” He bit down on his lip, nostrils flaring. “Someone is lying. Somebody is lying.”

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Bucky’s face began to contort then, the obvious tension ratcheting up several notches. A fleeting thought - fleeting and frightening - crossed Steve’s mind: What if the gun went off in Bucky’s hand simply because of a tension-borne muscle twitch?
“I’m not lying to you, Bucky.” Calm him down. Just bleed off the tension and get him to relax. “And the only thing wrong with what the museum said is that you didn’t die back then.”

He wished, in that moment, that he could have simply reached out and gently taken the gun from Bucky’s trembling hand. That there would be no resistance offered, that he could then put an arm around Bucky’s shoulders and steer him towards the sofa and sit next to him. That there might be a way to talk past everything that had happened in the intervening years. Everything that had been in that awful file, and everything that must have come after.

But the gun stayed on him, trained between his eyes. A one-shot kill, if anything went wrong. Bucky knew what he was doing. From a technical standpoint, at least; he obviously had no idea of the ramifications of what would happen if he pulled the trigger.

“But you’re right.” He felt a stronger note come into his voice. “Somebody’s lying to you. Somebody’s been lying to you for a very long time. But not the museum, and certainly not me.”

His eyes shifted pointedly from Bucky’s eyes to the gun, and back again. “Come on, Bucky. You don’t have to do that. Put the gun away.”

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The soldier didn’t put the pistol away.

“The museum said…”

The museum had said a lot of things. There had been a name and a birthdate. A place of birth, but one that couldn’t be correct. There had been clothing, even. And photographs. And newsreels.

How could there be newsreels?

Someone was lying.

“There were newsreels.”

A man with a face that looked very much like the soldier’s had been in the newsreels. He had been smiling in one of them. Laughing. Standing next to the man who was Captain America, and the recorded narration in the museum had said they were friends. Childhood friends.

you’ve known me your whole life

“And photographs. And…”

He licked his lips again. They were so dry. He wanted a root beer barrel, just to ease some of the dryness, but he couldn’t risk reaching into his pocket.

“And letters. There were letters.”

Written by hand. The museum had called them the ‘Bucky Barnes letters’, and they were supposedly correspondence between Captain America - Steve Rogers - and Sergeant James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes.

Wrong. That was wrong. That was all wrong.

He shook his head. “None of this is true. None of this can be true.”

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Steve felt a sudden terrible rush of pity for Bucky in that moment. How awful a thing it was to sit there at gunpoint and listen to his best friend rave about how his entire life had been a lie. The evidence at the museum alone had been overwhelming - Bucky had mentioned the photos and the newsreels, and the letters he’d last seen reprinted in a book several years prior, and that wasn’t even counting the evidence Bucky hadn’t mentioned - and yet it wasn’t enough to convince him.

On the heels of the pity came hot anger, directed at the ones responsible for having done this to his friend. Long dead now - beyond any justice but God’s own - but their presence still felt through their malicious handiwork.

“But why would I be lying to you?” He spread his hands, inviting Bucky to think about it for himself. “And how would the museum be able to make something like that up? Those pictures, those newsreels, those letters - they’re all real. All genuine. I remember them all.”

He was talking faster now, desperate to break through the wall around Bucky’s mind. “And that isn’t the end of it. The museum has more; I’ve seen it. They don’t put everything out all at once. There are different pictures, different newsreels. There’s one of you laughing at Dugan while I beat him in an arm wrestling match that he challenged me to.” He was suddenly seized by inspiration. “And there’s more that isn’t even at the museum.”

He stood up - slowly, so as not to startle Bucky into pulling the trigger - and walked to the bookshelf across the room. Bucky tracked him across the room with the gun. “Here.” He picked up a sepia-toned picture in a simple frame and held it out for Bucky to see. “That’s you in the top row, third from the left.”

George Washington High School had sent him a series of photographs in the first year he’d been back, out of a sense of nostalgic gratitude; photographs of the track team to which Bucky had belonged and to which he’d managed to attach himself as a sort of manager. He’d had a duplicate made of his favorite and brought it to DC with him, so that his apartment didn’t feel too bare of decorations.

“I’m not the one lying to you, Buck. And neither is the museum.” He looked Bucky in the eyes again and held out the picture.

Bucky didn’t take it.

Instead, he backed up a step, eyes darting to the picture and then back to Steve, back and forth as he apparently tried to read the words printed carefully at the bottom of the photograph.

*George Washington High School, Varsity Track and Field 1936*

Bucky backed up another step. “Why do you… why would you…? Why do you have that? The museum didn’t…” He shook his head. “The museum didn’t have that, and it… it didn’t…” He swallowed. “Finish the story.” His nostrils flared again and his hand wouldn’t stop shaking. “Finish the story, now.”

“I…” Steve hesitated, his brows knitting. “I’m not sure what you mean. What story?” He offered the picture again, realized Bucky wasn’t going to take it from his hand, and set it down on the side table next to the easy chair, into which he sank again. Things didn’t seem to be working very well at all. Except for the fact that Bucky hadn’t shot him yet, nothing seemed to be going the way it should have.

“The school sent me that picture.” He supposed he might as well begin with the question Bucky had asked him outright. “They sent me all eight, actually. One for each season we were on the team.” He
gestured at the picture again. “I’m in there too, but you probably wouldn’t recognize me. It’s from before the war.”

‘Before the serum’ was what he had meant. Before Dr. Erskine had given him the chance he’d always wanted, along with the physique to do everything he needed to do to get there. Back when he’d been unable to run around the track even once without collapsing into a fit of coughs and wheezes, back when he couldn’t even have lifted the shotput, much less thrown it. Back before he’d been Captain America. Back when he’d been scrawny, sickly, thoroughly unremarkable Steve Rogers, with no one to give a damn about him except for Bucky.

“Anyway, I never loaned them out to any exhibits.” He sighed. “They didn’t need them anyway; there was plenty for them to work with. And besides, they were personal.”

A thought suddenly struck him. The gun had jarred it out of his mind, but now it felt like the most obvious question in the world to ask. “Bucky, where have you been for the past two weeks? I didn’t know what happened to you after the helicarriers went down. I thought...” I thought you were dead was very nearly what came out. And along with that thought came the sickening memories of having been forced to fight his friend. Having had to hurt him, and be hurt by him, to prevent millions of lives from having been taken by HYDRA. Having had to hear him scream in agony as his shoulder had been wrenched from its socket. Having had to feel him fight desperately against the choke hold as the blood was being cut off to his brain. And having had to finally make the decision that it would be better to surrender completely to the savage beating that descended upon him after the mission had been completed and the helicarriers were destroying each other. Better to die, he’d thought in that moment, than to ever lift a hand against his best friend again.

Try again. Try something different. Get him to calm down.

He tried again. “How long since you’ve had a proper meal, Buck?”

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The soldier stared at him for a long, uncomprehending second.

He had very deliberately been off-the-grid for the past two weeks. His first priority, after dragging Captain America his mission Steve Rogers out of the river and leaving him there, had been to get far away and then assess and repair any damage done to his body. To that end, he had slipped inside an enormous Wal-Mart after it had closed, where he was able to pop his dislocated shoulder back into place, wash himself, and attend to his various surface wounds. His second priority had been re-equipping.

Re-equipping had meant not only finding appropriate weapons (the Glock G17, along with a Camillus titanium-bonded combat knife and a Boker Applegate boot knife, none of which were optimal, but simply available in the store), but acquiring suitably nondescript clothing and then food. He had filled a backpack with cans of tuna, beef jerky, granola bars, and a bag of root beer barrels. He had hesitated over the root beer barrels, something flickering in his mind, before shoving them into the backpack.

Third priority had been shelter. He had found a graffiti-covered house in a trash-strewn neighborhood. When it turned out to be hosting squatters, pulling out the Glock and telling everyone to fuck off had cleared the house in seconds.

Fourth priority: figure out what came next. He stayed in the house for days, occasionally sleeping on
a bare, filthy mattress and working carefully through his supply of food.

And thinking.

Commander Pierce was certainly dead, but he was only one part of HYDRA, and not even the most important part. There were others, and they would be looking for the soldier soon enough, if not already. The soldier should have contacted them, but...

Maybe he could find Captain America you’ve known me your entire life you know me you know me and make him explain everything. And then he could decide what to do.

In the end, he went to the museum.

He couldn’t remember exactly what had happened after that. There had been photographs. Newsreels. Letters. A recorded narration.

best friends since childhood only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country inseparable on schoolyard and battlefield in service of his country his country

And then there was the memorial panel.


He didn’t remember much after that. He couldn’t remember how to get back to the abandoned house, he lost his backpack somewhere, and then a day had passed - or maybe two - or maybe five, and then he was slipping inside of Captain America’s apartment, and-

He said none of that. There was too much to say, and so he said nothing at all. He lowered the pistol slightly, abruptly changed his mind, repositioned it.

He didn’t know what to say.

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Bucky’s face was hardly impassive during his long silence, but none of the myriad emotions that crossed over it gave any indication of an answer to his question. He supposed he’d just have to treat the lack of a response as an answer in itself.

“So, a while, huh?” He held Bucky’s eyes with his own. The momentary lowering of the gun hadn’t escaped him, and now seemed to be the time to try a change of tack. “No wonder you’re so jittery.”

He stood, sighing, and regarded his friend. The gun was still trained on him, unwavering now, and that very badly needed to change. He absolutely hated the fact that his past two encounters with Bucky had been violent, and that they had done each other serious injury during the most recent one. It would make him tear up if he thought about it for much longer. And he was not about to let it happen again. Not when there was nothing left for them to fight about, not when they didn’t have to be on opposite sides anymore. Not when Bucky had so obviously and deliberately made the decision to seek him out.

Maybe he was under orders to kill you. Did you ever think of that?

If he’d wanted to kill me, he could have shot me through the head when I came through the door. Or about a million times between then and now. He’s not going to kill me. He’s not.
“Why don’t you relax a bit, Buck?” He held out his hands in a calming gesture. “I’m not going to hurt you. And I know you’re not going to hurt me. So why don’t you put the gun away for a bit, OK? And let me find you something to eat.”

The gun wavered again. There was hesitation in Bucky’s eyes.

“C’mon, Bucky.” His voice was as calm and gentle as it had ever been. Which was quite a feat, considering the roiling emotions careening through him right then. “Just put the gun down.”

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The soldier hesitated another moment.

He was still jittery, breathing too shallow and ragged, and he really couldn’t remember when he had last eaten anything more than a root beer barrel.

But if he put the pistol away-

If he put the pistol away and let Captain America Steve Rogers—

you’re my friend

Captain America didn’t think he was going to hurt him. Even though there had been a pistol trained on him the entire time, he didn’t think he was going to hurt him. Why?

Why would he think that?

Maybe the soldier could ask him, but he couldn’t find the words. And Captain America - Steve Rogers STEVE - was offering food and speaking calmly and waiting for him to do something.

Another moment passed, and then he reengaged the safety on the pistol and tucked it behind him into the waistband of his pants. (There hadn’t been any suitable holsters at Wal-Mart, so he would have to do something about that later.)

But the pistol was away.

Captain America STEVE Steve let out a long breath and smiled, a bit shakily. “Okay. Good. Now we can relax.” He turned and headed toward the kitchen, gesturing for the soldier to follow him. “Come on, let’s see what I can find for you.”

Steve rummaged through the cabinets and the refrigerator, first coming up with a large glass of iced tea and setting it out on the table, talking all the while. “I wish I’d known you were going to stop by; I’d’ve done a bit more food shopping.” He produced a mostly-gone loaf of bread in the bread box, some cold cuts and condiments in the refrigerator. “See, I was planning on heading back to Brooklyn tomorrow, and I didn’t want to leave all the perishables to spoil while I was gone, so I’ve just been eating my way through what I had. If I’d known… well…”

The soldier simply watched him warily.

“Mustard?” Steve held up the jar in his right hand, a quizzical expression on his face. The soldier didn’t respond. “Mayo?” His left. Still nothing. He shrugged. “I’ll just surprise you, I guess. See what comes together.” He smiled and hastily threw a sandwich together, placing the finished product on the table next to the glass of iced tea and gesturing to the chair. “Here.” He smiled. “Dig in.”

The soldier hadn’t realized exactly how hungry he was until the sandwich was on the table in front
of him. He picked up half of it, ate it in two bites, then picked up the other half and finished it just as quickly.

Maybe he tasted mayonnaise? He wasn’t sure what he had just eaten. It didn’t matter.

He drained the drink in one prolonged swallow and set the glass down, breathing a bit too heavily. He looked at Captain - Steve. He looked at Steve.

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Steve watched in shock as the sandwich disappeared, followed in short order by the iced tea. He hadn’t been wrong, apparently; Bucky must not have eaten in a while.

“Wow!” He actually gaped. “That’s, uh… wow.” He shook his head and went to collect the plate. “I’d forgotten about your appetite.”

Bucky had always been able to put away massive amounts of food, he recalled as he put together another sandwich - this one heavier on the lunch meat, as he only had four slices of bread left. In their school days, Bucky would always eat breakfast at his own apartment before walking the block and a half over to Steve’s and eating a second breakfast - usually comprised of whatever Steve hadn’t managed to finish of his own breakfast. Oh, and the Ovaltine.

“Remember when you used to drink my Ovaltine?” He shook his head and smiled as he set the second sandwich down in front of Bucky and poured him another glass of iced tea. “My mom used to make me drink it so I’d gain a little weight, remember?”

The fact that Bucky obviously didn’t was apparent from the impassive look on his face, but Steve didn’t stop his reminiscence. “And I used to hate it. God, it tasted awful. But you never cared; you used to drink my Ovaltines like they were milkshakes.”

Please remember something. Let something I say ring a bell.

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“Ovaltine is just an anagram for ‘Vital One’,” the soldier murmured around the final mouthful of his second sandwich.

A mishmash of images flitted across his mind then: a half-empty drinking glass too large for small hands, and a scrawny blonde kid in oversized suspenders, and a radio - an old one, with a curved top and two dials - and a collection of box tops, because they could send those in and get a decoder ring, or just use the money for candy and-

No, no. No.

Mind tricks.

He grimaced, hands clenching suddenly in his lap.

The doctor always called them mind tricks. Mind tricks were bad. They took away his focus and confused him and made him see disturbing things. If he told the doctor about them, the doctor would make them go away, and then he wouldn’t be disturbed anymore.

He stared hard at the empty plate on the table.

Just mind tricks.
Steve continued talking. “I haven’t heard that in… How long has it been? A lot longer than it feels like. We would have been eight or ten, at the most, which doesn’t feel like so long ago, but… well, it’s been a long time.”

The soldier continued to stare into his lap with wide eyes.

“Hey, Bucky?” Steve reached across the table, as if he were going to put a hand on the soldier, but stopped short. “You all right? You’ve got one more sandwich coming to you before I run out of bread. Talk to me, why don’t you, while I put it together for you.”

“It’s… it’s just…”

He hadn’t had rest in a long time. He didn’t know how long, but it had been a while. Not since they had sent him to Commander Pierce, at least, and that had been-

He didn’t know.

But if he went too long without rest, the mind tricks would get worse, and the doctor wasn’t around to make them go away. So then what would happen?

“It’s just mind tricks.”

He watched Steve slap together the last sandwich, which he picked up the moment it was set down in front of him. He didn’t finish it off nearly as fast the other two; six bites instead of four, but he was still hungry enough to eat another one, or anything else that might be offered.

“They can…” He reached for the glass and drained half of its contents. “They can make them go away. Better that way. Better that they make them go away.”

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Steve recoiled in horror. Actually physically recoiled; he felt an involuntary spasm rip through him as the meaning of the words hit home. They had trained him to actively seek out the deletion of his memories when they managed to surface. They had conditioned him to find comfort in the loss of everything that had made him Bucky.

He had never felt this angry before in his life. And even though it went against his every principle, even though it violated everything he’d ever stood for and everything that separated him - and the country he loved - from those on the other side, he believed that if the people responsible (Karpov and Pushkin in particular) were in front of him right then, he could actually have killed them in cold blood rather than delivering them into the hands of the justice system.

“No, Buck.” He shook his head desperately. “No. How is that better?”

He reached out with both hands across the table, even though he knew Bucky would very likely back away from him. “How is it better not to remember anything about yourself? Your mind isn’t playing tricks on you, it’s trying to wake up! It’s trying to remind you of who you are! No matter how much they tried to make you forget, they can’t wipe it all away. And you’re remembering now.”

Bucky didn’t look at him.

He nodded in firm conviction, his jaw set to keep it from trembling. “You’re remembering. And I’m going to help you remember more.”
There was no response. Not that he’d expected one - not really - but still, it deflated him. And so he went back to his original notion of just giving Bucky the food he so obviously needed. No more bread, so no more sandwiches. A hasty rummage through the pantry turned up a couple of cans of soup. One didn’t take long to warm up.

“There you go, Buck.” He set the bowl down on the table. “Careful, it’s hot.”

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Steve then put something in front of the soldier that looked like solyanka, only missing many of the ingredients. But it was hot and chunky and it smelled good, and he really didn’t care what he ate anyway, so he began to eat it in large spoonfuls.

He considered picking up the bowl and just slurping it down, but he didn’t do that. He knew how to eat properly. He wasn’t stupid. And he wasn’t an animal.

And he didn’t want to talk about mind tricks anymore. Maybe later.

Maybe.

Besides, he didn’t know what he was supposed to say to any of that, so he said nothing and just ate the soup until there was nothing left. When the bowl was empty and the drinking glass was drained, he actually felt full. He would eat more if it were offered, but he didn’t feel nearly as jittery anymore.

 Probably that meant they should talk a little more. Steve should finish the story, and then the soldier needed to-

Steve had said the soldier’s name was Bucky. The museum had said so, too. And Steve kept calling him Bucky, or Buck, over and over again, so maybe it was true.

Bucky

He could try that for a bit and see how it felt.

Bucky took his cap off and pushed a hand through hair that felt very dirty, and they were supposed to start talking again, but he had just eaten a lot. The food was starting to settle, and he didn’t feel like talking, but he didn’t feel like leaving just yet either. And so he sat there and waited.

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The soup disappeared, though not as quickly as the sandwiches had. And after it was gone, Bucky seemed to settle back into his chair in a way that suggested he might actually have eaten his fill. But on the heels of the hunger now came a new issue.

Steve pulled a face as Bucky took his dirty baseball cap off and ran a hand through hair shiny with grease. The remainder of Bucky’s clothes didn’t seem to have fared any better than the hat, either. And now that the initial shock of Bucky’s presence and the tension of the gun were gone, he noticed the not-so-faint tang of old sweat in the air.

“When was the last time you had a shower, Buck?” He raised an eyebrow as Bucky parked the hat back on his head. “A decent hot one?” He jerked his head towards the bathroom. “Why don’t you go and get cleaned up. You’ll feel a lot better once you do. And I can toss your clothes in the washer, get you some nice clean ones.”

A sudden memory drifted back to him: The whole group of them, the Howling Commandos,
practically pushing each other out of the way to get to the showers in the barracks after coming back from two weeks out in the field with no way of washing up. How much better, how much more human had they felt once they were clean and in fresh clothes?

How much good would it do Bucky?

“A shower and a shave, Buck.” He never felt entirely clean himself if he let too long go by without a shave, and Bucky looked as though he hadn’t had a proper one in weeks. “What do you say?”

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Bucky surprised himself with how quickly he agreed to the idea.

Or maybe not. He hadn’t showered since his visit to Wal-Mart, and anyway, Steve hadn’t finished telling him everything yet. He would shower, and then they would finish talking, and then he would leave.

Maybe.

He followed Steve down the hallway and watched as he rummaged around for a towel and spare toiletries, along with a set of clean clothing that included sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. Then he left Bucky alone in the bathroom, telling him to just leave his clothing outside the door so he could throw it in the washer.

Carefully he placed his weapons on top of the toilet tank, then quickly stripped down and deposited his clothing in the hallway. He could hear Steve in the kitchen.

Steve hadn’t given him a wire brush for his metal arm, but it wasn’t really gritty and didn’t need more than a quick scrub. He spent longer in the shower than he meant to, but it was warm and relaxing, and he found himself leaning into the spray and closing his eyes for a while. Maybe for too long, but…

Afterward, he did shave and brush his teeth and drag a comb through his hair. The clothing that Steve had given him was comfortable and well-fitting, which was strange. Strange that any clothing of Steve’s would fit him correctly, though he couldn’t say why.

He re-armed himself, maybe awkwardly, but everything was hidden and that would have to be good enough for a while. He thought he would maybe stay in the bathroom for a bit longer, close his eyes and lean his head against the wall, but Steve would probably come looking for him, so he made himself go look for Steve instead. He found him in the living room, sitting in the armchair and reading a book.

“Okay.” He slid his hands into the pockets of the sweatshirt. “I’m clean.”

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He’d made himself busy in the kitchen as Bucky got into the shower, throwing out the empty bread bag and soup can, washing the few dishes, and mostly making sure Bucky had privacy to get his filthy clothes off. Sure enough, once he heard the shower running and went back into the hallway to check on Bucky, the clothes were lying in a neatly-rolled heap outside the bathroom door. The gun wasn’t with them, unfortunately, which meant that Bucky must have kept it with him. Probably, he thought with another rush of anger, they’d conditioned him to never allow himself to be without a weapon. Even in the shower, or sleeping, or wherever he might be.

Still, as he went through the pockets of the dirty clothes before tossing them into the washer, he
discovered something that sent a twinge through him of an entirely different sort.

*Root beer barrels.* He held them in his hands, a dozen of them, and felt suddenly overwhelmed by memory. *His favorite.*

As kids, whenever they’d had a spare couple of pennies - or occasionally a bigger windfall - he and Bucky had trooped over to Mr. Cicalese’s corner drugstore to buy penny candy. And Bucky had never left without a few root beer barrels.

Maybe there were things the brainwashing couldn’t take away no matter how many times they tried. Maybe, he thought with a great rush of hope, there was still a lot more of Bucky left in there than the monsters who’d scoured his brain clean had ever imagined. And so he set the root beer barrels aside on the nightstand in the guest room, turned down the covers on the guest bed, and went into the living room to wait for Bucky to come out of the shower. Which he did after a long time, looking considerably cleaner than he had beforehand. His hair and skin had lost their greasy unwashed sheen, and his face looked considerably less haunted without the weeks’ worth of beard stubble.

“That you are.” He set his book down on the side table and smiled. “And I bet you feel miles better.” He gestured to the couch. “Have a seat. Get comfortable.”

Bucky sank into the couch in a way that suggested he wasn’t intending on leaving any time soon. Good.

“I’m so glad to see you again, Bucky.” He sat forward in the chair, his eyes taking in the sight of his best friend sitting on the couch across from him. There was still a long way to go before he was entirely Bucky again, but at least he was clean and fed and comfortable. And that would go a long way.

“I really mean it. I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again.” He grimaced. “After the helicarrier, I mean; I wasn’t even sure I hadn’t dreamed the part about you hauling me up out of the river.” A shake of the head as the unpleasant memories began to drift back.

*His arm.* Steve remembered the sickening pop as he’d wrenched back on the joint lock, Bucky’s shoulder separating like a chicken wing. He remembered the awful scream Bucky had let out too, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the memory. Bucky’s arm had hung there limply for the rest of the fight, he recalled; he’d fired the gun with his metal arm from that point forward. But now there seemed to be no problem with the arm at all. What had he done to fix it?

The question was halfway out of his mouth when he realized that Bucky looked for all the world like he was just barely holding onto consciousness. His eyes had glazed over and unfocused, and he occasionally jerked his head to keep it upright. He sorely needed sleep, Steve realized, and he didn’t seem to want to admit it.

“Hey Buck?” Bucky’s head jerked upright again, his bleary eyes focused. “There’s a bed in the guest room if you want. You look like you could use a good night’s sleep.” He stood and offered Bucky his hand. “Come on. It doesn’t look like you can keep your eyes open much longer. We can talk in the morning.”

---

Bucky opened his mouth to… maybe say no? He wasn’t sure.

He knew he should say no. He knew he should grab his things and go, and that staying the night in Steve’s apartment was well beyond mission parameters, and yet…
And yet, he stood from the couch and followed Steve down the hall. He kept his hands hidden in the pockets of his sweatshirt though.

Steve showed him the guest bedroom, which included a bed that was much bigger and more comfortable looking than Bucky had used in… he didn’t know how long.

A long time, probably.

And then Steve said goodnight and shut the door. Bucky stared at the bed for a long moment. He would only lay down for a while. A few hours, and then he’d get up and leave. That would be the best thing to do.

Experimentally he knelt down on the bed, and then he was toppling forward face-first into the pillows and…
A Nightmare File

Chapter Notes

I do so love emotional torment. In fiction anyway. And away we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Washington DC
a week or so prior

After checking that Rogers was not going to die in the hospital, Natasha turned her attention to another pressing matter. The little spider in Kyiv owed her a favor, and Natasha gave her 48 hours to complete the job. Which gave her the time to figure out how she was going to get to Kyiv and back when she had just uploaded most of her life’s story to the internet. Not that she expected everything to come to light immediately; the SHIELD files were labyrinthine, tantalizing, and mind-numbing in equal measures, and it would take the good denizens of Wikileaks some time to comb through them all.

That being said, she didn’t want to risk someone posting one of her covers right when she was trying to board a plane to a former Soviet Bloc country.

As it turned out, the only cover of hers that definitely wasn’t online was that of Natalie Rushman. One of life’s little ironies, she supposed, and one that she would be taking advantage of. Without the lingerie, of course.

She met the little spider in Boryspil International Airport’s very own, capitalist TGI Friday’s. Over a ten dollar Coke (paid with American money, of course), she was handed a thick file and a few words. She and Belova were even now, and what that ultimately meant remained to be seen.

The file stayed tucked firmly in her purse on the flight back to DC. Maybe she could have looked at it that evening in her apartment or over breakfast the next day, but…

Natasha Romanoff had never been a coward, and yet she had no desire to confront what was in that file.

She ended up shoving it in Rogers’ hands a few days later, and whatever he did with it after that was his business.

---

Natasha had handed him the file as they stood there in the cemetery. Fury had just left - gone off to Europe to sniff out HYDRA there, and who knew if and when they’d see him again - and Sam had given the two of them a bit of space.

“Be careful, Steve,” she’d said as she handed it over to him. “You might not want to pull on that thread.” And, of course, she hadn’t been gone for more than a minute before he opened the file and saw what was to be only his first tiny glimpse at the horrors it contained.

A full-page glossy photograph of Bucky stared back at him - a photograph of him through the
oblong window of what looked like an iron lung. Except the window was frosted over, and so were Bucky’s closed eyes, and so was the rest of his face. Everything was tinged with blue, and he realized with a nauseated shock that they had frozen him. HYDRA and their twisted Nazi scientists had frozen him solid, just as Steve himself had frozen in the ice in the far reaches of the ocean. It brought a wave of sickened rage crashing over him, forced him to clench his jaw against an involuntary cry of pain and anger. But it wasn’t the worst thing on that page.

Because clipped to it almost carelessly, as though it were an afterthought, was a small photograph of Bucky as he had been that evening in New York when Steve had last seen him. At the old Stark Exposition, the night before Bucky had shipped out. The night Steve had met Dr. Erskine. The night everything about both their lives had changed forever.

He was wearing his dress uniform, the one the girls had always thought was so snappy. His hat, as always, was parked on the back of his head at the jaunty angle of studied carelessness he’d always favored. And there was the hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth and in his eyes - a smile that Steve remembered very well.

That little photograph had been enough to bring tears to Steve’s eyes. Enough to hold his gaze even when Sam started talking to him. Enough to make him close the folder and hold it protectively against him when he and Sam parted ways and he went back to his apartment.

There were more photographs in the file, of course. Ugly and horrible ones. He didn’t get very far before he found a series of grisly black-and-white photographs depicting a team of surgeons operating on what remained of Bucky’s left arm. He felt bile rise in his throat as he thumbed through them and realized that he was seeing the carefully documented process of the replacement of Bucky’s arm with the metal prosthesis he now wore. More horrifying, though, was the revelation that Bucky’s injury had not claimed his entire arm. Only his hand and part of his forearm were missing in the first image; they had just cut the rest of it off.

He closed his eyes against the grotesqueries he’d seen in only these first few pictures. And there was apparently a great deal more, but for one small problem.

“Natasha, I need your help.” His voice carried the tone of mixed annoyance and urgency he felt so acutely as he spoke into the phone. She’d seemed somewhat put off as well by his call, but he’d find a way to make it up to her. Right now, he needed her.

“Come on, Rogers. I can’t.” He could hear people milling about in the background, but he couldn’t make out where she was. A store, maybe?

“The whole file’s written in Russian, it looks like. And I can’t read it.” He sighed. “I need you to come back and translate for me.”

“Not right now.” She sounded tired. “Maybe later.”

“Natasha…” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I can’t trust anyone else. It has to be you.”

She was silent for so long, Steve wondered if she might have set the phone down and walked away.

“Damn it.” She said the words very quietly. “Fine. Fine, I’ll come.” She disconnected the call without another word.

He tried to resist the urge to poke at his own open wounds by looking at more of the pictures from the file while he waited for Natasha, but that resistance was short-lived. No matter what he used to try to distract himself, no matter how he tried to redirect his attention elsewhere, his eyes kept landing
on the stuffed manila folder that lay on his table. And his mind was never otherwise occupied.

What happened to you, Bucky?

He’d constructed a likely scenario in his mind. Bucky had survived the fall thanks to Zola’s experiments; that much was certain. He’d managed to survive, but either he’d lost his memory in the fall or HYDRA had done something to wipe his mind blank. And then they must have forged him somehow into this ‘Winter Soldier’, this man who had been responsible for dozens of high-profile assassinations over several decades. This man whom no one credible believed in, but who had become something of an infamous legend among the spies and killers of the world.

This man who had been his friend. Who still was his friend, no matter what they had done to him.

Yes, that was the basic outline of the way things must have unfolded - it must have been - but too many details were missing for anything to make sense. For one thing, how had they managed to stretch his ghoulish career out over so many decades when he didn’t appear to have aged very much at all? Steve supposed the freezing might have had something to do with it, but that couldn’t be the whole story, could it? And how had they forced him to forget about all of the things that had made up who he was? He’d read stories about people with amnesia, but never anything that said it was permanent. Did HYDRA have some sort of technology, powered by the Tesseract or some other such mystical object, that could warp a man’s mind and turn him against his friends and even his country?

Why not? You’ve seen things like that before, haven’t you?

But if so, what did it mean for all of them now?

He was so wrapped up in unspooling this horrific series of possibilities that he barely heard the door open. He looked across the room to see Natasha shutting the door behind her, a thin paper bag of what appeared to be a bottle of wine in one hand.

“Thank you, Natasha.” He stood near the table, his hands held stiffly by his sides to keep from snatching up the file and pressing it on her before she’d even gotten in the door. “You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ll make it up to you, I promise, but I need your help.”

“Get two of your Ikea goblets, Rogers,” she said by way of greeting, then waited on the couch while he went into the kitchen.

As he got the glasses from the kitchen, he remembered how he’d gotten them in the first place. He’d walked in one day, some time ago, to find Natasha sitting in his easy chair with her feet up on his table. She’d answered his question about how she’d gotten in with a chuckle, then told him that they were going shopping. His apartment made her sad, she’d said. She’d ended up taking him to Ikea, where she’d helped him select - or rather, selected for him - a large collection of furniture and kitchenware. They’d spent hours at the massive place - so big Steve couldn’t quite believe it - and even eaten at the in-store cafeteria, where he’d sampled Swedish meatballs for the first time. She’d also come by the apartment again the following day, when the massive purchase had all been delivered, and helped him assemble and arrange it all. It had been the first time they’d spent any real time together, and he had to admit that it had done a lot to help him trust her.

Like he’d come to trust her over the past weeks. Like he needed to trust her now.

When he returned to the living room, the file was sitting untouched on the coffee table. Instead of
prematurely opening it, Natasha had opened a bottle raspberry wine instead, which she promptly poured out in equal shares the moment he set the glasses on the table.

“I feel like this is going to be a long night.” She glanced at him, took a savoring sip of the wine. “So you might want to drink up.”

He took a sip of the wine, found it pleasantly sweet, and reminded himself not to drink it like fruit juice. Not that he couldn’t - he’d established long ago that nothing short of Asgardian mead would get him drunk - but he didn’t want to be uncouth, either.

“I’ll buy some for you to bring to Clint’s house when this is all finished,” he said as he set down his glass. “That was where you were going, wasn’t it?”

“I told you.” She took another long, fortifying pull on the wine. “I blew all of my covers and was going to make new ones.”

She ignored his raised eyebrows.

“Well, no putting it off any longer.” She set the wine glass aside, pulled the file over, and flipped it open to the first page, then spent a long moment staring at the photograph clipped to the bottom of the page.

“That’s an American military uniform.” She glanced at Steve. “Because your friend… because you think…”

Words seemed to fail her suddenly. She reached for the wine glass and took another long pull on it, though she didn’t entirely drain it.

“You think the Winter Soldier was your friend? Bucky Barnes?” Natasha peered at him, eyes narrowed. “The Howling Commando? You really think that’s true?”

“I know it.” Steve looked her square in the eyes. “He’s my best friend. He might as well have been my brother. I’d know him anywhere.”

Natasha said nothing.

He gestured at the file. “Look at the picture, for God’s sake. You’ve seen pictures of him before. You could do a Google search right now and probably come up with the exact same picture.” He shook his head. “No, it’s him. They just did something to him. Something awful, and I need to know how to undo it. Because when I find him again, I’m going to help him come back home.”

Natasha didn’t seem convinced, though. There was something in her eyes that seemed startled by what she had seen. Unsettled, even. Why? Hadn’t she seen far worse?

“Natasha?” His brow furrowed in concern. “What’s the matter?”

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression a strange mixture of… what was it? Pity? Unease?

“Steve.” He was surprised at how gently she said his name. “You don’t even know if he’s alive.” She held up a hand before he could cut her off. “Yes, I know. You think he dragged you out of the river, but you don’t know that for certain, and…”

She turned back to the file, abruptly turned away, and ended up shoving Steve’s wine glass into his hand. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up.” She bit back a sigh. “That’s a horrible road to go
down.”

She drained off her wine and moved to refill the glass.

Steve blew out a breath and looked down at the table, where the file sat almost mockingly.

“You’re my mission.” A staggering wallop across the face, a massive smashing impact that sent bloody spit flying and knocked him to the ground. And then another, and another, and another. He felt his cheekbone shatter. His nose. His jaw. His eye socket. And through the red haze that swam before his one good eye, he saw Bucky draw back his metal fist for the final blow. “Then finish it. ‘Cause I’m with you till the end of the line.” And then…

“It’s worse to go down the other road.” He shook his head, his eyes still on the file. “To think I saw him again after so long only to lose him again.” His eyes stung, his vision blurring. “You don’t know what that would be like, Natasha.”

The helicarrier drifted away into the sky as he hung there suspended in the air. And then something rushed up and hit him in the back, hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and it was suddenly cold all around him. Cold enveloping him again, the blue-green haze closing in around him and getting darker. He couldn’t breathe, but somehow it didn’t matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. Things were starting to go dark, the cold was starting to take hold of him again, just like it had before, but there was something coming after him. Something that glinted in the ghostly blue-green light, something that reached out for him before everything went black…

“You don’t know, and you don’t want to. I don’t want to.” He looked up, his jaw set, looked her right in the eyes.

“No.” She toyed with her glass, idly swirling the wine about. “I suppose I don’t know.”

“He’s alive, Natasha.” He said the words desperately. “He’s alive, and he’s out there, and he needs my help.”

“Well then. Brace yourself.” She took another sip of the wine and turned to the next page in the file. They were spared any new photographs to fret over, but were instead met with sheets of notes, which had clearly been written on an old typewriter.

Steve was practically vibrating with anticipation next to her.

She scowled at him. “Give me a moment to read it and think it over, Rogers. These things take time…”

Dr. Fyodor Ilyich Pushkin - Baykalovsk Facility - Department X

20 February 1945

The subject arrived today, packed on ice as per instructions. Subject pronounced deceased upon examination.

Considering where our informants found him, we were surprised that the subject was in such good condition. We might consider ourselves lucky in this respect. Despite the loss of part of the subject’s left arm, we should be able to harvest adequate samples.

-- Addendum

Subject’s clothing was removed, documented and destroyed, per standard procedure. Insignia on
clothing indicates subject was American military personnel, rank of Army Staff Sergeant. Personal effects are itemized below, also destroyed. See attached photograph of itemized effects.

Photograph, unknown woman. Early-mid 20's.
Letter addressed to subject, written in English. Most writing unintelligible, due to water damage.
Sender: Winifred Barnes, Brooklyn, New York, USA.
Photograph included in letter: woman and newborn baby. Writing in English on back of photograph: ‘Becca with little Eddie, born January 5, 1945’
Mark 3 trench knife
V-42 stiletto knife
American military identification tags:
Barnes
James Buchanan
32557038
O Positive
Catholic

22 February 1945

We let the subject thaw for two days and are now working on warming the body. Have sutured and bandaged left arm to prevent valuable blood loss.

In the meantime, we checked serial number once more against intelligence documents. Confirmed: subject was the sole surviving test subject of Arnim Zola. Very fortunate, indeed. We remain hopeful that our dissection will bear interesting results.

23 February 1945

Blood samples are very promising. Possible confirmation of suggestions from 1942 intelligence reports: HYDRA attempted to replicate super-soldier serum. Have taken several blood samples, possible use for Project [REDACTED]. Will possibly perform dissection tomorrow.

Have informed Comrade General Karpov. Awaiting further instructions.

24 February 1945

On a whim, my colleague requested that we try an experiment based on what he had read in a medical journal. By treating the subject as if he merely has an extreme case of hypothermia, my colleague hypothesized that we might actually be able to render the subject live through use of a defibrillator and insulin.

Perhaps it’s the isolation or the extreme weather, but I agreed to the experiment.

-- Addendum

It worked.

25 February 1945

We now have a live subject.

We have transferred subject from laboratory to medical wing, are running oxygen and intravenous nutritional therapy. Subject remains unconscious. Scans reveal extensive brain damage. Uncertain if subject will remain in persistent vegetative state due to brain damage. We will attempt to render
subject conscious this afternoon.

Transcript of conversation and observations on Subject [Name Redacted]
Date: 25 February 1945
Time: 1530
Transcriber: Dr. Iosif Olegovich Lagunov

Subject is brought out of unconsciousness around 1537. He remains lying in bed. Subject is dressed in pajamas, blanket is drawn up to cover loss of left arm. Due to intravenous dosage of diamorphine for pain, subject may be unaware that he is strapped to bed.

1539
PUSHKIN: (in English) How are you feeling, friend?

SUBJECT: … like shit (Lagunov - Subject slurring due to diamorphine or brain damage)

PUSHKIN: What is your name?

SUBJECT: (long pause) James

PUSHKIN: And your family name? (no reply) Surname? (no reply) Your last name? What is your last name?

SUBJECT: I don’t… I don’t know

PUSHKIN: Where are you from?

SUBJECT: (long pause) I don’t know

PUSHKIN: Can you tell me anything?

SUBJECT: My arm hurts

1545: Pentobarbital administered - subject rendered unconscious.

End Transcript

-- Addendum

Comrade General Karpov has been informed. Subject possibly suitable for Project [Redacted]. General Karpov to fly out to facility immediately.

... That was enough.

More than enough. Natasha flipped the file shut and practically pushed it away from her. She sat back on the couch, clutching her wine glass, and it looked like it was either that or clutch at her head. She closed her eyes and took a long swallow of the wine.

Steve sat there without moving. He felt numb through his whole torso, as though someone had turned the middle portion of him off - just pulled the plug.

“Karpov.”

He remembered the man vaguely; he’d been the subject of one of their rescue missions in the first years of the Howling Commandos. One of the times they’d linked up with the Invaders, in fact; it had been around the time Bucky and Toro had begun to strike up a friendship. Karpov had been
highly placed then, and important to the Allied effort. HYDRA had understandably wanted to get their hands on him, and the combined efforts of the Commandos and the Invaders had been enough to thwart them.

He felt his chest tighten, as it had when he’d been a young boy stricken with asthma. Felt the overwhelming weight of everything Natasha had laid bare crash over him. Felt himself struggle not to give way entirely beneath it. So much to absorb.

They’d destroyed his clothing, his possessions. Itemized and photographed them all, even his dog tags, and then probably thrown the whole pile into a furnace. A letter from Bucky’s mother, a picture of his sister and her newborn son, the photograph of the woman they hadn’t known but who had been very important to Bucky at the time… all of it gone. All so that Bucky would never remember who he was.

“Why the Soviets?” He suddenly looked up at Natasha, awash in confusion and feelings of betrayal more than half a century too late. “I thought it was HYDRA who had captured him, but I was wrong.” He couldn’t keep the anguish out of his voice. “The Soviets were supposed to be on our side. They could have just sent him home. Especially once they woke him up; they could have let him go back home. He had a family. He had a life. He…”

He felt a burning feeling rise up in his chest, tried to fight it down and only marginally succeeded.

Natasha opened her eyes and said in a strained voice, “That enough for you, Steve?”

“No.” He looked over at Natasha, unshed tears of anger and betrayal and loss standing out in his eyes. “The answer is no.”

He gestured at the folder, forced himself not to break down. “Keep going. I need to know what happened to him if I’m going to save him. There was something in there about brain damage, but he remembered his name even when he was full of drugs. That means he knew who he was then, or at least part of it. I need to know what they did to him to make him forget.”

Natasha didn’t respond. After a moment, she pushed herself off the couch and headed toward the kitchen. “I’ll just help myself. Don’t get up.”

Of course Steve got up, and he ended up making sandwiches for the both of them while she leaned against the wall with her eyes closed.

“Translating takes a lot of mental strain, Steve. I can’t go all night.”

She went back to the couch, Steve following with sandwiches, and he waited patiently while she ate half of a turkey and mustard on rye.

The file lay on the coffee table, just within her reach. She hesitated a moment, then opened it.

**Transcript of conversation and observations between Comrade General Vasily Yuryevich Karpov and Subject [Name Redacted]. Dr. Fyodor Ilyich Pushkin attending.**

*Date: 27 February 1945*
*Time: 1000*
*Transcriber: Dr. Iosif Olegovich Lagunov*

*At request of Comrade General Karpov, subject is brought out of consciousness around 1005. Subject remains in same state as described in previous transcript. Intravenous dosage of diamorphine has been administered for pain.*
KARPOV: (in English) Can you hear me, soldier? (pause) What is your name?

SUBJECT: (long pause) James… My name is… James

KARPOV: I think you may be confused, soldier. Do you know where you are?

SUBJECT: (pause) Hospital?

KARPOV: Home, soldier. You are home. (pause) This is a military facility in Siberia. You were brought here after being involved in a terrible accident. You are lucky to be alive.

SUBJECT: I… I know you… Remember you

KARPOV: My name is General Vasily Yuryevich Karpov. I am the head of this facility, and of the department supervising your hospitalization. (pause) What else do you remember?

SUBJECT: (pause) I remember you

KARPOV: Can you remember the details of your last mission? The one you were involved in when you had your accident? (pause) Can you remember the accident itself?

SUBJECT: My arm… hurts. It hurts

KARPOV: Yes. (pause) You were found at the bottom of a ravine in the Swiss Alps. From the seriousness of your injuries, the doctors think you must have fallen or been thrown from a cliff. As I said, you are lucky to be alive. But unfortunately, you were found with no identification.

SUBJECT: James… My name is James

KARPOV: (pause) Your brain was damaged in the accident, and it’s resulted in almost complete amnesia.

SUBJECT: James

KARPOV: The doctors think that ‘James’ must have been your cover, and that the loss of your memory must have caused you to adopt your cover identity in place of your real one.

SUBJECT: (long pause) Home… Want to go home

KARPOV: You are home, my friend. And we will help you to recover your strength as well as your memory. I promise you.

SUBJECT: Home

KARPOV: Yes. (aside to Comrade Doctor Pushkin - in Russian) I want him.

1012: Pentobarbital administered - subject rendered unconscious.

End Transcript

From the notes of General Vasily Yuryevich Karpov
27 February 1945

The American is suitable.

Our conversation went rather well. It is unfortunate that I was forced to carry it out entirely in English, but that is a temporary situation. The extent of his amnesia is near-total; he retains his
muscle memory and fundamental personality but has no recollection of any personal history. This suits our purposes perfectly.

The extent of his physical injury is disappointing - several bones broken, others shattered, left hand and much of left forearm missing, lacerated internal organs, muscle and ligament damage throughout most of the torso and upper body. However, to have sustained this much damage and yet remained alive is a testament to the efficacy of the Super-Soldier effect that Dr. Arnim Zola was able to reproduce - albeit crudely. And, like his linguistic handicap, his physical shortcomings can be corrected.

I have contacted the prosthetics branch regarding the replacement of the American’s missing appendage. Doctor Pushkin and his team are in the final stages of testing the mental recalibration device, which - if operable - would enable us to use the American’s amnesia as a baseline for complete psychological restructuring.

We will rebuild him, we will retrain him, and then we will use him in the coming war. The Soviet Union will have its own super soldier at long last.

Project: Winter Soldier is finally underway.

“I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

Steve felt cold all through the center of his body, as if he’d been immersed in a tub filled with ice and only his limbs had been spared. So it had been Karpov, then, who had taken even that last little bit away from Bucky. He’d remembered his name, and Karpov had simply waved it away as some trick of his amnesia. It had been just that easy.

Just like that, the most important part of Bucky was gone.

“He was supposed to have been on our side.” Hadn’t he said that before? It didn’t matter. His best friend had been deliberately and painstakingly turned into a mindless assassin by a man whom he’d had a hand in saving. All the time he’d thought Bucky dead - all the time he himself had been frozen in the Arctic ice - Bucky had been murdering people on the orders of a man who’d never been his legitimate commander.

“How could he not at least have remembered he wasn’t Russian?” So many questions, so much to digest, and so much of it unbelievable. Steve shook his head as though to clear it. “You just read that they had to interview him in English. He must have had some idea of what part of the world he was from, at least?”

But what about that ‘mental recalibration device’ they mentioned? Didn’t Karpov say they could use it to rewrite his mind?

“I feel like I’m going to be sick.” He said it again, and felt it. This was too much to take in…

---

Natasha heard Steve talking miserably next to her, but her eyes remained fixed on Karpov’s report and she didn’t think she had it in her to turn and comfort him in that moment.

His name had been James.

What else had happened to James? How had he ended up in HYDRA’s hands? Had it been by choice? Awful circumstance? Perhaps some third horrific option she had yet to consider?
When she had been given the opportunity to leave and start a new life, she had grabbed it and never looked back. She had found new purpose with SHIELD, and even more so with the Avengers. Had something similar happened with him, only with far more horrific and far-reaching consequences? Or was there something else?

What was she not seeing?

“The Winter Soldier…” she finally said, slowly as if she were chewing on the words. “I knew he was a Soviet assassin.”

She leaned forward and rested her arms on her knees. It was important to proceed carefully. Very carefully.

“There were always rumors, and those rumors go way back. I always assumed there was more than one Winter Soldier over the decades.” Her gaze remained fixed on the file. “It made sense. If they could have a Black Widow program, why not a Winter Soldier one?”

She wasn’t sure if she sounded flippant or bitter.

“HYDRA is what surprised me. The switch.” She snorted. “I don’t know if he chose that or not. I suppose we’ll find out.”

“Chose it?” Steve turned to her, horrified.

Natasha shrugged. It was entirely possible that he had. He hadn’t remembered Steve, and the file had said that he’d suffered brain damage that had left him a complete amnesiac. If that was the case, he wouldn’t have remembered HYDRA. He wouldn’t have known that he’d once been part of a team dedicated to stamping it out of existence, he wouldn’t have remembered that it had been HYDRA that was responsible for the fall that they’d all believed he’d died in, and he wouldn’t have recalled the tortures he’d suffered at the hands of Zola and the Red Skull. So why would he have objected to working for them?

“I let him down,” Steve said suddenly. “I swore a long time ago, only a couple of days after he died, that I wasn’t going to rest until every last member of HYDRA was in a cell or in the ground.” He spat out a bitter and humorless laugh. “I watched Schmidt disintegrate right in front of me when he picked up the Tesseract. And I piloted that plane into the ocean believing that I’d take the very last of HYDRA with me when I died.” He shook his head sad.. “And I didn’t find out how wrong I was until a few weeks ago. Seventy years too late. How’s that for bad timing?”

“It’s not your fault, Steve.” She said the words automatically, and though she firmly believed they were the truth, she didn’t have it in her to try to comfort him any more than that. “I need to go home and go to bed. I can’t do more tonight.” She closed her eyes against a sudden swell of confusion and exhaustion.

Maybe grief.

“I’ll come back tomorrow, okay? I promise.”

Before Steve could protest overmuch, she excused herself from the apartment.

The next day, she awoke from a fitful sleep and attempted half-heartedly to distract herself. There was no longer a SHIELD gym for her to work out in, so she went for a long, scenic, and very dull jog. She sat for an hour in a Starbucks, lingering over a chai latte and a pumpkin muffin. She checked in on Wikileaks to discover that its fine denizens had only just begun to dig into the early years of Director Carter and her team.
It wasn’t enough.

She let herself into Steve’s apartment at around ten in the morning only to discover he was out, and so she helped herself to a bowl of Raisin Bran and made herself comfortable on the couch. The file rested on the coffee table, but she ignored it for the time being.

When the front door opened and Steve walked in, she was only halfway through the bowl. “Took you long enough, Rogers. I thought you’d want to get started early.”

---

“I did.” He unzipped his hooded sweatshirt and hung it on the back of a chair. “I looked at those photographs until I couldn’t stomach any more, so I went out for some exercise.”

Sleep hadn’t come easily to him last night. He’d tossed and turned, waking up half a dozen times from nightmares. One had involved Bucky strapped down to an operating table, wide awake and screaming as men in long white coats, black rubber gloves, and opaque round goggles sawed off the top of his head and inserted ghastly machines into his brain.

He wouldn’t be surprised if what they’d actually done to him was every bit as horrific.

At any rate, he’d given up on sleep shortly after that and leafed through the file. He couldn’t read it, of course, but the pictures were awful enough. Bucky seemed to stay frozen in time throughout the course of the file, never aging a day. But his eyes... dear God. He’d seen every last speck of life fade from Bucky’s eyes as he went through the file, until they were as dead as the eyes of a department store mannequin.

He couldn’t stay there a moment longer once he’d seen that, and he’d headed out to the boxers’ gym he’d found years beforehand. The old man who owned it had given him a key, and he’d occasionally go there to knock a bag around for a while.

This time, as he had a few times before, he’d gone through several bags. Every time he pictured Karpov’s face on the front of the bag, his anger fueled his muscles and his punches burst the leather, pouring sand onto the floor. Finally, he’d cleaned up after himself, locked up, and gone out for a run instead.

“I’m going to go have a shower.” Natasha would wait; she knew from long experience how to make herself at home in his apartment. “Have some more cereal if you want.”

The hot water didn’t help soothe away the pounding in his brain any more than the workout had. There would be no cure for that except to set the wrongs right. To find Bucky and help him come back to himself, and then to track down everyone who had helped destroy his friend’s life and bring them to justice.

“All right.” He came back out in a pair of slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. Natasha had clearly helped herself to a fresh bowl of cereal. “Let’s get started.”

**CLASSIFIED - PROJECT: WINTER SOLDIER**

**CLEARANCE LEVEL: SS**

“‘SS’. Of course.” She looked at Steve. “Sovershennno Sekretno.” At his blank expression, she added, “No direct translation, but you could call it ‘top secret.’ The highest level of clearance required.”

“Well.” A small shrug. “Higher clearance was reserved for politburo business, but Sovershentno
Sekretno is where they hid all of their military secrets. Research facilities.” A little too casually she added, “Including the Red Room” Another shrug. “So a project like this? Well, Karpov did say they were in Siberia. There were a lot of top secret research facilities hidden around Siberia in the old days. I’m not surprised.”

Dr. Fyodor Ilyich Pushkin - Baykalovsk Facility - Department X

28 February 1945

We have been given clearance to begin Project: Winter Soldier.

The most immediate concern is the subject’s physical condition. While the broken bones and internal injuries will heal on their own, and at a rapidly advanced rate thanks to the serum at work in his bloodstream, the loss of the subject’s left hand and forearm must be rectified with prosthetics.

The surgery began today. We had initially discussed simply attaching the bionic limb to the subject’s arm without additional amputation, but the use of the full range of the limb’s abilities would not be possible due to the fragile nature of the radius and ulna. Attachment of the limb at the elbow joint would be likewise impossible. It was finally decided to amputate the remainder of the subject’s left arm and excise several of the adjoining muscles in the shoulder in order to mount the bionic limb directly to the subject’s shoulder assembly.

1 March 1945

The amputation of the remaining portion of the subject’s arm went quite well. We have moved on to the attachment of the mounting bracket for the bionic limb.

In order for the limb to function properly, there must be a firm base on which it can be anchored. This necessitated the grafting of carbonadium rods onto the subject’s clavicle at the acromion and the coracoid process, as well as the complete replacement of the scapular and clavicular ligaments with synthetic materials.

A far more delicate and time-consuming process is the attachment of the fiber-optic filaments to the subject’s brachial plexus nerve cluster. These filaments will replace the subject’s lost brachial nerves and permit the seamless integration of the arm into the subject’s natural body movements. Thus, before the limb can be attached, the neural uplinks must be given time to properly graft.

2 March 1945

No sign of rejection. Neural uplinks grafting well. While waiting for full acceptance of the base, as per orders, subject was sterilized.

... She trailed off at that. “Well, of course.”

The surgical photographs had become disorganized. Natasha made herself busy stacking and rearranging them into some semblance of order.

“Of course they would have sterilized him.”

The photographs of the amputation would come first. Then the photographs of the attachment of the mounting bracket. Then the grafting. The fiber-optics. And so on. And on. There were no photographs of the sterilization, of course. Why bother?

“Standard procedure and all.”
Her lips thinned into a hard line and her gaze drifted toward the ceiling. She clutched the photographs in her hands, though she had no desire to look through them again.

“It’s something they did to all of their operatives. Makes things easier, you know? Makes killing easier, makes everything easier.” She shrugged. “Keeps you focused, I guess.” Her gaze drifted everywhere but to Steve. She forced a wobbly sort of smile onto her face. “I’m not surprised. Why should he have been any different?”

---

The clinical and indifferent description of the ghoulish things they had done to Bucky had left him feeling nauseated once again. Hacking off Bucky’s arm all the way up to the shoulder simply because it had been more convenient than trying to work with what was left was awful in a way he couldn’t describe. If Bucky had come back home the way he’d been then, injuries and all, Steve would have accepted him without question, and so would have Becca and his mother. But no, the Soviet doctors had just cut the whole thing off for expediency’s sake.

He felt sick. Indeed, he found himself actually grateful he hadn’t eaten yet today. But Natasha’s words dragged his mind abruptly in a different direction.

All of their operatives…

He turned his head to look at her and saw the false smile plastered onto her face. Saw the monumental insincerity of it and knew the truth.

Makes everything easier…

He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised either. He’d lived through the war, after all, and seen what he’d thought was the worst people could dream up to do to one another. But he supposed that people’s inventiveness was never so great as when they were devising more awful ways to hurt, cripple, or enslave each other. And Natasha had never told him very much about what had gone on in the Red Room, and he had never pressed. Maybe he ought to have?

“I’m sorry, Natasha.” He sat there, not knowing what else to say or do. “I didn’t know.”

Bucky probably had no idea that such a thing had been done to him.

---

“Well, you wouldn’t have, would you?”

Natasha hadn’t shared it with anyone, after all. Not anyone who had mattered until right in that moment. Why would she have?

Best to push it aside and move forward.

For the next hour, she continued to translate the details of the surgery: the attachment of the bionic arm, more periods of waiting while his body accepted the prosthesis, and so on. Over a week’s worth of surgical procedures, all written in the detached and clinical style of a man who had long since detached from his own humanity for science’s sake.

Just like in the Red Room. After all, Department X and the Red Room had always been closely linked.

In the final stages, they had kept him in a medical coma, both to allow time to heal from the surgery
and also to expedite healing from his other, greater injuries. From start to finish, and including the coma, the procedure had taken them two weeks.

She skimmed the next few pages, then looked at Steve.

“They’re going to wake him up next. And you’re not going to like it.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments, concrit, and just popping in to say hi are warmly appreciated.
The Morning After

Chapter Notes

I’m so pleased to get any comments and kudos this early on. I find them so encouraging! Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Washington DC
October 2014

At 5:30 the following morning, Steve was awake and out of bed at the first chirp of his alarm. He’d set it early on purpose the previous night, fearful that Bucky would wake up early and take it upon himself to vanish into thin air again. Even the idea of this was so unbearable that he set the alarm absurdly early, regardless of how exhausted he knew he’d be in the morning, in order to head Bucky off before he disappeared once more.

He hurried down the hallway, visions in his mind of Bucky’s room empty and the curtain flapping gently in the breeze from the window he’d left open on his way out, but when he stopped in front of the slightly-open door to the guest room, he was surprised - and relieved.

Bucky still lay there on the bed, sprawled facedown in a position Steve had to stifle a chuckle at. When they were kids spending the night at one another’s apartment, they’d often shared a bed - in theory, at least. Bucky had always had a way of sleeping that seemed to leave no room on the bed for anything else. He’d stretch out his arms and legs until he’d chased Steve into a corner. And then, as often as not, he’d flop over on him.

Guess he really needed that good night’s sleep after all. Steve smiled and backed away. Might as well wait a while until he wakes up.

Except half an hour later, Bucky was still asleep in exactly the same position. And an hour after that as well. And after Steve had done his morning jog. And after he’d come back from the store down the block with some necessities for the large breakfast he’d have to make.

He had to chuckle as he began to cook breakfast. All dozen eggs went into the pan for a giant scramble. The freezer yielded a fairly large box of frozen waffles and another of frozen sausage links. Coffee went into the coffee machine, orange juice went into the refrigerator, the sausages went into the griddle, and the waffles into the toaster. And Steve, for once in what felt like a very long time, was feeling fairly good about the day’s prospects.

I wonder if he’ll wake up before lunch.

The coffee pot beeped just as the toaster popped. Four more waffles went onto the big plate, and he gave the eggs one last stir before he took them off the stove. Onto the table it all went, and Bucky was still nowhere to be seen.

Still a good sleeper. He shook his head, smiling at the memories from childhood. But too much longer and he’ll be late for breakfast. And that was never like him.
As he put the last of the waffles into the toaster and checked on the sausages, he remembered Bucky’s penchant for second breakfasts and third or fourth helpings of dinner and midnight snacks. He remembered the two of them eating an entire blueberry pie one afternoon, and Bucky still wanting mashed potatoes afterward. He remembered the endless procession of casseroles from Mrs. Barnes’ oven to his own front door after his mom had passed, and the fact that even though they were meant for him, Bucky still did more than his fair share of helping to polish them off.

Good times.

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The soldier awoke to the strong scent of coffee and frying meat.

For a moment, he couldn’t remember where he was. He rolled onto his side, scrabbled for an IV that wasn’t there, almost asked what year it was, only there was no doctor or technician in the room.

Realization came back to him by degrees. He was in Captain America’s house. Only he was calling him Steve now, because they were supposed to be friends. Steve had said so, and so had the museum. And he was supposed to be Bucky.

Bucky was supposed to be his name.

James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes.

Steve had also said that, and so had the museum.

He rolled out of bed and onto his feet, then listened by the bedroom door. Steve - or someone else, but judging by the sound of his movements, probably Steve - was in the kitchen. And the scents coming from the kitchen were very good.

He went to the bathroom and took a piss. Probably Steve would want him to brush his teeth and pull a comb through his hair, so he did that too. He was still wearing Steve’s sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt, and he adjusted his weapons so they were well-hidden within. Not optimal, but good enough for the time.

The sound of meat sizzling in a pan was too much to ignore.

He moved quietly down the hall until he spotted Steve in the kitchen, putting either bread or waffles into a large toaster. No threats detected, and so he slid his hands into the pockets of the sweatshirt and moved into the kitchen. He would wait for Steve to finish with the toaster and then maybe they would talk.

The toaster popped. Steve put waffles on a plate, tipped the sausages onto a big plate with a paper towel on it, and turned to put it all on the table, and then he saw Bucky standing there behind him.

“Buck!” Steve recoiled in shock, but recovered instantly. “I’ve known cats that make more noise than you.” He chuckled, catching his breath. “Have a seat. You’re just in time for breakfast.”

Wordlessly Bucky slid into a chair and watched as Steve put together two plates heaped with eggs, sausage, and waffles, then poured two glasses of orange juice and two cups of coffee.

Steve asked him how he took his coffee, but he didn’t know what the answer to that was supposed to be, and so he said nothing and ended up with a cup of black coffee and a bowl of sugar and some creamer before him.
Coffee later. Food now.

He didn’t hesitate, digging right into the eggs and then moving through the sausage and the waffles in turn. He wouldn’t let himself eat as quickly as he had the previous night, but it had been a while since he had eaten fresh, hot food, and he didn’t want any of it to go cold. It was different from what he was usually given for breakfast; mostly they gave him *kasha* and boiled eggs and tea, but what Steve had given him was good and hot and filling.

Familiar, maybe?

And then… a scrawny blonde kid sitting in front of a plate heaped with eggs and toast and bacon, and someone laughing - “C’mon, Stevie, eat it or I will!” - and a woman playfully swatting his hand away from the glass of Ovaltine, leave some for him, where do you put it all, didn’t I just give you a plate of food? And everyone laughing, laughing, laughing-

No!

He dropped the fork; it clattered on the edge of the plate and fell onto the table.

Mind tricks again. Just mind tricks.

---

Steve watched Bucky eat with the same gusto he’d applied last night. He was just happy there was better food to give him this morning. He’d made the huge egg scramble mostly because Bucky had never preferred one method of frying eggs above any other, and scrambling them all was the simplest and quickest way to prepare the whole dozen. And it didn’t seem to have bothered Bucky at all. He tore through his eggs, then attacked the sausages, and finally set in on the waffles. He’d disdained the butter while Steve had applied it pretty liberally to his own waffles, but he’d doused the waffles on his plate in syrup.

He found himself thinking back to breakfasts at his mother's apartment in Brooklyn so many years ago, when Bucky would unerringly show up and begin munching his way through everything left on the table - including Steve’s own breakfast, if he hadn’t finished it by then. Which he generally hadn’t. Bucky would try to eat his toast, steal his bacon, and drink his Ovaltine. About the only thing he never touched was the raw liver Steve had to eat every morning for his anemia.

He’d give anything for a breakfast like that again.

He was pulled out of his stroll down memory lane by the clatter of Bucky’s fork as it fell from his hand to the table. Startled, he looked across the table to see Bucky with his head down and his hands on the table, looking as though he’d had some kind of a seizure.

“Bucky?” He got up and was beside his friend in an instant. “What happened?”

Bucky was breathing heavily, too heavily, nostrils flaring and hands clenched, and he was muttering, “stop, I just want it to stop, I want it to stop.”

“Bucky?” He reached for him tentatively, but stopped just short of putting a hand on him. “Talk to me, Bucky. What happened?”

“Mind tricks.” Bucky choked the words out. “Just mind tricks again.” He squeezed his eyes shut. Tried to breathe.

Steve froze.
“I want them to stop.” Bucky opened his eyes, stared hard at his plate. Tried to breathe. “I want them to stop.”

Cautiously Steve said, “What did you see?”

Bucky had mentioned ‘mind tricks’ the previous evening, and Steve had been horrified and sickened. The fact that the Soviets and HYDRA had characterized the returning of Bucky’s memories as his poor besieged mind playing tricks on him was bad enough. The fact that they’d conditioned him to actively seek the prevention of the return of those memories was even worse. But nothing could compare to the method they would use for doing as Bucky was begging him to do right now. They would strap him down in that horrible chair and…

No.

“No.”

“Your mind isn’t playing tricks on you, Buck.” He knelt there beside Bucky’s chair, his breakfast forgotten for the moment. “It’s trying to heal itself. You’re remembering things, that’s all. And if you tell me what you remembered, I can try to help you remember more.”

That had to be the way. Maybe if he stayed with Bucky constantly, talked to him enough to open up his mind and provoke more of these flashes of memory, it might be enough to break the dam and allow the memories to come rushing back all at once.

Maybe…

---

Bucky continued to stare hard at his plate.

“There was…”

He could still see the skinny blonde kid, the plate heaped with food, the woman who both laughed and scowled in equal measures.

“Food. Breakfast food. Ovaltine. And a woman slapped my hand away, but she wasn’t…” He licked his lips. “She wasn’t mad. She was laughing.”

Next to him, Steve nodded. Eagerly. Maybe.

“And a kid. “ His breathing had slowed considerably. “Small blonde kid in suspenders. He was supposed to eat the food, but…”

They were just mind tricks….

… but he could see them anyway. He could see the next part.

“He never did. He never ate all of it.” He shook his head. “He never even ate most of it.”

And then…?

“I did. I would eat it.”

He was talking too much. Saying too much. That was always bad. They would get angry if he said too much. They would make the mind tricks go away.

“Just mind tricks.” He licked his lips again.
“That was me.” Steve’s voice was oddly choked, having to force its way past the lump that had risen in his throat. “Me and my mother.”

Steve took a breath, and when Bucky glanced at him, he saw that his eyes were wtery.

Why?

“You used to walk to my place every morning before school, so we could walk there together. We only lived about a block and a half apart. And you always ate breakfast at your place first, but by the time you made it to the front door you were always hungry again.” Steve smiled a strange, pained looking smile. “And you used to eat everything that was left from our own breakfast. You’d even try to drink my Ovaltine. Do you remember?”

Bucky said nothing.

Steve continued. “My mother used to make me drink the Ovaltine so I’d gain weight, but it never worked. You’re right; I never used to be able to finish what was on my plate. I never really even tried, because I knew you’d eat it.” He peered up at Bucky. “But you know it was me, don’t you? You saw my face.” A hint of a sad smile. “I’m not so little anymore, and suspenders aren’t exactly fashionable anymore, but it was me.” His voice grew stronger, more insistent. “And it’s not mind tricks, Bucky. You’re remembering who you are.”

“It didn’t…” He glanced at Steve, then away again. “It didn’t look like you. Face was too small and pale. Sickly.”

Because of the…

“Andemia.” His eyes widened. “There was raw liver. For the anemia.”

And the skinny blonde kid had to eat the liver every day, or drink it as ground liver juice, and the laughing-scowling woman would stand over him, arms folded, and she would make him drink it, she would-

“No.” He shook his head. “No, I don’t want it.”

The orange juice sat untouched on the table. He reached for it suddenly, drank the whole thing until the glass was empty, and set it down with a heavy thud.

He was panting all over again. “Don’t want it. I don’t want the story. I changed my mind.”

“You don’t need to hide from this, Bucky.” Steve remained kneeling by Bucky’s side. “This is real. These things you’re remembering are what really happened, not what they made you believe was the truth. Don’t run away from them.”

Bucky shook his head. “Don’t want it. Don’t want any of it.”

“Let yourself remember, Bucky. Let me help you.” And suddenly Steve reached out and put a hand on Bucky’s natural arm.

Bucky was out of his seat in a flash, on his feet and facing Steve, and he pulled out the combat knife and-

No!

Steve looked back at him, his hand hovering in the air where Bucky had been just a second ago.
No, he wasn’t supposed to have done that.

Bucky stared at him, eyes wide, breathing heavily, knife in hand.

“Take it easy, Buck.” Steve remained where he was, on one foot and one knee, his hands raised with palms outwards in a calming gesture.

They weren’t going to fight. Steve wasn’t attacking him. He wasn’t sure why Steve had touched him, but it wasn’t to attack. And Bucky wasn’t going to fight Steve anymore. He wasn’t going to hurt him. They were supposed to be friends. Steve had said so, and so had the museum.

No fighting. No mission. He was in Steve’s house, eating breakfast, after spending the night. Steve probably wanted him to sit down and finish eating. He had made a lot of food for them both, and Bucky was probably supposed to eat it all.

“I can eat.” He moved to sit down, sliding the knife away under his sweatshirt. “I can eat more.”

“Sure. Good. Go ahead and eat. We can still talk while we eat, can’t we?” Steve slowly went back to his own chair - making no sudden moves - and for a while, they ate in silence.

Bucky wondered if Steve would want him to leave soon. He finished everything on his plate, and before he could reach for more, Steve did it for him and refilled his coffee cup and orange juice glass, too. And so he ate more, until there was nothing left on his plate and he didn’t think he could eat anything else anyway.

A good meal, then.

“So…” Steve sipped his coffee and looked across the table at Bucky. “I was going to head back to Brooklyn today. And I was hoping you’d come with me.”

Bucky didn’t know how he was supposed to feel about that.

“I don’t… I have to…”

He had things to do. Things he needed to take care of. A new mission.

“You were supposed to finish the story.” He drained off his coffee and set the empty cup down.

“I’ll finish the story.” Steve took another sip of his coffee. “But it’s going to take a while. It’s your whole life, Buck; I can’t go through it all in a day, or even in a week. And besides, you’ll need time to think about it all.”

Bucky glared at him. “And then I’m going to find the rest of HYDRA and kill them all.”

He would go back to Russia first. He would start with the General. The General wouldn’t expect him at all.

Quietly he added, “I owe them.”

---

“We both do.”

Steve had sworn that himself, tearfully, with no one but Peggy as his witness after he’d come back from the Alps after Bucky’s death. He’d sworn he wasn’t going to stop until every last member of HYDRA was dead or captured. Wasn’t it about time he made good on his oath?
Also, Bucky needed time and help to recover his memories; that much was for certain. And time might not be something he’d get much of if he remained here in the DC area. HYDRA had been hurt badly by the loss of the Insight helicarriers and the exposure of their infiltration of SHIELD. Crippled, possibly even dealt a fatal blow. But it could still be dangerous - possibly even more so - in its death throes. Pierce’s death might call a temporary halt to any of HYDRA’s efforts to find Bucky, but that would be only a temporary reprieve. Bucky needed to disappear, to get somewhere far away from Washington.

Besides, he wasn’t about to let Bucky go off on his own after revenge. That would be a wonderful way to ensure that he never saw him again. Either they’d kill him outright or recapture him and either put him back on ice for decades or send him back out against the people hunting them. Or, if he managed to succeed in killing them all, he’d likely just disappear into the world and Steve would never be able to find a trace of him again.

*I’ll die before I let that happen.*

*I’m going to need Sam’s help with this.* His mind was working overtime, speeding to come up with a plan. Sam was a counselor at the VA; he’d dealt with traumatized soldiers before. He could point them in the right direction. *And Natasha’s too; she deserves to be part of this.*

“Come with me to Brooklyn, Buck. I think it might do you some good.” Steve smiled hopefully. “Seeing how the old neighborhood’s changed. We could even head out to the beach, if you want. To Coney Island, just like we used to.”

---

To Bucky’s surprise, he agreed.

Breakfast was over shortly after that, and Bucky changed back into his freshly washed clothing while Steve cleaned the kitchen. He pocketed the root beer barrels that had been left on the nightstand. After that, he had nothing to do while Steve packed a suitcase and called a car rental company, and so he sat in the living room and waited.

He was very good at waiting.

Before long, they were heading toward Brooklyn in a rented Toyota Corolla, which was a very efficient and inconspicuous car, but not reliable when it came to freeway chases and combat situations. If he didn’t get to HYDRA first, they would come for him, and it would be better if he weren’t in a car that provided very little cover in a firefight.

It would happen though. They would come for him.

Because of that, he decided he would stay with Steve in Brooklyn for a few days. Long enough to get as much of the story as possible, but not so long as to attract HYDRA to Steve’s house, and more importantly, to Steve. Better for him to stay out of things. Commander Pierce was dead and the helicarriers were destroyed, so Steve’s mission was over. Better not to involve him with HYDRA anymore.

A few days then.

He wondered how long HYDRA would wait before coming for him.

There was a small chance that they thought he was dead. The helicarriers had all crashed into the river, and one of them had even destroyed the Triskelion. And even though there had been no extraction point for the mission, he had ways of making contact, but he hadn’t. So maybe they
thought he was dead, but he wouldn’t count on it.

The General was not a patient man. They might already be looking for him.

Would they know to look for him at Steve’s house in Brooklyn? Killing Captain America had been his mission, but he hadn’t known that Captain America lived in Brooklyn. They had never told him.

That didn’t mean they didn’t know.

But maybe they didn’t know that Steve had said they were friends? So there was no reason for him to be in Brooklyn? Except that the museum also said they were friends, so maybe they knew that, too? Or maybe…

Somebody was lying about something.

HYDRA was lying.

He was going to kill them all.

For an hour or so, neither of them said a word. Steve didn’t turn on the radio - he didn’t have much patience for modern music, he said, and he hadn’t brought any of his music discs with him. So silence it was, and Bucky was fine with that.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve said suddenly. He cut his eyes toward Bucky for a split second, smiling. “You know they named a school after you?”

Bucky stared back at him. “Why? Why would they do that?”

“ Probably because you’re a war hero.” Steve shrugged, not bothering to hide his smile. “Or a ‘person of historical significance’, as it was explained to me. Apparently they name schools after people like that, so you got one named after you.”

Bucky didn’t know what to say to that.

“And one after me too.” Steve smiled again, shaking his head. “I couldn’t believe it when I first found out. It took seeing it for me to really catch on that it wasn’t fake.”

He lapsed into silence, and Bucky thought that maybe it was time for quiet.

Then Steve said, “OK, so back when I first came out of the ice, I was having a bit of trouble adjusting to the world. I’d been out of the loop for nearly seventy years, so SHIELD - well, Director Fury - thought it would be a good idea to assign me someone to help get me acclimated to the way things are now. So they assigned me Sharon Carter.”

Did Bucky know that name? Or a name like it? He wasn’t sure.

Steve continued. “And one of the first things she did for me was to take me on a tour of Red Hook. And there they were.” He grinned. “J. B. Barnes Elementary School and Steven G. Rogers Middle School. The kids apparently call mine P. S. America. I’ll show them to you sometime this week. What do you think?”

Bucky thought that being shown the schools was something Steve obviously wanted to do, so he said “okay,” and returned to staring through the window.

Was is possible that HYDRA was waiting for him in Brooklyn? Would they have figured out that he went to Steve’s apartment in Washington, DC and then agreed to go to Brooklyn?
Possible, yes.

Probable?

He wasn’t sure.

Also, why would anyone consider him a war hero?

He didn’t know how to answer that last question, and he didn’t know how to ask it either. And so he said nothing and just let the time pass.

A few days, then.

Chapter End Notes

A note about SHARON CARTER: So I fiddled with the timeline a bit regarding Sharon. I want to get her actively involved in the story without having to go through the rigmarole of "you’re who?!" And thus, Steve and Sharon already know each other. Nick Fury assigned her to be Steve’s SHIELD liaison when he first came out of the ice, and they have been involved in some way or another ever since.

So who was Nurse Kate? That was either Sharon, and Steve was playing along because he knew something was up, or that was a random SHIELD agent just in that one scene. All the other scenes - Sharon standing up against Pierce and Rumlow - totally Sharon.

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As always, comments, questions, concrit, and popping in to say hi are warmly welcomed!
A Nightmare File II

Chapter Notes

Again with the encouraging comments! I'm so pleased to be getting feedback this early on. Thank you so much!

There are quite a few notes at the bottom for your reading pleasure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Washington DC
a week or so prior

Five years ago in Odessa…

Natasha kept her face carefully impassive, betraying nothing, and the Winter Soldier shot through her to get to the engineer, then left her for dead on the ground. And as she bled out, as she felt herself slipping further and further away as Clint shouted hysterically into her earpiece, she wondered…

Why?

Before she was even clear to leave the hospital, and while she was still loopy on Oxycodone, Clint arrived to whisk her away to the farm, into the comfort of Laura’s open arms and the children’s enthusiastic embraces.

“I knew him.” She babbled because of the Oxycodone, or because of the pain seeping around the Oxycodone, or because she couldn’t keep it bottled up for much longer without exploding into agony and hurt and rage. “I knew him. I loved him once. I knew him.”

“You were so young.” Laura stroked her hair and held her close. She was the only person left in this world that Natasha would allow to do so. “You can’t blame yourself for that. You can’t blame yourself for any of that.”

“Older men, Nat.” Clint couldn’t hide the discomfort in his voice. “You know how they can be. With younger women. Telling them what they want to hear. Offering them the world. Easy marks, you know?” When her face crumpled at that - because of the damn Oxycodone - his crumpled, too. “Aw, Nat. You can’t… It’s not your fault. You were so young.”

“I don’t know how old I was. How could I know? I didn’t know.” Her voice was raw with fatigue. Pain. Betrayal. She kept talking because of the Oxycodone, or maybe because she had to get it out. “I’m not even sure when it happened. I don’t even know what was real or not. How am I supposed to know?

She slept for a day and a half after that and then she spent a long time looking into the mirror and teaching herself new truths.

It had never been love. It had never been anything more than physical comfort in a dark time. He had told her what she wanted to hear, and she had done the same. It had never been anything more. It had never been more than survival. People would do anything to survive.
Love was for children.

She hadn’t known.

She hadn’t known the truth about him. Or her. Or anything, really.

How could she have?

---

Everything Natasha had translated for Steve so far had left him feeling either numb with horror or boiling with rage. And yet he still found himself staring at the file as it lay there on his table. Still found his fingers itching to open it and leaf through the catalogue of perversions they’d come up with to torture Bucky.

Last night’s translating session had given him nightmares. They’d read through the account of what the file called Bucky’s ‘rehabilitation’. He felt his gorge rise at the thought of even the word. To call what they had done to him ‘rehabilitation’ was like calling the run-up to the Second World War ‘territorial consolidation’; it served only to mask what had really happened behind a veil of professionalism. It had been torture, plain and simple. Six months’ worth of torture.

That nightmare doctor, Pushkin, and his team had worked to rid Bucky of any fears that might have made him lose his nerve in the middle of an assassination mission. This had involved weeks on end of induced hallucinations, brainwashing drugs, hypnosis, and countless other horrific acts intended to force Bucky to experience the worst fears his subconscious could dredge up. And Pushkin had watched it all, even written detailed notes about it. It reminded Steve sickeningly of the Nazi doctors he’d read about - the ones who hadn’t cared what atrocities they’d committed, so long as it furthered their twisted goals.

He’d listened to Natasha reading those six months of notes and felt like his heart was being crushed under an iceberg. They’d done everything in their power to erase everything that Bucky had ever been with their psychotropics and their lies. And with their ‘mental recalibration device’, which the doctors had simply dubbed ‘the chair.’ He felt like vomiting every time he thought of Bucky strapped into it, a thick rubber bit forced into his mouth, waiting for the powerful electromagnetic surges to flow through his brain. Waiting for his memories to be erased and for new ones to be rewritten. New lies, new deceptions that Bucky had come to believe.

It had robbed Steve of restful sleep, made him need to switch from punching sandbags to punching girders, woken him up drenched in sweat and forced him to sit there alone in the dark, clenching his fists and sobbing at the brutal injustice of it all.

And still there was more to come.

---

Mind control.

Hallucinogens.

He hadn’t even been Russian.

What else might they have done? If they had been capable enough to twist a man’s mind into knots until he could no longer intuit even the most basic of facts about himself, what else could they have done to him?
To her?

What had ever been real?

She would be sick.

The next day, Natasha presented herself at Steve’s apartment and made a good show of reading through pages and pages of atrocities written in the most clinical manner.

After the subject, henceforth referred to as Winter Soldier, had been deemed appropriately conditioned, they had sent him to another facility for training. That had taken a year, and had included such activities as being made to shoot condemned prisoners from a watchtower as they were given the hopeless opportunity to flee for the gate.

She had been made to do such things as well, once upon a time.

Once he had satisfactorily completed his training, General Karpov had given him his first assignment: infiltrating an American army base in the newly created West Germany and murdering a number of soldiers. No specifically named soldiers. Just American ones.

“Karpov wanted to see if he would do it.” She looked up from the notes and over to Steve. “He wanted to see if he could take this American soldier and send him to kill his own. If this American soldier really had been made to believe he was a Russian-born, Soviet patriot. It was a test.”

“A test?” Steve said hollowly.

She turned her attention back to the notes because she couldn’t stand the look on Steve’s face. “If he could be made to do that, what else could they make him do? And he passed, of course. Six men. If he hadn’t…” She forced a shrug. “They would have just reconditioned him until he did.”

“Six.” Steve’s voice didn’t come out easily, rasping harshly past a throat sore from the strain of holding back cries of agony and rage. “Six Americans.”

Natasha waited. The file was very thick. Pages and pages of horrors that Steve would want her to translate. And at some point in there, certain events would be dragged into the light and subjected to the same mournful scrutiny.

Or maybe they had just disappeared those events, as they had done to so many others.

Maybe.

Steve continued. “Six of his own. Six tired soldiers who had survived the very worst fighting they’d ever know, only to die at the hands of a man who, if he’d been himself, would have clapped them on the back and raised a glass to them.” Steve gave a bitter, humorless laugh. “Six men who’d died simply because they’d been Americans, to test the abilities of a man those monsters had forced to forget was their brother in arms.”

He looked at Natasha suddenly. “Why? What made Karpov hate America so much that he would do something so twisted? How did he turn from an ally into such a bitter enemy? And why did he go after Bucky in particular, when Bucky had helped save his life?”

Natasha shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Steve must have seen something in her face or heard something in her voice, because his anger gave way quickly to concern. “Natasha? What is it?”
“Look. Steve.” She stared determinedly at a fixed point on the ceiling. “You should know something. There’s something I haven’t told you.”

“What?” Steve said warily. “What haven’t you told me?”

“I…” She closed her eyes for a moment.

“It’s just the way men are, Nat.” Clint’s eyes were soft and compassionate, and she couldn’t help but look away. “It’s not your fault. Don’t ever let yourself believe it’s your fault.”

“I knew him.”

Before Steve could reply, she held up a hand and plowed forward. Now, or she’d never get it out. Now, or she would just continue to read the file with an awful, sick clenching in her gut, just waiting for the moment to come to her.

“Before Odessa, I knew him.”

Love was for children, after all.

“He trained me. In the Red Room.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “He was known to be a particularly brutal and efficient trainer, and some of the girls were scared of him.” Her face darkened at the memory. “Those were the ones who didn’t make it, of course. He would train the girls who were just about ready to graduate.”

She snorted at the word. At the entire situation. At the circumstances that brought them to that exact moment.

“I wasn’t scared of him though. I was…” She shrugged. “I was very good. I had potential, and I wanted him to see it.” Another deliberate shrug. “And so it went, and then I graduated. And not too long after that, we met again.”

It had never been love. He had never cared about her. She had never cared about him. It had been survival, pure and simple. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“And I… and we…”

She took a deep breath.

“We fell in love.”

---

What?

Steve’s face went slack as his mind worked at that little revelation. Natasha and Bucky - in love? From what he’d seen of Bucky recently, it didn’t seem like the Soviets had left enough of him intact for him to come anywhere close to love. How, then? Had they missed something? And if so, what must they have done to him to make him forget?

The chair, of course.

The image came unbidden to his mind: Bucky clamped in place in that horrific engine of torture, his face a twisted grimace of agony as his mind was ripped apart and his memory stolen from him. If they could make Bucky forget who he’d been and where he’d come from, it wouldn’t have been that great a trick to make him forget who he’d loved. They’d wiped Steve from his mind, after all; how
difficult could it have been to do the same thing with Natasha?

And what about Natasha herself? His head nearly spun. If they’d been in love, then she certainly wouldn’t have expected Bucky to cold-bloodedly blow a hole through her to get to the man she’d been guarding. What must it have done to her?

For that matter, why had they allowed her to remember?

That was, of course, leaving aside the fact that the Soviets had used Bucky as a trainer in the Red Room. Steve had heard enough from Natasha to know what went into being a trainer there, and he knew beyond any doubt that Bucky would never have agreed to take part in the systematic torture, abuse, and murder of children - little girls, for God’s sake - if he’d still been the man Steve had known.

Of course, that also went for picking off fleeing prisoners as though they were clay pigeons and slaughtering brother soldiers in cold blood. So, he thought with a cold, sick feeling in his vitals, Bucky could have been capable of practically anything over those long decades.

“I think…” His voice came out as a croak; his throat had gone dry and he had to try again. “I think you’re going to need to elaborate on that.”

---

“We weren’t together for very long.”

Natasha closed her eyes against the sudden rush of memories. Confused memories, as always. Memories that overlapped and dates that never matched up and years that seemed to stretch into decades before collapsing under the weight of their own lies.

But she still remembered him.

“Not the first time.”

She glanced at Steve. He looked as if he already had a hundred questions, and she held up her hand once again to stave him off.

“She hadn’t yet known just how badly fire could burn.

“Things happened.”

The story unfolded in halting pieces.

She had flirted with each other, as people did in any situation anywhere in the world. Sometimes they trained together, and sometimes ranking members of the Politburo came to watch. Entertainment was scarce, and they were making reputations for themselves. They found comfort in each other, perhaps even some measure of happiness.

Perhaps love.

“She had the clearest, most colloquial American accent I had ever heard.” She snorted. “I didn’t know at the time. I just thought, if they had a program to make Black Widows, why not one for Winter
Solids?"

The words felt heavy in her mouth now. Heavy and foolish.

“His accent.” Steve’s voice came out toneless and dull. “I guess you couldn’t have known that it was so clear because he was an actual American. Not when even he didn’t.”

Natasha snorted at that.

“We used to work on my English together. We used to take comfort in spending time together. And then…” She couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice. “It fell apart one day, after a mission that didn’t go as expected. I was told on no uncertain terms that I was never to see him again. That it hadn’t happened. That I was to put it out of my mind.”

They had transferred her that same day.

“And for a number of years, I didn’t.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment, then suddenly Steve sat up and looked at her curiously.

“Wait.” Steve frowned. “You said Odessa happened five years ago. And that a ‘number of years’ went by between your encounters with Bucky. But either way, wouldn’t the Politburo have been defunct by the time you were training? How old were you? When was this, even?” He corrected himself. “The first time, anyway.”

Whenever Natasha tried to piece together the details of her old life, things became muddled. Concrete dates, especially, would slip away before she could make sense of them. The closer she came to putting together a coherent narrative, the less it made sense. Possible dates overlapped. Events seemed to stretch across decades.

Why should it have been any different in that moment?

“I…” She squeezed her eyes shut, tried to will a firm date into existence. As always, a hazy image swam before her and then drifted away. “I don’t know. More than ten years ago. Maybe twelve years ago?”

That didn’t feel right.

“Zola said I was born in 1984, so…”

That felt very, very wrong. Deep in her core, she knew that date was wrong. It was tempting, in its own way, to latch onto it anyway. It was something concrete, an exact date she could use to begin piecing together her life.

“I don’t know.”

Natasha Romanoff may have been many things, but she wasn’t a coward, and she wouldn’t latch onto even the most tempting bits of information if it meant creating a false sense of security for herself. Better to have no sense of time than a false one.

“But enough time passed before we saw each other again, and when we did…”

The relationship had gone on for months that time. They would meet in train stations for fleeting moments, in hotel rooms right before a mission got underway, and in her own little cramped room in the dead of the night.
“He would slip out right before dawn.” A ghost of a smile drifted across her lips. “We used to watch movies together. It felt so normal. I used to think, this is what normal couples do. This is how they act.”

The smile died.

“But I was becoming dissatisfied. I wanted out, and I wanted to take him with me, but I didn’t know how.” Her mouth settled into her a hard line. “I didn’t know how to get out. I didn’t know how to approach the idea with him. I just… I didn’t know. And then…”

The words died on her lips. Had she known how… had she been able to take him with her…

“You can’t do that to yourself, Nat,” Clint had said. “Woulda, shoulda, coulda. You’ll make yourself crazy.”

“Once again, the relationship blew up in our faces.” The bitterness crept back into her voice. “As punishment, I was sent on a mission that I wasn’t meant to survive, but I did, and I suppose that proved that I was loyal enough. And not too long after that, I ran into Clint. Or he ran into me. And you know how that went down.”

She looked at Steve. “I tried to find him after that. I tried for years, but after the fall…” At his confused look, she added, “After the Soviet Union broke up, record keeping wasn’t what it should have been, and the only reason I was able to get this now…” She gestured vaguely toward the file. “…is because I had finally narrowed it down enough to give my contact a good head start.”

Too little, too late.

---

The look on Natasha’s face throughout most of this revelation was of such bitterness, such regret that Steve wondered whether he ought to just call things off for the evening. How much could she - could the both of them - be expected to take in such a short amount of time, after all?

Or at least he could reach over and give her a bolstering embrace. Remind her that she was in a much better place now. Remind her that of course she wouldn’t have known how to get out on her own back then, to say nothing of taking Bucky with her, because the Soviets had twisted and warped her mind to make her believe such a thing was impossible.

He’d read once about the way circuses conditioned their elephants to keep them from escaping. The baby elephant’s leg would be manacled and chained to a stake in the ground. The elephant, not having come into its full strength yet, could pull at the chain with all its might and not budge it an inch. And later on, even when the elephant was full-grown and could break free of even the heaviest restraints with ease, it would not even test the comparatively flimsy chain and the stake it could have effortlessly tugged free of the ground. Such was the impact and the memory of the futility of its early attempts to free itself.

They’d done the same thing to Natasha and Bucky. Either of them could have cut a swath through any attempts to imprison them, prevent them from fleeing, or track them down and recapture them. Natasha could have killed every single one of the monsters who’d run the Red Room. Bucky could have killed Karpov and Pushkin, along with all their staff and security personnel, probably without even having to pick up a weapon. But the Soviets had instilled such terror in them that they never even bothered to try.

What was it about the Soviets that made them ruin people so utterly?
He didn’t hug Natasha; she wouldn’t have found it comforting. Not from him, anyway. That was why she had Clint and his family. And he didn’t suggest that she stop, either. He knew that she would stop when she wanted to, or when there was nothing left to read.

The latter would probably happen before the former.

A question came to his mind then. It was such a simple question, but out of the hundreds he could have asked, it felt like the only one that really mattered.

“What was he like then?”

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“Like any successful operative who manages to survive.” She shrugged. “Different faces for different situations.”

It was written clear on Steve’s face that he wanted - needed - more than that. He wanted something that would tell him his former friend was more than what they had made out of him. He wanted to hear that there was some semblance of Bucky Barnes left in the Winter Soldier, though she doubted it would bring much comfort no matter what answer she could give him.

No matter what she told him, he would probably be disappointed.

“In the Red Room, he was exactly what you’d expect a trainer to be. Brutal. Aloof. Demanding.” She shrugged. “I already told you that some of the girls were intimidated by him, but I wanted him to notice me. Being noticed meant survival, after all.”

Had it really only been fifteen years? She didn’t think so. It didn’t feel right, not at all.

“And eventually he did. After a particularly… difficult… demonstration…” She decided to leave the particulars out. Steve didn’t need to hear it and she didn’t care to relive it. “He told me I had impressed him. That was as close to high praise as you could get.” She plowed forward. “Later on, when I knew him outside of the Red Room…”

The two of them faced each other on the field, the training simulation having come to a messy end. She stood dressed in widow’s black, a pistol in one hand, a grenade in the other. And maybe he should have been angry or annoyed - she had interrupted the simulation, after all, and had been unauthorized to do so - but he was smirking at her, thumbs hitched in his belt loops, and she wondered if she might close the gap between them.

“Bring me better men then,” he told the grizzled man standing off to the side, though without breaking her gaze. “Or more women like her.”

She found herself smiling at the memory.

“Well, he could be cocky. Arrogant, even. He knew how good he was, and we…” Her smile faltered, and she felt a strange need to explain. “It was our whole world. It’s all we knew, and you had to take pride in your work, otherwise you’d drown.”

In blood. Your own, if not someone else’s.

“In private, he was…” She searched for the words and came up short. “Different. He had a sense of humor. I used to stroke his hair. I would loop my fingers into his curls and…”

She trailed away. Some of those memories were for her alone, and she tucked them aside to consider
“He was different. He told me he loved me once, days after telling me that love wasn’t for us. We had to make ourselves believe that. Love wasn’t for us.” She closed her eyes against the memory. “He said it out of desperation. Fear. We didn’t know how long we’d have.” Her lips thinned into a hard, miserable line.

“I don’t know if he meant it or not.”

---

Steve collapsed back into his seat, feeling like he’d been kicked in the liver. She might have been describing Bucky during the war, for all the similarities.

Cocky? Arrogant, even? That had been Bucky ever since they’d been young. In his teens and twenties, he’d known exactly how good-looking he was, and he’d never been short of company on the weekends.

Taking pride in his work? Bucky had written a letter to him during his time in basic training, while Steve was still fuming at home about being rejected for enlistment, to tell him that he’d been selected for specialized training. His marksmanship scores had apparently outstripped those of the rest of his class by a healthy margin, and they’d send him off to England shortly thereafter to be trained as a sniper. And while Bucky hadn’t particularly relished the idea of being a sniper - or even a soldier - he’d always made a point of doing whatever task he’d been given as well as it could possibly be done.

And a sense of humor? Well, that brought a sad smile to Steve’s face.

Hey, buddy, look what I got you for your birthday as the Fourth of July fireworks went off in the sky - the same joke he told every year, and yet somehow it just wouldn’t have been his birthday without it. Laughing back and forth about the stupidity of Andrew Koblinski, their mutual antagonist throughout most of school. He’d once actually taken out a notebook and written a reminder to beat Steve up after the semester had ended, because he’d been threatened with expulsion if any other fights happened that term. They’d both expressed amazement that Koblinski even knew how to write. The two of them on the beach at Coney Island well after dark on a spring evening, a few bottles of beer between them and Bucky poking fun at him for how easily he got soused. Bucky giving him a sloppy, drunk kiss before wrapping an arm around his shoulders. You’re all right, Stevie he had slurred. You’re all right.

Was it possible that all of that was still there somewhere in Bucky’s head? A ray of hope burst through in Steve’s mind, bringing light to his eyes. If Natasha had seen that side of him…

“If he said it, he meant it.” He wanted to look her in the eyes, but hers were still closed. “And if he was afraid and desperate, wouldn’t that make it mean that much more? Wouldn’t that mean he was looking for a way out too, and they just took it away from him?”

But what else had they taken from him? And - perhaps more frighteningly - what had they allowed to remain, for what reasons? Had they decided that robbing him of his memories and inserting new ones in their place had been enough? Did they not care about his fundamental personality? Or had they twisted it in some horrible manner, the same way they’d twisted the rest of his mind? How closely had they let him resemble the man he’d once been?

And if that resemblance had been as close as Natasha had described, why hadn’t something in him rebelled at the things they’d ordered him to do?
“But what happened between that time and Odessa?”

“I don’t know.” Natasha opened her eyes and shifted around on the couch to face Steve, her tone becoming more business-like. It was probably easier for her that way. “He was most likely working for HYDRA by that point.” A beat, then, “Judging by what Zola told us anyway, and while I don’t want to put too much stock in the words of a robot consciousness, it is a place to start.

Steve managed a wobbly sort of smile.

“Which means…” She hesitated, then a humorless bark of laughter burst out of her. “God, Steve, the exfiltration in Odessa was a SHIELD op. SHIELD was infiltrated by HYDRA, the Winter Soldier was working for HYDRA, so HYDRA arranged to sabotage an operation it already knew about?”

Steve’s mind reeled just trying to piece it together. All of it.

“Why go through the trouble? They could have just waited until the engineer was in the safehouse and used any compromised agent to kill him.” She shook her head. “Why send the Winter Soldier?”

“There has to be a reason.” Steve frowned. “Because you’re right; it makes no sense for HYDRA to have gone through that much trouble.”

He got up from the chair and began to pace. Irritably, nervously, futilely. “No one knew anything about the infiltration at that point. For God’s sake, Tony even broke into the secure files on the Helicarrier and there was nothing in there to point us in that direction. So it wasn’t as though they needed to throw anyone off the trail.”

The more he thought about it, the less sense it made. Even if the whole reason was that HYDRA had wanted Natasha done in - which was very probable - why would they have tried to do it in such a roundabout way? Wouldn’t it have made more sense, as she had suggested with the engineer, to simply have had some compromised agent or other kill her in her sleep?

A part of him wondered why Bucky hadn’t simply killed her in Odessa as she lay there helpless. No doubt she had wondered it as well, and she was probably wondering all over again right now. Had it been for the same reason Bucky hadn’t killed him? Was there still some memory, some feeling that wouldn’t have permitted him to follow through with it to its conclusion?

_I hope so. It’s the only way I’ll ever be able to get through to him when we find him again._

That brought him back to the real task at hand. Not the reading of the file; that was just incidental. A step along the road to the actual goal, which was to find Bucky and bring him back to his senses. Undo everything that HYDRA and the Soviets had done to him. And now something occurred to him, something that he hadn’t considered before but needed to be said now.

“I’m going to get him back, Natasha.” His mouth was set in a thin line of determination, his eyes focused and unblinking. “I’m going to find him, and I’m going to find some way to make him remember who he is.”

He took a breath, the words he needed to say at the forefront of his mind. It was only right, after all. It was only fair. And it would have been wrong not to do it.

“And I want you to be part of it.”

Chapter End Notes
About CLINT BARTON: So this story is not AoU compliant, but I've taken elements of the film and worked them in. Namely, Clint's family and their farm, because Natasha needs a safe space to crash somewhere.

As for how Steve knows about it: I'm working with the idea that something *Ultron-ish* but not quite full-on AoU happened a few months after the Chitauri incident. So it happened a few years ago, not too long after Steve came out of ice, and it would have involved Hank Pym being his Hank Pym-ish self and creating Ultron, which is better than completely railroading Tony Stark's character into full-on villainy. This also allows for the Avengers to have met Wanda and Pietro at this time, without erasing their parental lineage (yep, they're mutants) or Roma heritage or having them be in any way connected with HYDRA. And no, Pietro's not dead. *deep breath* So this is a 'good parts' version of AoU that I'm working with. *crickets*

PART OF Natasha's backstory was borrowed from CAPTAIN AMERICA AND BUCKY #624 by Ed Brubaker. If you haven't read it, do so. It's a fun issue.

As always, comments, concrit, and offers of fresh herbs and spices are always warmly appreciated!
Enter Sam! All is right with the world.

Red Hook, Brooklyn
October 2014

The drive had been long, but Steve had spent a lot of it talking. Mostly to himself, it seemed, but Bucky responded often enough that it didn’t really feel that way. In a way, it actually felt somewhat familiar; he’d always been the more talkative of the two of them. Growing up, Bucky had remarked more than once that what Steve really needed to learn to do was keep his big mouth shut. This usually came as both of them were holding semi-frozen steaks over black eyes or pinching bloody noses shut, the product of a fight that Steve had gotten himself into and Bucky had interjected himself into.

Good times…

The huge breakfast notwithstanding, it was a long drive and he hadn’t stopped for food. Part of that was because he was no fan of the sort of food rest stops tended to have, and part of it was because he hadn’t known how well Bucky would fare around that many people at such a precarious time. So he’d just decided to push on through, thinking he’d order pizza from Turvino’s for the both of them later on.

Bucky took in the neighborhood without comment. Not that he would have recognized anything at a glance; nearly every one of the old buildings had been razed to the ground in the 1950s as part of New York’s widespread ‘urban renewal plan’. A few familiar sights remained - mostly historic brownstones, old churches, and ancient factories converted into condos, like the one Steve currently lived in - but the old tenements they’d lived in as kids were long gone. Likewise missing was the building where Mr. Cicalese had dispensed over-the-counter medicine and penny candy, and behind which they’d gotten into trouble for plinking away at glass bottles with Bucky’s Daisy BB gun. And the old movie house they’d gone to all their lives. And the music hall. And pretty much everything else.

After Bucky had inhaled the pizza - the best pizza Steve had ever had came from Turvino’s, and that was a high compliment - Steve took him on a stroll around the few blocks close to where he lived. The apartment building he lived in had once been a factory, but no one could remember what it had produced, including Steve. Rather than tear it down, some enterprising soul had bought it, subdivided it, and rented it out as apartment space. It was spacious and high-ceilinged, and the enormous factory windows let in a great deal of light. Plus, its location near the old docks gave him a spectacular view of the Statue of Liberty from his bedroom every morning.

The day wore into evening, and Bucky went to bed wearing the same pair of sweatpants he’d worn to bed last night. They’d really have to get him some new clothes. In the meantime, the man Steve had been hoping to talk to was just picking up the phone.

“Hi Sam.” He ran a hand through his hair and stood at the window looking out over the water.
“Listen, I’m sorry if this is a bad time, but I have a pretty huge favor to ask you.”

---

The problem in running with superheroes, so far as Sam could tell, is that eventually the world was saved and everyone went back to living their lives. Which was a good thing, of course - hey, they had stopped a worldwide conspiracy that would have wiped out millions of people, so good work there, team. But now the work was over, and the team - or at least Sam - still had to get up in the morning and go back to the work that paid the bills.

Good work, sure. Meaningful work, too. But hardly in the world-saving category.

He had offered to accompany Steve on his trek to find his friend, but then Natasha had cryptically delivered a file into Steve’s hands and Steve had retreated pretty quickly after that. With a promise to call when it was time to start trekking, but after a week, the call hadn’t come and life still had to move forward.

The Air Force, on the other hand, had called. And sent a letter. And it all amounted to his presence being required at a hearing to account for the theft and loss of the multimillion dollar EXO-7 Falcon. Even if said Falcon had been used in averting a murderous global conspiracy. But what was saving the lives of millions compared to a million dollar experimental set of wings and miles of bureaucratic red tape?

In the end, the hearing hadn’t amounted to much more than a slap on the wrist and a stern talking to. He had, after all, assisted Captain America in bringing down a goddamn global conspiracy, and did they really want to imprison a decorated PJ - one who had served no less than two tours in Afghanistan besides - after that?

Still, it was stressful bullshit, and he coped with it by spending a day with his oldest sister and her family, mostly having his ass solidly kicked by his ten year old nephew over multiple rounds of Plants vs. Zombies. And then after that, it was back to the routine.

It left him feeling kind of restless, and so he was glad for the ten o’clock phone call.

“Hey, man, it’s not a bad time.” He wouldn’t mention that he had already been in bed, trying to get into a book that his sister’s husband had pushed into his hands and insisted he read. “I’m not doing anything productive.”

“You shouldn’t be.” Steve chuckled. “You should be enjoying a hard-earned and well-deserved vacation, and that’s why I really have no right to be calling you right now and asking you this.”

Sam waited a beat. Whatever Steve had to say, it sounded like it was going to be interesting.

“I found Bucky,” Steve said. “He showed up in my apartment in DC last night.”

Sam sat up so abruptly that the book tumbled off his lap and onto the floor. Sorry, Malcolm Gladwell, but apparently Steve had already reached The Tipping Point.

“Sounds more like Bucky found you.”

Which could be bad or good, and it was pretty hard to tell by Steve’s tone. Dude sounded both apologetic and cheerful, which was a hard balance to strike, but if anyone was going to do it, it would be Captain America.

Cautiously he said, “Did he trash your apartment? Was there a fight? Where is he now?”
And why was Steve specifying that his apartment was in DC? That implied that he was most definitely elsewhere.

“And where are you?”

“Brooklyn. We drove here today,” Steve said. “And there was no fight. My apartment’s fine - both of them, actually - and Bucky’s asleep in the other room right now. Anyway, he came to me looking for answers.” He sighed. “He was in bad shape when he showed up. He had been to the Smithsonian, and it clearly did bad things to him. Hadn’t eaten or slept in I don’t want to know how long. He’s been inhaling everything I give him to eat and sleeping like a rock, though, so I guess he’s doing better on that score.”

Sam hesitated a moment, then, “Well, that’s a start.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then abruptly got out of bed and stood by the window. He felt like he needed to be on his feet for this sort of conversation.

“So… does he know you? Does he know himself now? Probably not, if the museum freaked him out, so I’m just answering my own questions.”

There were several potential next steps they could take, but the first priority was assuring everyone’s safety. As much as they could anyway.

“How long until HYDRA comes looking for him? Unless you think they won’t, but…” He sighed. “That’s a big assumption to make. And does Natasha know?”

“Natasha doesn’t know yet,” Steve said. “But I’m going to call her as soon as I get off the phone with you. With any luck, she’ll be up here tomorrow evening.” Sam heard Steve settle heavily onto what sounded like couch cushions. “As for what he remembers, I’m not actually sure. But I know there are things he doesn’t know that he knows.” He sighed. “Like his propensity for root beer barrels, or his fragmented memories of our childhood breakfasts, or the Ovaltine slogan. He’s still in there somewhere, Sam; I know it.”

“Ohay.” Sam tried to keep the doubt out of his voice. “So… I can’t help but notice you didn’t answer my first question.”

His gaze drifted to the ceiling. He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. Steve hadn’t answered his first question because…

“You’re kind of hoping HYDRA comes looking for him, aren’t you? More helpful if they come to your door rather than you going out looking for them?”

Seemed about right.

The smart thing to do right then would have been to wish Steve luck, disconnect the call, and go on with his life. But…

But if it had been Riley…

Had there been a chance - any chance at all - to save Riley…

Besides… overwhelming odds? Small chance of success? Where did he sign up? He’d been a PJ for a damn good reason, after all.

“So how can I help?”
Steve let out a relieved sounding laugh. “If HYDRA does come looking for him, I’m going to give them every reason in the world never to do it again. But I also wanted to ask you to help me with something else.” A beat, then, “You work with troubled vets, Sam You know what it’s like for them, when they come home not remembering what it’s like to not be fighting every second of the day. Well, Bucky remembers a lot less than that, and he’s been through a lot worse. He needs help, and I don’t think it’s the kind of thing I’d know how to do all by myself. So…” He took a deep breath, blew it out again. “Can you come up? Point me in the right direction?”

“Yeah, I can come up,” Sam said automatically, before the rational part of his mind kicked him and sent him running in the other direction.

Figure out a way to help the world’s deadliest assassin? Who also happened to be Captain America’s best buddy from way back? Who, by the way, had easily destroyed Sam’s multimillion dollar wings before sending him spiraling to his near death?

No problem.

“Just let me arrange it with work, all right? I can come up day after tomorrow for a few days.”

“Thanks, Sam.” He could hear Steve’s grin. “I owe you one.”

No problem at all.

---

The phone woke Natasha up, and as soon as she saw the name on the screen, she snapped into alertness.

Her mind was already spinning through the possibilities: another HYDRA attack, the SHIELD leak had already brought horrific repercussions, the Winter Soldier had been spotted somewhere. Or possibly he was calling about Avengers business, in which case, it could be any number of exhausting and difficult things.

“Hi, Natasha,” Steve said. “How are Clint and Laura?”

Why did Steve sound so damn chipper at eleven in the evening?

She scowled into the phone. “I don’t know, Rogers. I’ll tell you when I get there tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah, about that…” He hesitated, a very clear sign that he was knowingly bringing up a subject which had the potential to turn very uncomfortable very quickly. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

He was about to preempt her time with Clint and Laura and the kids, she knew it. And so she waited for him to speak.

“Do you think you might be able to bring my bike up to Brooklyn?”

She raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t so bad.

“Sure, no problem, Rogers.” Tooling around on the bike sounded like fun, after all. “I’ll bring it out to Clint and Laura’s first, but I’ll make my way over to Brooklyn eventually.”

Wait a moment…
“Why are you in Brooklyn without your bike, Steve?”

Steve hesitated again. “Well, that’s a bit of a story.”

She waited.

“I had to rent a car to get here, since there wasn’t enough room on the bike for two people.” Now he waited a beat. “See, I had an unexpected passenger.”

Clearly he had learned from her the fine art of a stringing a story along just enough to keep a person hooked. She would have been proud if she hadn’t been tired and cranky.

“Bucky showed up in my apartment last night,” Steve said suddenly.

She sat up in bed with a jolt, instantly alert once again, as if someone had jabbed her with a shot of adrenaline.

“And that’s why you’re in Brooklyn now?”

She tried to slow her thoughts down, but they were tripping over themselves, flinging out the various possibilities.

“Was there a fight? Did he know you?”

And finally, the question Steve had asked her only a few days earlier.

“What was he like?”

“He’s….” The chipperness drained right out of Steve’s voice. “… not in a really great way.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Go on.”

He hastened to elaborate. “There was no fight; we’re both OK. But he came to me looking for answers after he’d been to the Smithsonian. He apparently went there after he pulled me out of the river, and…” He sighed. “Well, how great a mindset would you expect him to be in after seeing a three-foot-high picture of his face next to the story of a life he didn’t know a thing about?”

“Fair enough,” Natasha said cautiously. “Go on.”

“Anyway, he’d been outdoors for at least a week before he came to me. No food, no sleep. I gave him a big dinner and a change of clothes, made him take a shower and put him to bed, and he slept for about twelve hours.” There was heartbreaking warmth and hope in Steve’s voice now. “This morning, I gave him a big breakfast and asked him to come back home with me. And so here we are. He’s asleep in the guest room now.” He took a shaky breath. “So how soon can you make it up here?”

“Tomorrow,” she said automatically, before the irrational part of her mind pushed her out the door and demanded she get the bike and make the drive up to Brooklyn immediately.

She sank back into the mattress, forced herself to primly rearrange the blanket and settle in, because she absolutely was not breaking into Steve’s house and getting his bike and making the long drive up to Brooklyn that evening.

“I’ll come tomorrow morning.”

She was going to make herself sleep now.
“Don’t let him go anywhere.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments, concrit, and random conversations are warmly welcomed.
Red Hook, Brooklyn
October 2014

The soldier - Bucky - had been to Brooklyn before.

Once.

Almost.

A long time ago, and not because the museum said so, and not even because Steve had said so. Steve had walked him around the neighborhood, pointing out brownstones and old factories that people now wanted to live in, and they looked at the waterfront and the Statue of Liberty, and Steve said they would go to Coney Island tomorrow. They used to go to Coney Island all the time, Steve said.

But he had been there before.

Almost.

Maybe.

She smiled at him - feathered blonde hair and heavy blue eye shadow, and her smile was very friendly. “Do I hear a Brooklyn accent?” Too friendly, almost flirtatious. “Dallas is such a long way from Brooklyn. What brings a New York boy all the way out here?”

And then the mission was completed, but he never went to the extraction point. Instead he bought a ticket for-

The bus brought him to Houston, then another to Memphis, then another to-

He ended up on a train to Cincinnati, then Pittsburgh, then-

The headline screamed ‘SENATE TO BEGIN WATERGATE INVESTIGATION!’ but that wasn’t what grabbed his attention. The date jumped at him - March 25, 1973 - and he nearly grabbed the newspaper out of the man’s hand, but managed to ask in a strangled, polite voice if he might have a look at it.

How was it already 1973? Where had he-

He took the bus from Philadelphia to Trenton to Newark, and “seriously, Jersey?” echoed from the past somewhere. But that had been so long ago, another time and place, a dirty back alley in a forgotten neighborhood, and-
At the bus station in Newark, he pocketed a postcard for ‘Coney Island - Just Like You Remember!’ but he had to keep moving, because it was only a matter of time before they caught up and-

They raided the flophouse in Greenwich Village, all of them dressed as American police officers, and the one who pulled the bag over his head muttered in Russian - “just don’t make a scene, just don’t-” and it didn’t matter because-

“You went looking for trouble,” the old man told him, and the doctor was nearby, only it wasn’t Pushkin, it was the new doctor, and what the fuck did he know, how long had he been around anyway and-

“There’s nothing there for you-” and whatever they gave him made him talk, talk, talk, even though he didn’t want to, and they were going to put him back on ice, they were going to----

put…

… him back…

… on ice

…

…

---

Steve woke up that morning to the familiar sight of the harbor being lit up by the rising sun. And if he couldn’t see the sun rising out of the river (a northwesterly view was what he had) it was more than made up for by the sight of Lady Liberty out there, bright green in the early morning sun and as pretty as ever.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, stretched, and realized he felt very good about today. Bucky was in the guest room down the hall, where he was almost definitely still asleep after a full day yesterday and a huge dinner last night. Natasha would be here sometime later today, probably toward evening, which would give them the whole day to do some more walking around the neighborhood. Sam would be here later in the week, and that would allow them to start considering their options.

He pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, thinking he’d go check on Bucky before he went out for his morning jog. Maybe Bucky would like to join him? And then he’d make breakfast, and then maybe they could take a bus out to Bed-Stuy to see the school they’d named after Bucky. Maybe that might jog his memory a little; shake a few things loose and get him remembering a few more tidbits. Steve could only hope.

“Morning, Buck.” He grinned as he tapped on the slightly-ajar door. “You up?”

The door swung open at his tap, revealing Bucky sitting upright in bed with eyes wide open and glazed over, and the bottom fell out of Steve’s heart as Oh my God he’s dead hammered through his mind and he was by the bedside in a heartbeat to check on his friend.

“Bucky?” He took him by the shoulders and shook him, feeling something like relief at the warmth he felt - he’s not dead oh thank God - but his eyes didn’t blink and not a muscle twitched in his face.

“Bucky, what’s happening?”

He brought a hand up and smacked Bucky’s cheek, gently at first - “Bucky, snap out of it!” - and then harder. “Come on, Buck, don’t do this to me!”
He kept slapping Bucky, feeling himself beginning to give in to the mounting fear that something had just broken in his mind. That too much had happened in too short a time for him to deal with, or that HYDRA or the Soviets had done something to his mind to just shut it off if he fell into the wrong hands or disobeyed them. That Bucky had come so close to freedom only to end up in some kind of hellish waking coma.

“Come on, Bucky, say something! It’s me, it’s Steve, please wake up!”

---

... bucky

... bucky?

.... buck?

comeonbuckdon’tdothis

buckycomeonbuctalktomebucky

bucky?

bucky

someone was patting his cheek, patting patting insistently, patting patting he was supposed to talk bucky was supposed to talk he was bucky and steve was the one patting patting patting come on bucky say something he was bucky his name was bucky he was supposed to be bucky the museum had said so and so had steve and-

He looked at Steve.

“I’ve been to Brooklyn before.”

Steve wasn’t patting him anymore, but his eyes were wide and he didn’t look happy.

“Once. Almost. I didn’t make it.”

---

And then Bucky was blinking, his eyes refocusing and locking onto his own. And Steve stopped smacking Bucky’s face and put his hands on Bucky’s shoulders instead and tried to make his heart rate slow down, but Bucky was talking about having been to Brooklyn before. And Steve was about to reply that of course he had, he’d been born there and lived there all his life until his twenties, when Bucky elaborated just enough to make Steve realize that it wasn’t going to be that easy.

In 1973 (the file had said) Bucky had gone AWOL on a Soviet mission on U.S. soil. In Dallas, actually - the second time, not the horrible first that was so earth-shattering in its significance that Steve hoped to God no one else ever learned of it. Bucky had opted not to meet up with his Soviet handlers at the agreed-upon extraction point, instead disappearing and taking an intentionally roundabout route towards Brooklyn. He’d never made it, of course; the Soviets had had spies all over the U.S. at that point in time. He’d been captured in Manhattan and dragged back to Russia, where Karpov and his new doctor, a man named Rodchenko (Pushkin had died suddenly while Bucky was in the midst of his mission) had interrogated him to find the reason why he had tried to go to Brooklyn.
They’d known, Steve had fumed as Natasha had read the file to him. They’d known just as well as
Steve himself knew the reason Bucky had sought out his hometown. They’d just wanted to know
how much Bucky knew. Wanted it so badly that Rodchenko had injected him full of some truth
serum and let Karpov question him at length. And when they found out that Bucky had come close
to learning the truth but still had no inkling of it, they’d wiped the mission from his memory and
stuck him back into cryogenic hibernation with the intention of never giving him any more missions
on U.S. soil.

Steve had been absolutely livid when Natasha had finished reading that particular section. For Bucky
to have come so close to discovering the truth about who he was and where he’d come from only to
fall so agonizingly short of his goal - Bucky could have thrown a rock from where he’d been
captured and hit Brooklyn - made Steve’s blood boil. And now Bucky had remembered it as well.
Or at least enough of it to render him catatonic.

“I know you did, Buck.” He sighed and sat down on the bed. “I know you tried, and I know those
bastards caught you and dragged you back to Russia before you got there.” He shook his head and
ground his teeth in anger and sadness. “I wish to God you’d made it. I wish you’d made it and
remembered everything and wiped out every last one of them when they came for you. And I’m
sorry I wasn’t there to help you do it.”

---

“But…”

Bucky’s gaze drifted away to the side. He chewed on his lip, thinking, trying to grab onto the
scattershot images that seemed to shatter if he reached too close.

*Mind tricks,* the doctor would say. *How could you be remembering something from 1973? How old
do you think you are?*

And then the doctor would say that they needed to work on his conditioning and he would put him
in the chair and give him the rubber bit and then-

He winced.

“There was nothing there for me.”

The old man had said that. If the old man had said that, it was probably correct. The old man was
dead now, but…

“I went looking for trouble.”

He frowned. If he could just hold onto one of the images, even if they were only mind tricks… If he
could just examine one for a moment, then maybe…

Maybe…

“The old man said I went looking for trouble.”

---

*Looking for trouble.* Steve ground his teeth, trying to keep a handle on the rage he felt every time he
heard Bucky repeat those dismissive lies the Soviets had fed him to keep him docile. They’d robbed
him of his life, stolen any hope of ever seeing his home or his family again, and conned him into
doing indescribably awful things in the name of a patriotism that wasn’t even his. They were lucky,
he told himself as he fumed, lucky to have died so long ago that he couldn’t lay hands on them. Because if they had lived, and if he had been able to find them, he might not have been able to keep himself from beating them to a pulp before dragging them off to face justice.

“The old man.” There was little doubt as to whom Bucky was referring. “Karpov, you mean.” He nearly spat. “It makes sense he’d tell you that.”

He felt his chest burn as he spoke, heard the bitterness and the anger in his own voice and couldn’t stop himself. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair for them to have taken so much from Bucky. “You didn’t go looking for trouble; you went looking for your home. For answers, for a life they didn’t let you remember anything about.”

He was ranting now, railing against a man long dead but who had stubbornly lived on in the damage he’d done to Bucky.

“Karpov didn’t want you coming anywhere close to finding out the truth about who you were, because he knew damn well that once you found out, he and all his cronies were as good as dead. That’s why he sent so many people after you. That’s why he had your mind wiped after that mission. That’s why he never wanted you on American soil ever again, because he knew it would be all over for him if you ever found out how badly he’d fucked you up.”

---

Steve was angry now, talking very fast, and saying a lot of things about the old man that weren’t true.

“He’s dead.”

Bucky tried to remember when the old man had died, but he wasn’t very good at keeping track of dates. The doctor had said it had been a long time ago, and it felt like a long time ago, so…

“He died a long time ago.”

His gaze drifted around the room, skipping over Steve’s face to the window and then finally settling on his own hands. He clenched his fingers, digging them into the blanket.

The old man had been dead for a long time, but he had been nothing like the General. He hadn’t been HYDRA, he had been a true Soviet patriot. He had been proud of the USSR and of his specific place in it, and he had tried to instill that pride in the Winter Sol-

- in Bucky, too.

Softly he said, “Comrade General Karpov was a good man.”

Steve’s eyes widened at that. “A good man?” His voice went quiet. “If he’d been a good man, he would have let you come back home when he’d found you. He would have told you the truth about who you were, and he would have done what allies are supposed to do and told us that you were alive. But instead, he stopped you from remembering your whole life, and he made one up for you to match up with what he wanted you to do for him.”

Bucky looked at him in confusion.

“That good man took everything that ever meant anything to you and wiped it away,” Steve said angrily. “Do you remember your mother’s face? Or your sister’s?”
At each angry question, Bucky shook his head, but he couldn’t meet Steve’s gaze and he didn’t know how to answer his questions and he didn’t know why Steve was so angry at him, but it was too much.

Too much.

But Steve kept talking. “Do you remember the name of the woman you said you were going to marry after the war was over?”

“Stop it.” He clapped his hands over his ears. “Stop it, I don’t want to hear it.”

He shouldn’t have come.

He shouldn’t have come with Steve to Brooklyn. He shouldn’t have agreed to spend one night and then another, he shouldn’t have gone into his house to wait for him, he shouldn’t have asked for the story, he shouldn’t have done any of it.

Steve continued. “How about where you met the first girl you kissed?”

“Stop it.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Stop it.”

“Or what you said to me the day my mom died?”

“Stop it!” He pressed his hands against his ears even harder, muffling anything else that Steve might say to him.

Comrade General Karpov had been a good man.

He had been a good man!

But…

But… what about the museum? What about that? The museum had said a lot of the same things Steve had told him, only Steve was telling him more.

“… stop it.”

And what about the mind trick from 1973? Steve knew about that, too, so maybe it wasn’t just a mind trick. The museum hadn’t said anything about 1973, but the images had come to him and Steve had agreed that it had happened, and-

His eyes popped open and he stared wide-eyed at the blanket in his lap. His breathing sounded very loud in his covered ears.

Comrade General Karpov had been a good man…

… but Steve knew things, too.

“I don’t know anything.” His voice was raw with misery. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

---

Stop it, you idiot! Look what you’re doing!

Steve bit down on whatever else had been about to come out of his fool mouth and forced himself to look at Bucky. The expression on Bucky’s face had become one of anguish and confusion, his
posture one of defensiveness. And a part of Steve’s mind was trying to hold back, telling him that all he was going to accomplish would be to scare Bucky - possibly scare him away.

A good man wouldn’t lose his temper with a man who’s too hurt to know what he’s saying, either. A good man would stay patient with the guy who’s supposed to be his best friend.

He made himself think about that for a long moment, forcing himself to calm down. He wasn’t angry at Bucky, after all, and the fact that he’d upset him made him feel about two inches tall. He’d just wanted him to see the extent of what had been done to him, and hopefully give him a real reason to try to heal himself, but instead it seemed like he might have pushed him in the opposite direction.

“I’m sorry, Bucky.”

If Bucky was gone tomorrow morning, he realized with a cold sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, he’d have no one to blame for it but himself.

“You were right, you know?” He reached out a hand and laid it gently on Bucky’s shoulder. A big risk, sure, considering that Bucky had pulled a knife the last time he’d laid a hand on him, but damn it, his friend needed the support.

Bucky flinched, stiffened, but then gradually relaxed. And Steve breathed a sigh of relief, giving Bucky’s shoulder a squeeze for good measure. “You were right when you said that somebody was lying to you, and Karpov was the biggest liar of them all.” He shook his head sadly. “Karpov was as evil as they come, Buck. And the worst thing he did was convincing you that he was a good man.”

Bucky stared at Steve’s hand on his shoulder, but he didn’t pull away either. Slowly he lowered his hands, fingers clenching around the blanket. “It wasn’t…” He was breathing heavily, nearly panting. “It wasn’t Comrade General Karpov. He wasn’t… It wasn’t the old man, it’s HYDRA. They’re... they’re the ones... It’s HYDRA...”

Steve was on the verge of correcting Bucky, reminding him that while HYDRA had definitely played their part - and he wasn’t yet entirely certain what that part might have been - Karpov had still committed the original sin. But the more rational part of himself reminded him that Bucky hadn’t been able to process what he’d said just a moment ago without reverting to an almost childlike state. He’d clapped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut against what he didn’t want to hear. The hard truth about Karpov might have to wait for now.

“I don’t know.” Bucky shook his head. “I don’t know anything. I don’t know.” Gradually his breathing slowed. He waited a moment, then, “It’s HYDRA. It’s all HYDRA. They’re as evil as they come.” He was suddenly very calm, and he looked up from the blanket and met Steve’s eyes. “And I need to find them and kill them all.”

“I want HYDRA destroyed as badly as you do, Buck.” Steve gripped Bucky’s shoulder tightly. “But we don’t know enough to go after all of them. But if you know where to go, and who to go after…”

Bucky looked at him, a vague expression of wariness flitting across his face.

Steve leaned in close, his eyes intense. “Who took over the Winter Soldier project in HYDRA, Bucky? Was it Alexander Pierce?”

---

Commander Pierce?

He had been the Secretary of SHIELD and very highly placed in HYDRA, but why would he have
been in charge of a former-Soviet operation?

The question made no sense.

“Commander Pierce is dead,” Bucky said shortly. “He’s not a concern. But there were many HYDRA operatives within SHIELD.”

He wondered if Brock Rumlow and the rest of his STRIKE team were dead. Rumlow had been an asshole. If he weren’t dead, Bucky would take care of that soon enough.

“You should neutralize them before they go into hiding.”

He had the beginnings of a plan then. Steve would take care of the HYDRA operatives within SHIELD, which freed up Bucky to return to Russia and take care of HYDRA there. Maybe if they killed them fast enough, they wouldn’t have time to reform?

So long as he got to the General.

Steve frowned. “I’m with you on that, Buck. But who was your commanding officer?”

Bucky looked away.

The name was right on the tip of his tongue and he could see the man’s hateful, angry face, too. He knew his business and his habits, and he knew how much he disliked Bucky. He never even tried to hide how much he disliked him, and the doctor had repeatedly instructed Bucky not to show any dislike or disobedience in return.

Bucky hated him, and soon he would go back to Russia and kill him, and he would be very glad to do it.

But give away his name?

He couldn’t give away his name.

It didn’t matter that he hated the General. It didn’t matter that he planned to go back to Russia and kill him personally before killing everyone else in HYDRA. None of that mattered.

He couldn’t give away the name of his commanding officer.

He couldn’t do it.

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“You can’t tell me, can you?”

This time there was no mistaking the lack of response. And there was no mistaking the reason behind it either. Either Bucky was refusing to give up his commanding officer’s name, or he couldn’t do it. And based on everything Steve knew about HYDRA, as well as Bucky’s strongly expressed desire to hunt them all down and flat-out murder them all, he was willing to believe the latter.

That must have been it, he thought as another wave of sickness clenched his stomach. They must have conditioned him against giving any of that information away. HYDRA agents during the war had poisoned themselves rather than be taken alive and potentially provide their enemies with intelligence. It made sense that if HYDRA had gotten their hands on something like the Soviets’ brainwashing chair, they would have used it on Bucky to put some sort of mental block in place that would prevent him from giving up something as crucial as his commanding officer’s name.
Well, maybe now wasn’t the best time in the world to pursue that avenue of questioning anyway. Especially after he’d gone and upset Bucky on the heels of his frightening catatonic episode, it would probably be better to just follow through with his original plan.

“C’mon, Bucky.” He gave Bucky’s shoulder one final squeeze and stood up. “Why don’t you join me for a nice jog. Then we can come home and have a shower and some breakfast. And you can maybe find out how you like your eggs best.”

Chapter End Notes

Bucky's 1973 adventure is inspired by Captain America vol. 5 #11 by Ed Brubaker.

As always, feedback, concrit, and random kerfuffles are warmly welcomed.
Final Nightmare File

Chapter Notes

This is to those who like their fictional characters emotionally gutted while resolving some of the 20th century’s greatest mysteries.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Washington DC
a week or so prior

When he’d first been reawoken after his long sleep in the ice, Steve had resolved to catch up on what he’d missed. As his assigned SHIELD liaison, Sharon Carter had done her best to help him reacclimate. One day, she’d walked in with a stack of DVDs in her hands, explaining that she’d brought him a series of award-winning documentaries on each of the decades he’d slept through.

He’d watched all of them, fascinated and mesmerized by just how much things had changed in the sixty-plus years he’d been in suspended animation. Germany and Japan had become not only trusted American allies, but global economic powerhouses as well. People could watch films without having to leave their homes - or even their beds, as he discovered - thanks to the advent of television. The entire world was connected by a constantly-updating information framework. A man had walked on the moon.

M Miracles had abounded in those sixty years, and he had watched them all unfold in rapt fascination.

But that first decade had been the hardest to get through; the decade of the 1950s when the Soviet Union had turned from America’s closest ally to its most bitter enemy. When the American people had become terrified of the possibility that Communism might overrun the country. When a despicable man named Joseph McCarthy had played on that fear and almost singlehandedly created a frenzied hysteria that, though it was called ‘patriotism’, had no resemblance whatsoever to what Steve and the men he’d fought beside had felt.

And Bucky had been right in the middle of it. Carrying out the covert missions, the so-called black operations, which would officially not have existed but which had helped encourage that climate of fear and paranoia. Conned and brainwashed into taking up arms against his own country. Denied even the memory of his former life, his true identity, his home, his family…

There were no words for describing the anger, Steve decided. No words for describing the rage, the betrayal, the bitterness, the injustice of it all.

The file read like a particularly gruesome laundry list.

In 1946, a prominent member of the Politburo is assassinated in broad daylight as he walks to his car.

In 1947, a top scientist defects to West Germany. He is found dead in his house. His family is killed, as are his colleagues and known associates.

In 1948, several members of the United Nations are murdered in a chalet in Switzerland.

In 1949, negotiators of the Armistice Agreements are killed in a car crash, found drowned in a
swimming pool, discovered broken at the bottom of a stairwell, one after the other in a matter of
days.

The file went on and on: an American ambassador, a Swedish cabinet minister, a German financier -
no country, it seemed, had been spared. Pages and pages, with an occasional photograph or hasty
annotation in the margins. And endless medical reports; they reconditioned him constantly, wiping
and rewriting memories, programming in new ones. He learned new languages and acquired new
skills every year. The fighting skills he had to physically learn, but the rest was due to the Soviets’
‘mental recalibration device.’ He never failed a mission, never let his handlers or his superior officers
down. The perfect, obedient Soviet patriot, who never once questioned anything.

Not for years.

“These people were fanatics.” Steve shook his head bitterly and looked over at Natasha. Their
Chinese food sat, semi-picked-over, on the coffee table. Was there anyone who wasn’t on their
enemies list?”

“Everyone was the enemy,” Natasha said listlessly. The file was open in front of her, a large
photograph of a dead Swedish cabinet minister displayed prominently. “Even your own people could
very quickly become targets.”

She started to reach for one of the remaining wontons in the carton, seemingly changed her mind,
and tucked herself into the corner of the couch instead.

“Rogers?” She closed her eyes, tipped her head back, and wrapped her arms around herself. “Steve?
Make me tea.”

A flash of memory smacked Steve in the face unexpectedly.

They’d been in high school, and Bucky had been going steady for a few weeks with a very pretty
girl named Esther Schwartzbaum. Her conservative Jewish parents, however, hadn’t approved of
their daughter going steady with an Irish Catholic boy, so things had ended messily. Bucky’d been
devastated by that development and, in typical fashion, had crawled into bed and cocooned himself
miserably away from the world. Steve had gone in to try to talk sense to him, and after a good long
pep talk, Bucky had responded with a sullen “Make me a sandwich.” Which, of course, he’d been
only too happy to do, and Bucky had dragged himself out of bed and back into the world not long
after.

If only it could still be that simple.

He came back to the couch a few moments later, two cups of tea in hand, and sat down beside
Natasha. Reading the file was obviously distressing her - understandable, given what she’d so
recently revealed about her relationship with Bucky - and so she might be glad of at least some
comfortable closeness.

He knew he’d need it before all was said and done.

“They kept him active all this time.” He shook his head bitterly, aghast at the depths to which people
were capable of sinking and distraught that his best friend had been the victim. “Murdering anyone
who got in their way, or even might have gotten in their way, just like Project Insight was supposed
to have done.”

Natasha had nothing to say to that, and Steve didn’t press. For several minutes, they sat on the couch
in silence, one or the other occasionally sipping a gentle mint chamomile tea, until Natasha felt ready
to continue.

In 1950, several South Korean mediators are assassinated outside the Grand Palace Hotel in Seoul.

In 1951, three prominent American scientists turn up dead while visiting Oxford University. One of them mysteriously commits suicide in his guest suite, one falls from a window, and the third is found dead in the library stacks.

In 1952, the Winter Soldier is used to great effect as a trainer in the Red Room. He is used on and off in this manner for years.

In 1953, another person is senselessly killed.

And another.

And another.

And into 1954, 1955, 1956, and never once does the file indicate that the Winter Soldier questions any of his assignments.

Steve listened as Natasha laid it out, seeming to hesitate at points but never pausing for too long. It couldn’t have been easy for her, but she didn’t stop.

In 1957, something changes in Karpov’s report.

20 February 1957

It is with regret that I report that after over a decade of selective use around the world, Codename: Winter Soldier has shown some instability in his conditioning…

Bucky had been in the middle of a particularly odious mission - assassinating a group of defectors who’d crossed the Iron Curtain and brought politically volatile information with them - when he’d suddenly snapped. In the process of carrying out the murders in the basement of an opera house in the capital city of what had then been West Germany, he had turned against the team of Soviet agents who had accompanied him and slaughtered them all. When he’d been subdued and brought back to Moscow, Karpov and Pushkin had interrogated him - under heavy sedation and the influence of psychotropic drugs - to discover what had caused the ‘disturbing breach in protocol’.

Partial transcript of interrogation of Codename: Winter Soldier by Comrade General Vasily Yuryevich Karpov. Dr. Fyodor Ilyich Pushkin attending.

Date: 21 February 1957

Time: 921

Transcriber: Dr. Iosif Olegovich Lagunov

KARPOV: You will explain your actions, Winter Soldier. Explain the deaths of your team at your hands. Now.

WINTER SOLDIER: It wasn’t… they weren’t meant to…

KARPOV: It does not matter what they were meant to do. It matters what you did to them. (pause, Comrade General Karpov consults extraction team’s mission report) Every member of your support team was killed. One’s larynx was crushed, one was stabbed through the eye socket, one’s carotids were slashed, one’s neck was broken, and the last had a fractured skull. You will account for yourself.

WINTER SOLDIER: They were not… not… my team… Not my…
KARPOV: They were your support team, Winter Soldier. Their deaths are your responsibility. I want an explanation. Why did you do this?

WINTER SOLDIER: … not my team… Shouldn’t… be here… shouldn’t… all wrong…

KARPOV: What makes you think that?

WINTER SOLDIER: Wrong… here… All wrong… I’m not… not…

KARPOV: Answer me, Soldier. Why do you suddenly think this is all wrong?

WINTER SOLDIER: She wouldn’t… Rebekka wouldn’t… Bekka… shouldn’t be here… she…

KARPOV: Rebekka? (pause; consults mission dossier) Rebekka Nikitovna Zhelezkina was the name of one of your primary targets. A defector and political dissident capable of transmitting sensitive information to enemies of the Motherland. (pause) Something troubled you about her. What was it?

WINTER SOLDIER: Bekka… Bekka wouldn’t…

KARPOV: Bekka? Who is Bekka?

WINTER SOLDIER: Birthday was… yesterday… her birthday…

KARPOV: What are you… (long pause; then to Pushkin) Keep him sedated. I will continue this interrogation later.

Of course it hadn’t taken long for Karpov to find the connection: Rebecca Barnes, Bucky’s younger sister, who had been born on February 20th of 1919. Karpov’s reaction had been as swift and decisive as it had been horrifying: he’d ordered Pushkin to wipe all associations with the name Rebecca from Bucky’s mind, along with the details of that mission.

Steve had heard the expression ‘seeing red’, of course, but he’d never actually experienced it until now. A flood of anger surged over him so quickly, so powerfully, that his vision actually crinkled red at the edges momentarily.

“So close.” His voice came out strained. “He was so close to figuring out the truth. He actually turned against the bastards. And they still took it away from him.”

He wanted to find them, wanted to beat them within an inch of their lives before dragging what was left of them off to justice, wanted to make them undo the unspeakable things they’d done, but it was too late. Far too late. They were long dead, all of them, and Bucky…

“They took it all away.”

“It’s going to keep happening, Steve.” Natasha said the words very quietly. “That’s what they do.” She could not hide the exhaustion in her voice. “They go into your head and unmake you to the point that you never even realize you’ve been unmade. And if you do realize it…”

She gestured uselessly at the file.

“They just unmake you again. And again and again, until you’re no longer useful to them.” She looked at Steve, raised an eyebrow. “We’re only into the fifties, and it’s not going to get better. Do you want to keep going?”

“No.” He looked at Natasha, who wore on her face and in her posture what he felt in his heart. “But we need to.”
Natasha was speaking from experience, he knew. About being unmade, about being used until the end of usefulness and then discarded. And he felt absolutely awful for her, especially given what she’d revealed to him last time. Reading about the systematic dismantling of a man she’d once loved - not only reading through it, but having to analyze it and dwell on it enough to translate it aloud - must have been devastating.

He supposed that he and Natasha had more in common than either of them had thought.

Even so, he thought with a fresh burst of anger at Karpov, she’d gotten out. She’d been able to hang onto enough of her mental faculties to think about leaving that life behind, and able to make the choice herself when the time came. She hadn’t lost her sense of self. Bucky, though, had never had a prayer. They’d just ripped it away from him - who knew how many times? - and continued to use and abuse him.

“If you’re okay to keep going, that is.”

Natasha nodded over her tea, took what must have been a fortifying sip, and carried on reading the laundry list of despicable things Bucky had suffered through.

Later on in the spring of 1957, only a scant couple of months after Bucky had turned on his captors and been made to forget his sister’s name, there had been another incident. Again, Bucky had been sent to assassinate a defector. However, the man had had a daughter - not included in his dossier, apparently - who had appeared and spoiled the kill shot. Bucky had followed the pair of them into a dead-end alley, where he’d carried out the assassination not ten feet from the girl. But that had not been the worst…

16 April 1957
The Winter Soldier’s most recent mission was successful. His mission report, however, gave rise to a troubling incident. The Winter Soldier was irate during his debriefing, behaving without discipline before me and an assemblage of military and Party representatives. He was insistent that his mission dossier should have included information on the child, and became agitated when Comrade Yusupov asked him whether the dossier should also have included information on the target’s pets.

The Winter Soldier then lost all composure and began to yell at the assembled group in English. Thankfully, none of them made any comment; it seems they were too taken aback at the Winter Soldier’s breach of discipline to notice the language he had been using.

Afterwards, the Winter Soldier’s handler Gogol Feliksovich approached me and made me aware of another troubling development: it seems…

---

Natasha choked on the last few lines of the mission report.

It couldn’t be right.

She stared at the words, typewritten on paper yellowed and brittle with age, willing them to reform into something that made better sense. The longer she kept her gaze fixed to the page, the more the date jumped out at her.

1957.

The mission had happened in 1957.

Steve looked at her with concern. “Natasha?”
She shook her head, willed herself to continue. And when that didn’t happen, and a few more seconds ticked by in tense silence, she forced herself to translate the last few sentences aloud.

“It seems the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow Romanova have been engaged in…”

Karpov’s words, written so many years ago, rendered the relationship cold and clinical. They had been engaged in ‘conduct unbecoming of Soviet operatives.’

Fuck him.

“… an illicit affair that we are going to destroy, as we must have absolute control over every aspect of our operatives’ lives. In 1957.”

“In 1957,” Steve echoed. He stared at Natasha in shock. “That’s nearly sixty years ago. How is that possible?”

“I…” She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Her whole body felt achingly cold, and before she knew it, she was shivering. She drew her knees up, wrapped her arms around her legs, and hugged herself tightly.

“I don’t know how that’s possible.”

For a long, disbelieving moment, she stared at the file, then at the teacup, then at the large bullet holes scarring the far wall. They had been hastily plastered over, but anyone with any sense would know them for what they were.

“I’ve always known that something wasn’t right. I’ve always known that my memories weren’t entirely correct, that something was off.” She shook her head. “When I first defected to SHIELD, Fury made me talk to a therapist regularly. It was part of our agreement, part of keeping me on the straight and narrow, as he said.”

Best not to think about Fury right then. Best to keep moving forward.

“And I used to tell the therapist that I wasn’t remembering things correctly, that I couldn’t keep dates straight in my head, and she thought…” She swallowed the block of ice that had become jammed in her throat. “She thought it was selective amnesia stemming from trauma. And it seemed… it seemed…”

She felt very tired suddenly.

“I don’t know. I don’t have an answer.”

---

Steve didn’t have an answer for her either. What was there to even say to the bombshell that had just been dropped on her? The fact that she’d just seen concrete confirmation that she wasn’t even as old as she’d thought she was? God, how much else about herself was she doubting now?

The thought occurred to him suddenly and sickeningly that Natasha had very likely suffered through most of the same things that Bucky had. And looking at the way she’d curled in on herself, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms protectively around herself, it seemed more definite than likely.

Natasha had always been the consummate professional: cool under pressure, never allowing her
emotions to dictate her behavior, never even allowing her emotions to show. It was only a select few people, he’d learned, who would be allowed to see her drop that facade and see her at her realest and most vulnerable self. He’d become one of them very recently, and definitely in the wake of the fall of SHIELD, but he’d never expected to witness a moment like this - or her reaction to it.

He reached an arm out and put it around her shoulders, drawing her close to him as they sat side by side on the sofa. He hugged her tightly and supportively, and tried futilely to make sense of what she’d just read.

She leaned into the hug, seemingly automatically. At any other time, maybe she would have pulled away, but it appeared they both needed the connection and warmth in that moment.

“I’m glad you got away from them.” He shook his head in sadness and anger, hating the fact that she had had her life stolen from her every bit as much as Bucky had. “No one deserves this kind of a life.”

“No one deserves a lot of what we’ve ended up with.” She shrugged half-heartedly. “But it’s what we have to work with.”

Several seconds ticked by before she spoke again.

“I already told you how the relationship ended for me that first time. I was ordered not to see him again, and they sent me somewhere else. And I didn’t see him again, not for… I was going to say years, but... I don’t even know now. It could be years. It could be decades.” She exhaled slowly. “Let’s see how the shit show ends.”

They delved into the file again.

17 April 1957
The recent difficulties with the Winter Soldier’s behavior have gotten out of hand.

The deaths of his support team in West Germany were regrettable but not cause for termination of the program. The mental recalibration device was used to great effect, and I was willing to put the incident down to coincidence and poor luck. However, the double fiasco of his loss of discipline in front of the Party officials and his illicit affair with the Black Widow could not be ignored.

I have conferred with Comrade Doctor Pushkin, who has voiced the opinion that the Winter Soldier’s conditioning may be beginning to break down. However, he also offered a suggestion which I feel has merit: the Winter Soldier may be kept in cryogenic stasis during periods of inactivity and revived when needed. Comrade Doctor Pushkin also believes that if the Winter Soldier is conditioned immediately before immersion in cryostasis, the hibernation may serve to fix the conditioning more deeply in his subconscious.

We will proceed with this course of action.

18 April 1957
The Winter Soldier was initially resistant to the idea of cryogenic hibernation, going so far as to tell me outright that he ‘did not want to be frozen’. Thankfully, however, his instinct to obey orders has been strengthened enough by his conditioning that he did not refuse outright.

The procedure was a success. The Winter Soldier is now in stasis.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

They’d treated Bucky like a science experiment. A lab rat. He felt bile rise in his throat at the idea.
What kind of monsters were these people? And how had there been no justice for them?

“This is where it started.” He gritted his teeth. “Treating him like a weapon, like a thing. Something to be used and then just stuck back on the shelf till next time.”

He looked over at Natasha for her reaction and saw that she had gone positively green. And all over again, he thought about how torturous this must have been for her. Not only because of what she’d once felt for Bucky, but because she must have been wondering how much of this horror she’d experienced herself and never known about.

“Natasha?” He reached out to her again. “We can stop if you want. Maybe try again tomorrow if you’re up for it.”

---

Natasha agreed so quickly, and was out of the apartment so fast, that she couldn’t remember if she told him whether or not she would return the next day.

Ah well. They could just blame it on her own fucked up memories.

Sleep did not come easily to her that night, and she was up and jogging the next morning much earlier than she normally would have. Reading and translating the file, she decided, was its own special form of mental torture, and she wasn’t entirely sure if she wanted to continue doing it or not.

No, that was a blatant lie, and she knew it the second the thought crossed her mind.

There was absolutely no way she wasn’t going to finish reading the file. For one, she would absolutely never hear the end of it from Steve, and for another…

For another, she had to know the whole truth for herself. Anything else was unacceptable.

She let herself into Steve’s apartment around mid-morning, armed with four very large breakfast burritos and two cups of coffee. Not too long after, he turned up, sweaty from what appeared to be his own morning jog.

“Hey.” She gestured toward three of the burritos. “I thought we’d fortify ourselves this time.”

“Hey yourself.” Steve smiled. Her penchant for letting herself into his apartment unannounced was getting to be something of a running gag between them, and she would keep doing it so long as she kept enjoying his reaction. “At least you brought the food this time instead of helping yourself to mine.”

A shower and a change of clothes later, Steve was sitting on the sofa beside Natasha once again with a cup of coffee and three breakfast burritos in front of him, and Natasha felt ready to begin.

Considering everything they had discovered the previous evening, the morning’s reading was almost too deceptively easy. It felt almost companionable, sitting with their breakfast burritos and their coffee, reading over a laundry list of horror and death.

She warned herself to be cautious.

Over the next several years, the Winter Soldier is taken out of cryostasis, sent on missions and deployed to the Red Room, and returned to cryostasis at regular intervals. Comrade Doctor Pushkin also discovers that if the Winter Soldier is subject to conditioning not only right before going into cryostasis, but immediately after being thawed, the programming tends to root itself more deeply in
They teach the Winter Soldier to think of cryostasis as ‘rest’, and he no longer resists or questions its implementation.

And so it went.

More missions, more Red Room training, no further incidents.

“It’s almost banal.” She finished off her burrito and pushed her plate aside. “The banality of evil; a typewritten file of atrocities written by a man with no imagination or wit.”

---

Steve looked at her for a long moment with his eyebrow raised. He’d never heard her speak that way; it had sounded almost poetic. It struck him that he was seeing Natasha through no filter, with no mask and no facade. He was seeing her in a way very few people had ever seen her - as her truest self.

He wondered if she might end up going through something very much like he’d gone through himself in the first few months following his return. Whether she might begin to feel more and more that she did not belong to this time and place, especially as she learned more about her own past. And he wondered what, if anything, he might be able to do to help her.

But then the nuclear bomb exploded.

November 22nd, 1963. Dallas, Texas. The assassination that had shaken the world to its core and left an indelible blot on the soul of America.

*The Americans have been dealt a formidable blow. Their President, the man responsible for humiliating Comrade Premier Kruschev in the disastrous Caribbean Crisis, has been publicly assassinated. And most wonderfully of all, the man responsible was once one of their own, but is now a true Soviet patriot as well as the deadliest assassin ever conceived of.*

*The Winter Soldier has made the Motherland proud.*

“No.” Steve’s face had gone slack with horror. “Not him. I don’t believe it.”

Except he did. And that was the most gut-wrenchingly terrible part of it. There was no denying the reality before him.

Bucky had murdered President John F. Kennedy.

A white-hot ball of anger suddenly exploded in his chest. Bucky had been a soldier, damn it. A good soldier and a good American, and there was a time when he would have died before allowing any harm to come to the sitting U.S. President, let alone causing that harm himself. And yet Karpov had boasted of Bucky’s ‘Soviet patriotism’. It made him wish the man was in front of him right now, so he could throttle the life out of him…

“God damn them.” He spat the words out through gritted teeth, past a throat choked with rage. “God damn them all to hell. They ruined him!” He found himself suddenly on his feet, hands punctuating his words with harsh chopping motions.

Natasha looked at him wordlessly.
“They had no right turning Bucky against America. And for what? Because Karpov had a chip on his shoulder? Because he thought it would be funny, making a war hero shoot the President of his own country?” His hands curled into fists. “That assassination changed the way America worked. People spent their whole lives trying to figure out how it happened. And now…”

Now, he didn’t know.

He felt his self-control slipping rapidly away as he thought about what would invariably happen if this information got out. “This many years after it happened, everyone else who had a hand in the assassination is long dead. The only one left is Bucky, and it won’t matter to anyone that he wasn’t even a willing participant. They’ll bring the hammer down on him because there’s nobody else left. He’s going to be the one that fifty years’ worth of anger and resentment is going to fall on, and there won’t ever be any hope for him after that.”

One way or another, he realized with dull horror, Bucky wouldn’t survive it.

“No one else can know about this.” He turned to Natasha, suddenly panic-stricken. “If anyone else finds out about this, they’ll throw Bucky in a hole for the rest of his life or just outright execute him. They won’t care whether or not it was his fault.”

---

Natasha found she had nothing to say to any of that. Under normal circumstances, she was able to disarm a person verbally with a quip or some droll observation, but in that moment, words deserted her.

The file sat mockingly on the coffee table, and Steve stared at her, breathing heavily, his expression a strange mixture of terror and rage.

She had a moment to consider that the same man who was willing to blow SHIELD wide open no matter the consequences and who had been perfectly happy to let Natasha dump all of their secrets online for the world to see was now willing to cover up one of the greatest mysteries of the 20th century. And for one man.

She wondered what else he might do for James Barnes.

“You’re right.”

Carefully she unclipped the pages of that specific report, taking a moment to skim the aftermath of the assassination. It wasn’t pretty, and she wouldn’t mention it to Steve unless he asked.

“A Soviet-turned-HYDRA assassin would make the perfect scapegoat for any party, and no one will actually care about the truth.”

She held the pages out to him.

---

A moment passed while Steve looked at the pages Natasha was holding out to him. It gradually dawned on him that she was giving him what was very probably the only evidence in existence that tied Bucky to the assassination. She must have known what he would do with them, and yet she was holding them out to him anyway.

If ever she’d proven that she was on the right side, it was now.
Oh, she’d proven it in other ways, at other times. She’d risked her own life countless times to protect innocent people. She’d taken on the most dangerous missions - often volunteered for them - without hesitation. When the Chitauri had invaded, she’d stayed right there beside him to help evacuate the streets. She’d been the one who’d made the decision to blow SHIELD wide open. And yet this gesture, so small in comparison to all the rest - one man’s life compared to the lives of billions - stood with all the rest.

He took the pages and looked at them for a long moment, then looked back at Natasha.

“What happened after he came back?”

He’d destroy the pages after they finished.

She looked at him for a long moment, then, “When he returned to Moscow, Karpov congratulated him on a job well done. Then they wiped the entire mission from his mind and put him on ice for a year.” She shrugged. “Karpov and the ranking members of the Politburo obviously wouldn’t have wanted there to be anything that could trace the assassination back to the Soviets.”

Steve exhaled heavily, but said nothing.

“As for the others… Oswald and Ruby were both sleeper agents triggered into action and set up as patsies. Ruby was later silenced by a Black Widow.” Before Steve could ask, she held up her hand. “Not me, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the infamous Babushka Lady was a Black Widow.”

“And I wonder who ended up killing her?” He shook his head angrily. “That was the Soviet M.O., right? Just kill anyone who knows anything dangerous?”

And then kill the killer. And the one who had killed the killer. And so on into infinity, the paranoia never really diminishing. Natasha had come from that culture as well; she knew the extent of the lunacy that had characterized the Soviet Union’s secret military programs. It was a wonder she’d escaped alive.

“This is insane.” He dropped onto the sofa as though his legs had gone nerveless and stared at the papers still in his hand. “Completely insane. All of it.”

He stared at those papers for a long moment, until finally he couldn’t stand it any longer. He got to his feet and all but ran to the electric fireplace, turned it on to its highest setting and fed the papers in. And as the gas-fed flames hungrily ate up the only evidence that would link Bucky to the most infamous crime of the twentieth century, he fought down a sob of rage and anguish.

They both watched wordlessly as the fire curled the papers into ash.

When the job was complete, Natasha spent a few minutes clearing the breakfast dishes and tossing empty paper cups into the trash. Steve watched from the couch as she peered into his mostly-barren fridge and cupboards, coming up with the last two bottles of Boylan’s Creamy Red Birch Beer and a bag of pretzels.

He looked at her as she sat down next to him with the snacks. “When does it end?”

She sipped at her birch beer. “Let’s find out.”

Compared to the Kennedy assassination, the following decade was largely unremarkable. Oh, plenty of people had been senselessly murdered, of course, but nothing bore the same infamy as the mysterious assassination of a US president. Of note was that the Winter Soldier had more than once tried to slip the leash. And every time such an instance occurred, Steve reacted with fresh outrage.
In 1968, the Winter Soldier returns from a compromised mission in Beijing. The mission is one of his only failures, triggered by the target recognizing him as the hero who had rescued him as a young boy during the war.

Karpov’s response after a lengthy debriefing is to wipe the mission, and all associations thereof, from the Winter Soldier’s mind. He is informed that he will be reawakened when the Motherland has need of him once more, then returned to cryostasis.

In 1973, the Winter Soldier goes AWOL while on a mission in Dallas, Texas. It takes several weeks, and many sleeper agents breaking cover, to track him down. He is accosted right before reaching Brooklyn.

In the meantime, Dr. Pushkin dies of a sudden heart attack. He is replaced by his protégé, Dmitriy Stepanovich Rodchenko, who is responsible for getting the Winter Soldier to talk via the young doctor’s newly developed, highly potent truth serum.

Once again, Karpov’s response is to wipe the mission, and all associations with Brooklyn, from the Winter Soldier’s mind, before returning him to cryostasis.

And so it went.

Steve felt a sudden swell of anger at Pushkin, who had died without being held accountable for any of the horrible things he’d done. He’d gotten away with it. And the only thing Steve could hope for - not that it was much of a comfort - was that there was a justice beyond man’s. That Pushkin, who had escaped earthly justice, had only eternal torment to look forward to.

“So they didn’t let him remember anything.” He wasn’t sure how much more of this he could stand. He didn’t like being angry, and that was all he seemed to be feeling as they read through this encyclopedia of horrors. “Not his home, not his family, not his best friend, not even the missions they sent him on. They didn’t leave him anything.”

He wondered whether the repeated freezings and thawings had damaged Bucky’s mind any more or less than the repeated mind-wipes. If he somehow managed to find Bucky, and he worked as hard as he could to remind him who he’d once been, would there be a point Bucky couldn’t go beyond? Would he always remain the Winter Soldier?

“So what about Karpov?” He found himself desperately struggling to find something to hang onto. “How long did he live?”

---

They hadn’t let the Winter Soldier remember Natasha either, but she kept that little fact tucked away near the bullet scar on her stomach.

“I don’t know. If he’s still alive, he’d be very old now, and would it even matter?” She shrugged. “At some point, the Winter Soldier ends up with HYDRA, and we still don’t know if it was by choice or not.”

She hoped not, but she also knew quite well where hope could get a person.

From 1979 to 1981, the Winter Soldier is dispatched several times to Afghanistan without incident.

In 1982, the Winter Soldier accompanies Karpov and Rodchenko on a more permanent assignment to Afghanistan, which lasts for five years.
By this point, General Karpov is well into his eighties, but his loyalty to the Soviet enterprise keeps him from retiring. The Winter Soldier experiences several psychotic breaks during his time in Afghanistan, which Rodchenko attributes to long-buried wartime trauma resurfacing in the face of another brutal conflict.

And so it went, on and on.

At the tail end of 1987, the Winter Soldier is abruptly recalled to Moscow and placed into cryostasis without explanation.

Shortly after, in 1988, Karpov can longer hide the cancer that has been eating away at him, and he prepares to retire. In doing so, he abruptly shutters Department X, immediately dismissing all staff.

On 26 March 1988, Project: Winter Soldier is permanently decommissioned.

Natasha stared at Karpov’s last typewritten report. Something ugly and hot twisted violently in her stomach, so tightly she nearly vomited.

“Karpov died.”

She reached for her nearly-empty bottle of birch beer, drained off the dregs, and set it down heavily on the table.

“Karpov died, and it…” She looked at Steve with exhausted eyes. “It’s ugly, Steve. If you want to hear it anyway, I’ll read it to you. But it’s ugly.”

“Go ahead.” The resignation was clear in his tone. “It can’t be any uglier than the rest of this.”

20 March 1988

As I write these words, I cannot deny that they may be the last ones I will ever convey. For many years now, I have known that my disease was incurable. It is only my will, my dedication to the Soviet Union and to the Soviet people, that has kept me alive this long. And perhaps it is fate that the last days of my life come now, before I can witness the end of the Soviet era.

However, I can look back on my life and my contributions to the Soviet Union with pride. I presided over the majority of our victories during the so-called Cold War, largely due to the fact that I had foreseen the coming conflict even during the Second World War. And it was during the last days of that war that my greatest and most enduring blow against the Americans was struck.

I remember the first time I laid eyes on the man who would later become the Winter Soldier. There was little to distinguish him then, accompanied as he was by a man transformed by science into the perfect physical specimen. Beside him, the man named James Buchanan Barnes was as nothing. But I remember that day because I remember the astounding fact that Captain America was his best friend.

Captain America. The man wrapped in the flag of a country which fancied itself the leader of all the nations of the world. A man who revealed himself to personify everything worth despising about the United States. An arrogant man, who believed that his nationality gave him the right to give orders to men who should never have answered to him. A man who believed that his tiny band of mercenaries had accomplished their goals alone, by virtue of their individual accomplishments, never paying mind to the massive armies who had stood behind them. A man who owed all he was to science, yet seemed to believe that he was who he was because of where he came from.

And that is the greatest facet of the Winter Soldier. Not the countless enemies of the State he has laid to waste, not the endless usefulness he has provided to the Motherland, but the fact that I was able to
take an American - so much of one that he was the best friend of the very personification of the country - and transform him into that country’s deadliest enemy. A man who would slaughter his fellow soldiers, his countrymen, or his own President without question, so great was his Soviet patriotism. And a man who would kill his own best friend in cold blood because he represented everything wrong with the world.

This is my legacy, then. My final and decisive blow in a lifelong battle with the imperialist, capitalist, debauched West and its figurehead, the United States of America. My only regret is that I cannot live long enough to see him stand on the ruins of the American empire and raise the red-starred flag high over the dawn of the new world. But what I have done will have to suffice.

Glory to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, now and forevermore.

--Vasily Yuryevich Karpov, General

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Steve sat there for a long time, his jaw clenched and tears of rage, sorrow, and hate welling in his eyes. He’d known. Karpov had known exactly who Bucky was and what he’d meant to him. And not despite that, but because of it, he’d chosen to warp Bucky and turn him against America - and against him especially.

And he, too, had escaped justice. He’d died unpunished and gloating.

“I should never have saved his life.” He shook his head angrily. “I should have let him die. I should have just left him to the Nazis; he would’ve been right at home in their company. He hated me so much, he hated America so much, and he couldn’t do anything to me, so he took it all out on Bucky.” He shook his head again, fighting against the sob that was threatening to tear itself free. “I should have killed him myself. Then Bucky never would have…”

He broke down then. The tears overflowed, and he buried his head in his hands.

Chapter End Notes

A NOTE ABOUT THE BUCKY'S BACKSTORY: A little bit is taken from Captain America and Bucky #624 by Ed Brubaker, mainly the part where Bucky and Natasha had a relationship in their Soviet operative days. The rest is taken from my enjoyment of emotionally gutting characters before building them back up. So no, I don't have Brubaker to blame for Bucky's assassination of JFK.

Comments, concrit, questions, and recommendations for really good green tea are warmly welcomed.
Red Hook, Brooklyn
October 2014

Natasha parked the bike in Rogers’ customary spot and walked the half-block up to his apartment. It was always fun to drive that bike. She loved driving anything fast, and there’d been enough of a reason to make the trip go quickly this time that she’d gone double the speed limit for most of the highway distance.

James…

She wasn’t sure how to feel about meeting him again. The file had revealed enough to tell her that there was more to him than she’d seen in their whole head-spinningly complex relationship, especially their past two encounters. And yet, the abrupt dead-end of the file in 1988 seemed to create more questions than it answered.

Maybe the questions were better left unanswered? But that was a lie, and she knew it. And anyway, she had never been one to run away from a challenge.

Rogers wasn’t home when she went up, but it was no great trick to let herself into the apartment. He’d gone a bit pouty the first couple of times she’d done it, but she’d known it wouldn’t take long for him to get used to it. And she’d been right; he’d hardly batted an eye last time, and she’d been eating his cereal into the bargain.

But she didn’t have the apartment to herself for too long. Suddenly there was the sound of a key in the lock and Rogers’ voice in the hallway, and then there he was.

There they were.

James spotted her instantly, his body tensing briefly in unconscious preparation for action. She knew that reflex well, still caught herself doing it at inopportune times. Old habits died hard, it seemed, but he also didn’t carry it any further. He simply stayed where he was, waiting for someone else to make the first move.

“Hi, Natasha.” As usual, that someone was Rogers. “You’re in luck. We brought dinner.”

“So I see.” She smirked at Rogers in that way she knew got him to shake his head and smile back. “That Tortellini’s place must give you frequent flyer miles.”

“Turvino’s.” The head shake and smile, on cue. “And there’s enough for you, if you like.”

James, predictably, hadn’t said a word. His facial expression betrayed nothing. But she didn’t expect it to.
Steve unlocked the door and they walked into the apartment, and she was waiting for them.

*Chyornaya Vdova.*

Black Widow.


Traitor.

Maybe.

She and Steve were talking about dinner, and her expressions suggested friendliness and familiarity, but that didn’t mean anything. The sol- *Bucky* - was supposed to have killed her if she interfered in any way with the launch of the Insight helicarriers, but that didn’t mean anything anymore either.

Maybe.

He wasn’t sure.

Either way, she wasn’t talking to him, she was talking to Steve, and so he stood there with his hands by his sides and waited.

He was very good at waiting.

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As Natasha and Rogers chatted amicably, she had time to take a good look at James - Bucky? She could never see herself referring to him that way; the name sounded all wrong. When they’d met on the causeway, it had been a life-or-death situation with no time for anything but survival. But now that there was no immediate danger, she was able to take note of a few things.

His hair was very different, even partially hidden beneath the baseball cap he was wearing. In the fight on the causeway, she’d noted his long and unruly hair in passing but not devoted any real thought to it. But now, it seemed out of place on him. He’d never worn it long when she’d known him - nowhere even close; Soviet military regulations would have prohibited it and HYDRA command likely would have forbidden it - but it was probably long enough to tie back now.

His clothing was deliberately nondescript, though seemingly chosen for utility as well as anonymity. The baseball cap (no identifying team insignia) with its brim pulled low over his eyes would hide his face from casual observation and make identification by facial-recognition software all but impossible, and the plain grey hooded sweatshirt did very much the same. The loose-fitting jeans would have allowed him freedom of movement for those acrobatic aerial maneuvers and devastating high kicks he favored in combat. The boots - work boots, not combat boots; extremely generic tread pattern - would give him ankle support for hard running and jumping, and she was willing to bet he’d gone with steel toes to augment the kicks. He looked like a blue-collar worker on his day off.

But his eyes were the thing that drew her attention, and that brought very uncomfortable memories to the forefront of her mind.

*Staring down at her as blood welled from the hole in her stomach. Staring down at her without a hint of recognition as she bled, maybe bleeding out, maybe dying, and his eyes were so cold. So*
cold, not like they'd been the night he'd blurted out that he loved her, and nothing that had passed between them mattered anymore…

His eyes weren’t that cold now, not the chilling stare of the Winter Soldier, but that unsettling quality had been replaced by a hunted, haunted look like an animal tracked too long. He looked tired. Beaten.

Broken.

[“Do you know me?”] She said it in Russian.

Why had she said that?

Rogers had been unpacking everything from the Turvino’s bag and laying it all out on the table, but he froze now, tinfoil package of garlic knots in hand.

James looked at her and replied without hesitation. [“Natasha Romanoff, formerly Natalia Alianovna Romanova. Black Widow. SHIELD agent. Avenger.”] A beat, then, [“I know you.”]

The look on Rogers’ face wasn’t pretty. He looked surprised, wounded, and angry all at once at hearing James - Bucky, the man who’d apparently been his longtime best friend - speak fluent Russian without a trace of that perfect Brooklyn accent she’d tried to learn from him so long ago.

She wasn’t surprised. Rogers was a very emotionally-driven man, the sort who wore his heart on his sleeve and was heartbreakingly easy to manipulate because of it. It only stood to reason that he would hate to hear such obvious evidence of who had worked on his friend for four decades. She wondered what went through his mind when he saw the red star on James’ left shoulder.

All the same, she continued in Russian. [“And I know you, Winter Soldier.”]

Rogers would just have to deal with his negative emotions for the time being. It wasn’t as though this would be the last time he heard James speak Russian, after all, and he’d have to get used to it sooner or later.

[“Even if you are no longer the Winter Soldier.”]

She had to start someplace, after all. There was so much they needed to know, and it seemed only James could give them the answers. It would be a challenge, certainly, but she’d gotten the truth out of the Norse god of trickery and deceit without him knowing he was being played until it was all over. She was up to the challenge.

[“You say.”] James’ expression didn’t change. [“I didn’t say that.”]

Rogers put the garlic knots down on the table very suddenly, but he didn’t say anything.

James ignored him, never taking his eyes off her. But of course, she didn’t expect him to.

[“No, you didn’t.”] She offered a slight smile, a hint of knowing in it. Planting the seed in his mind that she knew things too, that Rogers wasn’t the only one with answers, and that there were things she might be able to tell him that even Rogers might not know. [“But it’s the truth.”]

“Hey, guys?” Rogers’ voice had an almost strangled quality to it, as though he was just barely maintaining his composure. Which was probably fairly close to the truth. He might have been only moments away from an outburst. “Can we try and keep things in a common language here?”
James’ expression betrayed no reaction. He’d been unreadable ever since he walked in the door, a sure sign that he saw her as someone to be wary of. Which she could work with, certainly, but which wasn’t the way she’d wanted to go. Maybe she could use Rogers’ reaction in some way?

A brief smirk flitted across Natasha’s face. “We are. Just not yours.”

She gave him a look that told him that she was serious about helping him, but that he’d have to let her work the way she needed to and not interfere. *Come on, Rogers, work with me here.*

“Tell you what.” She picked up her jacket from where she’d draped it over the back of one of the dining chairs. Rogers seemed to have picked up on her cue, but he didn’t seem happy about it. That was fine; if things worked out the way she planned, she’d be giving him something to be happy about. “Let me borrow your friend for a minute. We’ll be back before the food gets cold.”

Rogers gave her an odd look - his eyebrow raised and a look in his eyes that said he hoped she knew what she was doing - but eventually nodded. “OK. You’ve got about ten minutes tops, though.”

---

Bucky wondered what would happen after ten minutes - would Steve come looking for them? - but he didn’t ask, instead following Romanoff out the front door.

They walked through the hallway and then went down the stairs and through another hallway, and Romanoff didn’t say anything. Then they were outside on the sidewalk, with the East River on one side of them and several small shops on the other, and it was still early enough that the sun hadn’t begun to set and people were going about their business.

So if it were a trap, it was going to be a very determined one.

But why would it be a trap?

Steve seemed happy enough to see her, except for the part where he didn’t look very happy at all, but he had still asked her to stay for dinner. And they were both SHIELD agents and Avengers, which meant…

He wasn’t sure.

So if it were a trap, the reason for it wasn’t very obvious.

He waited.

Romanoff stopped suddenly beside the river and turned to face him. [“Now we can talk properly. Without bothering Rogers.”]

[“Talk properly?”] He glanced down at the water - no agents waiting on the rocks leading to the river - and scanned the rooftops - no snipers, no one obviously feeding her intelligence. No sudden boats on the river that didn’t belong there, no cars waiting at a distance.

For now.

He looked back at her.

She smiled slightly, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

[“He says we’re friends.”]
Steve had said so, and so had the museum.

He decided that Romanoff was probably not out to trap him. It was more likely that she was there to check on Steve. She wanted to make sure that Steve wasn’t in any danger from him. That he wouldn’t lead HYDRA to Steve.

She wasn’t wrong to be concerned.

[“I’ll leave before HYDRA comes.”] His mouth worked itself into a frown. [”He’s not… He’s not letting himself in for anything. I’ll leave first.”]

---

[“I don’t think he’d like that at all.”]

Natasha’s mind was working a mile a minute. She’d meant her comment as lightly humorous, but his response, serious as it was, had spoken volumes.

First of all, he was under the impression that HYDRA would be coming for him. Which was probably correct; the Soviets would never have let one of their assets slip the leash like this. There was no reason to suspect that HYDRA would handle things any differently. Either they’d make a Herculean effort to reacquire him or, if that proved impossible, simply have him killed to prevent him from being used against them. In all likelihood, the only reason they hadn’t swooped down on him already was the incredible disarray she’d put them in with her Assange-inspired stunt.

_Not too shabby, Nat._

But more importantly, he’d thought not of his own safety, but of Rogers’. He’d hastened to assure her that he would lead his would-be capturers away from Rogers, and that was a very interesting thing to chew on indeed. Not only was he capable of caring about the safety of others, but he’d specifically considered Rogers’ well-being above his own.

Where had that come from? It certainly wasn’t HYDRA programming. And it wasn’t likely to have been Soviet either. There was so much to process here. So much she didn’t know, and so much she’d thought she’d known in disarray...

[“Do you think he’s your friend?”]

He looked at her for a long moment. [“He says.”] Another lengthy pause, then, [“And so did the museum.”]

They both stared out at the water for a few seconds, then James abruptly said:

[“There were many HYDRA operatives within SHIELD. Steve wants to track them down and neutralize them before they go into hiding. You could help him with that.”]

[“Oh, I plan to.”] Again the slight quirking of her mouth in an unintentional smile. [“He’s going to need all the help he can get. And he’s the kind of man who’s usually too proud to ask for help, so we’re all going to have to pitch in.”]

Again the show of concern for Rogers. Her mind lit again on the staggering reality of just who he was, and wondered whether Rogers might not have been partially right. That somewhere beneath all the Soviet and HYDRA brainwashing, James - Bucky - still retained some vestige of who he’d been a long time ago. But if that were true…
If that were true, what else could he have retained? And what hadn’t been important enough for him to retain?

None of that. Best to focus on the task at hand.

[“But I’m thinking that HYDRA’s not his main priority right now.”] She looked for some hint of his mask of impenetrability slipping. So far, no dice. [“You are.”]

And then, there it was: a look of confusion skittered across his face. [“No, I’m not…”] His gaze drifted out to the water. [“I...failed my mission. Commander Pierce is dead.”] He shook his head, tried again. [“I’m not a priority. Tracking down HYDRA and killing them all is the priority.”] Very quietly he added, [“I’m nothing.”]

His words touched something very raw and ugly inside her. Something tied to a very specific time and a very specific place.

A place with white-tiled floors and steel-frame furniture, a place where a handful of little girls went to learn how never to be little girls again and where too many other little girls went to die. A place where your worth was measured solely by the number of missions you were capable of completing, and where failing one too many meant that someone else’s next mission was going to be you.

Of course it wouldn’t have been any different for James. Whether by HYDRA or the Soviet training programs or some combination of the two, he’d been taught that his worth could be measured by the number of bodies he left in his wake. That failing his mission meant that he was now beneath notice, and that that was the way things should be.

How long had it taken her to unlearn that? And how long would it take him?

[“Rogers doesn’t believe that at all.”] She smiled again, this time somewhat grimly. [“I’ve known him for the past few years, and he talks about you all the time. You were his best friend; it stands to reason you’d be his number one priority now.”]

---

[“I’m not.”] Bucky shook his head. [“I’m not the priority. I shouldn’t be.”]

He had failed his mission.

He had failed his mission to prevent disruption of the launch of the Insight helicarriers. He had failed his mission to neutralize Captain America and his allies. He had failed nearly every mission Commander Pierce had set out for him.

He had failed.

He was nothing.

And…

Maybe…

Maybe it was good that he had failed.

Probably.
HYDRA was lying. It was good that he had failed.

He had a new mission now: track down the rest of HYDRA, starting with the General, and kill them all. He wouldn’t fail at that. That would be his priority. And Steve’s priority had to be tracking down HYDRA as well. Anything else didn’t make sense.

Except that Romanoff was looking at him with a strange expression, her mouth quirked in a half-smile, like she knew so many things that he didn’t but she wasn’t going to tell him. Or didn’t want to tell him.

A surge of anger rushed through him. What the hell did she know anyway? Why was she even here?

[“And you wouldn’t understand.”] He spat the word. [“Traitor.”]

---

And there it was.

There’d been a time when being called a traitor to the Soviet cause would have stung terribly. Or - no, wait. The Russian cause. Maybe? Damn it, things needed to start making much more sense inside her own head.

At any rate, that time was long past. And what would have been the harshest of indictments back then was now something of a badge of honor.

[“Traitor?”] Natasha raised an eyebrow. [“To whom? To what?”]

He said nothing.

She faced him full-on, looking him square in the eyes. [“If you mean I’m a traitor to the Soviet Union, who would have had me killed without a moment’s hesitation like they did with all the other girls who went through the Red Room, then you’re right. I’m not one of them anymore, and I plan to spend the rest of my life making up for the things I did before I got to call myself a traitor.”]

Still nothing.

Her eyes, her face softened somewhat. [“And you’re wrong. I do understand. I know what it’s like to fail a mission.”]

Clint’s voice in her earpiece, yelling hysterically for her to respond. Blood trickling into her eyes from the gash on her forehead. Blood welling between her fingers as she desperately put pressure on the gaping wound in her stomach. James’ face, no hint of recognition in his eyes, looking at her like a beetle pinned to a card. The icy and dispassionate way he lifted his weapon and blew the back of the engineer’s head off, then turned and walked away. And the love she’d felt for him, the most she’d ever felt for another human being in all her life, shriveling like paper in fire. Curling into black ashes and leaving nothing but pain in its place.

[“I failed my mission in Odessa.”] She held his gaze, searching for some hint of recognition there. [“Do you remember?”]

---

Bucky looked back at her, anger quickly turning into wariness.

Clearly it was a test. One that he was likely meant to fail, only he couldn’t see what the end game or
even the setup was supposed to be.

What did she want?

She stared at him, gaze clear, expression betraying nothing. No half-smile this time. No hint of the answer she expected.

Had there been in a mission in Odessa?

Unconsciously his gaze strayed off to the side, and he found himself looking at the river. He knew that his memory wasn’t always very reliable. The doctor helped him with that occasionally; that’s what some of the conditioning was for, even if he hated it.

But…

But sometimes… and especially when the General was present… he found it difficult to string his thoughts together reliably. Sometimes the words would just drift away before he could grasp them. Sometimes he couldn’t put sentences together, let alone ideas, let alone entire situations and memories.

The mind tricks didn’t help. He hated those, too.

And still Romanoff was waiting. And he found the words slipping away from him.

[“There wasn’t…”]

It was already the wrong answer, he knew that much. But he didn’t know what the right answer was meant to be.

[“I wasn’t in…”]

Wrong.

[“I don’t… I don’t know.”]

---

There was no hint of dishonesty in his voice, no tell in his eyes or his posture. No slight twitching of facial muscles gave him away. He really didn’t remember.

He didn’t remember any of it.

At the farmhouse, after Clint had taken Natasha out of her hospital bed and brought her to the only place she was truly capable of recovering, she’d told Laura the whole story. Her affair with James, the way they’d fallen in love, all of it. And when she’d gotten to what he’d done to her in Odessa only a few days prior, she’d begun quivering like a machine on overload that was about to shake itself apart. Laura had gathered her up into her arms, and she’d sobbed until she had nothing left. She’d sobbed out all her grief at James’ betrayal, all the agony of her broken heart, and she’d finally passed out from exhaustion.

After that, she’d convinced herself that none of it had ever been real. That she’d been a fool, taken in by an older man who’d more thoroughly bought into the Soviet line than she herself had. That he’d never loved her, and that she’d been an idiot for allowing herself to love him.

That love was for children.
But now, after everything the file had laid bare about him and everything she was seeing, she knew that everything she’d made herself believe in order to save her sanity had been no more real than the past she only half remembered. That he was as much a victim as she’d been.

Had he really loved her? Had they taken that away from him after their affair had been found out? Had he looked at her so coldly in Odessa not because his loyalty to HYDRA was greater than the love they’d once shared, but because he truly hadn’t known who she was?

And there was more. The more she spoke to him, the more she looked at him, the clearer it became that he was not at all the same person he’d once been. He’d had a sense of humor before. He’d been cocky; arrogant, even. Laid-back yet braggadocious, and every bit as good as he thought he was. He’d had a mesmerizing smile and a way of carrying himself that had drawn her to him. But now? Now he seemed like a cipher. An empty shell, almost as though everything that had made him James had been scooped out. It was shocking, and extremely unsettling. And - if she were honest with herself - just the slightest bit heartbreaking.

What must Rogers have felt when he spoke to him?

[“Never mind,”] she found herself saying. [“We should head back now.”] She forced a smile onto her face. [“The food won’t stay hot forever, you know, and I’m sure our ten minutes are up. Don’t want Rogers to come looking for us.”]

There were still so many questions.

Chapter End Notes

Questions? Comments? Recipes for garlic butter? Send them at me.
Red Hook, Brooklyn
October 2014

“I’ll… consider it, Mr. Secretary.” Steve couldn’t quite believe what he’d just said, but then again, he couldn’t quite believe a lot of things that had happened over the last few weeks either. “That’s all I can do for right now.”

“Please do consider it, Captain Rogers.” The voice on the other end of the phone sounded both relaxed and insistent, the way only a twangy mid-Southern accent could. “Because the hard truth is that there’s going to be a SHIELD one way or the other. No one at the top is going to stand for it just ceasing to exist, no matter the reasons. And I think I speak for all involved when I say we’d all sleep more soundly in our beds with Captain America at the helm.”

Steve disconnected the call and stared at the phone in his hand, shaking his head and wondering whether they’d even let him refuse the offer that had just been made. And wondering whether he had any right to refuse, considering the kind of people that were likely to apply for the position of Director of SHIELD in his absence. The last thing the country needed - the last thing the world needed - was another Alexander Pierce running things behind the scenes.

But Steve had never wanted to be the kind of leader they were asking him to be. He led best from the front lines, not from behind a desk. How could he be the leader he knew they respected and admired if he couldn’t put himself in the same boat as the men he was commanding? How could anyone respect him if he wasn’t facing the same dangers he was ordering others to face? He’d never wanted to be a general; he wouldn’t have been any good at it. He was a soldier. Men followed him because they wanted to, not because he had rank or status. And he led not by virtue of who he was, but by virtue of what he did. He’d never be able to do that as Director.

Fortunately, Natasha and Bucky chose that time to return from their walk. Natasha seemed eager to leave, though, saying the drive had worn her out and that she wanted to get things in order at her apartment. That sounded odd to Steve - he’d wanted her to come up to help with Bucky, after all - but he knew what he’d get if he pushed the issue before she was ready to talk about it, and so he’d thanked her for bringing the bike up and made a note to call her the following morning to work out details. On her way out, he asked her - in a low voice, naturally - if she wouldn’t mind picking up a few changes of clothes for Bucky, since he had only his one outfit and the sweats he’d borrowed. She agreed, of course, but without her customary smirk.

What had she and Bucky talked about that had left her so affected?

*Take a guess, Steve. Just give her some room.*

“Hey, Buck.” Best to focus on Bucky for now. “You hungry?”
Romanoff left so quickly that it was obvious to Bucky that he had done something wrong.

She had failed her mission in Odessa, and she wanted to know if he remembered. Whether he was supposed to remember the mission specifically or remember why she had failed, she hadn’t said, and then she was out the door and gone.

He felt vaguely unsettled, though he couldn’t begin to explain why.

Or maybe he understood a little bit.

At least he understood that tracking down and destroying HYDRA was the priority. Romanoff had understood that, too, and she had also pointed out that Steve wouldn’t see it that way. So long as Bucky was around, Steve would mistakenly believe that he was a priority, and that would distract Steve from destroying HYDRA.

The longer Bucky stayed, the less Steve would focus on HYDRA. The longer Bucky stayed, the more likely it was that HYDRA would make the first move, and if Steve were distracted…

Romanoff was right to be concerned.

“When are you going to begin tracking down HYDRA?” He slid into one of the chairs at the table. “That should be your priority now.”

Steve gave a chuckle at that and popped one of the garlic knots into his mouth. “There are a lot of priorities. I just got another one on the phone right before you came in.”

Bucky dragged a slice of pizza out of the box and onto his plate.

“I’ve been thinking about how to track HYDRA down.” Steve chewed at another garlic knot. “And I think we’re going to need to move quickly. They’re scattered now, disorganized after what happened to the helicarriers and after Natasha exposed them to the world. So now’s the best time to go after them.” He smiled. “And I want you to help me take them down.”

Bucky looked at Steve from over the top of a very large slice of pizza. “What did Romanoff expose?”

The branch of HYDRA that had been buried within SHIELD might have been scattered and disorganized, but that was only one branch. HYDRA was much, much bigger than SHIELD.

Cut off one head…

“Just the part of HYDRA that was in SHIELD?” Bucky shook his head. “There’s more than that. You should think bigger than that.”

After all, the General had never been part of SHIELD. Not at all.

“And I am going to kill them all. Just…”

Just not in America. Steve and his allies could deal with that. He wanted the General and everyone involved with him.

He bit off a large chunk of the pizza slice. “You need to think bigger than that.”

Steve picked up his own slice of pizza and took a large bite, chewing silently for a moment. “How
much bigger?” He sipped his soda. “How were you planning to go after them all by yourself? Do you know where to find all of them?”

“How were you planning to go after them all by yourself? Do you know where to find all of them?”

Bucky finished off the pizza slice in a few bites, then hovered over the garlic knots for a moment before deciding on more pizza. “And they can tell me where to find others.”

With the right amount of pressure - usually along the throat, though kneecapping people could be very effective, too - anyone could be made to talk. And people didn’t like him..

People were afraid of him, the doctor said.

They would talk.

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“How were you planning to go after them all by yourself? Do you know where to find all of them?”

Steve knew perfectly well that HYDRA’s influence went far beyond their takeover of SHIELD, far beyond even their infiltration of the American government. In all likelihood, they had spread their insidious malice to practically every corner of the world. It would take a large, coordinated effort to bring them down, and Bucky deserved to be part of that.

He’d had the idea ever since he’d learned of HYDRA’s continued existence. The fact that they’d infiltrated the government of the country he loved so much was unforgivable enough, but turning his best friend against him and forcing the two of them to fight with millions of lives riding on the outcome was unspeakably evil. He’d sworn to stamp out HYDRA more than half a century ago, and he’d awoken from his long sleep to find them even stronger than they’d been before. It was time to destroy HYDRA for good; to crush their embers and scatter their ashes, to ensure that they would never rise again. To cut off every last one of those proverbial heads and burn the stumps shut, so no more could grow back.

Of course Bucky would be a part of this elite team. And so would Natasha, who had the skills necessary to gather intelligence and carry out precision missions. He’d want Maria Hill and Phil Coulson as well, the only two members of SHIELD’s administration that he knew he could trust. And Sharon Carter, of course; regardless of their personal history, there was no SHIELD agent he would recommend more highly. And Clint. Other names were up for consideration as well, people he could possibly convince to join them: James Rhodes and Carol Danvers, Wanda and Sam...

But he’d have to move fast. Maria Hill was about to begin working for Stark Enterprises. Phil Coulson had his eyes on a top asset-handling position with the FBI. Sharon Carter was about to begin training at Camp Peary for field work with the CIA.

As for Bucky... More than anyone, Bucky deserved to be a part of this team. After all HYDRA had done to him, after all they’d taken from him, he deserved to strike back at them.

“I’m going after HYDRA, Buck.” Determination thrummed in every syllable; he could even hear it in his own ears. “I’m not going to stop until it’s a memory. And I want you to come with me.”

For a long moment, Bucky didn’t reply, instead focusing on finishing the second slice of pizza and starting on a third. “Romanoff said she’s going with you. And that’s good.” He washed the pizza down with a swig of soda, then hooked his finger over the tin of garlic knots and dragged them over.

“Uh-huh.” Steve snagged one last garlic knot before Bucky took the tin. “And you.”
He hadn’t missed that Bucky was trying not to let himself be hooked into anything. That he wanted to keep himself free from commitments and obligations so that he could disappear whenever he wanted to and go after HYDRA on his own. And that was quite simply not going to happen.

“Look, Bucky, you’re not going after HYDRA all by yourself.” He leveled a stern gaze at him. “They’d capture you and either run your mind through a blender again or just decide it wasn’t worth the trouble and kill you.”

Or - and this was the part that truly worried Steve - Bucky would go after the ones directly responsible for what had happened to him, assassinate them quickly and quietly, and then just vanish without a trace. He’d never come back home, he’d never initiate any kind of communication, and Steve would never lay eyes on him again. And that would not stand.

“You need help.” He reached a hand across the table, searching for Bucky’s hand. “And not just with HYDRA, either; you need to remember who you are. The Soviets and HYDRA did things to your mind that I don’t even have words for, and you’re not going to fix that on your own.” He sought Bucky’s eyes with his own gaze. “But we can do all of it together.”

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It seemed Steve wanted the garlic knots back, so Bucky pushed the tin into his open hand. He liked the pizza better anyway.

Steve was staring at him, waiting for a response, but…

Bucky knew how to talk about hunting down HYDRA. He could make suggestions. He could even help make some plans. That was easy. He knew all of that.

But…

Talking about anything else…

He felt his thoughts beginning to unspool, and he reached for something to grab onto. Steve didn’t want him to leave. Steve needed to hunt down HYDRA. If Bucky stayed, Steve wouldn’t focus on hunting down HYDRA.

Bucky wasn’t a priority.

He wasn’t supposed to be.

Steve was still staring at him. He wasn’t eating the garlic knots.

“I’m…”

He didn’t like talking about himself. There was nothing to talk about. Nothing that needed to be said.

“I’m not…”

He reached for another slice of pizza without looking at Steve, but he frowned instead of taking a bite. The pizza lingered in his hand.

“I know who I am. You said. The museum said.” His gaze strayed off to some vague point in the distance. “I’m not damaged.”

A strange expression crossed Steve’s face then. Bucky didn’t know what to make of it.
“Come on, Buck.” Steve said the words quietly. Calmly. “You don’t have to lie to me. And you don’t have to lie to yourself. There’s a difference between knowing what the museum said and actually remembering things about your life.”

Bucky said nothing to that.

“How can you remember the way it felt to say goodbye to your mom the day you shipped out?” Steve sighed. “Can you remember the taste of the beer we used to drink on Coney Island before you left? Or the way the pipes in my apartment used to sound when too many people were running water in the building? Can you remember anything that isn’t cold hard fact?”

“I’m not…” Bucky shook his head. “I’m not lying. I’m not…”

The museum had said his name was James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes. That he had been born in Brooklyn, New York in 1917. That he had been a sergeant in the American military. That he had died in 1945, even if that part wasn’t true.

It had said he and Steve were friends.

There had been pictures.

“... lying.”

What else had the museum said? That he had served on the Western Front of the European theater during the Second World War. That he had been a Howling Commando. That he had been the only Howling Commando to “give his life in the service of his country.”

He knew facts.

He wasn’t lying.

“And those things were a long time ago.” He licked his lips. Stared down at his plate. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not…”

Just facts.

“I’m not damaged.”

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God, it hurt.

It hurt to have to do this to Bucky. Not just to see him this way, which would have been bad enough on its own, but to have to be the one who opened Bucky’s eyes to the reality that he was, in fact, damaged. Damaged so badly that he didn’t even know the full extent of it. And that might have been the worst part of all - Bucky might believe he wasn’t damaged simply because he couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t been that way.

But even that crushing realization wasn’t going to stop Steve from doing what he had to do. Because it was Bucky at stake, and that made everything so much more important. He couldn’t afford to be discouraged. And he would never let him down again.

“You’re pretty damaged, Buck.” He got up from his chair, the pizza and garlic knots temporarily forgotten, and stood beside Bucky’s chair. Gently, he laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder; Bucky twitched but didn’t move away. “But I don’t think any worse of you for it, and neither should you.
It’s not your fault.”

No, he reminded himself bitterly, it had been Karpov and Pushkin who had done the initial damage. And Rodchenko who had continued it. And HYDRA who had done something indescribable to make it all worse. Bucky, whatever missions they might have given him, however many bodies he’d left in his wake, hadn’t been responsible. He’d been used by them, just as a bullet or a blade might be used. It was the hand that wielded the weapon that bore the real blame.

“No of this is your fault.”

Bucky didn’t respond to that. He only stared at his plate, his expression unreadable but his eyes filled with something indescribable and yet painful to see. And a long few moments passed in silence.

Finally, simply to break the silence, Steve spoke up again. “Anyway. I got a call from the Secretary of Defense while you were out with Natasha. They’re not going to let SHIELD die, apparently.” He sighed, heading back to his chair and settling into it again. “And they want me to be the new interim director.” He shook his head. “Can you beat that?”

Well, he certainly couldn’t.

Chapter End Notes

A NOTE ABOUT PHIL COULSON: So... he's not dead, but he's not doing whatever it is he does on AoS. This is not AoS compliant, as I've never seen a single episode of that show and am unlikely to do so. I'm working off the idea that the Avengers thought he died in the movie, Fury went along with it to motivate them, and then... surprise! Coulson was released from the hospital after a long recovery. So... good motivation there, Fury. Great job, team.

As always, all comments and conversations are warmly welcomed and greatly appreciated.
Red Hook, Brooklyn
the next morning, October 2014

“I’m going up to Brooklyn for a few days to help Captain America sort out a few issues,” Sam had told his supervisor, because honesty really was the best policy when it came to stuff like that.

She had looked at him for a long, surprised moment. “Well,” she finally said, “if Captain America needs your personal help, you probably should go help him.”

And that was that.

Well, that was the easy part anyway.

For most of the drive up, Sam tried very hard not to think over-much about the fact that he was heading to Brooklyn to help Captain America with his brainwashed-HYDRA-assassin-former-World War II hero-friend. Also known as Bucky.

Because really? If he thought too hard about that, he’d turn the damn car around so fast, the wheels would fly off. And he had just gotten a new car, too, after a difficult argument with the insurance company. He really didn’t want to have to go through that nonsense again.

Finding parking in Red Hook was easier than he thought it would have been, and before long, he was heading up the steps of one of those massive, pre-war factories that someone had retrofitted into expensive waterfront condos.

He was searching for the right doorbell- a lot of condos existed inside that factory - when a woman in a long red coat joined him on the steps and reached for a doorbell without hesitation. The same one he had been searching for, in fact.

“So…” He looked at her. “You here to visit…?”

Wait.

Was the fact that Captain America lived there supposed to be the sort of thing meant to be a secret? An open secret, maybe? Or was it just something everyone in the neighborhood knew about and discussed freely?

“Captain America?” Some sort of Eastern European accent rolled right off her tongue. “Oh yes. He’s been hiding. I’m here to make sure he’s not dead.”

Running with superheroes had its own set of rules. Or maybe he was overthinking it.
The intercom crackled. “Hi, Sam. Wanda,” Steve said cheerfully. “Come on up, both of you.”

They introduced themselves on the way up to Steve’s apartment. Sam was just getting the idea that Wanda Maximoff seemed familiar, but he didn’t have the opportunity to follow up on it before Steve flung his front door open and ushered them both inside.

Wanda went to embrace Steve - or rather, he enveloped her in a hug - and when they separated, she eyed him appraisingly. “You’re looking a lot better now.”

“That’s where I’ve seen you before.” Sam snapped his fingers and turned to Wanda with a smile. “Hospital, right? Only there were so many people-”

“Coming in and out.” Wanda nodded.

“Impossible to keep track of everyone.” Sam settled his hands onto his hips and turned his attention to Steve. “You had a lot of visitors while you were doing your whole Sleeping Beauty routine.”

“And a lot of visitors after you woke up.” Wanda shrugged. “And even after the doctor got tired of all the visitors and turned your morphine drip way up.”

Sam’s smile widened into a grin. “Yeah, Dr. Patel didn’t take any guff.”

Good times, if one ignored every single thing surrounding the event.

He turned his attention to Steve. “So how are you doing?”

“I’m doing OK.” Steve stepped back, spread his arms, and looked down at himself. “All healed up, no scarring, nothing permanent. I’m actually not even sore anymore, if you can believe it.”

Sam wasn’t sure if he could believe it or not. And now that he thought of it, he wondered where exactly Bucky was. He wasn’t quite prepared for the dude to just rush him out of nowhere.

But Steve didn’t mention Bucky yet, instead inviting Sam and Wanda to relax in the living room while he made tea. He put the kettle on, took mugs out of the cabinet for the three of them, and then he spent the next twenty minutes catching them up on what had happened so far.

“And then, just yesterday, I got a call from the Secretary of Defense asking me to head up SHIELD.” Steve shook his head and set down his mug on the coffee table. “I don’t even know how to start thinking about that. Not with everything else going on right now.”

Sam looked at him. “Huh.”

There was a long pause after that, the three of them alternating between exchanging glances with each other and staring into their mugs.

Wanda broke the silence first. “So you’re going to accept the position then?”

“Because it sounds like you don’t really have a choice.” Sam drained off the last of his patchouli tea and set the mug down a bit too heavily on the coffee table. “It hasn’t even been, what, three weeks? Two-three weeks, and they’re already talking about rebuilding SHIELD.”

“Well, no, it’s not as if I haven’t got a choice.” Steve sat forward in his seat, elbows on his knees. “They can’t make me do it if I don’t agree to it. But they’re not going to let SHIELD stay down.”

Sam grimaced, uncertain if he should laugh hysterically or slouch moodily into the couch. “We just took them down.” He shook his head. “I just got a new car. And they want to rebuild SHIELD? Do
“they have new Insight helicarriers that we didn’t know about?”

“Nobody’s ready to let that kind of a vacuum exist, no matter the reasons.” Steve sighed. “And honestly, the only way to stop the exact same thing from happening with a new version of SHIELD as happened with the old one is to head it up myself. To make sure things get done properly, to make sure there’s accountability.”

Wanda raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing, continuing to sip at her tea.

Steve shrugged, smiling slightly. “And let’s face it, the only way the American people are going to accept a relaunch of SHIELD is if I’m tied to it. So I’ve got a lot of leverage there that I can use to make sure nobody tries to push things in the wrong direction.”

It was Sam’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Like I said, it sounds like you don’t really have a choice.”

“Will you relocate to Washington then?” Wanda leaned forward, rested one elbow on her knee and cupped her chin in her hand. “Help them rebuild the Triskelion, make new helicarriers, do all of that?” She frowned slightly. “You’ll be very busy.”

“And speaking of busy…” Sam shifted abruptly in his seat, eyes sweeping over the living room. It was still just the three of them. “Where’s...” The name felt ridiculous on his tongue, but it was the dude’s name, and so out with it. “Bucky? Hiding? Not feeling very hopeful about your new career?”

“Bucky’s in his room.” Steve gestured with his head. “He knew you were coming by, Sam. I just don’t think he’s exactly ready to talk right now. But he’s all right.”

Sam decided not to ask how, exactly, Steve qualified someone as “all right.”

“And no, I’m not moving out to Washington,” Steve continued. “Especially not now. If SHIELD’s going to be a thing, if there’s nothing I can do about it, then it’s going to go the way I say it goes. And that means the Avengers are going to have a hand in it.”

Another raised eyebrow from Wanda. “How is that?”

Steve ticked off points on his fingers. “No Project Insight. Nothing like it. The old Helicarrier’s fine, but no one’s going to go deciding who’s guilty and who’s innocent based on anything but hard evidence. And no Triskelion either. I’m going to talk to Tony about using some of that office space he’s complained about not being able to rent out in the Tower.” He smiled, but his eyes were hard with determination. “SHIELD’s going to work out of New York. And so am I.”

A slight smile flitted across Wanda’s mouth. “So you’re going to accept the position then?”

“Sounds like it.” Sam nodded. “You’ve got your work cut out for you. Just got to call the Secretary of Defense and lay out your demands.”

He reached for his tea mug, realized it was empty, and resettled on the couch. The patchouli stuff wasn’t bad. Different. Spicy. He made a mental note to recommend it to his sister.

“Make sure you ask for a big raise.” Sam couldn’t tell if Wanda was serious or not. “Anything they offer, double it. Triple it. They are asking a lot.”

“It’s not about the money,” Steve said automatically. “It’s about doing the right thing, no matter what’s in it for me.” He paused. “Or even whether there’s anything in it for me. And besides, I haven’t decided anything yet. There’s still Bucky to consider.” A beat, then, “Speaking of whom, he doesn’t seem like he’s going to come out on his own.” He stood up from the easy chair. “Excuse me
He went the few steps down the hall to Bucky’s door and tapped on it. “Hey, Bucky? I’ve got Sam here to talk to you. And there’s someone else I’d like you to meet when you’re done.” He tapped again. “Are you up for it?”

He waited a moment and then opened the door.

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Bucky had listened very carefully to the conversation.

He recognized the voice of the man known as Sam Wilson. Steve had said earlier that Wilson was coming up from Washington DC to talk to him. What he wanted to talk about was unclear, but Steve had asked him to maybe mention to Wilson that he wouldn’t try to kill him again.

Pointless to mention it.

The mission was over. Bucky had failed the mission. There was no reason to target Wilson any longer.

He didn’t recognize the woman’s voice, but he caught that her name was Wanda and he heard the distinct tones of a Transokovian accent. Very possible, then, that the woman was Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch. Steve hadn’t mentioned that she was coming, but there she was.

Steve came into the room then, and Bucky looked up from where he was sitting on the bed. It was clear that Steve wanted him to talk to Sam Wilson.

He didn’t move from his position, legs drawn up, hands resting over his knees. “If you want me to.”

“We talked about this, Buck.” Steve sat down on the side of Bucky’s bed. “Sam works in the V.A. He works with veterans who’ve had a rough time getting adjusted to civilian life again. Guys who’ve seen a lot of bad stuff, and had a lot of it happen to them. I asked him to come here so he could try to help you.” He put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “What I want is for you to get better. What do you want?”

He wanted to track down HYDRA and kill them. Especially the General.

But Steve very clearly wanted him to talk to Sam Wilson, who had driven all the way from Washington, DC to talk to him.

So…

“I’ll talk to him.” He waited a moment, then, “I’ll tell him that I won’t try to kill him.”

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“So yeah, I’ll be telling my sister about this tea.” Sam shrugged, gave Wanda a grin. “It’ll be nice for a change. Usually she’s the one making me try new things, and I always swear I’m going to hate them, and I always end up loving them.”

Steve came back into the room at that moment and gave him a thumbs-up sign. Sam stood up and shrugged again. “Guess that’s my cue.”

He wasn’t going to lie to himself; he felt a little tense as he walked down the hallway. The last time he’d met this guy face-to-face, he’d wound up getting his wing torn off and being booted off the
deck of a helicarrier ten thousand feet in the air. Not that he was worried about that sort of thing happening again, but it didn’t make for the most laid-back of feelings as he prepared himself to sit down and get the guy to open up to him.

He hesitated for a moment at the door, then tapped on it. “Can I come in?” He stuck his head in the door, looked around the room.

Bucky was sitting on the bed with his knees drawn up like an eight-year-old who’d just watched a Guillermo del Toro movie. His face was wary, his eyes focused on Sam as he came in the door, not shutting it behind him. He had the look of a man who was definitely not mentally healthy, and Sam had to warn himself not to make any hasty assumptions. He hadn’t even engaged the guy in conversation yet.

“Hi there.” He sat down on the edge of the bed, at the other end from where Bucky was sitting. “My name’s Sam Wilson. We sort of met before; I don’t know if you remember. I’m the guy with the wings.”

“I remember.” Bucky appeared to be studying Sam very carefully. After a moment, he said, “I won’t try to kill you.”

Sam paused for a second, thinking he hadn’t heard Bucky correctly, then realized he had. And he couldn’t help it; he laughed. Not a long, loud laugh, but enough of one to break the tension. Enough to get rid of his jitters so he could get down to business.

“Sounds like Steve primed you.” He shook his head, smiling. “I appreciate it, though. Thanks for that.”

Bucky said nothing.

“So why don’t you tell me what it’s been like for you this past couple of days?” He shifted his position on the bed, trying to get a bit more comfortable while still giving Bucky his space. “Steve filled me in on the basics, but he can only tell me about stuff from his point of view. So I know how happy he is to have you here, but how are you?”

Bucky looked at him, confusion written clearly across his face. Then his gaze drifted away, out the window to nothing in particular.

Sam waited patiently. Didn’t offer anything that might be considered a ‘correct’ answer.

Bucky chewed on his lip.

Sam still said nothing.

Finally Bucky said, “I’m not damaged.”

Which was exactly what a damaged person might say.

Sam had heard that, or things very much like that, from a lot of guys who came back from tours of duty with something wrong upstairs. Nobody wanted to cop to the fact that they couldn’t handle a return to normal life. Nobody wanted to admit to mental illness - at least not at first. So what you did was to show them, gradually but insistently, that everything was not as peachy as they might tell you it was. And once you’d gotten them to admit that there was a problem, you could help them start working on overcoming that problem.

“I didn’t say you were.” He shrugged, assuming a loose and relaxed posture. Bucky still seemed
wary, though not exactly tense. More like confused. Confused and lost. “All I did was ask you what you thought about being here. Are you planning to stay for a while?”

Bucky pulled his gaze back from the window and looked at Sam sharply. “Steve’s priority needs to be hunting down HYDRA. But if I’m here, he doesn’t think that hunting down HYDRA should be his priority. That would be dangerous for him.” He shook his head. “He’ll get killed that way. I’ll stay for a few days, but…” Another shake of the head. “After that, Steve needs to become SHIELD director and track down HYDRA. And I have my own mission.”

“Hey, man,” Sam said easily. “Steve’s already talking about how he wants to do the whole SHIELD director thing. I don’t think you have to worry about his priorities.”

Except Steve had as good as said that Bucky was his priority, period, end of story. At least for the foreseeable future, until Bucky got his head on straight. And it didn’t look like that was going to be a quick and easy thing to do.

But Bucky’s diverting of the topic away from himself to focus it on Steve was interesting. Almost as interesting as the fact that he seemed to want to raise concerns about Steve’s safety. Was that out of genuine concern, or simply a desire to steer the conversation away from himself?

“But you said something about a mission of your own.” Sam raised an eyebrow. “You feel like talking about that?”

For a long moment, Bucky was silent, eyes down and fixed on nothing in particular. “HYDRA has been lying to me.” He looked up at Sam through a curtain of hair. “And I’m going to find the ones responsible and kill them all.”

Sam was silent for a long moment.

It was easy to remember, even in this comfortable a setting and with everything Steve had told him about Bucky’s past, just how dangerous Bucky was. He’d fought both Steve and Natasha to a standstill out on the causeway. He’d flipped onto the hood of Sam’s car like he was stepping off a sidewalk onto the street, punched through the windshield with that robot arm of his, and tore the steering wheel clean off before nonchalantly jumping onto the hood of another speeding car and waiting for them to crash. And he’d destroyed the EXO-7 and very nearly killed Sam, just to get him out of the way so he could focus in his real target.

Not to mention that he looked dangerous as anything with that metal hand and his hair hanging in his face like that. And the cold fury in his voice was unmistakable. It did not make for a pretty picture.

“You told Steve this yet?” Bucky appeared to nod ever so slightly, his eyes never leaving Sam’s. “And what does he think?”

Very quietly Bucky said, “I owe them. And Steve thinks he owes them, too.” His gaze drifted back out the window once more. For a long moment, he was silent. “The museum said that we both fought HYDRA back in the war. We both owe them.”

“And what about afterwards?” He had to ask, intrigued as he was by just how badly HYDRA had messed this man up. “After you give HYDRA their receipt, what then?”

Bucky looked at him, expression crumpling into confusion very quickly. “Then nothing,” he said carefully. Slowly, as if examining each word. “After that, nothing.”

“Nothing?” Sam expression turned into one of real concern. “Sounds to me like you don’t plan on living through this mission of yours.”
Which honestly wasn’t that surprising. He’d talked to plenty of guys who had no illusions about their chances of adjusting to civilian life. Plenty of guys who’d left the best parts of themselves out there in Sandland. Plenty of guys who were already dead, except for the part where they were still walking around.

Those were the guys who’d tempt fate. The ones who’d drive too fast or drink too much or take too many drugs or find other ways of daring God to just come and get them already. The ones who didn’t mind dying. Who would welcome it, because they were jealous of their friends who hadn’t made it through. Or because they’d seen and done and experienced too many horrible things to ever be able to have a normal life again, and they knew it was only a matter of time before they became a danger to everyone they met.

“You haven’t told Steve that, have you?” He raised an eyebrow. “‘Cause something tells me he wouldn’t be happy to hear it.”

Bucky’s gaze drifted away.

Apparently there was nothing left to say.

The silence stretched between them.

Well, that said it all, didn’t it?

The guy was very definitely disturbed. And given what Steve had laid out about what had happened to him over the course of - what had it been? Sixty years? Seventy? - it wasn’t anything that could be dealt with over the course of a few group therapy sessions and some community outreach. Bucky was going to need a lot more help than Sam could give him by himself. Which wasn’t to say that Sam wasn’t going to do his best to help him, but there were definitely going to have to be other people involved. Actual shrinks, not just counselors and social workers. He’d have to go through his network, make a few calls.

“Hey, look.” He put the serious look on, the kind he wore when he was at a critical moment in group sessions. “You don’t have to make a big decision like that all at once, you know? And even if you think you know what you’re gonna do right now, it doesn’t mean you can’t change your mind later on.” He stood up. “Steve cares a lot about you. And it’s not always an easy thing to find that in this world. I wouldn’t be so quick to run away from that.”

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Sam disappeared into the bedroom, and then Steve and Wanda were alone for the first time in several weeks.

“So.” Wanda looked at him for a moment, then picked up the empty tea mugs and headed into the kitchen, Steve following behind her. “You’ve been busy.” She took a moment to prepare the kettle before turning and facing him, back against the counter. “And from the looks of things, you’re planning on making yourself even busier.” A small smile quirked at the corners of her mouth. “Right back into things.”

“Well, it’s not like I can just sit by while these things happen.” Steve shrugged, spreading his hands. “You know I’m not like that. But you’re right. It does feel like an awful lot’s happening at once. And I’m right in the middle of it.”

She folded her arms, raised an eyebrow. “Because you’ve put yourself in the middle of it. Because you’re definitely taking the job.” She held up a finger before he could interrupt. “Don’t pretend that
“You are still thinking about it. You already laid out your plans.”

“But that doesn’t mean I want to do it.” Steve returned her small smile. “I know I’ll probably wind up doing it because there’s no one else people will trust. The Secretary all but laid it out in those words. But I’m not ready to change careers just yet.”

“You could always open an art studio and quietly retire.” Another small smile. “You won’t, but it’s an idea.”

The kettle started to whistle behind her, and she turned and spent a few moments preparing three cups of patchouli tea. With her back still to him, she asked, “What are you going to do about Bucky?”

“Draw pictures of him, I guess.” He shook his head, picturing the likely look on her face. “Wasn’t that what you were hinting at?” A beat, then, “Seriously, though, I don’t know. That’s why I asked Sam to come up from DC. He works with traumatized vets; I thought he might be able to point me in the right direction. I was just planning to have Bucky stay here with me, take him on a few strolls through the neighborhood, talk to him all I can, and hope that something helps jog his memory.” He sighed. “I don’t know what else to do for him.”

For a long moment, Wanda was silent, then, “Have you asked Bucky what he wants? Because that is important, you know.” She turned and looked at him. “You can’t plan around him.”

“But he can’t plan for himself either. That’s the real problem, don’t you see?” Steve shook his head, images and words from that horrible file rushing through his mind in competition with even worse images from his imagination to fill in the gaps. “He doesn’t have anything left. He doesn’t remember anything about his life, and he hasn’t known anything for almost seventy years except for the Soviet Union and HYDRA. He ran away from HYDRA, thank God, and he’s not going back to them, but they didn’t leave him anything else to make a life with.”

The horrible injustice of it made him sick with rage. And adding fuel to the fire was the fact that although Bucky knew the names and whereabouts of everyone in HYDRA who had been responsible for his treatment - the only ones left alive who could be punished for what had been done to him - he couldn’t tell Steve.

“So I have to help him find it.”

“That poor man,” Wanda said quietly. “He’s lucky to have you then.”

She picked up two of the tea mugs, gestured with her head for Steve to take his own, and headed back toward the living room.

“At the same time, make sure you don’t get so caught up in finding his life for him that you don’t give him a chance to find it on his own as well.” She set the mugs down on the coffee table and settled back on the couch. “He knew enough to run away from HYDRA, thank God, and he’s not going back to them, but they didn’t leave him anything else to make a life with.”

Steve eased himself into the easy chair, mug of tea in his hands. “He doesn’t have anybody else.”

He stared into his tea, the swirls of steam rising off of it almost seeming to frame the segue into his memories. It had always been that way, for as long as he could remember. He and Bucky had been each other’s only real friends for their entire lives.

Oh, Bucky had been a very outgoing and friendly person when he’d been younger, and he’d had plenty of acquaintances. All the other guys on the track team had liked him, and he’d gotten along
just fine with them. He’d never been short of dates either. But Steve had always been the one Bucky had come to for anything serious. For anything real. And Steve had always been the one who’d been there for him at all the worst times.

And for Steve, it had been even more so. A scrawny little loudmouth with no athletic ability and an encyclopedia of health problems, he’d had very few people he’d even consider acquaintances. His only real friend back then was, and had always been, Bucky.

Bucky had been there for him every time he’d gotten the tar knocked out of him for standing up to a bully twice his size. Bucky had been there for him through every single illness that had left him bedridden, through every asthma attack and every fainting spell. Bucky had been there for him the day he’d walked home from Green-Wood Cemetery after his mom’s funeral. And now, Bucky needed Steve to be there for him. There was no real choice, was there?

“He’s only got me.” He looked up into Wanda’s eyes. “I can’t let him down.” A myriad of emotions flitted through him - grief and loss and longing, and a desperate, almost painful feeling of hope.

Wanda must have seen something in his expression, because she rose from her seat and crossed over to him. Without hesitation, she drew his head against her chest. “It will be okay. Maybe not right this moment, but we will find a way to make it okay.”

He sank into Wanda’s embrace, settling his head into her chest, and let himself sag for a moment. Just a moment, that was all he needed, and then he could go back to holding himself up. But right then, it was very comforting to be supported instead of providing the support.

She carded her fingers through his hair. “It’s difficult right now, because it’s so new and uncertain, but we’ll figure things out. We know many people, and those people also know people. We will find a way.”

“I just need him to stay here.” He lifted his head so he could look at her properly, smiling slightly to show that he was all right. “He said he wanted to go after HYDRA himself, and I know what’s going to happen if he does that.” He shook his head. “If I can just get him to stay here until we find a way to help him, then it’ll all be okay.”

Before Wanda could reply, Sam came back into the living room. He hesitated, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, as if he were trying to decide whether or not he had intruded into a private moment.

“I’ve made more tea,” Wanda said, detaching herself from Steve and resettling on the couch. “It should still be hot.”

A brief expression of relief danced across Sam’s face, and then he thanked her and found his seat on the couch. After a second or two, he spoke.

“Look, Steve. Your friend is...” Sam seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. “Not well. He is not a healthy man.”

Wanda cupped her hands around the tea mug. “He doesn’t want to come out?”

“He doesn’t want to come out,” Sam confirmed, shaking his head. “And he doesn’t really want to stay here either. He says he wants to go after HYDRA. Says he owes them.”

Steve sighed. It was bad enough to have seen it himself, bad enough to have had those thoughts in his own head, but to hear them echoed in words from a man who knew from mental illness was upsetting.
Upsetting, but not demoralizing. He wouldn’t allow himself to lose hope. Not before they’d even tried anything.

“He does owe them.” He blew the steam from his tea and sipped a hot mouthful. “The both of us owe them more than I know how to say. But he can’t go after them himself.”

“Well, that’s his plan.” Sam took a tentative sip of the tea. “And quite honestly, I don’t know if you’ll be able to stop him if that’s what he decides he’s going to do.” He lingered over his tea for a moment, then set the mug down and leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. “Look, Steve. He wants to deal with his enemies in HYDRA, and he doesn’t want to come back from it.”

“He…” Steve trailed away in disbelief.

The full significance of what Sam had just said hit him like a flaming Louisville Slugger wrapped in barbed wire. Bucky didn’t want to come back from squaring off against HYDRA. Bucky wanted to face his enemies and have it end there.

Bucky wanted to die.

“No.” He clenched his fists, clenched his teeth. “No. No, he’s not going to end it that way.”

Not now. Not when he’d just come back. Not his best friend in all the world, not the man who was everything to him in every way that counted, not the only remaining link he had to the world he’d left behind more than half a century ago.

“No now.” He shook his head, stubbornly - maybe futilely - railing against it. “Not now, not ever. I won’t let him do it. You’ve got to help me, Sam. You’ve got to…”

Words failed him.

“I’ll help,” Sam said quickly. Immediately. “Of course I’ll help.”

“What can we do?” Wanda looked at him.

Sam sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. Drank more of that patchouli tea. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think he’s actively suicidal.”

Steve looked at him miserably.

Sam sighed, but pushed forward. “He sounds like an awful lot of vets who’ve seen some pretty bad stuff, then come home and can’t see their way past it all. They can’t see any way out, they can’t see how they’ll ever adjust to civilian life. I think he’s a man who doesn’t know what to do once the mission’s over. He can’t see that there’s anything past that for him.”

“But there is.” Steve sounded miserable even to his own ears. “There’s everything in the world out there for him now that he’s away from them. He’s back home, for God’s sake.”

He hated the way he sounded, but he couldn’t stop the words from pouring out. “We were both born and raised not fifteen minutes from here. We lived here, we went to school here, we worked here. All four of our parents are buried here. This is our home, and now he’s back after…” He almost choked on the words as they came out. “- almost seventy Goddamn years, and I’m not going to let there be nothing for him.”

The words kept on coming, almost as if he wasn’t the source for them but instead some kind of conduit or antenna. “They stole his life from him. They took away everything that ever mattered in
the world to him and stuck something else in there instead. They’re the reason his mother died thinking she’d lost her husband in the first war and her only son in the second. They’re the reason he missed his sister’s whole life, and his nieces’ and nephews’ too. They’re the reason he wouldn’t recognize a single one of his family or friends if they were standing right in front of him, and the reason he damn near killed me, and I’m not going to let him die fighting them.”

He took a long shaky breath. “Because that means they win. And I will not let that happen.”

A long moment passed while he sat there and allowed his feelings to settle. After all, he reminded himself, it was the general who rushed headlong into battle because of his own emotions who lost every time. He drank some tea, took several calming breaths, and when he could do so without losing control of himself again, started to speak.

“So here’s what we’re going to do.” He looked at both Wanda and Sam in turn. “We’re going after HYDRA. All of us, Bucky included. I’m going to start calling in everybody I think can help us. Wanda, I’m going to need your help. Back in the old days, HYDRA was about magic as much as it was about science. And if they’re doing it again, we’re going to need somebody who knows how to stop it.” He paused and turned to Sam. “And Sam, you know what it’s like to go up against HYDRA face-to-face. How would you like to come up here and be a part of the new SHIELD?”

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Sam blinked.

“Like I said.” A smile flitted across Wanda’s mouth. “You’ve already accepted the job, Mr. SHIELD Director. Or what do we call you? Captain Director?”

“Director America?” Sam shook his head. Firing off a joke was easy enough, but… “Are you offering me a job?”

He really hadn’t expected that. Not at all.

And how long would it take to pack up his apartment anyway? Especially if he just hired movers to do it?

And now he was running away with himself. He needed to slow down. Evaluate the offer. Think on it seriously.

“Seriously?”

Steve nodded. “Seriously.” He hesitated a moment, then, “If you feel up to relocating, that is. I don’t want you to feel like you have to uproot your whole life just because I say so. I certainly don’t want you to feel like you’re leaving anyone at the V.A. in the lurch; I know how much that means to you. So it’s up to you.” He smiled a tight smile. “But yes, I’m offering you a job.”

“Ah.” Sam reached for the mug of tea, changed his mind, and sat back. “Okay.”

His mind worked furiously for a few moments.

How much would it cost to hire movers anyway? At DC prices? Probably some ridiculous amount, but it would certainly save him the stress of packing and moving.

And he would want to give proper notice at his job. He liked and respected his supervisor and the work itself was important and meaningful. Come to think of it, maybe he could transfer up to New York? The VA was always, always hurting for counselors. So there was that to consider.
But… working for SHIELD? With various Avengers? And Captain America? To continue taking down a goddamn global terrorist organization?

He warned himself to play it cool. Go home, talk to his sister, think it over. Get back to Steve in a few days.

“So when do we start?”

Or not.

Chapter End Notes

So.. this chapter was an exercise in editing. It started out at 23 pages and I aggressively edited it down to 14 1/2 pages. I wonder if I could have edited it down even further, or if it stands well as is? Comments on this would be greatly appreciated, considered, and warmly welcomed.
HYDRA Reemerges

Chapter Notes

They're all Russian, in Russia, so assume they're speaking Russian. No [brackets] needed for indication.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Moscow, Russia
two weeks prior

The last thing any general wanted - or anyone in any position of authority, for that matter - was to be jarred out of sleep at some ungodly hour by the ringing of a telephone to which only the barest minimum of people had access. It never meant anything good.

“Lukin.” Aleksander Anatolyevich Lukin answered in a tone of voice that very strongly implied the person on the other end had better have had a very good reason for calling.

The voice on the other end of the line cleared his throat. “Sorry to bother you so early in the morning, sir, but… have you checked the news yet?”

“You woke me up, Marko Danilovich.” He didn’t care that his tone was sour. He’d recognized the voice of the man on the other end of the line: the lone technical assistant he had sent over to Alexander Pierce along with the Winter Soldier. For him to be calling at such an hour meant almost certain bad news, and he was in no mood to have the conversation drawn out. “No, I haven’t seen the news. Tell me what you have to tell me, and do it very quickly indeed.”

Regardless, Marko Danilovich hesitated, then said, “Project Insight is a failure, sir.”

Lukin snapped awake instantly, his voice filled with outraged anger. “What the hell do you mean, Project Insight is a failure?” It had been an idea six decades in the making, the ultimate goal of HYDRA in their reshaping of the world under a single uniting rule. “Explain yourself.”

“The helicarriers... “ Another ridiculously drawn out pause. Lukin could practically hear the man cringing. “There was… an interference. The helicarriers fired on each other. One crashed into SHIELD headquarters and the other two crashed into the river.”

By dint of enormous effort, he refrained from hurling the phone across the room. He did, however, squeeze it until it creaked. “And just what kind of an… interference… would cause that to happen?”

“Captain America, sir.”

This time he bit his lip to prevent himself from cursing aloud. “The Winter Soldier was supposed to have dealt with Captain America and the Black Widow both. Put him on the line right now; I want his full report. Now, do you hear me?”

“I hear you, sir, but...” Marko Danilovich cleared his throat. “The Winter Soldier never reported in. There was no extraction point, and... and I believe he might have gone down with the helicarriers.”

Lukin bit his lip so deeply he tasted blood. The Winter Soldier was missing? No extraction point?
He’d loaned the Soldier out to Pierce under heavy protest because HYDRA command had ordered it, and the imbecile had cost him the deadliest assassin in modern history. “Fine.” He forced himself not to scream the word. “Then connect me to Pierce and I’ll have him explain this debacle.”

“Secretary Pierce is dead, sir.”

“Are you…” He had to stop himself again from hurling the phone across the room in a fit of rage. Everything was imploding. The Winter Soldier missing in action, Pierce dead, Project Insight in ruins, the organization’s master plan for bringing an unruly world to heel blown away like smoke on the breeze…

“I need advice.” He said it more to himself than Marko Danilovich. “Expert advice. This has to be at least partially salvaged. I want you to patch me into the Zola consciousness.”

Another long sigh.

Lukin braced himself.

“The fort that housed the Zola consciousness was blown up on Secretary Pierce’s orders.” Once again, Marko Danilovich cleared his throat. “While pursuing Captain America and the Black Widow.”

Lukin couldn’t stop the expletive from flying out of his mouth. Nor could he stop it from doing so at a volume high enough to rouse anyone nearby from sleep. But he was far beyond caring at this point.

“All right.” He breathed hard, trying desperately to calm himself. “This need not be a total loss. We still have enough operatives in strategic places within the government of the United States to turn this to our advantage.” His mind had already begun to work on the possibility of painting this entire debacle as a case of the Avengers having gone rogue and wreaked havoc upon a government agency. Yes, that could work nicely. Turn the country against its superheroes and watch it tear itself apart…

Marko Danilovich infuriatingly cleared his throat once again. “That’s what I was getting at, sir. The news? You see… well… HYDRA’s in the news, sir. The infiltration of SHIELD was… leaked. On the internet. It’s on… it’s on Wikileaks.”

Lukin was silent for a long moment at this last bit of horrible news.

“This is a fatal blow, do you understand that?” His words were quiet, icy, and deadly serious in their monotone. “There will be no salvaging of HYDRA’s operations on American soil. It’s done.”

“Yes, sir. What do you want me to do, sir?”

He took another deep breath, his entire body quivering with anger. “To begin with, I want the Winter Soldier found. Dead or alive, I want him found. Drag the river for his body, and if it doesn’t turn up, I want every available eye looking for him.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?”

“Isn’t that enough for you?” he snapped, enraged. “Get to it now!” He only barely managed not to crack the screen of his phone as he jabbed savagely at the disconnect button.

If the Winter Soldier was still alive then at least Lukin could make some attempt at controlling the damage done. The Winter Soldier could be used to hunt down and eliminate every last one of HYDRA’s highly-placed operatives within the American government and military before they could
be captured and interrogated. That, at least, could prevent the destruction of the American branch of the organization from spreading internationally and crippling HYDRA entirely.

He picked up the phone again and contacted the doctor at his dacha. His holiday was over.

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The call came early in the morning, and for a confused moment, Dmitriy Stepanovich Rodchenko thought the neighbors’ boy might be calling to ask for help with the wifi signal again.

At four in the morning…?

No, it wasn’t even the house line that was ringing, but a mobile phone that only a select few people in the world would be calling.

Clearly his holiday was over, and it had only been a few weeks.

He found his glasses on the nightstand, sat up in bed, and pushed a hand through unruly hair that had long since gone grey. Only then was he ready to check the name on the mobile’s screen.

“Yes?” He bit back a sigh. “I’m listening.”

“I certainly hope so, Doctor.” Rodchenko could hear General Lukin tapping away urgently at a keyboard. “You’ll need to be.”

General Lukin laid out the fundamentals of the catastrophic disaster he had just been made aware of: the American Alexander Pierce’s death, the destruction of the Insight helicarriers, the exposure of HYDRA’s infiltration of the American government. He sounded about two seconds away from losing his temper entirely.

“And the Winter Soldier’s whereabouts are also unknown,” General Lukin spat. “That imbecile Pierce apparently never even gave him extraction coordinates.”

The seconds ticked by in horrific silence.

The whole world had been destroyed in a matter of hours.

It would be like the fall of the Soviet Union all over again. Only this time, instead of merely being thrown out into the cold when Department X was abruptly shuttered, and made to support himself by cleaning toilets in the evenings while working at a crumbling state hospital that could only occasionally afford to pay him in bags of moldering potatoes and carrots, and living in a cramped communal apartment without hot water or even heat most days…

Instead of merely living with the public shame and disgrace of being cast aside so immediately, of having fallen so quickly and completely…

This time, Rodchenko’s fall would be televised to the world, and then it would be very quickly followed by the type of public execution meant to soothe the fears of angry politicians. Either that, or he would spend the remainder of his years serving as a broken example in a Siberian gulag.

The nightmare had rendered him mute, but General Lukin was not a patient man.

He found a shaking voice somewhere. “What would you have me do?”

“Pack your things,” General Lukin said shortly. “I have a helicopter en route to you now. You are coming back to Moscow to prepare for the journey to America.”
There was nothing to say to that.

For the next few hours, Rodchenko packed his things and shuttered the dacha until next time. And the frustration, dim in the back of his mind, grew into full blown anger.

He had told the General that he wished to accompany the Winter Soldier to America. That it wouldn’t be enough to send a mere technician and then trust him to not only oversee the Winter Soldier’s programming and conditioning, but to act as an advisor to the Americans. That the Americans would be careless because it wasn’t their life’s work on the line, and so it didn’t matter nearly as much to them. That he himself could have acted as the Winter Soldier’s handler, instead of entrusting him to a bunch of overarmed cowboys.

All of that had been said and more, and in the end, it hadn’t mattered one bit. The Winter Soldier had been packed off to America with Marko Danilovich, and Rodchenko had been given leave to go on holiday.

And now it had all gone to hell.

The sun spilled over into the sky, and Rodchenko stood outside and waited for the world to end.

“Will you come for dinner tonight?” the neighbor asked him, coming up from a morning jog with no greater concerns on his face. “My wife is making-”

He never found out what the man’s wife was making. His voice was drowned out by the Black Hawk touching down in the middle of the dirt road. A moment later, several men wearing the black combat uniform of Kronas’ private militia spilled out of the helicopter.

He spoke to the captain, a hard-faced man who couldn’t have been older than thirty. “All of my things are inside by the door. You may proceed.”

The neighbor looked at him, wariness and shock fighting for room on his face. “Is there something you haven’t told us, Dmitriy Stepanovich?”

“Many things.” He headed for the helicopter. “But have a good day.”

There was nothing else for him to say.

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The next several weeks were a whirlwind of activity.

Lukin had engaged in several emergency discussions with HYDRA high command, including the head of the Eastern European section, along with the heads of two major branches of his Kronas Corporation in the United States. It had been unanimously agreed upon that the only way to salvage HYRA was to completely snuff out its presence in the United States, by whatever means necessary. Furthermore, and pertaining to Lukin’s personal interests, there could be no trace of any link between his business holdings in America and HYDRA’s operations there. His generous portfolio, he thought with a fresh wave of anger at Pierce, was going to suffer somewhat in the coming weeks unless he was very fortunate.

Rodchenko, immediately upon his arrival in Moscow, had been tasked with preparing himself and a hand-selected team of technical assistants for a journey to America. Either the Winter Soldier would be found alive and they would reacquire and recondition him, or his death would be confirmed and they would retrieve his body in order to safeguard both their proprietary technology and the elusive Super Soldier serum in his blood.
Meanwhile, Lukin had assembled a team of surveillance experts from the ranks of the military arm of Kronas. They had been dispatched to America with orders to locate the Winter Soldier at any cost. And while they searched, Lukin himself had compiled a list of those HYDRA operatives who had to be silenced in order to prevent the downfall of HYDRA worldwide.

At first, the surveillance team had watched the hospitals and morgues in the Washington DC area. The admission of a large man with a cybernetic left arm was not likely to go unnoticed, but that part of their search had been fruitless. They had also kept close track of the salvage efforts at the site of the Insight helicarriers’ crash. The river was being dragged daily for remains, and while most of the bodies recovered had been rendered unrecognizable by fire, explosions, and scavengers, the Winter Soldier’s carbonadium-jacketed arm would have been immediately identifiable. Had it been found, that was, which it was not.

The team had then moved on to watching Captain America’s apartment and his hospital room. His assassination had been part of the Winter Soldier’s most recent mission; it stood to reason that the Winter Soldier might attempt to finish that mission if he were capable. But when Captain America had been released from the hospital and begun to testify at a series of government hearings and the Winter Soldier had not made an appearance, the team had needed to readjust its focus once again.

As neither the Winter Soldier’s body nor his distinctive arm had been located, they reasoned, it was likely that he was still alive. And so the team turned to sifting painstakingly through video surveillance footage from all over the DC metro area, running every available record through recognition software and checking exhaustively by eye to confirm. And finally, after far too long, they had brought him one result.

“From the Smithsonian Museum of American History.” Lukin gazed down at a series of grainy black-and-white images of a man in drab civilian clothing and a baseball cap. “These were taken eight days ago.”

He peered closely at the most distinct of those pictures. The face looked like that of the Winter Soldier, but he wanted to be certain.

“Doctor Rodchenko. Come look at this.”

Rodchenko stared at the image for a long moment, then turned to regard Lukin. “That’s him.”

They would proceed.

Chapter End Notes

For the one who wanted whump... it's being set up ever so slowly.
As before, if they're ["talking like this,"], then they're talking in Russian.

Red Hook, Brooklyn
the next morning, October 2014

The previous night, Sam had experienced the strangest dinner of his life. Or maybe the most interesting. Or some amazing combination of the two.

Noteworthy, definitely.

After he had finished business at Steve’s place, Steve had made a quick phone call and arranged for Sam to spend the night at Avengers Tower, in what had to be the most high-tech apartment he ever would see. Sam gave Wanda a ride over to the tower, as she apparently lived there, too, where they were met by Pepper Potts, who just so happened to be the presiding CEO of Stark Industries. As it turned out, Ms. Potts wanted to meet this “new friend of Steve Rogers, who had so courageously risked his life to stop a global terrorist organization,” and wouldn’t he (and Wanda) join them for dinner?

Well, how could one possibly say no to that sort of invitation?

As it turned out, the ‘them’ in Ms. Potts’ proposal turned out to be not only Iron Man in the flesh (and wearing a Metallica t-shirt, which Sam would have never guessed at), but honest-to-God royalty, the very crown prince of Wakanda himself. Who insisted they merely address him as T’Challa.

That in itself would have been enough, but halfway through the third course, T’Challa turned to Sam and asked him for the details of the EXO-7. Because he planned to improve on it. As a gift. And because he wanted to see if he could.

Well, well.

It had been one helluva night.

Which, in Steve’s living the room the next morning, he was trying to explain in casual detail to Steve and Natasha - who had turned up right as Sam was being buzzed in - and, surprisingly, Bucky, who was sitting in the easy chair with a hard expression on his face.

Small steps, certainly, but much better than hiding in his room.

Besides, Sam’s story was very cool.

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“Cool story, bro.”

Natasha kept her face carefully neutral for a long moment. But when Sam’s expression went from
self-satisfied to wounded, she broke down and chuckled. “I’m sorry, I had to do it. You left yourself wide open. It actually does sound pretty cool.”

Sam shook his head at her, a just-you-wait smile on his face, and it was good that she had so many other people to focus on in this room. Because she didn’t know if she was quite ready to go one-on-one with James again quite so soon.

After what she’d come away with last time, she’d had to make herself scarce. She’d had to retreat, to reгрупп and try to process what she’d learned: that James hadn’t chosen his mission over her in Odessa, that he hadn’t shot her out of cold-blooded callousness, that he hadn’t looked at her in that horrible way because he’d never cared about her at all and she had only been a dalliance, and that he honestly didn’t remember any of it.

I love you.

He’d blurted it out one night, in the midst of a very hard conversation she’d been trying to have with him about their future. How she’d started to think about the fact that no one in their profession lived to be old. How there were no gold watches and pensions for people like them, only shallow unmarked graves at best and complete disappearance at worst. How every day might be the last for either of them, or for both of them.

I love you.

He’d looked so strange after he’d said it. Like it had come out of his mouth all on its own, without his direction. Like he hadn’t even known it until he’d said it. And that was what had made it feel so real. Later on, after Odessa, she’d had to make herself believe that he had just been a very talented actor. That he’d played her, for some sick purpose she didn’t understand. That none of it had been real.

And now, she didn’t know.

So she’d done as Rogers had asked, gone out and bought a few sets of clothes for him. Comfortable, utilitarian gear like he’d been wearing the last time. Duplicates of each item in different colors. Simple. Easy. She had dropped them off into Rogers’ hands the other night, but hadn’t allowed herself to stick around for conversation.

She’d need to see James again, she’d realized. To learn more, to understand more about what had happened to him and what he was now. And to try, with Rogers, to wake him up somehow. If that was at all possible.

Speaking of Rogers, he was in the midst of pouring everyone a cup of very strongly-scented herbal tea and complimenting Sam on his good fortune. “That sounds like pretty good luck for you, Sam. T’Challa and Tony are about on the same level when it comes to inventing crazy technology. He’s bound to improve on those wings.”

“Well, any improvement is better than…” Sam trailed off and glanced at James, a brief expression of awkwardness flitting across his face.

Of course it would feel taste mentioning the destruction of his wings when the perpetrator was sitting in the room with him. But James continued to sit there, the same stony expression on his face, and he still hadn’t uttered a word.

“Well, anyway.” Sam grinned. “T’Challa said he had some ideas, and then Tony said he had some ideas as well, and before you knew it, there was some intense science rivalry happening in that
dining room.”

---

“Oh, you have no idea.” Steve laughed quietly. Tony’s ego was very well-known, but T’Challa’s opinion of himself was pretty justifiably high as well. He was not only the crown prince of one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, but also a brilliant inventor and scientist - holding a Ph.D. in physics from Oxford - an occasional Avenger, and a renowned superhero in his own right. “I’d imagine somebody had to break that up before too long.”

He turned to look at Bucky, who was still sitting there in the easy chair with an unamused look on his face. He hadn’t wanted to be out in the living room with everyone, preferring instead to stay in his room, but Steve had wondered how much of that was really good for him. In the end, he’d convinced Bucky to come out and at least sit there with everyone. Bucky had agreed, but had yet to open his mouth or even change his expression.

*Come on, Buck.* He pleaded with his eyes. *Don’t be like that. Remember what we talked about this morning.*

Earlier that morning, when Sam had called to say he’d be coming by again, Steve had wound up talking to him at length about his fear that Bucky would simply vanish. That he’d go off on his own after HYDRA and never be seen or heard from again. It had robbed Steve of a good night’s sleep and gotten him out of bed insanely early yet again, just to check that Bucky was still asleep in his room. Sam, though, had said he’d had an idea about how to begin to handle things, and Bucky had responded with a wary affirmation when Steve had told him that Sam was coming by to suggest something to him. But now, when everyone was here, Bucky had seemingly shut himself off.

“Hey, Bucky.” He remembered a time, so long ago it made him ache, when Bucky couldn’t help but make himself the center of attention. How he’d always fared best in big social situations while Steve had been on the fringes. And now he was a Sphinx. “You feel like talking?”

---

Bucky reminded Sam very much of a teenager who had been forced to join his parents when they had company over, and Sam felt a rush of pity for Bucky in that moment. The man needed help very badly, and Sam would do everything in his power to see that it happened.

Then Steve asked Bucky a question, and Bucky seemed almost surprised to be addressed at all. He looked at Steve with a sudden sharpness in his eyes, and though he didn’t actually say anything, his body language had become much more alert.

Sam wondered then how often Bucky must have sat in a room while his HYDRA handlers - or scientists or torturers, whatever those monsters called themselves - simply talked and worked around him. Or on him. Bucky must have learned to simply tune them out and let the conversation flow past him, as Sam highly doubted his input was ever valued or asked for. And, Sam realized with an uncomfortable twist in his stomach, he probably didn’t expect it to be any different right then.

*Dude needed help. Seriously. Immediately.*

“So.” Sam leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. “You and I talked a bit yesterday, and Steve and I had a talk this morning, and instead of having a bunch of separate conversations, I thought it might be easier to have a single one now.”

Bucky looked back at him warily.
Sam decided to interpret that as an invitation to continue. “Because the truth is, your buddy here,” and he gestured to Steve with a slight incline of the head, “is worried that you’re just going to up and vanish one day. Maybe go after HYDRA on your own without saying anything. That right?”

Bucky was silent for so long after that, Sam wondered if he had been paying attention at all. But right before he was about to jump back in, Bucky spoke.

“We…” He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. “We talked about that. Steve knows.”

“Yes I do.” Steve jumped right in, almost before Bucky had finished speaking. “I know how badly you want to go after them. You told me yourself, and no one in the world could blame you for feeling that way. But I told you before, and I’ll tell you again, that going after them all by yourself is a recipe for disaster.” Steve looked as serious as Sam had ever seen him, and there was a glint of fear in his eyes as he spoke. “There are too many of them. Either they’ll catch you and mess your head up all over again, or they’ll just decide it isn’t worth it and kill you, or…”

Steve didn’t seem to be able to bring himself to say that last part, but Sam could fill in the blanks just as well. Steve was afraid that Bucky would target the people directly responsible for his treatment under HYDRA, kill them, and disappear. And that didn’t feel entirely wrong.

“I owe them,” Bucky said quietly. Coldly. In a way that left no mistaking what he had in mind as payment.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, you do. No one here is saying any differently.”

Bucky didn’t say anything to that, but Sam hadn’t really expected him to. He used the momentary silence to sip his patchouli tea and gather his thoughts.

“But here’s the thing.” Sam set the mug down on the table. “Look, we all know that the truth is, if you really wanted to leave, no one could stop you.”

Steve very much looked like he wanted to jump in and volunteer that he would, indeed, try to stop him, but thankfully he said nothing.

“But also keep in mind, no one wants you to take off on your own, for reasons I think we’ve covered pretty well.” He spread his hands. “So all I’m asking is…”

The wariness had come back into Bucky’s eyes, but Sam plowed forward.

“That if you do decide to leave, you at least tell someone first. Could be Steve.” Sam shrugged. “Could be me. I’ll give you my cell number, and you can call me any time you want to. No taking off without telling someone that you’re going to do it. Can you agree to that?”

---

“Or it could be me.”

Natasha hadn’t planned on saying much of anything, only on observing James and possibly talking to him alone later on if the opportunity presented itself, but she’d ended up surprising herself.

James could do it, she knew. He could go off on his own, track down his HYDRA commanders, and put them all down with little to no difficulty. The Winter Soldier, after all, was known to everyone who believed he existed as the deadliest assassin in the world - possibly the greatest who had ever lived. But the problem was not that he would fail. Not that he would be captured and reconditioned or killed, as Rogers feared, but that he would instead disappear. That there would be
no trace of him to follow, and no one to betray his whereabouts save for the corpses he left in his
wake.

And the more she thought about that possibility, the more she found she disliked the idea. After
everything James had gone through - after everything the two of them had once meant to one
another, regardless of whether that counted for anything any longer - he deserved better. An
opportunity like the one Clint had given her when she’d been at rock bottom and looking for a way
out. A chance to make his life his own. To follow his own path and to be what he chose to be.

She looked at the faces of the three men in the room, all of them surprised to hear her jump into the
conversation, and none more so than James. “If you decide to go anywhere, you can call me.” She
felt that slight smile crawl back onto her face. [“At least you’ll know you can talk to me
comfortably.”]

“Sure.” Rogers eyed her suspiciously, probably because he didn’t seem to like the two of them
speaking Russian to each other. “Call Natasha, call me, call Sam, but you’ve got to call somebody,
Buck.” He picked up his tea, but didn’t seem to want it for anything more than something to occupy
his hands with. “Can you promise me you’ll do that?”

---

Several seconds ticked by in tense silence.

For a moment, Sam actually wondered if Steve were about to shatter the mug in his hands. Dude was
squeezing it tightly enough, and the expression on his face seemed just as strained.

Natasha, too, seemed very interested in the proceedings. Maybe there was a story there, but from
what Sam knew of her so far, she would only choose to share it when she was damn good and
ready.

Steve seemed like he was on the verge of saying something, and Sam was about to jump in as well,
when Bucky spoke.

“Okay.”

Sam let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Okay?” He raised his eyebrows.

Bucky nodded.

“Okay, then.” A half-smile, mostly borne out of tension, flitted across Sam’s mouth. “Okay.”

Achievement unlocked.
Coney Island, Just Like You Remember!

Chapter Notes

If they're speaking Russian, there will be ["brackets in the dialogue."]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Red Hook, Brooklyn
late October 2014

It had been a full week since Steve had brought Bucky home with him to Brooklyn, and it had been a very busy week.

To begin with, he’d formally accepted the Secretary of Defense’s offer to head up S.H.I.E.L.D. There’d been an official meeting, and the assembled suits had all been very relieved. Well, initially at least; some of them had balked at a few of Steve’s suggestions, such as relocating the organization’s headquarters to Avengers Tower and linking the whole enterprise with the Avengers. But he’d made it clear that either the new S.H.I.E.L.D was going to be run his way or it simply wasn’t going to be run at all. And either everyone was happy with the arrangement by the time the meeting ended, or they’d done a very good job of pretending that they were.

Once that had been taken care of, it had been time for a very large round of phone calls and meetings. First and foremost had been his meeting with Tony to arrange for the allocation of space in the Tower. Which Tony had actually been fairly pleased with; he’d been griping for a long time about not being able to rent out any of the unused floors, since it seemed that most businesses believed Avengers Tower wasn’t the safest place to set up shop. He’d also talked to Maria Hill, Phil Coulson, and Sharon to let them know what was happening, and all of them were more than willing to come back to work for S.H.I.E.L.D if he was going to be the one heading it up. Though Maria seemed genuinely surprised - and moved - when he told her that he wanted her to be the next in line.

“I’m only looking at this as a temporary position,” he’d said to her. “Six months at the outside, just long enough to make sure everything’s running smoothly, and then I want to turn it over to someone I can trust to run things the right way.”

Sam had also gotten in touch with him during those few days. He’d put in for a transfer from the V.A. in Washington to the one in Manhattan, and said he was in the process of looking for an apartment. Steve had told him not to be ridiculous, that there was an apartment waiting for him in Avengers Tower, and Sam had seemed pretty ecstatic about that idea.

All in all, things seemed to be falling into place. Especially with regards to Bucky.

They’d gone out walking in the neighborhood several times. One day Steve had walked them past the blocks where their old apartment buildings had stood, though they had long since been bulldozed and replaced by buildings that seemed to have seen much better days. Steve could still remember the zigzagging crisscross of clotheslines strung from the windows, from the fire escapes, from railing to railing across the courtyard, with laundry flapping from each one. He could even remember the way that one particular stair had creaked ominously under even his slight weight; Bucky had had to make a habit of jumping over it.
On another day, he’d brought Bucky to look at the corner building that had been home to Mr. Cicalese’s drugstore, Bucky’s go-to destination for root beer barrels and jawbreakers. Mr. Cicalese had been a fixture of their neighborhood for as long as Steve could remember, chewing them out for plinking away at bottles and cans with Bucky’s air rifle in the abandoned lot beside the store, coming out from behind the counter with a broom handle and whaling the tar out of a group of older kids who’d been beating on Steve when it was clear that Bucky was overwhelmed, giving Bucky his first job behind the soda fountain, and even offering to let Bucky take over the store a few months before the draft was announced. Mr. Cicalese’s store was likewise long gone, replaced by a Walgreen’s. But the memories remained.

At least, they remained for Steve.

---

Every morning when Bucky woke up in Steve’s house, he decided that it would be the day he would leave and begin tracking down HYDRA.

But every morning when Bucky woke up in Steve’s house, he awoke to discover that once again he had slept for twelve hours, in a bed that was far too large and comfortable for one person, and that the sweatpants and sweatshirt he had slept in were much too comfortable as well. And every morning, Steve would make a giant breakfast of eggs and waffles and bacon, except once he had brought breakfast burritos instead, and once they went out for pancakes. And then they would walk around the neighborhood, and Steve would talk about things.

And so every evening, Bucky would decide that he would leave the next day instead.

One morning, Steve had an official SHIELD meeting to attend, which meant that he was at least starting to consider making HYDRA a priority. On that morning, Wanda Maximoff came over and asked Bucky if he wanted to go to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, and so they spent three hours walking around and eating brownies from the cafe and occasionally feeding the fish and the ducks. Wanda didn’t talk nearly as much as Steve did, and when she did, it was mostly in Russian or German. As a Roma growing up around post-Communist Transokovia, she explained, it had been necessary to learn several languages.

He liked her.

When he awoke that particular morning, he realized that he had stayed at Steve’s house for a week, which meant that he definitely had to leave that evening. Especially since Steve was finally thinking about making HYDRA a priority.

The scent of frying bacon got him out of bed, and before long, he was in the kitchen.

Probably he was supposed to tell Steve that he was leaving that evening, since he had promised to do so, but he didn’t want to say anything yet. He needed to say something though, otherwise Steve would nearly drop the frying pan when he turned and saw Bucky standing in the kitchen, and it would not be good to waste that much bacon.

“I’m here.”

---

Steve turned, frying pan in hand, to see Bucky standing there behind him.

“Morning, Bucky.” He shot him a smile. “Just in time. Let’s eat, and then I’ve got plans for the day.”
It was gratifying to see Bucky’s appetite. He’d always been able to put food away in huge quantities when they were younger, and if anything, that seemed to have increased. He absolutely devoured anything that was put in front of him, and even Steve was beginning to be surprised at the amount of money he was spending on things to cook for breakfast. They’d go through an entire dozen eggs every day, along with a gallon of milk or orange juice, sausage, bacon, waffles or pancakes (these were Bucky’s favorite) and occasionally toast or cereal. And there was never anything substantial left behind after these huge breakfasts.

Bucky also seemed to be getting a bit more relaxed, which was gratifying as well. He no longer had that aura of constant tension about him, nor did he flinch so much when Steve put an occasional hand on his shoulder. And while Steve knew that he was certainly armed wherever he went - a fact which made Steve very uncomfortable but which he knew he couldn’t change just yet - he never brought those weapons out into the open.

“We’re going to go someplace special today, Buck.” He’d been thinking about this trip for days, and today was the day it was going to happen. “I think you’re going to love it…” He paused, peered critically at Bucky’s face. “When was the last time you shaved?”

Bucky drained off his orange juice before replying. “Maybe…” He set the empty juice glass on table. “In your other apartment?”

“In my other…” Steve shook his head. “You mean back in DC.? That was a week ago, Bucky. Do you mean to tell me you haven’t shaved in a week?”

Still shaking his head, he led Bucky to the medicine cabinet, picked out a disposable razor for him, and shut him in the bathroom to take care of business. He knew how far from clean he always felt if he missed a shave, and he shaved every morning. How Bucky must have felt after a week, he had no idea.

Bucky came back out after a couple of minutes, freshly clean-shaven and with his hair combed back wet. Steve wondered for a moment about the practicality of encouraging him to get a haircut, but there wouldn’t be time today. And at any rate, Bucky pulled on his baseball cap before Steve had made a decision.

“Oh, that’s much better.” He smiled. “Grab your coat. Let’s get out of here.”

The subways had Steve worried briefly, but Bucky seemed to handle them well enough. Which was very fortunate, considering that it took two trains to get them from Red Hook to Brighton Beach. But before long, they were climbing the stairs out of the subway station and walking briskly down the sidewalks of Brighton Beach towards their final destination.

---

The first thing Bucky noticed when he came up from the subway were the many Cyrillic signs on the storefronts. Steve didn’t seem to notice them at all, but Brighton Beach was apparently full of Russian-language bookstores and bakeries and attorneys-at-law. And Russian speakers, too; he could hear the language in passing as he and Steve walked down the street.

The second thing he noticed were the smells coming from some of the restaurants and cafes: frying beef for pirozhki and the distinct scent of cilantro-heavy khinkali. It was almost overwhelming, the sudden scents of home, and he slowed his pace and tried to breathe it in.

He wondered if anyone would be selling bags of honeyed chak-chak. It would be a good snack for the beach, and even though he had eaten breakfast not too long ago, he suddenly felt hungry again.
Maybe a quick snack from one of the cafes would be okay?

He stopped in front of a building whose big, blue awning pronounced it to be Черное море гастроном - the Black Sea Deli, and it took Steve a few more paces to realize that Bucky wasn’t next to him anymore.

“We could have a snack?” The words felt awkward coming from him. He never got to make suggestions.

A strange expression flitted across Steve’s face, but he said, “Sure, Buck,” and walked back over to him. He smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes, and put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “Let’s find a Baby Ruth or something.”

They walked into the deli, and the aroma of freshly fried knish - heavy with ground beef and potatoes and onions - was so strong, it made Bucky’s mouth water.

An elderly woman slid the tray of knish into a large display case filled with other hot foods, then straightened and eyed Bucky and Steve for a moment.

[“I’ve some pelmeni in the back, young man.”] She jerked her thumb toward the kitchen door. [“It will be ready in a few minutes. You look like you could eat a dozen pelmeni or two.”]

Easily and quickly.

[“I could, but… no chak-chak today?”] Bucky kept his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He was wearing a glove on his metal hand, but better not to draw attention to it.

The woman snorted. [“No chak-chak ever, and anyway, you look like a man who needs something heartier than fried dough balls.”] She gestured to Steve. [“Same for your quiet friend.”]

His eyes were drawn right back to the knish, steaming in the glass display case. [“Knish then, Grandmother.”]

Her wizened face split into a toothy grin at that. [“Of course knish. Young men need meat, not dough and honey. How many do you want?”] Before he could answer, she said, [“At least six, I think. Between the two of you, you could easily eat six.”]

He was suddenly very hungry. [“Maybe some pelmeni, too?”]

[“Of course pelmeni.”] The woman jerked her chin toward Steve. [“What’s wrong with your friend? Doesn’t speak Russian, does he?”]

Bucky turned and looked at Steve. [“No.”]

Steve didn’t look happy. His hands were in his pockets and his mouth was a firm line.

The woman snorted. [“Well, he’s probably hungry. Hang on, I’ll get the pelmeni.”] She turned and headed into the kitchen, leaving the two of them alone for the moment.

He thought that Steve would probably start talking then, but he didn’t, and Bucky wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do about that. So he said nothing, and then the woman returned with a cardboard container that was probably filled with pelmeni.

The woman continued to talk - about the weather and how it was a nice day to be outside - while she filled another container with knish. Then she bagged it all up and placed it on the counter.
“Anything else, young man?”

There were a lot of things that looked good, both on the shelves and in the display case, but they couldn’t get everything. So he said, “Maybe a drink?”

“Tea?”

He used to drink tea every day, and had only started drinking coffee since he had been staying with Steve, but tea didn’t feel right for the occasion. Not if he and Steve were going to Coney Island, though he couldn’t say why.

He chewed on his lower lip for a moment, then, “Vodka?”

The woman laughed. “Getting started early?” She glanced at the clock on the wall behind her. “Well, it’s past noon anyway, and it’s five o’clock somewhere.” She shrugged. “I have a few good bottles of it, too. You’re lucky, young man.”

That wasn’t true, but he wouldn’t say anything.

A moment later, Steve paid for everything, and then they were back outside and walking toward Coney Island. And Steve still seemed like he wasn’t happy, so Bucky wouldn’t say anything about that either.

---

Steve had walked into the store, feeling as though he’d stepped through some kind of portal into another world. The store was in Brighton Beach, sure, but not a single one of the signs was in English. Not a single one of the items on the display shelves behind the glass-fronted counter was recognizable to him. Even the sign above the Coca-Cola refrigerator was written in Russian script. He might as well have been in Russia instead of a neighborhood in Brooklyn.

And then he heard Bucky and the old lady who apparently ran the place start jabbering away at one another in machine-gun Russian.

His first instinctive reaction was shock. But hard on the heels of that shock came surprising resentment. Karpov had succeeded in his attempt to hurt him through Bucky, more than he had ever known. His influence was still being felt a quarter century after he’d died. For Bucky to still be so fluently speaking a language that wasn’t his own…

He suddenly wanted to leave the deli. Wanted to grab Bucky by the sleeve and run, and not stop until they got to Coney Island. Wanted to sit with his friend on the beach like they once had, drink like they once had, and let things go back to the way they were supposed to be.

For some reason, it bothered him more to hear Bucky talking to the old lady in Russian than it had to hear Bucky and Natasha speaking Russian. And he didn’t know why, but it was beginning to eat at him.

He wanted to leave. But he didn’t want to upset Bucky on a day that was supposed to be fun and beneficial to them both. So he just shoved his hands in his pockets, said nothing, and hoped this would be over with quickly. He watched Bucky and the old lady talk, watched her smile and laugh at whatever Bucky had said to her, watched as Bucky seemed to suddenly develop a bit more of an idea of how to handle himself. And it was all wrong, all of it.

How was it possible to take a man and completely rebuild him, to the point where he accepted a different language, a different culture, a different country as his own? To entirely erase any
connection to his own country and language and family, until he actually became a different man? It was sickening. And yet Karpov had managed it, to the point where Bucky still seemed to think that he’d been a good man.

*I hope today works out the way I’d planned it.* He closed his eyes, fisted his hands in his pockets, and said it like a prayer. *There’s got to be a way back for him. There’s just got to be.*

It was an almost indescribable relief to walk out of the door. It felt like a complete inversion of what had happened before: walking out of a strange foreign place and back onto the familiar ground of his own hometown. Leaving behind the indecipherable signs and the unfamiliar language and the maddening ease with which Bucky had slid into the Russian language was such a relief that he found himself feeling lighter with each step they took down the sidewalk away from the deli.

“So, what did you get to snack on?” He gestured towards the bag Bucky held in his hand. “And how did you know we were going to need the vodka?”

---

*Pelmeni and knish.* Bucky tried to think of a good English translation. *“Meat dumplings and… potato… potato pockets. With meat.”*

They crossed a busy street, and then Bucky could see a boardwalk ahead of them, and beyond that, amusement park rides backed by the ocean.

He had been there before, hadn’t he? Steve had said so, but the museum hadn’t said that at all.

“And the *babushka* asked if we wanted tea, but I thought…”

He felt the thread of the conversation begin to slip away from him.

“I thought…”

It didn’t matter what he thought.

He didn’t exist to *think.*

Not him.

Idiot.

He caught his breath, and suddenly he couldn’t remember what he was supposed to say. He couldn’t even remember the question, but Steve was looking at him, and…

And…

“The boardwalk,” he said quietly, just for something to say, “is there.”

“Yup.” Steve smiled broadly and pointed. “There’s the boardwalk. They moved it, of course; they had to. There was a big hurricane a couple of years ago that wiped out a lot of the old landmarks, but the best ones are still here and they’re rebuilding others.”

Bucky nodded.

“I couldn’t believe Nathan’s ended up getting as famous as it did.” Steve pointed to a huge restaurant that took up almost a whole block of storefront space. “They apparently went multinational about thirty years ago, but the original one’s still here.”
Bucky nodded again, and walked along next to Steve as he pointed out all of the things that were supposed to be interesting.

Steve was grinning now, pointing out the old classics as they neared the beach. “The Wonder Wheel’s still there. And the Cyclone. I think those were the first things they fixed after the hurricane. I guess they thought it’d be good for people’s morale to see their old favorites back to normal.” He smiled. “I know it was good for me.”

Bucky didn’t know what he was supposed to say to any of that, but Steve was smiling and it was clear that they were supposed to be happy about Coney Island.

So he said, “okay,” and they walked onto the boardwalk, and Steve continued to point out important Coney Island landmarks.

But… hadn’t he been there before? Not just because Steve said so, but because…

He had pocketed a postcard - ‘Coney Island - Just Like You Remember!’ emblazoned across a big ferris wheel in full color. He wanted to get there, wanted to see for himself, but…

He had gone looking for trouble, and…

No…

The pelmeni and knish steamed hot in the bag, and he just wanted to sit somewhere and eat them and then maybe open the vodka and drink that, too. Maybe they could sit on the beach, sit directly on the sand, and eat all of the food and pass the vodka back and forth, and…

“Can we eat?” he said quietly. “Can we just eat?”

Steve stopped and looked at Bucky and his smile faded away. Bucky didn’t look happy enough about Coney Island, Steve’s expression seemed to say, and he was ruining the fun.

Bucky had fucked up.

Steve didn’t say that though. Instead he said, “Sure, Buck,” with a worried expression on his face. “Sure. Anything you say. Come on, let’s go find a place to sit.”

They walked past the picnic tables and benches set up in rows along the boardwalk, then stepped onto the sand and walked out towards the water.

“Here, Bucky. Pull up a dune.” Steve sat down in the sand, putting the vodka in its bag down next to him. “You all right?”

“I can eat.” Bucky sat down and opened the bag, pulling out both containers and twisting the lids off, one after the other. He passed the container of pelmeni to Steve, then plucked out a knish and ate half of it in one bite.

Better. Much better.

He finished off the knish and started on another one.

That, he could do. Just sit on the beach and eat and listen to the waves rolling up against the sand and the seagulls squawking loudly overhead.

Peaceful.
Was it familiar?

He wasn’t sure.

He glanced at Steve. “Do you like it? The pelmeni?”

“It’s…” Steve chewed carefully, staring up at the sky as he did so. “Not half bad.” He swallowed, nodded, and smiled. “Different, but not bad.”

Good. That was good.

“So.” Steve reached for a knish and turned to look at Bucky. “Do you like it here?”

“It’s quiet,” Bucky said around a mouthful of knish.

When he and Wanda had gone to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden the other day, Wanda had brought along a bag of bread crusts so that they could feed the ducks. They had sat together on a bench for at least a half hour, watching as an ever increasing number of ducks fought over their dwindling supply of crusts. It had been a good afternoon.

He plucked a pelmeni from the container and hurled it some distance away. Within moments, a flock of seagulls swooped down to eat it, all of them squawking angrily at each other.

He wished he had a bag of bread crusts.

Maybe next time.

Except that he was supposed to leave that evening, and he hadn’t told Steve yet. Only he didn’t really want to think about that right then. He just wanted to sit on the beach for a while.

He threw another pelmeni toward the seagulls. “I like it.”

---

“I’m glad.”

Okay, so maybe ‘It’s quiet’ wasn’t exactly the justification Steve been hoping for. But considering what Bucky had been through, maybe a little quiet was what he needed. And while Steve had hoped that Bucky might have found that Brooklyn felt like home - especially living in the apartment in Red Hook, not five minutes from where they’d grown up - it was enough that he liked it.

Enough for now, at least.

The pelmeni were disappearing fast, as Bucky tossed them to the seagulls, and the knishes wouldn’t last long either. Steve picked another one out of the container and bit into it - managing not to down half of it in one go the way Bucky would have - and gazed out at the waves.

“We used to come here all the time back then.” His voice turned wistful, his eyes taking on the faraway look of reminiscence. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to knowing how long ago it was. It only feels like a handful of years ago.” He shook his head slightly. “Sometimes not even that long.”

There was no response. Steve didn’t really expect there to be.

They sat there for a while, munching their way through the admittedly tasty Russian fare and not saying much at all. Bucky had said that he liked his quiet, after all, and Steve tried his hardest to oblige him. Once in a while, he would comment on the breeze or a certain scent or the way the beach
looked so much the same as it had so long ago, but he tried to stay quiet for Bucky’s sake.

“Hey, Bucky?” He reached for the vodka after a few minutes. “Feel like a drink?”

Bucky nodded after a moment. “Okay.”

In the absence of cups, Steve took a swig directly from the bottle before passing it over to Bucky. And suddenly, it felt as if the years had melted away. He and Bucky were sitting on the beach at Coney Island again, snacking on food they’d picked up along the way and drinking alcohol with nothing to do but while the day away.

He couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

---

Bucky was about to point out that they had no cups, but Steve didn’t seem to care. He was even smiling, so Bucky decided he didn’t care either.

The old woman had been right; it was good vodka. It went down smooth, without any burning sensation, and they probably should have bought a second bottle. They passed it back and forth quickly enough that before long they had already drained half of it.

It was nice.

Familiar, maybe…

And then - a scrawny blonde kid sitting next to him in the sand, and several empty bottles scattered between them, and it was nighttime, only the lights of Coney Island lit the whole beach in neon colors, and the scrawny kid was laughing “you gotta slow down, Buck, how many is that?” and he was laughing right back, laughing laughing, beer warm on his breath and on his cheeks, and he leaned against the scrawny kid, “maybe I’ll just sleep here, it’s my birthday, I can do what I want…”

Bucky stared wide-eyed at the half-empty bottle of vodka in his hands.

Vodka, not beer. And it was still daylight. He was on the beach with Steve, and they had vodka and pelmeni, and...

And…

“We came here before?” He didn’t look up. “On my birthday? We came here?”

---

“Yeah.”

Steve turned to Bucky, his eyes wide and expectant, his heart in his throat. Was this it? Was this the key to unlocking the prison they’d built around Bucky’s mind? Would he finally, after almost seventy years, be able to truly come home?

“Yeah, we did.”

There was such anticipation, such expectation, such hope in his voice. This might be it. This could be how Bucky was going to remember everything. Maybe it would start with him remembering his birthday, and then maybe he’d go on to remember the night they’d gotten drunk on the beach before he’d first shipped out in 1940. Or the time when they’d been ten years old and brought an entire birthday cake to the “We Deep-Fry Anything” pavilion at the boardwalk. Or the time Bucky had
hurled a hot dog at Andrew Koblinski’s head from the top of the Wonder Wheel - and hit him dead-on - only for Koblinski, who couldn’t figure out where the hot dog had come from, to head off to the Tunnel of Love by himself. They’d laughed for hours at that…

Come on back, Buck. I miss you.

With a tremor in his voice, he continued.

“We came here on your eighteenth birthday. It was the first time you were old enough to drink, and we bought a six-pack of beer and just came down here and drank it all.” He smiled reminiscently. “Well, mostly you did. I was a lightweight back then.”

---

“It was winter,” Bucky said slowly and quietly. “It was cold on the beach.”

The images in his mind fragmented for a split second, but then… he put an arm around the scrawny kid, “you’re all right, Stevie, you know that?” and he kissed him sloppy and wet and warm, and they were both laughing again, they had drunk too much, he would feel it in the morning when he showed up for work at the store…

… fireworks exploded against the night sky, and the beach was crowded, and the scent of funnel cake and popcorn and hotdogs clung heavily to the air, and several empty bottles of beer were scattered at their feet in the sand, and he waved his hand up at the fireworks, “Happy Birthday, Steve. Look what I got you!” and the scrawny kid rolled his eyes, but he was laughing laughing laughing…

That couldn’t be right.

“No…” He shook his head. “It was summer.”

His mind never worked right. That’s why the doctor said the images were only mind tricks. That’s why he would make them go away. That’s why…

Steve was looking at him with a strange expression.

“It wasn’t my birthday.” Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. “It was yours. It was summer. There were fireworks.”

---

“It was both.”

Of course the memories weren’t all going to come back at once, Steve thought. Bucky had gone through too much at the hands of Karpov and Pushkin, his mind rewritten too many times for his memories to come back cleanly. Not to mention whatever had happened to him in the years after the file had dead-ended in 1988. It was no wonder he was confused by the many times they’d spent birthdays - and other days - on that beach.

“Your birthday’s in the winter, Buck. December 17th.” He gave Bucky what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “You always used to hate it because it was so close to Christmas that you only ever got one present for both days. Mine’s on July 4th, and you always used to tell me the same bad joke every year. That you’d gotten me fireworks for a present.”

His mind was suddenly filled with images of their birthday celebrations. Bucky eating his cake and opening his present from Steve - invariably a drawing or painting, since the two of them never had
any money. Bucky slapping him on the back and pointing up at the sky with his usual “Hey, Steve, look what I got you for your birthday!” The two of them going out to the movies, Bucky having gotten him a date yet again, and the girl gamely not making fun of his inability to talk to her properly because Bucky had told her it was his birthday. And so often, the two of them sitting on the beach surrounded by empty beer bottles and cardboard snack boxes, each with an arm slung around the other’s shoulders. Just the two of them, as always.

“But we used to come out here all the time. I can’t even remember how many of our birthdays ended with us here.”

Bucky was silent for a long moment, then quietly he said, “It can’t be both. The doctor says it’s just mind tricks, but you say it’s real.” He stared at the bottle of vodka in his hand. “It can’t be both. It can’t be mind tricks, but still be real.”

“The doctor.” Steve’s face turned sour. “A doctor tries to help you get better, Buck, not screw you up even worse. And you know they lied to you.”

He couldn’t adequately describe the hatred he felt for those so-called ‘doctors’. The things they had done to Bucky had been inhuman. They’d left him so little of his own mind that he couldn’t even imagine that his own memories were true. Just ‘mind tricks’.

“When told you your memories were ‘mind tricks’ anyway?” He wondered whether Bucky could even acknowledge names if someone else brought them up, or whether the same conditioning that prevented him from revealing the name of his commanding officer in HYDRA would go this far as well. “Was it Pushkin? Rodchenko? Someone else?”

Bucky stared out at the water.

Damn it, Steve had only wanted to sit on the beach with Bucky and revisit the old days. He’d been so happy a minute ago, listening to Bucky bringing up things he remembered, if only in disjointed and confused flashes. It had been something to hope for, something to hold onto and to work toward, and he wasn’t going to let the long-dead Soviets or the unknown HYDRA operatives take it from him. He wouldn’t let them have this too, not after everything else they’d done.

“Because it’s not mind tricks, Buck. It’s real. And whoever told you that your mind was playing tricks on you when all it was trying to do was heal itself was lying to you.” He shook his head vigorously. “They had to lie to you. They had to do whatever it took to keep you from remembering who you are, because they knew that once you did, it would be all over.”

Bucky shifted and looked at him with an unreadable expression.

Steve continued. “That you’d turn on them and kill every last one of them for what they’d done to you. So they lied to you, told you it was your mind playing tricks on you, stuck you in that damned chair and blanked your mind anytime you ever got close to figuring out the truth, did everything they could to make sure you never remembered.”

“But…” Bucky started to say, but trailed away.

Steve took a breath and looked at Bucky with a softer expression. “But even after all of that, you’re still remembering things that really happened. And none of it’s mind tricks, Bucky; it’s all real.”

After a long moment, Bucky spoke. “HYDRA lied,” he said slowly. “I know HYDRA lied. You said so, and so did the museum, but… But why would the old man have lied?” He chewed on his lip. “That doesn’t… he wouldn’t have… he wouldn’t…”
Bucky wore a look like that of a lost child. There was such confusion, such dismayed bewilderment, that it made Steve’s heart ache. And the worst part of it was that he knew the exact answer to Bucky’s question. The ‘old man’ had written it out in his own words.

“Because Karpov wanted you to be the Winter Soldier.” Steve’s voice sounded sad and bitter even to his own ears. “Because he hated America so much, and he hated me so much for representing America, and he thought that turning my best friend against our country would be like spitting right in my face.”

Bucky’s eyes widened slightly at that. “But…”

Steve continued. “And so he made sure you wouldn’t ever know that you were from Brooklyn. He made sure you wouldn’t remember that you were a soldier in the U.S. Army. He made sure you wouldn’t remember your home, or your family, or me. He made you speak Russian, made you eat Russian food and wear Russian clothes and everything else he could do to convince you that you were one of his own men.”

Bucky continued to stare at him with wide open eyes.

God, it hurt. It hurt so badly. Especially on the heels of what Bucky had remembered just a few short moments ago.

“They all lied to you, Bucky. I hate to have to say it, and I hate that you have to go through it, but they all lied. Even Karpov.” Steve snorted. “Especially Karpov.”

---

“But…” Bucky said again, and again didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

His stomach twisted in a weird, uncomfortable way, and he could suddenly feel the weight of all those knish. He wished he hadn’t eaten them, wished he hadn’t drunk the vodka. Most importantly, he wished the fucking mind tricks hadn’t happened, because all they did was confuse him and make Steve upset, and then instead of eating and drinking on the beach, they had to…

Had to…

Talk about lies? Talk about the truth?

Both?

Could it be both?

He didn’t fucking know anymore.

“That doesn’t…”

He wanted to get up and go track down HYDRA right then. Find the General and make him tell the truth. Or he would just kill him. He wanted to find him and kill him. He wanted to sit on the beach with Steve and drink vodka and feed the seagulls. He wanted the mind tricks to stop.

But maybe the mind tricks were real?

He didn’t know anything.

He was so tired…
He wanted to lay down in the sand and close his eyes. He wanted to track down HYDRA and kill them all, especially the General. He wanted to sit on the beach with Steve and drink vodka.

Nothing made sense anymore.

“I need rest,” he said quietly. “It’s been a long time since I had rest.”

He didn’t know anything.

HYDRA had been lying the whole time, but Steve was saying that the old man had been lying, too. Everyone had been lying, which meant the doctor was lying, and maybe the mind tricks were real - more lying - and maybe Steve was going to say that even rest was a lie, too, somehow. He didn’t know anything anymore.

---

“I’m sorry, Bucky.” Steve shook his head, eyes half-closed against the pain. “I’m so sorry. I know it hurts, and I wish to God it had all worked out differently, but it’s the truth.”

For the thousandth time, he swore that he would finish the job he’d started during the war. The job he’d sworn to finish after Bucky had fallen from the train. The job he’d thought he’d died finishing as he guided the Red Skull’s massive Valkyrie bomber into the Arctic Ocean. He was going to destroy HYDRA. Crush them, bury them, and spit on their graves for what they had done. And just as Peggy had told him, he knew he wouldn’t be alone in doing so. He’d be fighting HYDRA alongside those he trusted the most. Sharon. Maria. Phil. Sam. Wanda. Clint. Natasha.

And Bucky. Most importantly Bucky.

“You do look like you could use a bit of a nap.” That was an understatement, honestly; as Steve looked at his friend’s face, he was a bit worried at just how weary and beleaguered Bucky looked right then. “No problem. It’s been a busy day, after all. We can just head back to Red Hook and I’ll leave you be for a bit…”

And then it hit him. Hard, like a rail splitter wielding a sledgehammer.

_An integral part of the Winter Soldier’s conditioning is the implantation of the suggestion that cryogenic hibernation is restful. This has removed his earlier hesitation at undergoing the cryogenic freezing process._

Bucky wasn’t talking about a few hours of naptime. He wasn’t even talking about turning in early for the night. He was talking about cryo-sleep.

“No, Buck.” He felt sick to his stomach at the thought of it. “No more of that. No more cryo. I’m never letting anyone do that to you again, do you hear me? Never again.”

“Why?” Bucky looked at him in lost bewilderment. “Why no more rest?”

“Because I’m not letting anyone stick my best friend in a damn freezer, is why.” Again Steve felt a rush of anger at Karpov, at Pushkin, at the whole entirety of HYDRA, for what they’d done to Bucky. “Because getting put on ice is anything but restful. Believe me, I know. I spent almost seventy years under the ice in the Arctic, and I never want to go through that again.”

Bucky said nothing to that.

How could he convince Bucky that cryogenic freezing wasn’t restful? Especially when he’d had it
implanted in his brain by that damned machine? How did you fight something like that? Could seven
decades’ worth of belief and conditioning be overturned?

*I’m sure as hell going to try.*

He reached out a hand and laid it on Bucky’s shoulder, gripping it reassuringly. “But that doesn’t
mean you can’t get some real rest. You’ve got a nice big soft bed at my place, and you know you
can sleep as long as you want.” He found a small smile somewhere and stuck it on his face. “And
I’ve noticed you’re comfortable enough there to sleep for twelve hours straight, no problem.”

Maybe that was it? He brightened suddenly.

“Seems to me like you’ve got a lot of real rest you need to catch up on.” He raised an eyebrow. “The
cryo obviously didn’t do you any good at all, if you have to sleep such long hours now.”

---

Bucky stared at Steve for a long, confused moment.

Maybe… that had been a good point?

He wasn’t sure.

He wasn’t even sure what he was supposed to say to that. What was there to say to that? He did like
the bed - it was nice and soft - and he had been sleeping for twelve hours a night - he was so tired all
the time, and it just happened that way.

“Huh.”

His gaze drifted to the bottle in his hand. After a second’s hesitation, he pounded it back, then passed
it to Steve.

“We should probably finish this.”

---

Steve accepted the bottle from Bucky with a huge smile on his face. From the series of expressions
that had crossed Bucky’s face, it looked as though his comment about cryo had hit a lot more pay dirt
than he’d hoped for.

“We probably should.” He took a drink from the bottle, looked at it critically. There wasn’t much
left. “And then we should probably go home.”

It felt good. Sitting there on the beach at Coney Island with Bucky, drinking and talking and
watching the world go by reminded him very pleasantly of old times. But better still was being able
to talk about ‘going home’ when ‘home’ was just a short subway ride or two away in Red Hook.

And when ‘home’ was home for Bucky, too.

Chapter End Notes

A NOTE ABOUT BUCKY’S BIRTHDAY: So back when I wrote this chapter a few
months ago, I didn't know that Bucky's birthday (in the comics anyway) is supposedly in March. I had placed it in December 1917, as Steve's is in July 1918. If Bucky were born in March 1917, that would make them a grade level apart in school, which seems like it would make it harder to maintain a friendship as little kids. So December it stays.

Food chapters, by the way, always make me hungry. I'm dying for pelmeni and knish now.
Nightmare File Redux

Chapter Notes

This is to those who thinks Bucky doesn't have enough emotional anguish.

As before, if they're speaking Russian, ["it looks like this."]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Red Hook, Brooklyn
late October 2014

It had been another busy week, and Steve was well underway with the progress he’d been making on the rebuilding of SHIELD.

For one thing, the help he’d asked for had come through with flying colors. Maria Hill had stepped away from her offer from Stark Industries - which apparently had Pepper Potts disappointed, but which he knew Tony would find a way to smooth over - and begun combing through the files of SHIELD personnel to initiate the first round of background checks. The idea was to hire back as many of the old SHIELD hands as possible, providing the positions were absolutely necessary and the people themselves could be trusted. Phil Coulson, too, had come back from the FBI - ‘returned from my sojourn to cartoon land’, he drily called it - and was looking forward to working with Steve’s elite HYDRA-hunting team. He’d even worked with Maria to bring the old Helicarrier out of retirement and back online. It was currently undergoing a massive retrofit, but Tony and T’Challa were both confident that it would be airborne inside of two weeks.

He was also very happy to have the two ringers he’d called in come on board. Carol - formerly Captain Carol Danvers, USAF; formerly Ms. Marvel; currently Captain Marvel; very recently an Avenger - had recently called him back to accept his offer. And Rhodey - well, Rhodey had had his reservations, but he’d accepted for two reasons. One, because Steve had made it a point to let him know how much his expertise as a Colonel in the Air Force would mean to the fledgeling SHIELD. And two, because his superiors had given him a direct order to act as a liaison between SHIELD and the government. And since both Rhodey and Carol were trusted Avengers as well as having experience as military officers, they’d be pulling double duty as field agents and administration.

And, just as importantly, there was Bucky’s progress. After a long jog one morning, Steve had suggested they treat themselves to a breakfast at a local waffle house. Bucky had been very obviously satisfied with the meal, and so Steve had looked up a series of pancake and waffle houses around the area for them to try. He had the idea they could do it every few days, which Bucky seemed pleased with.

Bucky had also managed to begin to rediscover his old love of science fiction. On a whim, Steve had asked Bucky to sit and watch *Star Wars* with him, remembering how much Bucky had loved to watch the old *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* serials at the picture house- sorry, *movie theater* - when they’d been young men. Bucky had enjoyed it so much that Steve had come out into the living room later that night to find Bucky still awake and watching the movie again.

Things were going well, he thought.
Things were going too well, Bucky thought.

Life with Steve was easy and comfortable, and the longer Bucky stayed with him, the harder it was getting to convince himself to leave. Before long, another week had gone by, and he had been there for two weeks. He didn’t know when he was going to leave and begin tracking down HYDRA, but he knew it had to happen.

Soon.

But in the meantime, nice things were happening.

One day, when Steve had further SHIELD business to deal with, Wanda Maximoff came over again. This time, she asked Bucky if he wanted to accompany her to the Brooklyn Museum to look at the Egyptian collection. And so they went and spent four hours looking around the museum, covering much more than just Egyptian cat statues. And afterward, they had a lot of Indian food, so much that he ended up bringing cartons of it home.

He wasn’t supposed to think of Steve’s house as home.

On a different day, Sam called and wanted to talk to Bucky. “Hey, man, just checking up,” Sam told him. “Glad to hear you’re still around.” Then Sam told him that the crown prince of Wakanda was almost finished making him a new pair of wings, and that he’d even show them to Bucky, so long as there were no grappling hooks present. And Bucky had promised that there wouldn’t be, and Sam had found that very funny and he talked to him for a few more minutes before hanging up.

He wasn’t used to people wanting to talk to him.

One evening, he and Steve watched *Star Wars*, which was probably one of the best pictures ever made. That evening, when Steve was in bed, Bucky watched it again, and Steve ended up joining him halfway through. And then he told him that there were actually five more *Star Wars* pictures, and maybe he’d like to watch all of them.

He would like that very much.

And so it went, and before long, two weeks had gone by, and Bucky hadn’t left yet. And he was supposed to, he really was, and he would - soon - but…

But not yet.

---

Having Bucky around had really brought home to Steve how important the little things were, he realized one day.

Little things made up so much of what the two of them did that they couldn’t really be called little things anymore. Their routine had come to include seemingly mundane pursuits like morning jogs, huge breakfasts, and just sitting on the couch and going through Bucky’s Netflix queue. Well, actually, it had been Steve’s Netflix queue to begin with; he’d gotten the subscription years beforehand. He’d never really gotten the hang of it and had meant to cancel his subscription, but he’d kept on forgetting, and since he’d registered for automatic payment and renewal, it was easy to just let it slide into the background. But Bucky had been sitting on the couch one day with nothing to do, and Steve had suddenly remembered the subscription, and Bucky had latched onto it. He now had dozens of films and television shows lined up, and for every one the two of them watched together, it
seemed as though Bucky added ten more.

But those little things, those seemingly mundane and trivial things, were what made having Bucky there mean so much to him. Steve finally had Bucky back, after such a long time and after so many hardships on Bucky’s part. And to see Bucky looking and acting so much more relaxed made him happy in a way he didn’t have words for.

Which was why he was wrestling with the choice he had in front of him now.

The file was there. He’d brought it with him from DC - such an important and potentially volatile piece of information couldn’t be left around for anyone else to find - and stuck it on a shelf in his closet. But recently, he’d begun to worry about what would happen if Bucky were to stumble across it by accident. He could read it, after all, even if Steve couldn’t. More to the point, he knew perfectly well what would happen if Bucky found the file on his own. Bucky would think Steve had been deliberately hiding it from him, and the trust that had been built up between them would be shattered.

And besides, the file was the definitive proof Bucky needed that everything the Soviets had done to him was indefensibly evil. That Karpov hadn’t been the well-intentioned ‘old man’ that Bucky seemed to believe he was and that they’d done everything they could to erase Bucky’s past. Didn’t Bucky deserve to know the truth about himself and his own life?

“Bucky?” He went out into the living room, file in hand, to find Bucky sitting on the couch watching Battlestar Galactica on Netflix. “Listen, have you got a minute? I need to talk to you about something important.”

“This is a very exciting serial, Steve.” All the same, Bucky paused the program, set the popcorn bowl down on the coffee table, and looked at him warily.

“All right, listen.” Steve sighed.

Bucky continued to stare at him.

Steve plowed forward. “Natasha found a file for me, right around the time I was getting out of the hospital. She thought I’d want to know what happened to you after the war, and I guess she wanted to know, too. And I thought you deserved to have me give this to you. Not wind up finding it on your own and thinking I was trying to hide it from you.” He hesitated, then brought the file out from behind his back. “I’ll warn you, it’s not pretty. But it’s the truth, and after all these years of being lied to, you deserve the truth.”

He held the file out, and Bucky took it.

---

Steve looked at him with a strange expression on his face, and Bucky suddenly wanted to tell him to go away. Go away and let him look at the file without being looked at.

He got up from the couch and moved to the dining table. If the file was so important, then he probably didn’t want to sit on the couch with a bowl of popcorn while reading it. He seated himself, set the file in front of him, and without hesitation, Steve sat in the chair across from him.

The front cover was clearly marked объявление - classified - in thick black letters. But over the top of that, someone had stamped законченный - decommissioned - in red ink.

Steve was still looking at him with that weird expression.
Waiting for something.

He glowered back at him. “What?”

“What?” Steve continued to look at him, then said, “It’s the Soviet file on what they called Project: Winter Soldier. It’s about you. What happened to you after the war. What they did to you. All of it.” He gestured toward the file. “You’re going to have to read it for yourself.”

A flash of anger surged through Bucky suddenly. He glared at Steve, still sitting at the table, waiting for Bucky to do or say something. Or to begin reading.

“Go away,” he said, and then bent his head, letting his hair curtain around his face. He wouldn’t have to pay attention to Steve at all that way, whether or not he went away.

Steve didn’t go away.

Bucky opened the file.

There was a photograph of a corpse on a slab, and he realized with a sudden shock that the corpse was him.

But hadn’t the old man told him that once? The old man had told him that he had nearly died, that they had found him at the bottom of a ravine, but that no one knew his name or where he had come from. There had been no identification on him. They had thought him dead at first, and so he was lucky to be alive.

Lucky lucky lucky.

Except that there was an itemized list next.

And a photograph of military identification tags. American military identification tags.

Barnes
James Buchanan
32557038
O Positive
Catholic

The list was written in 1945.

Dr. Pushkin had known in 1945.

He turned the page, continued to read.

The American is suitable…

The old man had known.

We will rebuild him…

The old man had always known.

we will retrain him…

The old man had lied to him.
and then we will use him in the coming war.

Comrade General Karpov had lied.

He had lied.

He flipped through the pages, one after another, but it never got better. It never got any better.

The ‘mental recalibration device’ - the chair, the doctors had never called it anything more than a fucking chair - had been used on him again and again. Apparently for decades.

Again and again and again for fucking decades, and he had never questioned it.

“We need to work on your conditioning,” one doctor or another had always told him. And even though he hated it, fucking hated the chair, hated it, he had always gone along without question. They would strap him into it and stick the rubber bit in his mouth, and then…

His breath caught in his throat just thinking about it.

But it wasn’t conditioning. It was reprogramming. Rewriting. And they could do anything they wanted, put anything they wanted in his head, and he would have never known the difference.

For decades.

He flipped through the pages faster and faster, and read as the bodies piled up over the years. One mission after another, and he was always so fucking proud to serve the motherland, so fucking proud to serve under the old man.

They had wanted him to be.

They had programmed him to be.

And the bodies just kept piling up.

And the old man had known.

He had always known.

---

Steve sat there anxiously, watching Bucky’s expression as best he could through the curtain of hair that had fallen over his face and seeing it grow darker and darker. And as Bucky turned another page, and then another, something occurred to Steve that brought his resentment of Karpov right back to the forefront of his mind.

It had taken Steve and Natasha a solid week to make it through the file. Every few pages had represented an hour’s worth of reading and translation for Natasha, but Bucky was reading through the file as quickly as Steve could read through the Sunday Times. He’d been so thoroughly indoctrinated, so completely reprogrammed, that he could speed-read Russian.

Another page turned. And as Steve watched Bucky’s eyes flicker back and forth over line after line of typewritten horror, he watched the look on his best friend’s face turn more and more stormy.

Bucky’s hands were gripping the edge of the dining room table, his shoulders beginning to tremble. And as Steve watched him, he noticed that Bucky’s metal hand was gripping the table hard enough to make deep marks in the wood. The fingertips that he’d dug into the asphalt of the causeway to
brake his skid to a halt when he’d been thrown off the roof of Sam’s car were now digging into the surface of the table. It might not be too long, Steve realized, before Bucky splintered the edge of the table in his grip.

*Then do something. Say something. Be his friend.*

“Bucky?” He leaned across the table, his eyes and his face and his voice full of concern. Wondering if he’d made a huge mistake. “Bucky, talk to me.”

---

The old man had known.

He had always known.

The old man had lied.

He had lied.

They had all lied to him.

They had looked him the face and told him they didn’t know his name, that no one knew his name, that no one knew who he was or where he had come from.

They had looked him in the face and lied to him, and then they had rewritten his mind so that he would believe all the lies.

Without question.

They had lied to him for decades, and he had never fucking questioned it.

Halfway through reading a mission that took place in 1956, his vision blurred hot and angry and wet. He couldn’t breathe. His chest was tight and his throat had closed up, and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t even swallow.

He had stayed too long.

They had lied to him.

He had stayed too long, and he had let them get away with their lies, he had let them get away with their lies while he sat on the couch and ate snacks and watched television, and they had lied to him they had lied to him they had-

The table splintered under his grip and-

They had lied

they had lied

they had fucking lied to him he had sat on the couch doing nothing and they continued to get away with their lies and they had lied they had lied

they had lied

The table crashed into the wall, the file exploding into the air in a flurry of papers and photographs.
“They lied to me.” He could barely get the words out. “They lied.”

He stood up, nearly knocking the chair over, and then he grabbed the fucking thing by its back and hurled it into the wall.

He would kill them.

Now.

He had waited too long. He would find them now. He would kill them now.

He turned for the front door.

He would kill all of them.

---

When Bucky’s breathing had become ragged and harsh, Steve had known something was very wrong. When Bucky’s face began to contort in rage, he’d known it had been an absolute mistake to give him the file so soon. He’d been a fool to imagine Bucky could handle something so completely world-shattering only a couple of weeks in. He should have waited, should have broken it to him more gradually, should have…

The edge of the table cracked and splintered in the viselike grip of Bucky’s metal hand.

In the next eyeblink, Bucky had stood up and swatted the table aside with his metal arm. It smashed against the brick wall, shattering the glass of several picture frames. The file exploded into a confetti of fluttering pages all over the room. Steve, operating out of sheer self-preservation, leaped to his feet and backpedaled.

Bucky’s voice was filled with bitter, venomous rage. His pain, his anger, his betrayal could be felt as if it radiated through the air like heat off an open flame. And his words, if anything, were worse.

He seized the chair he’d been sitting in, hurling it violently across the room where it smashed to pieces against another wall. Bucky, quivering with rage, turned to storm out the door. And Steve’s heart almost stopped out of sheer panic.

Stop him now, screamed some tiny sane part of his mind, or you’ll never see him again.

“Bucky, wait!” He lunged for Bucky, managed to latch onto his shoulder. “Don’t go! Bucky-”

Bucky growled “Let go of me!!” and grabbed Steve and hurled him backwards, hard enough to fly back-first into the cupboard.

The Ikea particle-board cracked, collapsing in on itself, dull pain burning through Steve’s lower back, but he jumped right back to his feet. “Bucky, stop!” He grabbed Bucky’s arm with both hands.

---

Bucky turned, twisted out of Steve’s grip and dropped him, but Steve was right back on his feet, reaching for him again, grabbing him-

“Get off me!”

Bucky kicked him, sent him staggering toward the chairs, knocking one or two of them over. Again he reached for the door, and Steve was back, shouting for him to wait, stop, just wait, and his hands
were on him and-

With a strangled growl, Bucky lunged at him. They careened into the coffee table, then fell through it, the wood splintering and snapping under their combined weight, and still Steve was yelling for him to stop, listen, Bucky stop.

“Leave me alone!”

He jumped back to his feet, but Steve followed him

“Bucky, stop this!” Steve grabbed Bucky by the shoulder and spun him around, and Bucky swung wildly at him. Steve hooked him under the arm and hip-throwed him into an end table, which splintered under his weight and scattered a pile of books across the floor.

He was back on his feet in a second, eyes blurry wet hot with rage, but now Steve was standing in front of the fucking door. He growled, slammed bodily into Steve, and they hit the door, Steve’s head banging against the frame, and he hoped the fucking door broke, he hoped the door would splinter shatter break so he could get away so he-

“Fuck off!”

they had lied to him they had lied they had lied

Steve grabbed him again, pushed off from the door, and they stumbled back into the living room, and Steve was still yelling for him to stop, get a hold of himself, stop stop stop

“Leave me alone!”

the old man had lied they had all lied they had all lied

He backhanded Steve with his right hand, and Steve staggered, but he didn’t drop, and he was still pleading with Bucky, asking him to stop wait don’t go listen to him listen listen

he would kill them he would kill them all he would kill them

“They stole my life!” He screamed his throat raw and the hot blur in his eyes overflowed and spilled down his face.

Steve wasn’t the one he wanted to fight, wasn’t the one he wanted to hurt, so why was he doing it, why was he ruining everything?

The fight rushed out of him suddenly, and he faltered and dropped heavily to his knees, then bodily onto the floor, and he curled into himself and whimpered the words again.

“They stole my life…”

---

During the week Natasha had spent at Clint and Laura’s, she’d done a lot of thinking. Almost entirely about James, to be honest, and the way she felt about how things stood with him now. And she’d had a series of epiphanies.

She’d come to terms with the fact that everything she’d made herself believe about him in the weeks, months, and years following Odessa had been very far from the truth. And that had been a very big - and very scary - step to take. It had meant reevaluating what felt like everything about her life. Had she been foolish to fall in love with him? Perhaps, though not because of who he was or what he
might have done to her, but because of the people who’d ruled over every aspect of both their lives with an iron fist and unblinking eyes.

Had he ever intended to cause her any harm? No. She believed that firmly now, after having read the file and been confronted with the damaged shell of a man he was now. Had he honestly loved her back then? Yes. And it hadn’t mattered one bit, because they’d stolen it from him just like they’d stolen everything else. That had been the bitterest pill for her to swallow, and she’d wound up curled up in Laura’s arms for a while after coming to that conclusion.

And then she’d come across an even more difficult question, one she’d tried to push away but which had insistently wormed its way back into her conscious musings: what did she feel for him now? Pity? Sympathy? Charity? Or was there something more at work, something unfulfilled from all those years ago, something that she’d tried to stamp out of herself but had remained inside her, weak and close to dying but never completely gone?

She went back to Brooklyn at the end of the week.

*Love is for children.* Did she even believe that anymore?

On her way to Rogers’ apartment, she stopped at that pizza place he seemed to love so much and picked up some sandwiches. A single foot-long sandwich for her, which she’d split between lunch today and tomorrow, and two apiece for Rogers and James. She’d bet neither of them would have anything left over by the end of lunchtime.

She let herself in as usual, a smirk already in place as she pictured the look on Rogers’ face when he saw her there. Readied herself to deliver some witty remark or other as she handed over the sandwiches and made herself at home as she was wont to do…

And then she saw James on the floor. Curled up in a fetal position and obviously sobbing, Rogers beside him with one hand on James’ shoulder and even more obviously distraught, the apartment a wreck.

“What happened here?” She dropped the bag, came forward to crouch beside them, her eyes already scanning the room for assailants but finding none. Her eyes sought Rogers’, found grief and anger there. Before he could answer, she turned her attention to James.

[“What happened to you?”]

---

Bucky wanted to go away.

He wanted to close his eyes and go away somewhere, just go away in his head like he did sometimes. That would make the hurt stop. It would make everything stop.

But he didn’t go away. He remained curled up on the floor, tears leaking from his eyes and sliding messily down his cheeks, breathing ragged and painful and loud in his ears, and fingers clenched around nothing at all.

Steve had his hands on him, was talking to him, murmuring things, talking talking.

Romanoff was there suddenly. Her question was very simple.

[“They stole my life.”] His voice sounded cracked. Broken. There was nothing he could do about that. [“They stole my life.”]
His words wrenched something inside her, causing Natasha a kind of pain she hadn’t been prepared for. She’d expected him to be detached, withdrawn, suspicious; she could have dealt with that. But this was something different.

He knew.

Her eyes darted around the room again, landing on the empty manila folder with its red Cyrillic stamp and the dozens of papers scattered around the room chaotically. And she turned to look at Rogers with disbelief in her eyes and voice.

“He found the file?”

Rogers shook his head, grief filling his voice. “I gave it to him.” His voice seemed to catch. “I didn’t want him finding it himself, thinking I was trying to hide it from him. And then he tried to leave, and I had to stop him, and…”

She laid both hands on James’ shoulders. He flinched at that initial touch, but offered no resistance.

Love is for children.

She pulled his head gently into her lap-

I’m pretty sure this is a bad idea.

- and began to softly stroke his hair.

You’re going to regret this.

[“They stole mine too.”]

James just lay there, eyes wide and unfocused, clenched fingers gradually relaxing as she continued to stroke his hair. After a long moment, he whispered, [“Why? Why would they do it?”]

She’d asked herself that question hundreds of times since she’d first begun wondering what it might be like to live a different life. Since before she’d begun working for SHIELD, since before Clint had seen fit to give her that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to redeem herself, since the time she’d started to consider that the life they’d given her had been twisted and wrong. And whatever reasons she’d imagined they might have had, there was only one that had made any real sense.

[“Because they could.”]

His head in her lap, her fingers threading softly through his hair brought back memories that grabbed at something deep within her and twisted savagely. It was so familiar as to be painful - how many times had she done the same thing? - and yet, it was unlike any other time they had been in that situation. How bizarre was it, she thought, to have had the most intimate relationship with the man and yet have him remember none of it? And even more so, to be settling back into such an intimate and familiar routine as this despite the fact that he’d come very close to killing her on two separate occasions?

But who had ever said that life made any sort of sense anyway?

She stroked his hair gently, felt his muscles gradually relax and unclench until he was slumped nervelessly against her, all the tension and all the fight gone from him. Rogers still had his hand on
James’ shoulders as well, and her eyes met his for a brief moment before drifting back down to James.

She wondered what it would have been like to have had a friend like that when she was growing up. Someone to talk to at night, to prop her up when her nerve failed and for her to support in turn. Someone she could have cared about, who cared about her as well. Someone for mutual support against every horrible thing they had thrown at her in the Red Room.

And then she realized that such a person would only have been used against her. That the sadists who had run the Red Room would have forced them to fight one another to the death, because nothing about her had been allowed to remain unscarred.

[“But we both survived. And now here we are.”]

A long few moments passed, during which Rogers stayed mercifully silent, his hand still gripping James’ shoulder as if he were afraid to let go. Her own hands cradled James’ head, stroking his hair softly while he remained motionless save for his occasional shuddering breaths. And at some point it became apparent to her that James was not going to get up without some kind of prompting.

[“I think some sleep will do you good.”] She murmured this in his ear as she leaned her head down to his. [“Come now, let me help you up.”]

He hesitated, then peeled himself away from her lap and slowly climbed to his feet. Exhaustion appeared to hit him like a wave, and he nearly staggered. Natasha had been right. Sleep would do him some good.

“I could sleep,” James said abruptly to Steve, and then without waiting for a reply, he turned and headed down the hall.

Natasha followed him to Rogers’ spare bedroom - James’ room now, she imagined, for the foreseeable future - and closed the door behind them. Not enough to latch it, but enough to at least give James the sense of privacy.

[“You’ve got a lot to think about, I’d imagine. A lot to come to terms with.”] She gave a single breath of humorless laughter through her nose, shaking her head as she turned down the bed for him. [“I know I did.”]

That was true on more levels than she was prepared to admit to him just then. When she’d first gotten out, when Clint had brought her in and vouched for her, when it had become clear to her that she wasn’t going to die and that instead she was being given a chance that she could never have even imagined enough to hope for, she’d had to do a lot of thinking. About herself, mostly; about everything she’d been responsible for and everything she’d been a party to, and none of it had been very pleasant. And she’d needed to come to terms with some things about herself that had been particularly difficult to admit; namely, that she hadn’t been strong enough to make it out on her own. Not physically, not mentally, not morally. And that she was going to need to spend the rest of her life doing right if she hoped to even come close to atoning for all the wrong she’d done.

But more than that, she’d had a lot to think about during these past weeks. Ever since she’d learned the truth about James, she had been forced to reevaluate herself all over again. And some of the conclusions she’d come to were as frightening as they were alluring.

But now was not the time for dwelling on what had been, what should have been, what might have been, or even what might be in the future.
“You don’t want to sleep in your clothes, do you?”

---

“Usually I sleep in Steve’s sweatpants and a t-shirt.”

Bucky wondered why Romanoff had followed him all the way into the bedroom and decided it was probably so that she could make sure he would actually sleep and not try to leave by climbing out the window.

“But it doesn’t matter what I sleep in.”

He hesitated a moment, but it was Romanoff, and she would likely know where he might hide any weapons. So he removed the Glock and the two knives from under his clothing and slid them under the pillow on the bed.

Still she was looking at him, waiting for him to do something, so he unbuckled his belt and skinned his pants down, then folded them and set them on the dresser. He dragged his long-sleeved Henley t-shirt over his head, then folded that as well and set it on top of the pants. That left only boxer-briefs and socks, but she hadn’t specified that she wanted him completely naked, so he left those on for now.

Well, socks were uncomfortable to sleep in. He tugged them off and placed them with the rest of his clothing.

“Better?”

---

Natasha had a brief reeling moment as he disrobed, remembering the last mission they’d had together and the mess they’d made of the hotel room, standing lamps toppled and potted plants overturned by the frenetic nature of their…

No. She mentally slapped herself. Get a grip, Natalia Alianovna.

She would not let herself get lost in those reminiscences, especially with him in the room. Later on, perhaps, when she’d gone back to her own apartment and there was no one there but her, she might let herself remember the times it had been good. But now, it would only distract her from what she needed to be doing. For James, and not for her.

“If you feel more comfortable now, then yes. It’s better.”

She hadn’t missed the fact that he’d stowed his weapons in the exact same place he always had. She’d be surprised if he didn’t slip his hand under the pillow and fall asleep with his fingers wrapped around the butt of his pistol or the hilt of one of the knives, like he’d done every time they’d fallen asleep beside one another. But then, she supposed that wasn’t something they’d have wanted to make him forget.

“Now get into bed and try to sleep.” She managed a small smile, gesturing at the bed, and he did as he was told.

He probably always did as he was told.

She drew the covers up over him, then knelt beside the bed as he settled in and began to lightly stroke his hair again.
You’re letting yourself in for so much pain, Natalia. You know that, don’t you?

He lay there, just looking at her as she stroked his hair, and it wasn’t long before he was struggling to keep his eyes open. But just before he drifted away, he spoke.

[“Why?”] He looked at her with tired eyes. [“Why are you doing this?”]

He wouldn’t believe her if she told him. Or perhaps he would, but it would simply confuse him. He didn’t need any more of that.

She kept her smile carefully in place.

[“Because I want to.”] She brushed a lank tendril of hair out of his eyes - too long, this hair of his; it didn’t suit him at all. [“Because you need it. And because you ask too many questions when you should be sleeping.”]

And because as much as she had convinced herself that their love had never been real, the file had blown her carefully constructed emotional walls to dust. And for the sake of what she now knew had been real, and for the sake of the man he had once been, she had to throw in her lot with Rogers. If there was a chance at fixing the damage that had been done to him, regardless of what he might or might not feel for her afterwards, she had to try.

His breathing began to even out, to become shallow and regular. His muscles began to uncoil. And still she stroked his hair.

[“It will be all right.”]

But just who was she trying to convince?

---

As Steve silently tried to put his living room back in order, he felt dizzied by everything that had just happened. By the fight - not that he was still in pain, but he was shaken by Bucky’s sudden onrush of violence - by the destruction of his living room, and most especially by the way everything had ended.

Bucky’s still here, he told himself over and over. That’s all that matters.

Except it wasn’t. And his eyes landing on the scattered pages of the file reminded him of that.

It was just as Bucky had said, he thought with steadily growing anger as he picked up the pages and stuffed them into the folder. They’d stolen his life. And now Bucky knew it.

He put the file on the kitchen counter, as his tables had been destroyed in the fight. He’d gathered up the broken pieces of the tables, at least, and stacked them by the door to bring down to the dumpster later on. The dishes that had fallen out of the cupboard and shattered were swept up and thrown out, as was the broken glass from the picture frames. But even if the damage wasn’t visible anymore, it still resonated in his mind.

He was sitting on the couch when Natasha came in from the other room, bringing an entirely new series of worrying thoughts with her. It troubled him that she and Bucky spoke to each other in Russian, partly because it meant he couldn’t understand them, partly because it marked him as belonging to a different culture than was his own, partly because it meant that the horrible things the Soviets had done to him were still making their effects felt, but mainly because it meant that the two of them seemed closer at times than he and Bucky. And he had no idea what to do with that feeling.
“He’s asleep,” Natasha said. “Clearly he needed it.”

“I should never have given him that stupid thing.” Steve put his head in his hands. “I’m an idiot.”

The sandwich bag was still by the door where Natasha had dropped it. She grabbed it, sat down on the couch, and handed one of the sandwiches to Steve. “What happened?” She selected one of the sandwiches for herself. “Why did you give him the file?”

“I didn’t want him finding it on his own.”

He unwrapped one end of the sandwich mechanically, smelled a still-warm chicken parmigiana, but didn’t move to take a bite. He simply stared at it, then at the wall, then at nothing whatsoever.

“I didn’t want him reading it and thinking I was trying to hide something from him.” He shook his head. “He wouldn’t have trusted me. He would’ve just left. And then I could never have helped him…”

But Bucky had tried to go regardless. He’d had to fight Bucky - again - to keep him there. And who was to say he’d still be there in the morning?

“And he needed to know.” He felt the anger rise in his chest, hot and choking, fighting to get out. “He kept talking about Karpov like he was his father or something. Like he could do no wrong. He needed to know just how badly they lied to him. Not just HYDRA, but the Soviets too.”

And how well had that worked out? Where had it gotten him? More importantly, where had it gotten Bucky?

“I screwed up. I know it.” He shook his head. “He wasn’t ready. And now…” He shifted slightly, focusing on Natasha for the first time. “Is he all right? What did you say to him?”

“I told him to undress and go to sleep.” She unwrapped her meatball sandwich and took a bite. “And he did.” She looked at the sandwich for a long moment, moved to set it down, but the coffee table had been destroyed. “So… He looked at the file, became overwhelmed, and reacted violently?” Her lips thinned into a line. “Then he tried to leave, decided to go after HYDRA right then and there, but you moved to stop him?”

Steve didn’t even need to reply. The answer was written clear on his face.

She didn’t bother stifling her sigh. “You can’t keep him here. You know that. Eventually he’s going to go after HYDRA. The only question is ‘when’.”

“I can’t let him go by himself either. You know what’s going to happen if he does that. We both do, and that’s why I agreed to head up SHIELD.” He shook his head angrily. “And maybe I can’t stop him from going after HYDRA, but I can damn sure go along with him to make sure he comes out of it in one piece. I can make sure he sticks to some sort of set of rules, and I can make sure he doesn’t lose what’s left of himself along the way.” He met her eyes almost challengingly. “And you can’t tell me you’re not in it for the same reasons.”

“Rules?” Natasha raised an eyebrow. “What rules do you imagine you’re going to make the Winter Soldier follow? What do you imagine you can make him do?”

She held up a hand before Steve could protest. They had agreed on rules the other day, after all. At least the one rule.

“He’s going to go after them one way or another,” Natasha continued, “and he’ll either follow that
rule about telling someone first, or he won’t, and we both know it.”

Steve wondered sometimes if Natasha knew him better than he knew himself.

“And,” Natasha took a breath, collected herself. “The longer he stays here, the more likely it is that HYDRA is going to come for him. He knows that. He’s said as much, and he’s told me that he’ll leave before they can come here.” She looked him squarely in the eyes. “Because he doesn’t want to involve you.”

Steve looked out at his bare living room, at the piles of splintered wood stacked by the door. And for a brief moment, he didn’t know what to make of anything.

Chapter End Notes

Does it need more emotional anguish? Juuuust wait.

As always, comments, concrit, and saying hello are warmly welcomed.
By the time Bucky woke up, the setting sun had striped the room orange through the cracks in the window blinds. The clock on the nightstand said it was 6:37. He had slept for five hours.

He slid his hand out from under the pillow, releasing his grip on the combat knife, and rolled over onto his back, then sat up. His stomach growled uncomfortably, and he remembered that he had skipped lunch. If he stayed in bed much longer, he’d end up skipping dinner, too.

But…

The reason he had skipped lunch was because he had gotten angry and destroyed Steve’s apartment. Then he had laid on the floor until Romanoff told him to get up and go to bed. Then she had ordered him into bed and petted his hair until he fell asleep.

He had destroyed Steve’s apartment.

Steve had allowed Bucky to come stay with him, and Bucky had thanked him by yelling at him and fighting him and destroying his apartment. He had told himself that he wasn’t going to fight Steve ever again, but he had done it anyway. He had ruined all of Steve’s furniture. He had shouted at him. He had thrown him into the furniture and broken it.

He had ruined everything.

He had ruined everything, and if he had only left earlier like he said he was going to do, then none of it would have happened. He needed to leave then.

Right away.

---

Cleaning up the apartment while Bucky sawed logs in his bedroom had given Steve plenty of time to reflect on what Natasha had said to him. How Bucky wanted to leave to track down HYDRA. How they couldn’t make him follow any rules if he didn’t want to.

But the most telling part of what Natasha had said before she’d left was that Bucky hadn’t wanted to get Steve involved. That he’d wanted to leave, to run away, before HYDRA came looking for him and put Steve in danger. And that was the most encouraging thing she’d said, though Steve hadn’t fully realized it until long after she’d left. It meant that there was enough of Bucky left to care about Steve. That somewhere in the mess they’d made of his mind, Bucky still felt the instinctive urge to keep Steve out of trouble just as he had all those years ago.
And that was an encouraging thought.

Before long, Steve had finished the cleanup, save for dragging the broken tables out to the dumpster, and he’d made something of a mental list of things that needed to be done to get the place back in order. Nothing too drastic; buy some new glass for the picture frames (and new frames entirely in some cases), run out to IKEA to order replacements for the broken furniture and dishes, put everything together when it was delivered, and do a good thorough mopping to pick up the last of the broken glass.

Piece of cake.

But not everything was as easy to fix as a few broken tables. He’d made a terrible mistake in showing Bucky that file and he needed to set it right as soon as Bucky woke up. Speaking of which, he thought as he glanced at the clock, it was high time he checked on him. Bucky was so quiet in his movements that he could have been up for some time now without anyone knowing about it.

He could even have slipped out.

This last disturbing thought got Steve out of his chair and down the hall in record time. The door was slightly ajar, and he breathed a profound sigh of relief as he saw Bucky’s silhouette sitting up in the bed.

“Hey, Buck.” He smiled, coming into the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed. “Did you have a good nap?”

Bucky looked at him warily for a moment. “The nap was good.”

“Good.” Steve nodded, still smiling. “Good, I’m glad. It looks like you needed it.”

That was putting it lightly. Bucky had slept for five hours, slept like a rock, and that was typical of his behavior over the past weeks. He regularly slept twelve hours a night, sometimes more, and it was plain to see that wouldn’t change anytime soon. Steve thought it might have something to do with how badly the repeated trips through cryogenic hibernation and the repeated use of the chair had damaged his mind. Bucky’s mind probably needed a great deal of rest and downtime just to process what was happening, let alone try to repair itself. He wondered if it was even possible for Bucky’s mind to fully repair itself, or whether it would need help, and if so, just what kind of help they could even find. Before long, Steve was lost in thought.

Bucky was still looking at him, as if he was waiting for something. Or maybe waiting to tell him something.

Steve’s eyes trailed over Bucky’s exposed arm. Bucky wore his long-sleeved shirts around the house habitually; this was the first real opportunity Steve had gotten to see Bucky’s replacement limb up close.

The eerily natural way it lay was what first drew his gaze. Bucky might as well have been wearing a tinfoil sleeve, for how fluidly the mechanical arm blended in with the subtle movements of Bucky’s upper body. As he watched, the metal fingers shifted slightly to change their grip on the quilt. The movements were noiseless and incredibly natural. It was like watching Tony in his Iron Man suit, except that there was flesh and blood under the suit while the movements of Bucky’s arm were entirely artificial.

His eyes trailed up the arm’s length, noting the complex overlapping of armor plates that created seamless joints at the wrist and elbow. The structure of the thing mimicked the shape of Bucky’s real
arm so closely that it seemed real itself. But the shiny metallic finish set it apart. And there were other things that drew his eye as well, things that turned his mind from awed astonishment to anger.

First was the red Communist star on his shoulder. A logo, a brand name there for all the world to see. For Bucky to see every time he looked in the mirror. It hadn’t been enough to steal his memory, to make him speak Russian and wear Russian military garb and eat Russian food and follow Russian customs; they’d needed to mark him as their property in a visual way.

And then there were the scars. A knotty maze of scar tissue joining metal to flesh, marking the place where healthy tissue had been hacked away to make room for the metallic prosthesis. It made it look as though the metal arm had grown right out of Bucky’s shoulder like some nightmare plant, splitting and tearing through the flesh in the process and leaving its mark behind forever.

He couldn’t find anything to say.

“I’m going to leave now,” Bucky said suddenly.


But Bucky didn’t have to answer; Steve knew. It was back to the same old story. Bucky wanted to go after HYDRA. He wanted to go after them himself, and just as Sam had learned and Steve had guessed, he had no plans for anything afterward. He wanted to take HYDRA down in a blaze of glory, and he wanted to burn in that blaze along with them.

And it was all Steve’s fault for showing Bucky that damned file like an idiot.

“No.” He heard the note of panic and fear in his own voice. “No, Bucky. Please don’t go. That’s the last thing I want you to do.” He reached out and laid a hand on Bucky’s right forearm. “I want you to stay here. Stay here and get better, and when it’s time to go after HYDRA, we’ll do it together. You and me, just like always.”

---

_Just like always…_

Bucky looked at Steve’s hand, resting on his natural arm, and then back at Steve.

What had _just like always_ been like? Before the museum. Before HYDRA. Before that even. Before 1945.

Before he had become damaged.

_You’re pretty damaged, Buck._ Steve had said that over pizza and garlic knots. _But it’s not your fault._

Because Bucky didn’t remember the taste of the beer they used to drink on Coney Island. Or the way the pipes in Steve’s apartment used to sound when too many people were running water in the building. He didn’t remember anything that wasn’t cold hard fact, and the little that he did sometimes remember were just mind tricks.

Or they weren’t.

They weren’t, because HYDRA had lied to him. And not just HYDRA. They had all lied to him. Every day. The entire time.

The old man had lied to him.
A surge of anger rushed through him, so powerful that he nearly jumped off the bed to leave right then.

“I destroyed your apartment,” he said through gritted teeth. “I fought with you, even though I said I wouldn’t do that again.” He clenched his fingers around the blanket. He would track down HYDRA and kill all of them. Every last one. “And it’s because HYDRA lied. Everyone lied. And I need to leave now so I can kill them all.”

“And then what?” Steve tightened his fingers protectively, possessively, fearfully on Bucky’s forearm, and Bucky didn’t know what to do about that.

Didn’t know how to feel about that.

“I don’t want you to go, Bucky.” Steve shook his head earnestly. “I don’t care about the furniture, I don’t care about the fight. I care about you. I thought you were dead for so long, and now that I’ve got you back, I’m not about to let you just walk away.”

Bucky looked at him for a long moment. His eyes drifted back to Steve’s hand, still squeezing his forearm tightly. And still, he didn’t know what to say.

Steve smiled a wobbly, strange smile. “I just got through getting bounced off the walls trying to get you to stay. Doesn’t that tell you anything, Buck?”

Maybe.

He didn’t know.

Finally Bucky said, “HYDRA needs to be the priority.”

He hadn’t forgotten that Romanoff said that so long as Bucky stayed in Brooklyn, Steve would make him the priority. And that didn’t make sense. No matter what Steve or Romanoff said, it didn’t make sense.

“No me.” He glared at Steve. “I’m not the priority. HYDRA is. Yours. Your priority.” And just so Steve understood, he added, “Mine, too.”

“No way, Buck.” Steve locked eyes with Bucky and gave him his glare right back. “You are my number one priority. Always have been. Always will be.”

Bucky didn’t break eye contact.

Neither did Steve. “So here’s the deal. You and I are going after HYDRA together. None of this lone wolf business. It’s going to be you and me, along with a bunch of people I know from the Avengers and everyone from the old SHIELD that I know for sure I can trust. We’re going to go after HYDRA together, and I swear to God, Bucky, we’re not going to let a single one of them get away.”

Steve waited a beat, still keeping his gaze locked on Bucky’s unblinking eyes, and then cracked a small smile. “But before that, we’re going to get up early tomorrow morning, have a nice big breakfast, and head over to the Ikea store so I can replace my living room set.” He still hadn’t let go of Bucky’s arm. “Come on, Buck. Just let me help you.”

Punk.

The word drifted across Bucky’s mind suddenly, and though there were no mind tricks - memories?
to accompany it, it felt suitable somehow.

He looked down into his lap, turned the word over in his mind. He liked it. It seemed like a good word to use at some point. At the right time, whenever that would be.

Later.

Maybe there could be a later?

He was so exhausted.

The idea of getting up and leaving was exhausting. Of having to go out by himself and kill everyone in HYDRA and then never come back. And if he did that, Steve wouldn’t be able to explain the mind tricks - memories - to him anymore. They wouldn’t be able to go jogging and then eat big breakfasts. He wouldn’t be able to sit on the couch and watch Battlestar Galactica, or wear sweatpants and sleep in a big comfortable bed, or talk to Sam on the phone or go to the museum with Wanda or allow Romanoff to pet his hair.

That had been nice.

He was so exhausted, and he just wanted to lie down and go back to sleep, then wake up in the morning and eat a big breakfast and go with Steve to the Ikea store. And then he wanted to hunt down all of HYDRA and kill them.

Together. Maybe.

Maybe that would be okay.

“I’m tired,” he said quietly. He hadn’t meant to say that. He wasn’t even sure what he had meant to say. “I’m so tired.”

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“I know, Bucky.” Steve reluctantly relaxed his grip on Bucky’s arm, a dizzying wave of relief crashing over him. If Bucky was still tired after a five hour nap, then he was certainly too tired to go dashing off after HYDRA tonight. Which meant there was still time to talk. To remember. To convince him that the only way to beat HYDRA was the way they’d always done everything else in life.

Together.

“So go on and lie down. You’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.” A small smiled flitted across his mouth. “Got to get your twelve hours, after all.”

Bucky didn’t so much lie down as collapse. Steve drew the covers over him, then stood up as Bucky began to settle into bed. Except that Bucky’s version of ‘settling in’ had always been something that could more accurately have been described as ‘flopping around like a landed fish’. He wound up sprawled in what looked like a supremely uncomfortable position, his arms and legs splayed at odd angles and his left arm hanging entirely off the bed.

“Oh, come on, Buck,” he groused, picking Bucky’s arm up by the wrist and tucking it back into bed along with the rest of him. “Sleep like a human being, will you?”

It was only after he’d closed the door behind him and was out in the hallway with a grateful smile on his face that he realized he’d done that to Bucky’s metal arm. And that suddenly the thing didn’t
seem nearly as creepy as it had a few minutes ago…

***

“Come on, Bucky, try and stay with me.” Steve chuckled, doubling back towards Bucky, who was staring at the cutaway view of a sofa cushion, its springs being tested by a hydraulic piston. “This place is easy to get lost in. Trust me, I know.”

They’d gotten up early that morning, as they’d been getting used to doing over the past couple of weeks, and gone out for a nice brisk jog. As usual, they’d had a very big breakfast and showers, after which Steve had ushered Bucky right back out the door for a leisurely walk over to the Ikea. The walk had taken them around twenty minutes, during which Steve had had plenty of time to see that Bucky seemed to have recovered fairly well from the previous evening. And once they’d gotten into the store, Bucky had seemed pretty enthralled by the whole thing.

“I remember the first time Natasha took me here.” Steve stuck his hands in his pockets. “It was bigger than anything I’d ever seen before. I could’ve stayed all day just to look around. I ended up having to come back just to take it all in.”

“Ikea is a strange place,” Bucky murmured.

Steve had an inventory sheet that he was filling out with a small pencil. Once they were finished buying all the furniture, he had told Bucky that they would eat Swedish meatballs and mashed potatoes and apple pie in the food court, then go home and put all the furniture together.

It was a good day so far.

“Romanoff took you shopping?” Bucky asked the question hours later, over his second plate of Swedish meatballs. “Why?”

Steve snorted with laughter, having to put down his forkful of meatballs. “It’s kind of funny, actually. I came back to my apartment one day and found her just sitting on my couch with her feet up, waiting for me. She told me she thought my apartment looked sad, and before I knew it, I was at Ikea tagging along behind her while she picked out furniture for me.”

That had been a fun day.

“But I wound up liking the things she chose, and it was easy to get it all delivered, and it was easy to put it all together, and I have to admit she was right.” He shook his head, still smiling wryly. “The apartment looked much nicer afterwards.” He paused, smiled. “Natasha’s a great girl.”

That had really been the point at which they’d started becoming friends, he recalled. Everything afterward had been built on that one shopping trip, and they had only become closer in the past few weeks. And now, he couldn’t imagine things any other way.

“And I even had my first taste of Swedish meatballs that day.” He smiled, popped another one into his mouth. “Speaking of which, you seem like you’re enjoying them.”

It occurred to him just then how good it felt to be doing such a mundane thing with Bucky. Here they were, eating at a furniture store’s food court in the middle of shopping for some tables, and it made him so happy he felt like he could dance.

No way I’m letting him go.

***
Ikea could deliver furniture the same day, and so a few hours later, several flat-packed boxes had been stacked in the living room.

Steve had a sizeable collection of both records and CDs. He told Bucky to pick whatever he liked, so Bucky had chosen at random, coming up with a record by Harry James and His Orchestra. And as the sounds of the big band drifted out over the living room, Bucky thought some of the songs sounded… familiar.

Maybe.

Assembling flat-packed furniture wasn’t very difficult, but it did take a while. He put together a coffee table, a kitchen table, and an end table, while Steve worked on assembling a large cupboard made up of many moving parts. They replaced several picture frames and built a few chairs. At some point, Bucky microwaved the entire box of Ikea apple pie, and then they sat on the couch, two pieces of pie each on Steve’s new orange Ikea dishes.

“They didn’t have these stores before?” Bucky frowned slightly into his pie. “No, they didn’t. They should have.”

His frown deepened. No, they wouldn’t have had such stores. No one would have ever thought to throw furniture away. If a table broke, it was fixed somehow. If it broke again, then books would be stacked under it and everyone would make do.

“We threw nothing away,” he said quietly, and then his gaze wandered over to Steve’s kitchen.

“No, we didn’t throw anything away.” Steve paused over his apple pie. “But then again, the furniture was a lot sturdier back then too.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes slightly, still staring into the kitchen. “And we used to take baths in there.”

“I remember the bathtub in the kitchen.” Steve smiled and took another forkful of the pie. “With the board over it for a countertop during the day.” He chewed, looking up thoughtfully. “Yeah, they stopped doing that a couple of years after the war. All the old buildings were torn down, and the newer ones all had separate bathrooms instead of just toilet closets.”

Bucky thought he remembered that.

Maybe.

Steve smiled broadly. “I remember the time I had to clean out the bathtub in your house. When you got suspended for fighting with Koblinski. We were thirteen.” He chuckled. “Koblinski was stealing lunch money from some kids, and I called him out on it in front of everyone. Well, of course he started to knock me around, and you came by to break it up, and the principal, Mr. Emerson, kicked the both of you out. I went to Mr. Emerson’s office to protest your suspension, only to be told by his secretary that she’d been specifically instructed not to let me in. And so I went to find you at your place instead.”

Bucky stared thoughtfully into his pie.

Steve chuckled again. “You were so mad at me for getting you into trouble. Your mother had given you this huge list of chores to do while you were suspended. I remember you snapping at me ‘Get lost, punk.’ And I said something like, ‘Oh, come on, Bucky, don’t be like that’ and eventually you told me that if I wasn’t going to go away, then I should at least make myself useful. And so I wound up hunkered down in that bathtub in your mother’s kitchen, scrubbing it out with a scrub brush.”
There was that word again - punk. Bucky decided he liked it.

The sound of the Henry James Orchestra drifted across the room, and Bucky ate another forkful of pie.

It had been a nice day.

***

The next morning, only minutes after they had returned from their morning jog, Steve received a phone call from someone associated with SHIELD. Based on what Bucky overheard, her name was Sharon, and she would be picking up Steve in an hour.

Bucky also picked up on Steve’s quiet negotiations with Sharon, telling her that he needed at least ninety minutes, and then he ended the call quickly and contacted Wanda Maximoff. And before long, Wanda Maximoff was at their door.

She was a handler, Bucky realized. His handler.

Wanda asked Bucky if he wanted to accompany her to Prospect Park Zoo, and he grudgingly agreed because he knew he was supposed to do so. And then Sharon Carter (Steve had supplied the rest of the name) landed a Porsche 904 in the middle of the street.

Bucky temporarily forgot to be angry.

Sharon Carter was behind the wheel, but Romanoff was right next to her. She winked at Bucky as Steve climbed into the backseat, and that was… nice, he decided.

“Well,” Wanda said as the car flew away, “I wouldn’t mind one of those one day.”

“You don’t have to mind me.” Bucky didn’t take his eyes off the flying car, watching as it got smaller and smaller in the distance. “I already told Steve I wasn’t going to leave yet.”

Wanda shrugged. “I know I don’t have to, but the company is nice.” She peered closely at Bucky. “And it’s not good to spend so much time alone.” Another shrug. “Anyway, there are many things in New York that I haven’t seen, the zoo is one of those things, and I’m going whether or not you come with me. So… do you want to come?”

He did.

“Also,” she continued, “there is a Mexican-Korean barbecue place near the park that promises kimchi that will ‘burn your insides to a crisp.’ And definitely I must try that. Do you want to try as well?”

He did.

---

Steve had changed into his blue and white SHIELD uniform once he’d hung up the phone with Wanda, figuring that whatever was so important would require him to look professional. And when Sharon arrived with Natasha in tow, both of them in uniform, he began to wonder whether it was something more important than he’d originally thought.

“So what’s the story, Sharon?” He leaned forward, having to raise his voice to be heard over the wind rushing past as the car climbed higher. “Did we hit a snag?”
“Far from it,” Sharon began, but Natasha cut her off with a wry “Don’t spoil the surprise.” Then she turned to address him directly. “You’ll figure it out soon anyway.”

And once they climbed high enough to need to close the top of the car in order to breathe properly, he did begin to put it together. It didn’t all become clear, though, until they broke cloud cover and he saw, looming surprisingly close and looking fresher than ever, U.N.N. Alpha.

“The Helicarrier.” He had to admit, he was very pleasantly surprised. “I wasn’t expecting it to be ready for another month at least. How did you make that happen, Sharon?”

“Not me,” came the reply. “But you’ll see when we land.”

And sure enough, once the Porsche was secure in the hangar bay, who had come through the main entrance but Maria Hill, also in uniform, trailed by Phil Coulson, T’Challa the Black Panther, and -

“Oh. Guess bingo let out early today, huh, Grandpa?”

“I swear you write these things down and just wait for a chance to say them, Tony.” All the same, Steve smiled, then turned to T’Challa. “So you did all the real work, right?”

“Naturally.” The crown prince of Wakanda smiled thinly; his intellectual rivalry with Tony was the subject of some of the longest-running jokes around the Tower. “Though I will credit him with the new reactor.”

“And the repulsorlift engines in lieu of the turbines.” Tony ticked off points on his fingers. “And the modified refraction panels. And let’s not forget the five-person on-bridge Jacuzzi.”

“He’s just kidding about that last part, right?” Steve looked from one person to another, but no one, not even Natasha, was so much as smirking.

Phil’s poker face was the first one to break. “The jacuzzi is in the back. Far from the bridge.”

“So go ahead.” Steve smiled, pleased, and regarded his team. “Give me the tour.”

Things were starting to work out.

Chapter End Notes

... right?

As always, feedback, comments, and recommendations for interesting cuisine are always welcome. And yep, that Mexican-Korean barbecue restaurant exists.
As before, they're all Russian, so assume they're speaking Russian. No [language brackets] needed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Moscow, Russia
late October 2014

The surveillance team had reported back to General Lukin just a few moments ago, and the news had been both reassuring and unsettling. They had located the Winter Soldier after weeks of chasing down seemingly-promising leads that had turned up nothing. It had taken a great deal of painstaking detective work, though; the security camera images from the museum had only been the first in a long series of steps.

After placing the Winter Soldier at the museum at that particular time, the team had turned to tracing his progress from there. Unfortunately, that had led nowhere; the Soldier’s image did not appear again on any recorded material they had access to. Their next move was to return to their surveillance of Captain America’s residence in Washington DC. By that point, however, his apartment was deserted and he did not appear at any of the local places he habitually frequented. A thorough search of the apartment and garage, though, revealed that he had left his motorcycle behind.

A check of Captain America’s credit card revealed that he had rented a car in Washington DC a week after the Winter Soldier had shown up at the museum. A check of the rental history revealed that the car had been returned in Red Hook, Brooklyn. And simple logic dictated that he would not have rented the car had he not needed to transport something - or someone. Surely enough, upon traveling to Brooklyn and staking out Captain America’s residence there, it was not long before the team was able to visually confirm the presence of the Winter Soldier.

The Soldier was indeed alive, then, and his whereabouts known. That was the good news.

The bad news was that he had been taken in by Captain America, and that the rogue Black Widow Romanova had been seen coming and going from the building where he resided. Which meant that he was now definitely aware of his own history, whether or not he had regained any intuitive memories of his past. It also meant that it would be very difficult - indeed, bordering on impossible - to retake him.

Fortunately, Lukin had at his disposal the entirety of HYDRA’s assets within the Russian military, as well as his own assets within his multinational Kronas Corporation. He had his pick of well-trained operatives who specialized in subtle, difficult, and often illegal extractions. He had state-of-the-art technology and access to any intelligence he might have desired.

And, perhaps most importantly, he had Dr. Rodchenko.

“Your task will be to undo the damage that the Americans and Romanova have done to the Winter Soldier.” He gave Rodchenko a steely gaze. “That imbecile Pierce was responsible for enough of it, but Captain America and Romanova may have done the worst part of it.”
He leaned in close to punctuate his point. “And I will have the Winter Soldier ready for deployment as soon as possible after his reacquisition. I need him reliable, is that clear?”

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“It’s clear.”

Whether or not it was possible remained to be seen.

As soon as Rodchenko had been recalled to Moscow, he had downloaded all of the data from the mental recalibration chair currently stored in a bank vault in Washington DC onto his laptop. And what he had found had not been pleasing. Just as he had feared, the Americans had not used a light touch in conditioning and programming the Winter Soldier. And seeing as he had gone missing most likely by choice, it was highly doubtful that his current mental state was anything approaching acceptable.

He had also contacted Marko Danilovich and directed him to pack the chair and store it in one of Kronas’ domestic warehouses. And then for weeks, there had been nothing to do but wait, until they had found the Winter Soldier in Brooklyn, apparently living in Captain America’s home. Which gave a very good indication as to his probable mental state.

Reacquisition would be extremely difficult, but not impossible if handled carefully and by the correct team. And with the correct methods, of course. To that end, he prepared an extremely fast acting sedative formulated specifically for the Winter Soldier’s unique metabolism. The dose was high enough to kill a normal man.

On the Winter Soldier, it would give the team about three minutes before he metabolized it, woke up, and promptly slaughtered all of them.

One could only hope General Lukin had chosen a competent team then. They would have exactly one shot at reacquiring the Winter Soldier.

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“The mission is simple.”

Lukin had assembled a team of special operatives, drawn from both his private Kronas militia and the Russian military. They were of varying ages and varying specialties - and there were three women among them - but they all had one thing in common. Every last one of them had been involved in what were euphemistically referred to as ‘extraordinary renditions’ - kidnappings, not to mince words. And they were all very, very good at it.

“This is the target.” A slide of the Winter Soldier appeared on the screen of the briefing room - his face in close-up, a detailed photograph of the arm, bust and body profiles. Lukin folded his arms as he addressed the team. “I cannot overemphasize the importance of this man. This mission must succeed at all costs, is that clear?”

There was a general murmur of assent from the half-dozen professionals.

“Of equal importance is the manner in which he is acquired. If he sees you coming - if there is even a hint that you are nearby - then he will escape.” He fixed his eyes on every one of them in turn. “And above all, you are not to directly engage him in combat.”

“Why?”
Lukin’s head snapped around at the question, his eyes narrowing as he took in the lithe, surly man who had spoken.

The man smiled, idly toying with a throwing knife as he continued. “Is he a ‘tough guy’?”

Lukin paused for a moment, more for effect than anything, before replying.

“You’re off the team.”

He turned to the rest of them, ignoring the surly man as Kronas security stepped forward to escort him from the room. “As for the rest of you, be aware of something. The target has more confirmed kills than all of you combined. He is an expert at infiltration and assassination, so I repeat: Do not engage. Use stealth and the element of surprise.” He raised an eyebrow. “Are there any questions?”

There were none.

Chapter End Notes

Liked it? Hated it? Let me know!
The Vacation is Over

Chapter Notes

I bring you a chapter of joy and glad tidings...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Red Hook, Brooklyn
3 weeks after Bucky first arrived
late October 2014

“It tastes sticky,” Bucky said of his triple venti half-caf vanilla shot caramel macchiato with whipped cream.

“I think it’s supposed to when it looks like that.” Wanda pulled on her shaken green tea lemonade through a straw. “That’s the point of picking the most complicated drink off the menu.”

He sipped the drink again. “Still sticky.”

“Lemonade next time?” Wanda suggested lightly.

“Maybe.” Bucky set the drink cup aside on the cafe table, reached for a pumpkin scone, and ate it in two bites.

They had a plate between the three of them, stacked high with slices of pumpkin bread, pumpkin cake, pumpkin muffins, and pumpkin scones.

“Starbucks is very serious about its pumpkin product,” Wanda had said when they first entered the shop. “They advertised it a lot last year, too.”

Bucky started on a piece of pumpkin bread.

“I still can’t get over how much they can get away with charging for a cup of coffee.” Steve took a sip of his own drink - a copy of Bucky’s; very sticky indeed - and shook his head. “I can remember when you used to be able to get a cup of coffee and a sandwich for only a nickel.”

All things considered, he wasn’t going to do too much griping about inflation. It wasn’t as though he couldn’t afford even these high prices, after all. He had more money now than he’d ever even heard of anyone having back when he was younger. When Sharon had been his liaison during the first few months after he’d come off the ice, she’d told him about the money the government had set aside for him. Apparently, he was owed seventy years of back pay at a captain’s salary, adjusted for inflation, which had amounted to eight digits’ worth of money. Enough to allow him to flat-out purchase rather than rent his apartment in Red Hook and still be able to get by very comfortably off of the interest alone.

Still, he did find it odd sometimes that everything seemed to be so much more money these days. Especially when he could remember things like penny candy and five-cent slices of pie at the Automat.

“But anyway,” he continued, taking a bite of his scone and smiling at Wanda and Bucky, “these are
pretty good.”

He was very happy that Bucky and Wanda seemed to be getting along well. Bucky needed as many people on his side as could be found, and Wanda was probably one of the most compassionate people Steve knew. She didn’t seem to mind taking Bucky out to see the sights of New York on the days when Steve had S H I E L D business that took him away from the apartment, and Bucky didn’t seem to mind going wherever Wanda chose to lead.

“So what’s on the agenda today, Wanda?” Steve took another sip of his drink.

Bucky finished off his slice of pumpkin bread and started on a pumpkin muffin.

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They ended up going to Prospect Park.

Bucky liked the park. He and Steve went jogging there some mornings, and he and Wanda had already visited the zoo. This time, Wanda suggested, they could walk around Lefferts Historic House, which was apparently a very important piece of New York’s historic past. According to the brochure.

The house was fine, though Bucky didn’t feel very connected to New York’s historic past. Mostly he liked being in Steve and Wanda’s company. He thought a little about Romanoff, and about Sam too, and decided he wouldn’t mind seeing both of them again either.

Maybe everyone would like pumpkin muffins and sticky drinks?

“Romanoff will come by again?” he asked Steve one afternoon, when he had returned from a solo trip to Starbucks, laden with two fancy coffees and a bag of muffins.

He had started taking walks around the neighborhood on his own. Sometimes he would go to Starbucks and pick new things off the menu, sometimes he would choose random shops to look around in, and sometimes he would just walk around Red Hook and try to see if any of it felt familiar. It didn’t, not in the way Steve was hoping it would be, but it was beginning to feel like a place that could be home, and maybe that was enough for a while. And anyway, the walks were good.

“And Sam?”

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“Oh sure.” Steve took the bag from Bucky and brought it over to the table. “Sam’s going to be around an awful lot now. Soon he’ll be living over in the Tower, and he’ll be helping rebuild S H I E L D, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s over here about once a week or so.”

Steve had been glad to see Bucky developing a taste for going out and exploring the neighborhood on his own. His walks had started as just twenty-minute strolls around the blocks adjoining the apartment building, but they’d grown over the past week into sojourns of an hour or more. And he always seemed to come back with something interesting, which never failed to put a smile on Steve’s face.

It gave him an indescribably good feeling to see how well things were going for Bucky. He’d made some definite improvements in the weeks since he’d shown up in the living room in DC, and Steve saw no reason why the improvements couldn’t continue. Oh, there hadn’t been any monumental revelations or a complete undoing of Bucky’s conditioning, but he was undeniably calmer and more
relaxed. Especially at the apartment, which Steve was already beginning to think of as their apartment.

He grabbed a plate, sat at the table and opened the bag. “Hey, muffins.” He pulled the muffins out of the bag one by one and set them on the plate. “And as for Natasha, she stops by every so often anyway.” He smiled wryly. “Of course, she never tells me when she’s going to do it, probably because she likes just letting herself in and waiting for me to open the door and find her sitting in my favorite chair, eating my cereal or something.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “But yeah, she’ll be around.”

Steve didn’t add that Natasha would very likely be stopping by much more often than had been her habit beforehand. Bucky would just have been uncomfortable if he knew the reason for it. And besides, it was Natasha’s story to tell if and when she chose to. He had no right to spill her secrets, especially about something so deeply personal.

“C’mon over and sit down.” He beckoned to Bucky, who still had both huge cups of coffee in his hands. “We can try these muffins, and you can tell me how your walk went.”

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“Briskly.”

They cut all six muffins in half, and Bucky discovered that the chocolate chip muffins and red velvet muffins were especially good, the banana nut muffins and pistachio muffins were acceptable, but the corn muffins and oatmeal raisin muffins were very disappointing. Which didn’t stop him from eating them, but he wouldn’t buy them again.

Probably.

He found himself back in Starbucks the very next day after walking around Red Hook for an hour. Maybe he hadn’t given the oatmeal raisin muffin enough of a chance. He ordered two of those, plus a couple of curry puff pastries that looked interesting, and two grande flat white coffees. Which were described as “bold ristretto shots of espresso over steamed milk.”

That meant absolutely nothing to him, but it seemed worth a try.

He walked down the street, pastry bag in one hand and cardboard coffee tray in the other. The barista had suggested cutting the muffins in half, buttering, and toasting them, so maybe they would try that when-

A dart punctured the side of his neck.

He dropped the coffees and the bag, yanked the dart out, and his knees were already buckling under him, his vision already crinkling black, and-

A girl in an NYU sweatshirt and sweatpants tossed her heavy textbook aside, leaped off the front stoop of a nearby building and rushed to catch him-

He tried to back away, tried to find the shooter on the rooftop-

The girl got a shoulder under him. Another assailant rushed him from behind - he could just make her out, dark business suit, laptop bag.

He reached for the bag or maybe for the knife under his shirt, but he was moving underwater, too slowly, so slowly, and his fingers had gone numb and everything was fading away and-
A van pulled up to the curb. Someone from the inside slid the door open and they all dragged him inside, and he had just enough time to see a gurney with an IV bag mounted over it, and-

And…

It had been…

nice

while………..

…………………….

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At first, Steve had thought that Bucky was just taking a walk.

He used the opportunity to get a light workout in, doing a few calisthenics he’d favored when there were no weights handy. Handstand push-ups, one-armed pull-ups, single-leg squats… He did fifty of each, feeling nicely warmed-up when he was done, and promised himself that tomorrow, he and Bucky would hit the gym at Avengers Tower. At least he knew that there would be weights there that would give him a decent challenge. He’d been known to bench-press half a ton on a good day, and it had been too long since he had gotten in a workout like that. And Bucky would probably enjoy it too.

He showered and dressed, coming out into the main room expecting to see Bucky sitting on the couch, maybe with a bag of something from some street vendor or other. But Bucky wasn’t there, and a concerned glance at the clock showed Steve that it had been an hour and a half already.

What was keeping him?

The minutes ticked by in agonizing slowness. And with each passing minute, the excuses he could find for Bucky’s lateness grew less and less convincing.

He’s probably exploring the old neighborhood. He’s probably just watching the birds. He’s probably looking for another waffle house. He’s probably…

Finally, at the two-hour mark, his worry got the best of him. He grabbed his coat, hurriedly scribbled a note, and stuck it to the door with a piece of scotch tape before leaving.

Hey Bucky. Went out to look for you. If you get home before I find you, call my cell. Whatever you do, don’t leave the apartment.

He walked as quickly as he could, eyes scanning the passersby as he walked. He had no plan more sophisticated than walking around the blocks near the apartment and gradually widening his radius until he found Bucky or his phone rang. And then, when he’d calmed down enough to behave rationally, they were going to go to Avengers Tower and get Bucky a StarkTech cell phone so this wouldn’t happen again.

Come on, Bucky, where are you?

The bottom fell out of his stomach when he saw the Starbucks bag on the ground, muffins scattered across the sidewalk. Nearby lay two coffee cups, the coffee still wet on the sidewalk where the cups
had fallen. And on the sides of the cups…

“Oh no.” A knife made of ice buried itself in his guts.

On the side of one cup was written ‘Steve’.

“Oh God no...” His knees gave way.

On the side of the other cup was written ‘Bucky’.

And then he knew.

Chapter End Notes

THE END!

Yep, that's it. This is how it ends, folks. Nothing to see here. No mental anguish. No HYDRA. No Bucky feels. No nothin'.

(I kid. Good god, I kid.)
Recalibration

Chapter Notes

As before, they're all Russian, so assume they're speaking Russian. No [language brackets] needed for this one. Get ready, folks. Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

somewhere in Jersey City
late October 2014

General Lukin had made the flight on his private Kronas jet as soon as the team had announced that they would be making the move on the Winter Soldier the following day. He was accompanied by a dozen select members of his elite Kronas militia, armed and equipped to secure their operating position in America. Dr. Rodchenko and a pair of his technicians were on board as well. The doctor had spent most of the flight tapping away on the keyboard of his laptop, an agitated expression on his face, occasionally muttering his frustration over the Americans having damaged his “life’s work.” Which was all well and good, so long as he managed to repair his life’s work and get him back into the field. For the time being, Lukin was content to leave Rodchenko to his laptop and focus on his upcoming reunion with the Winter Soldier.

Soon.

Upon landing and arriving in a derelict industrial wasteland proclaiming itself to be Jersey City, they had begun to prepare their base of operations. Kronas’ holdings extended far and wide and included, among other things, a seemingly nondescript brick warehouse on the waterfront, near the old docks. However, the interior of the building was as different from its mundane exterior as possible - beneath its battered brick facade was concealed a fully-equipped safe house with every precaution, from reinforced steel-core walls and doors to GPS and satellite masking. It was the perfect staging ground to conduct their operation.

They had scarcely gotten the mental recalibration chair assembled and anchored to the concrete floor of the room that would serve as the doctor’s laboratory before the call came through from the rendition team that the Winter Soldier had been secured and was en route to the site.

Very soon.

Two hours later, the team arrived. And between them, strapped to a gurney with an IV in his hand, was the Winter Soldier.

They moved fast. The Winter Soldier’s hat, coat, shirt, and shoes were taken from him and disposed of. His pockets were emptied of their contents, among which was a receipt from a Starbucks in Brooklyn and a few crumpled dollars. His weapons, a pistol and a pair of cheap-looking knives, were also disposed of. He’d be provided with proper weaponry when the time came, but not before Lukin made certain that the proper fear and respect had been reinstilled in him.

Rodchenko evidently did not trust the Winter Soldier any more than Lukin did, or than the rendition team had. As soon as the team had wheeled in the gurney, the doctor instructed them and his techs to put the Winter Soldier into the chair and secure him. The chair’s restraints had been designed to
withstand the full power of the Winter Soldier’s enhanced musculature and mechanical arm when he was in the midst of a full induced seizure. He would not be able to free himself when he awoke, though it would be amusing to watch him try.

Most amusing, Lukin thought with a shark-like smile, especially when he realized the futility of his attempt.

“Time for him to wake up, I think, Doctor?” He gestured to the IV in the Winter Soldier’s hand, and Rodchenko hesitated only a moment before coming forward to shut the drip off and withdraw the needle.

Rodchenko then spent a long time running through a series of diagnostics using the chair’s built-in scanners. His face grew more dismayed with every test he ran, and finally he made a scoffing sound and shook his head angrily. “Pierce’s technical staff were all incompetents, and Marko Danilovich has much to answer for.” He gestured at the Winter Soldier, who was still limp in his restraints twenty minutes after the IV drip had been disconnected. “There’s damage there that will take several sessions to correct. And some of the scans are coming back inconclusive.”

“Which means what, Doctor?” Lukin was in no mood for Rodchenko’s technical banter. “How long will it take you to repair him?”

“That is what I mean, General.” Rodchenko slid his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. “I don’t know what may have happened to his memory in the weeks he’s been here, but it’s safe to assume that he has at least been told a great deal. His conditioning may have been ruined to a large degree, and I won’t know how far the damage extends until I can speak with him.”

“Then speak with him, Doctor.” Lukin narrowed his eyes. “But I will do so first.”

For long moments, nothing happened. Then a slight flutter of the eyelids. And then, blearily, the Winter Soldier opened his eyes.

“Ah.” Lukin smiled a self-satisfied and very cold smile and folded his arms as the Winter Soldier’s eyes focused on his own. “The prodigal son returns.”

---

The voices were distorted. Muffled, as if Bucky were trapped underwater.

For a long, confused moment, he imagined he was once again in the waters of the Potomac, and if he could only break the surface… if he could only breathe…

The voices continued to talk around him, rushing past him senselessly. Except he wasn’t underwater. That had been a long time ago. He had been on the street.

On the street. Walking home. With coffee and muffins. It had been a good day. There had been several good days. Maybe there could be several more.

That had been a mistake.

The voice was directed at him now. Cold and mocking. As it always had been. And he understood then. He had always known it would happen.

The coffee and the muffins, the park and the zoo, living with the man on the bridge and talking to all of his friends - that had been a dream. It was time to wake up.
His eyes blinked open and he was staring at him. Smiling and waiting.

The General.

“You.”

He growled the word and leaped forward - he would kill him, he would wrap his hands around his neck and strangle the life out of him, he would -

His head snapped back against a headrest and his arms stayed locked in place, and all he could do was clench his fingers and thrash about in impotent, excruciating rage.

It was time to come home.

---

“Me.”

Lukin allowed himself the luxury of a slowly broadening smile as he watched the Winter Soldier struggle futilely against his bonds with increasing fury, his enjoyment increasing along with the Winter Soldier’s rage, until the struggling ceased. Until all the Winter Soldier could do was to glare at him, to pour out hate and venom from his eyes and feed Lukin’s triumph.

“Well.” He smiled again, a small cold smile this time. “Now that that’s over with…”

He leaned in closer, putting his face within range of a lunging blow from the Winter Soldier - if he could have moved from where he sat. He smiled, and leaned in a few inches further to drive the point home.

“You couldn’t have imagined that I was going to allow you to simply slip away from me.” He looked at the Winter Soldier with deliberate condescension in his eyes. “And you certainly couldn’t have thought that I would allow you to exist in this world as anything other than what you were engineered to be. You are the deadliest assassin in the history of the profession, no more and no less.”

He turned away, picked up a crumpled piece of paper from the table where the contents of the Winter Soldier’s pockets had been deposited, and held it out for the Winter Soldier to see. “Overpriced coffee and bakery sweets.” He gave an ugly, mocking laugh. “Just another mundane, meaningless little man milling with the others through the streets of an American city. Indistinguishable from any other.” He crushed the receipt in his fist. “Pathetic, that you tried to live such a life. I am going to cure you of your pitiful little ambitions.”

---

A flood of hot shame rushed through him suddenly, and he went limp in his bonds.

The old man would have been so disappointed in him. The old man had taught him to be a proud Soviet patriot. He had taught him to sneer at the capitalist, debauched West and their obsession with acquiring money and material goods. Overpriced coffee and bakery sweets? He would have been ashamed to see the soldier-

No.
No!
Bucky. His name was Bucky. His name had always been Bucky.

The old man had lied to him. He had lied to him, they had all lied to him. They had lied, they had lied. He needed to hold it in his mind that they had lied.

“Fuck off!”

Again he began thrashing against his restraints. He had never tried to break free of the chair before. They had never expected him to. That didn’t mean it couldn’t be done.

There was a blur of motion from the Kronas soldiers, a staccato flurry of clicking and clacking as weapons were drawn and cocked. A few men that Bucky dimly recognized as a pair of techs backed away suddenly.

But the General simply laughed at him. “Still fighting? Still unwilling to accept the reality of your situation?” He shook his head. “I should have known better than to expect anything more from you.”

“Fuck you!” Bucky would scream his throat raw before he gave in.

The General shrugged. “I shouldn’t be surprised.” He gave a small, knowing smile. “This isn’t the first time you’ve abandoned your mission to go off on your own. But of course you don’t remember.”

The General was lying.

He was lying, he was lying. They were all liars. They had lied to him for decades, they would keep lying to him now. He needed to remember that. Needed to keep in his mind that they had lied.

He stopped struggling long enough to stare murderously at the General, chest heaving with enraged exertion.

“You’re a liar.” The General would make him pay for that comment, but right then, Bucky didn’t care. “And I do remember.”

They had stopped him. The old man had said he went looking for trouble. But Steve had said that Bucky had been trying to go home. That they had stopped him from going home.

They had always lied to him. They had stolen his life. He had to hold onto that.

“I tried to go to Brooklyn once.” Bucky spat the words, chest still heaving with exertion. “A long time ago.”

“I see.” The General’s demeanor shifted abruptly. Gone were the taunting smiles and mocking laughter. His eyes hardened. “Then I’m sure you know just how dangerous it is to remember things.”

Bucky froze.

The General leaned in so close that Bucky could have throttled him if he had been able. “So what else do you imagine you know?” he said softly.

Something cold and terrifying slithered into Bucky’s stomach right then and he fought down the urge to vomit. Fought down the urge to squeeze his eyes shut, block everything out, and wait for the nightmare to end.

He had said the wrong thing.
The General would make him pay for that.

He stared hard into his lap. It wasn’t a nightmare. There was no waking up from it, no discovering that it had been an awful dream, that he was still in Steve’s apartment and that they could go jogging and eat a big breakfast and watch *Battlestar Galactica* on Netflix.

That had been a dream, and it was over.

He made himself speak. The General wouldn’t tolerate his silence for very long.

“Nothing.” He could barely hear his own voice. He didn’t look up from his lap.

The General smiled. Whispered, “I don’t believe you.”

Bucky didn’t look at him.

The General reached out suddenly and seized a handful of Bucky’s hair - not hard enough to rip it out, but hard enough to cause pain - and yanked Bucky’s head back so he was forced to meet his eyes.

“Do you think you can hide anything from me? Ever?” the General asked softly. “You’re lying to me, Soldier.” His eyes flashed dark and dangerous. “And I won’t have it.”

Bucky said nothing, but the ball of ice in his stomach had spread across his body and he felt cold and awful all over.

The General retained his grip on Bucky’s hair, not allowing him to look away. “You were living with Captain America for weeks. And now, you are going to tell me what he told you. All of it.”

Last time someone had put their fingers in Buck’s hair, it had been Romanoff, and her touch had been soft and gentle. She had petted him while he lay with his head in her lap, and then she had followed him into the bedroom and stroked his hair until he had fallen asleep.

That would never happen again.

He wanted to go away.

Just go away in his head like he did sometimes, and let the world move on without him. But it didn’t happen. The General was looking at him, fingers snarled in his hair, waiting for a response. Silence would only make things worse.

He had to tell him something.

“Bucky,” he said quietly. “My name is Bucky.”

He wanted to go away.

“Bucky, is it?” The General snorted in disgust. “That man is dead.”

He tightened his grip in Bucky’s hair and looked unblinking into his wide eyes.

“Bucky died seventy years ago. General Karpov merely took what was left of him and made you.” He sneered. “A dramatic improvement, if I ever saw one. Bucky would never have been capable of assassinating a dozen highly-placed Swedish government officials in the course of a single day. Bucky could never have slipped past the security measures of the Japanese to stab one of their most high-profile businessmen to death in his own office. And Bucky certainly would never have had the
skill - or the courage - to assassinate a sitting President of the United States in public.”

“I didn’t…” Bucky started to say, but his voice slipped away somewhere.

He had.

Of course he had.

“You did.” The General smiled coldly. “These things were far beyond Bucky. But for the Winter Soldier, they were merely in the line of duty.”

Of course he had done those things.

That was all he had ever done. That was all he had ever been useful for. He knew it, and General Lukin knew it, and the old man had known it, too. No matter what the museum or Steve had said, he had done those things. He had always done those things. Even when he had gotten away from HYDRA, all he had wanted to do was return and kill them all.

He had never been more than a killer.

Except that the mind tricks were memories.

And Steve remembered him.

He said the words very quietly, but he said them. “You stole my life.”

The General laughed long and loud at that. “Pathetic. Just who told you that? Captain America?” He snorted derisively, releasing his hold on Bucky’s hair and shoving his head backwards. “He knows less than you.”

He turned away, still laughing, then rounded suddenly on Bucky once more. “Where do you imagine you’d be without me? Where?” His voice turned savage and he thrust his face close to Bucky’s. “Think, if you have the brains to do it. Think about where you were when I found you, and then tell me I did anything besides give you a life!”

Bucky’s only response was to glower at him. He would kill the General. He would kill him. He would kill him.

And all the General did in response was laugh. “You don’t remember, do you?” he taunted. “You don’t remember how General Karpov used you to guard his cancer-ridden body in Afghanistan, only to have you frozen and shelved, the entire project deactivated just before he died?”

“That’s not…” Bucky started to say, but his voice drifted away, confused and angry and terrified.

“Oh yes, it’s true.” The General practically licked his lips. “He would have left you frozen forever, and who would even have known about it? Who would ever have thought to look for you, even? You would have stayed frozen in that warehouse for years, until someone finally disconnected the power and you drowned in the stasis tube.”

“But…” Bucky hadn’t gotten to that part of the file. He hadn’t read anything past 1956. He had been too afraid - too angry and afraid - to go back to it. And now...

And now...

The General came close again, spitting the words out venomously in Bucky’s face. “I am the only reason you are alive today. Karpov would have let you rot. But I found you. I thawed you, I gave
you new purpose and forged you into HYDRA’s weapon. You owe me your life. Do not dare to tell me I stole anything from you.”

Something broke in Bucky’s mind then.

They had taken everything from him.

The old man, the General. The Soviets and HYDRA. They were all the same in the end. They had taken away everything. They had rewritten his mind so many times, force fed him so many lies, that he had no idea what was true anymore. All of it could be a lie, or none of it, and he would have never known the difference.

He still didn’t know.

“You stole my life!”

He screamed his throat raw and thrashed wildly in his restraints. If he fought long enough and hard enough, maybe he could break them. He tried to push off from the leg rests, but his socked feet couldn’t find purchase, sliding off the sides. And still he struggled.

---

“Such a waste.”

Lukin felt real disgust, real disappointment at seeing the Winter Soldier this way. He was meant to be the world’s deadliest assassin, a man without fear or hesitation. A killer born and bred. Not some pathetic, screaming child throwing himself uselessly at his restraints and hungering for a life far beneath his ability and dignity. Not someone who sought to be so much less than he was capable of being.

Shaking his head, he stepped back.

“You know what is about to happen to you. And if you don’t, you can probably guess.” He locked eyes with the Winter Soldier again. “I am going to see that you are restored to your true self. It may be a lengthy process, and it will certainly be a painful one -”

He turned to look at Dr. Rodchenko, who had an uneasy expression on his face. He swept it away with a severe glare of his own - Rodchenko would do as he was ordered to do or be cowed into it as had been done in the past - and turned to regard the Winter Soldier once again.

“But in the end, you will once again be the assassin you were intended to be. Not Sergeant James Barnes, certainly not this Bucky, but the Winter Soldier.”

He sat down in a nearby swivel chair, watching the Winter Soldier’s face hungrily, and spoke without moving his eyes from the scene he was about to witness.

“Proceed, Doctor.”

---

“No!”

Bucky had always been afraid of the chair. He had always been scared of the excruciating pain that it would inevitably cause. But now he felt such visceral, gut curdling horror of the thing, that he couldn’t stop himself from screaming.
“No, I don’t want to!”

They had always told him that it was just routine conditioning. That he needed it to fix his mind, to
make him a better soldier, to keep the mind tricks at bay. But now he knew the truth, and the truth
was more horrifying than any of their lies.

They would take it all away from him. The morning jogs and the waffle houses and the walks
around the neighborhood. Accompanying Wanda to the park and talking to Sam on the phone and
laying there as Romanoff petted his hair. And talking to Steve, and Steve explaining that they
weren’t mind tricks, that it was his mind trying to heal itself, that he was damaged but it wasn’t his
fault, and that he could stay with Steve and get better.

He would never get to stay with him again. He would never get to sit on the couch with Steve and
eat apple pie and listen to records, and Steve would never again tell him that they could fight
HYDRA together, that they could figure out things together, just like always.

They would take it all away. Forever.

“I don’t want to do it!”

---

Lukin smiled thinly. “Has what you’ve wanted ever mattered?”

He welcomed the fear in the Winter Soldier’s eyes and voice. He’d wanted it, waited for it,
anticipated it, and now he could savor it.

The Winter Soldier had begun to struggle again, fighting in earnest this time, his strength renewed by
his terror. That was good; Lukin wanted him that way. He wanted him to fight, to resist as much as
he could, and to feel that resistance crushed. Swept aside by the machine as it cleansed his mind of
the disease of knowing who he had once been.

Lukin wanted to see the Winter Soldier fight his own unmaking with all of his strength, only to
realize that all his strength would never be enough.

“Do it, Doctor.” His voice was clipped, though his eyes never left the Winter Soldier’s. “Now.”

Rodchenko hesitated a moment, but then came forward with the rubber mouthpiece in hand. “Open
your mouth, Soldier,” he said calmly. Soothingly, as if talking to a small child. “It is time.”

---

Bucky looked at the doctor as if seeing him for the first time.

“No!” He shook his head wildly, eyes wide with both terror and rage. “No, I don’t want to.”

He couldn’t break out of his restraints no matter how hard he struggled. He had known that from the
beginning, but desperation and fear had motivated him to try anyway. Now all he had left was the
doctor, and of course he would do as the General commanded.

They were both HYDRA, and they were all liars.

He turned his head away from the bit.

“I won’t do it,” he said through gritted teeth. “I won’t kill for you. You can’t make me forget.”
He had to hold them in his mind. All of them. Steve and Romanoff and Sam and Wanda. Everyone. It was all he had left.

The doctor hesitated a moment, then turned and nodded to one of the techs. The tech came forward, pulling on thick gloves, and he clamped Bucky’s nose shut with his fingers.

Bucky continued to thrash desperately, his face reddening, and he held his breath and held his breath and held his breath, but the tech kept his fingers firmly in place.

Nature won out.

Bucky gasped for air, and the tech shoved the bit home and roughly leaned against Bucky’s mouth with all his weight. Out of the corner of his eye, just beyond the tech, he could see the doctor turn to the chair’s control panels.

General Lukin was beside Bucky suddenly, looking down at him with ugly eyes. “You think I can’t make you forget?” He smiled. “Whose will do you imagine is stronger - yours or the machine’s? Shall we find out?”

Bucky heard the familiar, sickening whirring of the machine, watched as the halo spun itself around and lowered the clamps toward his head.

The tech backed away.

He squeezed his eyes shut, whole body clenching in panic and terror, and he told himself to hold onto them. All of them. Romanoff and Wanda and Sam and Steve. Especially Steve.

And his name. Bucky. James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes. He had to hold onto his name.

And remember that-

A surge of electricity tore into his mind, shredding his thoughts and tearing out a scream from somewhere deep inside of him.

He had to hold onto-

Hold on-

Their faces swam before him. Steve and Romanoff and - their faces cracked, then exploded like fine glass before falling away into the void.

His name, he knew his name, his name was Bucky, he knew his name.

James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes.

Another surge of electricity hit him. He nearly vomited from pain, his whole body seizing uncontrollably, his fingers clenching so tightly that his nails cut into the flesh of his one hand.

James Buch...

Bucky...

Electric talons seized his mind greedily, squeezed it for one awful moment, then tore it in half and threw it into the darkness.

Ja... anan...
Buck...

… B

He screamed until he hoped he would die, and he waited for the end to claim him.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand... that's it!

For the next day or so anyway. I'm off to see Civil War tonight, and I imagine that's
going to give me a great many Bucky feels to mull over. Who knows how that will spill
into editing the rest of this story? (It's all written, just needs editing.)

Oh, the Bucky feels.
They’re all Russian, so assume they're speaking Russian. No [language brackets] needed.

And remember, I never promised the next chapter would be happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

somewhere in Jersey City
late October 2014

The Soldier awoke by degrees.

The lights were unusually bright, and he squinted against them until his eyes adjusted and he could examine his surroundings. He was sprawled on a cot, in a room with white washed walls, but when he moved to yank the IV from his hand, he found nothing.

So he hadn’t just awoken from rest.

He glanced down at himself, saw that he was wearing the standard, black cotton combat uniform of Kronas’ private militia. He wore that while preparing for a mission, but never while actively on one.

So he hadn’t just come from a mission.

Where was he then?

He sat up, then instantly doubled over from the sudden head rush of pain. He dug his fingers into his scalp, closed his eyes, and waited for the pain to recede.

The doctor must have been working on his conditioning, then.

So where was the doctor?

---

The Winter Soldier’s reconditioning had been slower and more laborious than usual. For one thing, there had been much more to scour away this time. His ordinary reconditioning normally entailed the removal of no more than a few days’ worth of memories, if that much at all, or the reinforcement of earlier protocols and conditioning sessions. This past session had involved the removal of nearly two months’ worth of memories, the seeking-out and removing of any memories or partial links to certain memories, and the implantation of some rather severe new protocols.

For another thing, the Winter Soldier had kept on passing out from the mental strain and sheer agony of the recalibration, and General Lukin had steadfastly refused to allow him that easy an escape from his punishment.

“Wake him up,” he’d ordered Rodchenko the first time the Winter Soldier had fallen unconscious and hung limply in his restraints. And when the doctor had brought him around with smelling salts,
Lukin had grabbed a handful of his hair and hauled his face up to look him square in the eyes. “You’re going to experience this all the way, Soldier.”

But the reconditioning had finally been completed, and the Winter Soldier’s nerveless, dead-weight body had been dragged out of the chair and deposited in a bed to allow him to recover. And now, the urgent message from the techs had told Lukin that the Winter Soldier was awake.

Very well then. Time to find out how it had all worked.

The Winter Soldier was sitting up in bed, hunched over in obvious discomfort when Lukin walked into the room. Two guards in black Kronas uniforms remained at the door; Lukin had given them very strict orders not to enter the room but rather to prevent the Winter Soldier from leaving it. Two soldiers, even seasoned experts like these men, would have posed no threat to the Winter Soldier in actual combat; they would have served only to provide him with more weaponry. Lukin, though, was unafraid to confront the Winter Soldier alone and unarmed.

“Oh your feet, Soldier.” He stood imperiously in the middle of the room and waited for his order to be obeyed. “Mission report.”

That was a fitting beginning to his little test, he decided.

---

For a long moment, the Soldier hesitated.

Probably too long. The General was not a patient man. The doctor warned him constantly not to do anything that would make the General angry, but it was easy to make the General angry. The General didn’t like the Soldier very much.

He hesitated because his head hurt very badly and he didn’t feel steady, but the General would not accept any excuses. And so he sucked in his breath and climbed to his feet. He faltered slightly, but he was standing, and maybe that would be enough. Maybe the General wouldn’t be angry.

As for his question…

“Sir?”

He looked at the General in confusion. He wouldn’t have forgotten a mission, but the General was asking for a report. So there must have been a mission.

The General was going to be angry no matter what.

“Mission, sir?”

The General glared at him. “What is the last thing you remember, Soldier?”

For another long moment, he was silent.

The last thing he remembered was…

Maybe…

He didn’t know, but he needed tell the General something, or he would be angry with him. And then the doctor would be disappointed. But his head hurt so much and felt so blurry, as if someone had stuffed his mind with alcohol-soaked cotton balls.
The General wouldn’t want to hear that.

His gaze drifted away to somewhere in the distance and he chewed on his lip. He wavered again on his feet, and he felt like sitting down, but the General hadn’t given him permission, so he continued to stand.

And still he had to say something.

“Talking…” His gaze wandered to the floor. “To… the doctor…? Sir?”

The General frowned and took a deep breath. After a long moment, he said, “Tell me all you know about Captain America.”

The Soldier’s eyes snapped back to the General’s at that, his unfocused gaze immediately settling into a glower. That question he could answer, and easily.

“Rogers, Steven Grant. Avenger. Recently appointed director of SHIELD. Enemy.”

But that wasn’t all...

Quietly he said, “And I hate him, sir.”

If the General asked him why he hated Captain America, the Soldier had no answer for him. But he could feel a burning enmity smoldering deep in his chest, so hot and painful that it made his hands clench tightly at his sides in barely suppressed anger.

If he saw him, he would kill him.

“Eliminate on sight.”

---

Now *that* was improvement.

Lukin had difficulty disguising the pleasure he felt at hearing the Winter Soldier proclaim his hatred for Captain America, and he certainly could not keep the satisfied smile from his face upon hearing the Winter Soldier promise to kill the man on sight. Even though those had been the specific conditions Lukin himself had insisted upon, even though the conditioning had been done at his express direction, he still felt a rush of triumph.

There had been no deceit in the Winter Soldier’s tone, no hesitation in the baleful glare he had donned when Lukin had mentioned the name Captain America. The Winter Soldier had never been capable of any sophisticated deceit at any rate; he was an assassin, not a spy.

And speaking of which…

“And what of Natalia Alianovna Romanova?”

He practically licked his lips in anticipation of the Winter Soldier’s response. The history between the Winter Soldier and the rogue Black Widow had been a tangled and troubling one that had caused a great deal of difficulty over the decades. Lukin himself had presided over the last such incident, and he had not been gentle in the punishment he had meted out to the Winter Soldier. And yet, even when the Winter Soldier had encountered her in Odessa and put a bullet through her, he had not finished the job. Romanova had survived, and Lukin had been furious at the Winter Soldier’s failure to kill her.
Had she gotten through to the Winter Soldier during these past weeks? Lukin would not have put it past her to have done so. Nor would he put it past the Winter Soldier to still harbor some sort of weakness for her, despite the amount of reconditioning they had done on him with respect to her over the decades.

“Tell me what you know about her.”


“Good.” Lukin could not keep the smile of satisfaction from his face, or the slight tremor of triumphant laughter out of his voice.

He’d done it. He’d scoured the Winter Soldier’s mind clean once again, stripping away all the doubts and cares and attachments that would have led him away from both HYDRA’s cause and Lukin’s own. He’d repaired the damage that Pierce and the other Americans had done to his perfect killing machine, leaving him once again fit for duty. No distractions, no attachments, no exceptions.

“That’s very good. And now your mission briefing.” Because there was still the mission - a series of them, in fact - and time was of the essence. “There has been a crippling breach of security within HYDRA on American soil, and I want all potential leaks plugged.”

He laid out everything - Insight’s destruction, Pierce’s failure, the treacherous actions of the Black Widow and Captain America - leaving the Winter Soldier out of it. Giving the Winter Soldier just enough information to enable him to do his job, and no more.

“You will be given a video dossier on the first target tomorrow morning at 0600.” They’d stopped giving the Winter Soldier printed dossiers over a decade ago; Lukin had reasoned that reading gave the Winter Soldier too much autonomy. Better to have the information read out to him, presented in audiovisual format with as little print as possible, to keep him in the mindset they wanted.

He folded his arms. “I will expect confirmed silencing of the target by 1800 hours tomorrow evening. And upon your return, another dossier will be waiting for you.” A beat. “There will be thirty-plus targets in all, and they must be eliminated as expeditiously as possible. Is that clear?”

The question slipped out of the Winter Soldier’s mouth too quickly. “Thirty, sir?” A frown skittered across his face, but he worked quickly to hide it. However, he clearly could not hide how disoriented and confused he was, and after a laborious moment, in which he practically wavered on his feet, he lowered himself slowly onto the cot, sitting on the edge of it.

The Winter Soldier’s confusion was expected. He always awoke from cryosleep confused, always came out of a conditioning session confused. And Lukin wanted it that way. Confusion created dependence, and the dependent were easy to control.

That being said, the Winter Soldier looked up at Lukin, his expression dizzy with pain and disorientation. “That’s a lot, sir. And…” He chewed on his lip. “I haven’t had rest.”

“There is no time for rest now.”

Lukin couldn’t keep the impatience out of his voice. There had been enough of a delay in beginning this series of missions because of the difficulty of locating the Winter Soldier. He would not tolerate any further delays, certainly not of the length of time a ‘rest’ would necessitate.

Oh, he knew what the Winter Soldier meant by ‘rest’. He had been struck with admiration for General Karpov over that bit of conditioning. It had been artful as well as ingenious, and he had held
it up as something worthy of emulation. That being said, however, putting the Winter Soldier into cryogenic hibernation would put him out of action for three months at least. They had never tested the cryostasis for a minimum length of immersion time, but all of Pushkin’s research and Rodchenko’s experience had shown that three months was as short a time as they were willing to attempt. And now was not the time to experiment, with so much at stake.

But surely there was a way to use this to his advantage…

“Later.” He controlled the smile, but it showed in his eyes. “Once you have eliminated them all. Then you may rest.”

---

Dr. Rodchenko waited until the General had left the room before going there himself. Actually, he waited until several minutes had passed after the General had left the room before even getting up from the notes on his laptop. He had no desire to encounter the General again this evening; he did not care overmuch for spending too much time in his presence if he could help it, and he had not cared at all for the General’s insistence that the Winter Soldier be conscious throughout the entirety of the reconditioning.

The Soldier, unlike the General, needed his attention. The procedure had taken quite a bit out of him. Even ordinary reconditioning usually left him dazed and unable to function properly for the duration of the day, and this had been no ordinary reconditioning. Rodchenko would be surprised if the Soldier were able to drag himself out of bed at all the following day, much less function in the manner the General expected of him.

He pushed open the door to the Soldier’s room and entered without preamble, finding the Soldier curled up in his bed with his hands clamped around his head. He was very clearly still experiencing residual pain from the procedure, and Rodchenko felt a swell of annoyance at the General. He seemed not to care that the Soldier, despite his training and augmentation, was still capable of being damaged.

“Talk to me, Soldier.” He spoke in the calm, even voice he had perfected over more than a decade of being one of the few people capable of carrying on a thorough conversation with the Winter Soldier. “What do you feel?”

---

As soon as the General had left, the Soldier curled up on the cot, hands clutching his head.

His head hurt terribly. Bad enough that he thought he would vomit if he got up again any time soon, and yet he was supposed to be ready for a mission in the morning. A mission that he only had twelve hours to prepare for and then complete.

And that wasn’t the only thing…

Not only did his head hurt, but it felt… wrong, somehow. Bad in a way that he couldn’t describe. He tried to focus on what was wrong. Maybe he could come up with an answer and then tell the doctor, but his thoughts simply unspooled and slipped away from him.

All wrong.

He ended up staring at the wall, hands still wrapped around his head, until the doctor walked in.

“It hurts.” He didn’t sit up. “It all hurts.”
"I know."

Rodchenko sighed, irritated. The General seemed to have no regard for the fact that his treatment of the Soldier had detrimental effects. It was akin to a young boy hurling his toys around the room roughly and carelessly, certain that when he broke them, they would be mended. Repaired, yes, but never again as good as new.

Still, his irritation was not directed at the Winter Soldier. It never was, and it never had been. He had always remained cognizant that the General’s behavior was not the Soldier’s doing, and that to subject the Soldier to his frustrations at the General would be unfair. And so he heaved a great sigh and knelt down beside the Soldier’s bed to examine him.

Pupils, pulse, breathing… all close enough to normal. No severe damage had been done so far as he could tell. The pain, however, would likely not recede for some time, and that would make it difficult for the Soldier to rest properly. Fortunately, he had thought far enough ahead to have brought along a syringe of the sedative he had formulated specifically for the Soldier’s tolerance and metabolism.

"I will give you something to help you rest."

A hopeful expression skittered across the Winter Soldier’s face. “The General said no rest.” He looked at the doctor without moving his hands from his head. “No rest until all thirty-plus targets are eliminated. And that will take a long time. At least several weeks.” His voice was just barely a whimper. “My head hurts. Why does it hurt?”

Rodchenko sighed again. “The conditioning was very extensive this time.”

There were times, Rodchenko thought as he looked down at the Soldier, that he came close to losing his taste for his work. He had spent nearly forty years of his life working with the Soldier. He had made him his life’s work. He was the only man still on the project now who had been there in the old days, before General Lukin had taken over, and he knew that that had given him a bond with the Soldier that no one else could claim. And to hear the Soldier reduced to such pitiful whimpering filled him with disappointment and dismay.

Someone like the General did not deserve to command the Winter Soldier. It should have properly been a man more like the late Comrade General Karpov, who at least had a respect for the Soldier. Who would at the very least have allowed him the rest he was begging for.

But it had not happened that way. And if there was one lesson life had taught Rodchenko, it was that pining for the way things might have been done nothing to change the way things were. One either adapted to survive, or one was trampled underfoot by the world.

He took out the syringe and uncapped it. “I would let you have your rest if I could, but the General has forbidden it.”

He gently took the Soldier’s hand from his head, the Soldier offering no resistance as he did, and slid the needle expertly into the Soldier’s right arm. He did it quickly, not even needing to search for the vein. It had been long enough that he knew his way around his work. He kept hold of the Soldier’s hand as the sedative began to take effect, and as he watched the Soldier’s pain-contorted face begin to relax, he tentatively laid a hand on his forehead.

“But I will do what I can.”
So... we're going strictly non-Civil War compliant now. Which I enjoyed quite a bit (enough to see it twice), but it's clearly not simpatico with this story. (I wrote the whole story from January-March, so before I knew enough about Civil War anyway.)

Love it? Hate it? Angsty enough for you? Not angsty enough? Let me know!
Man with a Plan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

aboard the UNN Alpha Helicarrier
same day, late October 2014

The phone call Steve had made to Natasha had been fast, panicked, choked with fear and anger and loss. He’d barely managed to convey that Bucky had been taken, and that he needed her and everyone else to get ready as fast as possible and meet at Avengers Tower. And then he’d hung up and headed back to his apartment as quickly as he could.

They took him. The bastards...

He felt his rage mounting as he stripped off his clothing and donned his uniform. Not the blue and white SHIELD stealth suit, the one he wore to look official or signify that he was acting in any governmental capacity, but his Captain America uniform. Which might have overlapped with SHIELD’s jurisdiction, but as far as he was concerned, he would go after Bucky whether or not doing so was sanctioned by SHIELD.

They’re going to do it all again. He bit his lip in anger as he picked up the shield and headed down to the garage for his bike. They’re going to take it all away from him again, and if I don’t find him fast, I may never see him again.

The thought of it was enough to draw a pained, strangled cry from him.

He forced himself to fight down the panic. To let the anger motivate him. Bucky needed him, that much was for sure. He needed him now more than he ever had, and Steve wasn’t about to let Bucky down again. Not now that he knew he could save him if he got there in time. So he kicked the bike into life and roared off towards the Tower.

Natasha was already there when he arrived. So were most of the rest of the team, including Sam, who was in the midst of moving but had responded to the urgent call anyway, along with Coulson and Rhodey and Clint and Carol and Sharon. And as fueled by anger and the need to act as he was, it didn’t take long at all to explain the situation.

“We’ll be able to coordinate a better search from the Helicarrier,” Maria Hill had said, having just come from there herself. “All systems are up and running, and we’ll have access to the information grid in real-time”.

Twenty-four hours later, though, the grid had turned up nothing. There’d been no security footage of the section of the street where Steve had found the coffee cups, and so there’d been no way to track the kidnappers based on that. Which was likely the reason they’d chosen to nab Bucky at that precise spot. And so Steve stood there on the bridge of the Helicarrier, in the same place Nick Fury had used to stand, with nothing to do except think about the horrible things that were happening to Bucky. And how with every passing hour, Bucky might be slipping farther and farther away from him.

---

The movers had been stacking the last box in Sam’s new apartment in Avengers Tower when he got the call. And so it seemed like he definitely would not have the weekend to settle in and explore, and he definitely wouldn’t have the opportunity to have his sister and her family up just yet.
Soon, but not yet. After all, his nephew had started screaming in excitement when Sam told him where he was moving to and why. Little dude would kill him if he didn’t have him over soon. For that matter, so would his niece. Probably everyone else, too.

Definitely very soon, but in the meantime, work was starting immediately. He felt very fortunate that T’Challa had just finished and gifted him his new set of wings the evening prior. Then again, he hadn’t had the chance to wear them in combat yet, so…

Well, one thing at a time.

He was just approaching Steve on the bridge - dude needed to sit down, have a coffee, and breathe before he worried himself into a breakdown - when he was eclipsed by Agent Sharon Carter, walking briskly and carrying a set of enlarged photographs in one hand.

He had only met Agent Carter the previous afternoon, and briefly at that, but he could already tell she was a woman not to be trifled with.

She pushed the photographs into Steve’s hands. “Steve, look at this.”

Sam raised an eyebrow at that. ‘Steve’, was it? Not Captain, or even Cap? He looked back and forth between the two of them for a moment, then filed the information away for later. A man could learn a lot just by being quiet and paying attention.

“Senator Larry Stern was found dead this morning,” Agent Carter explained. “Two shots to the back of the head.” She glanced at Sam. “Killed while in federal custody.”

Steve looked at the photographs, though his expression made it apparent he immediately regretted doing so. “In federal custody?” He looked up at Agent Carter. “Any I.D on the shooter?”

But the words were barely out of his mouth before Steve clearly realized the obviousness of the answer to his question. Who else could have gotten through the layers of security that had surrounded Stern? Who else could have slipped past armed guards, secure and secret locations, cameras, motion detectors, and who knew what else to assassinate a former United States Senator who was being held under charges of international terrorism and high treason?

Had to be their boy...

“Bucky.” Steve looked between Sam and Agent Carter bleakly. “They’ve put him back to work already.”

Agent Carter nodded. “It’s a possibility.”

Steve’s mouth thinned into a line. “What’ll it take to keep tabs on every HYDRA agent implicated in Natasha’s big information dump?”

“Colonel Rhodes is already working with Stark on something that can sift through all of that information and ping any important names,” Agent Carter said, and passed the photographs to Sam.

He took them, but didn’t look at them. He had seen more than enough during his time as a PJ that his imagination was perfectly capable of filling in the gory blanks.

“Something new though, probably some new proprietary Stark software,” Agent Carter continued. “The Colonel doesn’t trust that any currently available government software hasn’t already been compromised by HYDRA.”
“Seems reasonable,” Sam said. And terrifying, but he didn’t need to say that part.

Agent Carter nodded. “It does, but it means that we’re racing against the clock, starting… yesterday.”

A moment later, she had left, taking the photographs with her. Sam turned to Steve, eyebrow raised. “So how are you doing then?”

Steve looked at him. “I’ve had better days.”

Sam didn’t even need to point out how much of an understatement that was. He knew - and understood - enough to know how hard losing Bucky had hit Steve. And he knew enough to know how quickly they needed to get him back. He had seen - and experienced - the dude in action, after all.

“He didn’t deserve this,” Steve said suddenly. “He never chose this, and he never did anything in his whole life to warrant the living hell they gave him.” He stared off into the sky through the giant fishbowl windows of the bridge, jaw set in anger. “But they did it anyway. They did it to him then, and they’re doing it to him again now. And you know what the worst part is?”

Sam waited.

Steve turned and looked at Sam with hollow eyes. “He knew it was going to happen. He knew they’d come for him, and he said he wanted to leave before they found him, and I wouldn’t let him. And now he’s gone.”

Sam had nothing helpful so say to that; Steve wouldn’t accept or be comforted by any bullshit platitudes, and anyway, they both knew that there was no guarantee that they would even be able to find Bucky. Or worse, if they did find him, there was no guarantee that the man wouldn’t be so far gone as to be beyond help.

There was no point in saying that though. Steve wouldn’t be having it. Best to just wait and see what happened.

For a long moment, they stood on the bridge in companionable silence, and Sam found his thoughts wandering to Riley.

As always when he thought of Riley - of his corny ass jokes and even cheesier smile while waiting for a reaction to said corny ass jokes - his chest tightened uncomfortably and he momentarily found it hard to remember to breathe. It had taken three years - and no small amount of therapy - for him to feel like he could even talk about the man without either raging against the arbitrary unfairness of it all or breaking down into miserable tears.

If the circumstances had been different, if he had been the one to discover that Riley was still alive, only brainwashed against his will into becoming some kind of mindless killing machine, would he have done whatever it took to bring him back? No matter how impossible it seemed?

He didn’t even need to answer that question.

“Look, man. I heard Agent Coulson mention that there’s Peruvian hot chocolate in the conference room.” He gestured in the general direction of the door. “Apparently they make that stuff with three kinds of milk, chili powder, and special chocolate.”

It sounded really damn good actually, and not just as a distraction.
“Want to get a cup and see if it’s as good as he says?” He looked Steve over briefly. “Don’t say no. You could really use a cup.”

And a break.

---

The hot chocolate was good. And there was more of it the next day. Unfortunately, there was also news of another assassination.

“Brigadier General C. DeWitt Hunter.” Rhodey sighed as he stood beside Steve, looking at the information on the viewscreen. “Air Force Global Strike Command. That one could’ve really hurt us.”

Steve had to agree with Rhodey on that front. AFGSC, like the Strategic Air Command before them, was charged with providing ‘strategic nuclear deterrence and global strike operations’. Which meant that this General Hunter had been at least partially in command of a constantly combat-ready fleet of bombers carrying nuclear ordnance. And since he’d also been HYDRA, who knew how close the world had come to nuclear war on countless occasions?

“He was being transferred up to New York for a hearing in front of the UN Security Council when the convoy got hit.” Rhodey shook his head. “Containment vehicle was disabled by an explosive device. The personnel supervising the transfer were all killed, the door was blown open, and the General was shot dead. Single shot through the heart, single shot through the bridge of the nose. Either one would’ve been enough.”

“Good God.” Steve felt sick to his stomach. It was bad enough that Bucky was being forced to work for HYDRA again, bad enough that these HYDRA operatives were being wiped out before they could give the valuable testimony that would smash the rest of the organization apart, but to hear that Bucky had slaughtered the guards as well was like being punched in the gut.

They were innocent. They were doing their duty. They didn’t deserve to die.

There was no way of tracking Bucky to or from the scene of the assassination. The computers on the Helicarrier were busy analyzing the security footage, but it would take a very long time. And in the meantime, there was nothing to do but wait and pray. And not sleep.

2:47 the following morning found him red-eyed and sleepless, drinking Peruvian hot chocolate with Sam, when Carol brought him the news of another assassination. This time it had been Charles Hanover, a former CEO for a handful of investment firms who had transitioned to the government’s finance sector. It wasn’t certain when he’d first begun to work for HYDRA, but it had ended just two hours prior when he’d been found in his locked prison cell, his throat opened in a tidy V-shape and his blood congealing in a huge pool on the floor. No one had seen his assailant come or go.

“We won’t have enough time.” Steve clenched his fists. “We have no way of knowing who they’re going to hit next. Everything’s happening at once…”

---

If anyone had asked Sam why he had been the one to find Steve awake and sitting in the conference room at 2:30 in the morning, well, he was sure he could come up with an answer that didn’t involve Riley. Luckily no one asked, not even Steve, though he did accept Sam’s offer of a cup of Peruvian hot chocolate.

They sat in companionable silence, each of them likely thinking about their own lost boys, when
Carol walked in and delivered the news. She didn’t stay long after that, and Sam couldn’t blame her.

“Colonel Rhodes and Tony are working on that... what did Agent Carter call it?” Sam leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Proprietary Stark software?”

“And it’s not finished yet.” Natasha appeared in the doorway, arms folded. Judging by the dark circles under her eyes, Sam could guess that she hadn’t been doing much sleeping either.

“Peruvian hot chocolate?” Sam pulled out one of the rolling chairs and gestured toward it. Natasha sat down without a word, though she gave the smallest of nods.

“Well, what can we do in the meantime?” Sam rolled his chair over to the electric kettle and switched it on. “Compile a list of possible suspects?”

Steve sighed. “I don’t know how much good that’ll do. HYDRA’s going to go after everyone they think is a potential leak. Remember what happened to Jasper Sitwell.”

Bucky had killed Sitwell, too. Punched right through the window of Sam’s car and threw the guy into a truck.

Steve shook his head. “The last thing HYDRA wants is anyone giving away any of their information. Which means we’re going to want to look for anyone who might be connected to something that wasn’t mentioned in the information from SHIELD’s servers, along with those who are.”

Sam sighed and leaned back in his seat, holding his hot chocolate cup. “That’s a lot of suspects.”

“And that doesn’t even begin to cover the ones who haven’t been arrested yet.” Steve looked back and forth from Sam to Natasha. “The number of arrests that’ve been made so far is nothing compared to the number of people mentioned in the big information dump. The next target might not even be someone in custody. Or even someone on any of our lists. What we really need is a way to figure out who HYDRA thinks is the biggest threat.” He looked at Natasha. “Any ideas?”

“Besides going through all the lists and all the files, name by name, and arranging them by threat level?” Natasha snorted. “Which is what Rhodey and Tony are working on anyway.”

The conversation quickly lapsed into silence. Behind them, the kettle clicked off, and Sam rolled his chair over and took a moment to prepare a cup of Peruvian hot chocolate. He set it down in front of Natasha, who nodded a wordless thanks. Meanwhile, Steve was leaning back in his chair, staring sullenly at the wall.

“Look.” Sam sighed. “There was nothing either of you could have done to prevent this. Blaming yourselves is just an exercise in feeling miserable.”

He knew that old song and dance routine quite well, and it had gotten him nowhere in the end.

Natasha looked up at him sharply, and Sam had a brief moment to wonder what her stake was, exactly, in recovering Bucky. Because he didn’t honestly imagine she had been up in the middle of the night out of deep concern for apprehending all of HYDRA as quickly as possible.

Sam plowed forward regardless. “What could you have done? Followed him around forever?” He shook his head. “He wouldn’t have allowed it, and anyway, he could have shaken you at any time.”

---
“I could have gone out walking with him.” Steve shook his head, staring at the wall with his hot chocolate forgotten and growing cold beside him. “I could have done what I said I’d do and keep him safe. I could have started going after HYDRA sooner, and maybe given them something else to focus on besides my best friend.”

He knew, as he was laying out all the things he could have done, that he’d failed Bucky. Bucky had always been there for him, all throughout his life. Bucky had been there when he was bedridden as a young boy, keeping him company so he’d have more to do than listen to the radio and draw. Bucky had been there when he’d had no real friends growing up, being the one person who kept him from being entirely isolated. Bucky had been there when he’d been beaten up for speaking out against people who thought that they could get away with anything, always ready to throw a punch in his defense. Bucky had been there when he’d struck out with girl after girl, never losing his cheerful enthusiasm for a double date.

Bucky had never once let him down. But every time it had ever really mattered, he’d let Bucky down. He’d let him fall from the train in Switzerland, and the result had been Bucky’s capture and transformation into the Winter Soldier. And now he’d let him be recaptured by HYDRA, and people had already started dying.

“Or I could just have listened to him and let him go.” He slumped in his chair. “He knew this was going to happen, and he wanted to go after them. Maybe I should just have let him do it his own way.”

What good was the serum, in the end? What good was the shield, what good was all his training? What good was Steve Rogers, if he couldn’t even protect the one person who mattered most in all the world?

What good was any of it?

Chapter End Notes

Did you know Peruvian hot chocolate is made with three kinds of milk? I wonder what those three kinds are...?

As always, feedback, comment, and recipes for hot chocolate are warmly welcomed.
Malfunction

Chapter Notes

They’re all speaking Russian, so no [language brackets] needed. And remember, I never promised to bring happiness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

somewhere
a few days later, early November 2014

The fourth and fifth targets were eliminated as their arrests were being made.

The soldier waited on the rooftop opposite the couple’s four story brownstone townhouse, and when the federal agents made their move, so did he. The heavyset man he shot between his nervous eyes. Before the blonde woman could start screaming, he dropped her with a clean headshot. And before the agents could muster themselves into action, the soldier had already dropped off the roof into the alley below, where he was quickly retrieved by the extraction team.

Five targets eliminated. Twenty-five more, and then rest.

He was silent on the journey back. The extraction team never liked to speak to the soldier more than they had to. It made them nervous, and if they were too nervous, they would want to secure him in place.

He hated them all.

Twenty-five more targets, and then rest.

No more of that, a voice whispered insistently.

He looked up sharply. Two members of the extraction team looked back at him, hands instantly going for their weapons.

Cowards.

No more cryo.

He looked quickly at the driver, then back at the extraction team, his eyes just as wide as theirs. But no one had said anything, had they? No one was talking, though one member of the team was holding his hand out apprehensively.

He made the rest of the trip in unbreakable carbonadium chains.

Of course, the General was not pleased.

“What happened?” The General directed his question to the captain of the extraction team as the rest of the team were escorting the soldier out of the van. “Why is he in chains?”

Of course the General didn’t ask the soldier.
“He started behaving erratically, sir.” The captain cleared his throat. “Making jerky movements with his head and looking at us with wide eyes. I wasn’t going to take any chances, sir. Not with the whole team.”

“I see.” The General gave the soldier a long look. He would pay for the General’s anger later, he knew it.

The soldier didn’t hear the rest of the conversation. The extraction team led him away and left him alone in his room. They didn’t remove the shackles. He didn’t care though. He wanted to be alone so he could lay down.

He wanted rest.

*Never again,* the voice whispered urgently. *Earnestly?*

He whipped his head around to the door. No one was there. No one else was is the room. What then? What was-?

*The cryo obviously didn’t do you any good at all if-*

No!

Stop it!

He ended up on the floor, slumped against the wall, breathing heavily, head clutched in his hands.

He stared down at the floor with wide, panicked eyes.

Mind tricks again.

Just mind tricks, which meant he needed to tell the doctor. He was supposed to tell the doctor when his mind played tricks on him. The doctor would make the mind tricks go away

*Who told you your memories were mind tricks anyway?*

“No!” He shook his head wildly. “Stop it!”

---

General Lukin stood in the doorway as the Winter Soldier shouted, watching him thrash about like a madman, and realized that he had been wrong in his earlier assessment. He had imagined that the reconditioning had been a great success and that the Winter Soldier had been restored to full field capability. The Winter Soldier’s first several missions had gone incredibly smoothly, and it had seemed as though they would be able to scratch targets off the list at the rate of one per day, or even more than that. But now, it was becoming apparent that the reconditioning was falling to pieces.

The question was, how badly was it crumbling? How much longer would the Winter Soldier be able to perform his duties? And what sort of reconditioning would have to be done to restore him to normal functionality?

“Stop what?” He stepped into the room, his arms folded, staring down at the Winter Soldier imperiously. “What are you going on about, Soldier?”

The Winter Soldier froze, though his breathing was unsteady.

Lukin waited.
“Nothing.” The Winter Soldier was still panting. He swallowed, tried to steady himself. “Sir.” He didn’t look up from the floor.

“Don’t lie to me, Soldier.”

He was on the Winter Soldier in an instant, taking hold of him by the hair and yanking his head up so that he might look him in the eyes. He had no fear of the Winter Soldier restrained; the carbonadium shackles at his wrists, elbows, ankles, and knees would prevent any movement that might cause injury. And if the shackles failed for some unknown reason, he was still not without means of preventing the Winter Soldier from harming him.

“I heard you yelling from the hallway.” He gestured with his chin, his eyes still locked with the Winter Soldier’s and his face wearing a hard look that showed he was in no mood for argument. “You were yelling and thrashing about, you sent your extraction team into such unease that they were forced to chain you, and I demand to know why. Now speak!”

---

The soldier wanted to go away.

He wanted to close his eyes and go away, and when he came back, he wanted to sit on the couch and listen to records and eat apple pie with-

Where had that come from?

His eyes darted from the General to the rest of the room, which was furnished only with a cot, a small table, and a chair. No couch. No record player.

There was nowhere to go.

He was just confused because of the mind tricks, but the General wouldn’t want to hear that. If the General knew about new mind tricks, he would be even angrier than usual.

Carefully he said, “I’m better, sir. I’m fine now.”

“You can’t lie to me, Soldier. I heard you.” The General tightened his grip in the soldier’s hair, pulling his head back until the soldier’s eyes came up to meet his again. “And I know that with you, where there is one outburst, there will be more.”

The soldier said nothing. No matter what he said, the General would be angry with him.

Abruptly the General released his grip in the soldier’s hair and stood up. “I am going to speak to Doctor Rodchenko and have him come to inspect you. And I am also going to tell him that I recommend your conditioning be refreshed.”

Without another word, the General left the room. The soldier curled up on the floor and waited, and some time later, he heard the doctor’s voice in the doorway.

“This is ridiculous,” the doctor said, and pressed the intercom button to bring the guards, then crouched down beside the soldier. “What happened to cause this?”

The soldier didn’t bother listening to the hurried conversation between the doctor and the guards. It never matter what they said, so he had long since learned to stop paying attention.

Instead he thought about apple pie.
A series of images drifted across his mind then: heating up an entire box of apple pie and eating it on orange plates, but not by himself, no, he was sharing the pie with someone, there were two orange plates, and they sat on the couch and talked about furniture, the furniture was new that day, he had helped build it and then he wanted apple pie and they listened to records and…

And…

The doctor was unlocking the shackles and talking to him. The soldier was supposed to pay attention to the doctor when he talked to him directly.

“I had apple pie,” he said quietly, sitting up so he could look at the doctor. “I heated up a whole box of it and served it on orange plates.”

That had been nice.

A nice mind trick, maybe.

He wouldn’t have minded another like it.

“Mind tricks.” The doctor frowned. “Mind tricks, you know that. Nothing more. Your conditioning was very stressful this time.”

The soldier chewed on his lip. It hadn’t felt like a mind trick, but the doctor was never wrong. Even if it had been a nice mind trick, it was only a mind trick.

“I think we may have to update your conditioning,” the doctor said slowly. “To prevent the mind tricks from disrupting you at your work, you understand.”

The soldier looked at the doctor with wide, panicked eyes. The images of apple pie and orange plates and records vanished, to be replaced with a solitary image of the chair, restraint cuffs open, waiting for him.

“But…”

He wasn’t allowed to refuse his conditioning. He wasn’t allowed to disobey the doctor. He wasn’t allowed to lie and pretend the mind tricks hadn’t happened. He had to tell the doctor when the mind tricks happened, so the doctor could make the mind tricks go away.

A tiny part of him wished he hadn’t said anything anyway.

“We just did that.” He shook his head. “We just did conditioning. I’m fine now. I can be fine.”

He wasn’t allowed to refuse his conditioning, but he was allowed to try to convince the doctor that he didn’t need it. It never worked, not ever, but it was all he had.

Another frown, but the doctor wasn’t angry at him. He was never angry at him. “The mind tricks disturb you, don’t they? And don’t I always take them away for you? Come now, you don’t want to have this happen again, do you?”

After a long moment, the soldier nodded.

Wordlessly the soldier stripped out of his combat uniform and into the black cotton uniform of Kronas’ private militia; the doctor preferred that the Soldier wore simple, easily removable clothing in the laboratory. Finished, he followed the doctor down the hallway into his laboratory, then sat in the chair while the doctor and the technicians made whatever preparations they needed to.
The soldier never paid attention to that part. They never asked him to do anything and would just work around him as needed. And that gave him time to examine the thoughts that drifted across his mind.

Maybe the apple pie on the orange plates hadn’t been a mind trick?

It didn’t feel like a mind trick. He could still taste the apples, warm and sweet and mushy in his mouth, and the orange plates felt very new. They had just unpacked them, hadn’t they? They hadn’t even washed them yet, but he had wanted pie, so…

And they had built furniture.

And listened to a record.

It felt very real.

“We used to take baths in there,” he murmured to no one in particular. But what had that even meant?

He didn’t think anyone would tell him.

--

The Soldier sat unresisting in the chair while the reconditioning cycle was programmed into the machine. Rodchenko, though, had an uneasy feeling that this lack of resistance was merely a temporary reprieve. The Soldier had seemed terrified of the very idea of his impending reconditioning just a few moments ago, and although his demeanor had changed when Rodchenko had spoken to him calmly and rationally, it could change again just as quickly.

And that was leaving aside the fact that he had begun talking at random about memories from his past, whether real or imagined. It was entirely possible that the three weeks he had spent living with Captain America had wreaked irreparable harm on decades’ worth of meticulous conditioning, and that the only means of setting things right again would be a deep reconditioning followed by a lengthy turn in cryosleep. Which the General had, naturally, forbidden.

He felt a rush of frustration again at the Soldier’s predicament - frustration and pity. If the General had listened to him and allowed him to put the Soldier into cryostasis immediately after his reacquisition and conditioning, then they could have woken him up again in a few months’ time and bypassed all of this nonsense. Indeed, if the General had not been so fixated upon treating the Soldier’s reconditioning as a form of punishment, then perhaps the conditioning would not have frayed so quickly.

But none of that was the Soldier’s doing. And that was the source of his pity, for the Soldier still had to bear the burden of the effects of the conditioning without the rest to which he had become accustomed. He was hurt, exhausted, and confused, and yet the General still insisted he be able to perform miracles.

Rodchenko found that he disliked the General more with each passing year. Indeed, with each passing mistreatment of the Soldier. And he was always the one who ended up being made to repair the damage the General left in his wake.

Rodchenko shook his head in disgust as he keyed the final sequence into the machine and stepped forward with the rubber bit. He would have to go and speak to the General after this round of reconditioning was complete and present his case once again. The General would likely refuse his advice, as he had already made up his mind and was not a man to whom reconsiderations came
naturally, but at the very least Rodchenko had to make the effort. Otherwise, the Soldier’s conditioning was likely to continue to deteriorate, to the ultimate end of jeopardizing his work in the field and quite possibly his very life.

“Open.” The Soldier wordlessly complied, making eye contact for a brief moment that Rodchenko found inexplicably distressing, and then looked away again.

He stepped back and began the sequence. And when the Soldier began to writhe and scream, he suddenly found that he wanted very badly to step away. But he remained, whether out of loyalty to his position and responsibilities, or out of loyalty to the Soldier himself, or out of compassion, or out of pure habit, he could not have said for certain.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Buck, but being the Winter Soldier sucks. Steve better get his ass moving.

As always, comments, feedback, and the gnashing of teeth are warmly welcomed.
aboard the UNN Alpha Helicarrier
10 days later, November 2014

More than a week later, the number of deaths were well into the double digits. Various government offices had expressed their concern at the growing threat. News agencies were beginning to put the killings together into a series of interconnected events. Nervousness abounded on all fronts. And they were hardly any closer to finding Bucky.

It was welcome news, then, when Tony came forward to announce that the tracking algorithm he and Rhodey had been working on was finished.

“Pretty simple, really.” Tony stood in the middle of a glittering 3D array of highly technical looking windows that represented the tracking algorithm. “The program analyzes all aspects of each piece of data on the victims, then compares it against everyone else in the list to determine similarities and possible patterns. When there’s enough data, it spits out a short list of possibilities.”

“Possibilities for what?” Steve asked, dreading the answer.

“For who’s next in the crosshairs, Cap.” Rhodey’s voice and expression were grim. “And that’s when we go out and get our hands dirty.”

“This program sounds a lot like what Zola wrote for Project Insight.” Steve looked over at Tony, who shrugged cavalierly.

“There’s a good reason for that,” Tony said. “I borrowed pretty heavily from what we could retrieve of Zola’s algorithm from the Insight satellites, which means not only does it follow HYDRA’s criteria for who might be next instead of ours, but it might turn up people who aren’t on any of our lists to begin with.”

Rhodey cut in. “There’s one big drawback, though. The initial short lists aren’t going to be that short. The program only increases in accuracy the more data it has to work with. Which means…”

“That we might have to wait for more of HYDRA’s targets to end up dead before we can point ourselves in the right direction.” Steve hated how helpless he felt, especially knowing what was at stake. Not just the lives of the HYDRA operatives they were hoping to squeeze for intelligence, but Bucky’s life as well. “That’s a big gamble.”

“It’s the best I can give you, Steve.” Tony offered a smile. “And take it from me. When you know how to do the math right, it pays to gamble. And it pays to bet big when you do.”
“So what do we do in the meantime?” Sam leaned back in his chair, his gaze sweeping over everyone gathered around the conference table. “Just wait?”

Natasha shook her head. “I don’t like those odds.”

“Even if the initial short lists aren’t that short, it’s something,” Maria said, tapping her fingers along the edge of her tablet.

Sharon nodded. “It’s a place to start.”

“We can fan out.” Clint had leaned so far back in his chair that Steve thought he might tip over at any moment. “Try to cover as much of the not-short short list as possible.”

Carol raised an eyebrow. “Until it shortens?”

Clint nodded. “Until it shortens.”

“Great.” Carol pulled a face.

“Well, it’s not perfect.” Coulson leaned forward, resting his arm on the table. “But it’s better than waiting for something to happen.”

Better than feeling like there was nothing to do besides wait for grim news and act with the appropriate amount of frustration. So there was that.

As Sharon had said, a start.

...

Steve had split them all into groups, trying to stick to teams of two or three as much as possible so there would always be someone watching everyone’s back, and sent them out to go after the first few hits on the algorithm’s list. He’d partnered himself with Sharon that afternoon; despite their turbulent and ultimately failed romantic history, they’d managed to maintain a good and professional working relationship as well as a stable friendship. And they’d been on enough missions together that each knew what the other was going to do almost before it happened.

“OK.” He looked over at Sharon as she piloted the flying Porsche, reading aloud from the dossier he’d pulled up on her tablet. “Frank W. Benson. Congressional lobbyist with a whole lot of stroke. Somewhat new on the political scene, but he’s got more corporate connections than he knows what to do with. Responsible for funding the campaigns of most of the senators from the Northeast for the past seven years. Not on the initial list from the big SHIELD information dump.”

“Which means we might be able to make him an offer.” Sharon banked the car sharply and began to bring it in for a landing. “If his name’s not out there, we might be able to convince him he’s got everything to gain by talking to us.”

They landed the car a block away from a large glass-fronted building which seemed oddly deserted. A slightly-askew poster on the lobby door proclaimed ‘Citizens for Progress will return to this location pending temporary repairs.’

Benson was obviously shutting things down, with the intention of lying low or simply fleeing the country. Sharon seemed to think so as well, and quickly bypassed the electronic lock on the door with a pocket codebreaker. And just as they entered the lobby, the door clicking shut behind them and the lock re-arming itself, a very well-built but very nervous-looking man came out of a door on their right, a laptop briefcase in his right hand and a thick manila folder under his left arm.
Benson’s nerves didn’t improve any when he found himself confronted by Captain America and a uniformed, armed SHIELD agent. The moment he saw them, he turned and bolted in the other direction. He might even have succeeded if he’d been dealing with any ordinary pair of SHIELD agents. As it was, he made it all of ten steps before Steve knocked his legs out from under him with the shield.

“There’s no point in running, Mr. Benson.” Sharon’s voice was brisk and businesslike, and her hand never strayed far from the holstered pistol on her hip. “And you probably don’t want to run from us anyway.”

“I don’t…” Benson scrambled to his feet. “I don’t know anything. I don’t have anything you’d want.”

Steve moved to flank Benson, the shield back on his forearm and held at the ready. “You know HYDRA’s looking for you too, and you know they’ll kill you when they find you.”

Sharon continued. “You’ll last longer in SHIELD custody, and we might even be able to make it worth your while to tell us everything you-”

Benson’s head exploded with a sound like a fist hitting a ripe watermelon.

A spray of thick, hot blood splattered across Steve and Sharon’s shocked faces, and they were peppered with a shower of rough splinters.

The sound of the gunshot came a second later.

Steve froze. Shock held him immobile, his insides turning to ice, and every inch of him was numb as he waited for the next bullet to find him...

“Steve, get down!” Sharon dropped into a crouch, pulling Steve down with her, yanking the shield from his suddenly nerveless fingers and holding it up to repel another shot. She chanced a series of darting looks around the empty lobby, looking for the shooter, but Steve’s mind had gone as numb as his body. And as he crouched there, still in shock, the horror of what had just happened hit him.

_Bucky_...

Bucky had just assassinated Benson. Shot him clean through the head while they were talking to him. They were covered in his blood. His brains. Those hard splinters had been fragments of his skull.

Numbly, he felt Sharon haul him to his feet and drag him out of the building. Heard her call in to the Helicarrier and describe the situation in a hurried tone.

_That could have been either one of us. _The horror took hold of him. _It could have been Sharon. It could have been me._

“Steve?” He heard Sharon’s voice as if from far away. “Steve, snap out of it!”

_Bucky could have killed me._

He began to wipe the blood and brain matter off of his face with hurried, frantic motions. The nausea rose up, brought on not so much by the physical gore as by the realization that his best friend had been there, without him knowing it, and if he’d shifted his aim slightly, could have shot Steve or Sharon right through the head.
Bucky could have killed me.

“UNN Alpha, this is Agent 13. I need to evac with Captain Rogers. Unable to pursue suspect. Over.”

Sharon was pulling on his arm again, towing him over to the car and somehow he was in it and they were flying away and Sharon still had Benson’s blood all over her face and bone splinters in her hair and HYDRA had done the same thing to Bucky that they’d just made Bucky do to Benson. Blasted the brains right out of his head and put something else there instead, something awful and alien, something that could have made Bucky move those crosshairs just the tiniest bit over to the side and centered them on Steve’s head instead of Benson’s, and then it would have all been over.

Bucky could have…

---

Seventeen targets neutralized.

Thirteen or more to go.

Then rest.

Seventeen targets neutralized. Thirteen or more to go. Then rest. Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

The mantra ran through the soldier’s head steadily. It ran through his head as he watched the video dossier on his next target. It ran through his head as he pulled on his combat uniform and selected his weapons. It ran through his head as the extraction team deposited him at the drop off point, and as he situated himself on the roof across from the glittering glass building, and as he assembled the M40A5 sniper rifle.

Seventeen targets neutralized. Thirteen or more to go. Then rest.

It ran through his head as he watched Captain America and an armed SHIELD agent approach the building.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

It ran through his head as Captain America’s head drifted into his crosshair.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

It ran through his head as he let Captain America and the armed SHIELD agent break into the building.

Seventeen targets neutralized. Thirteen or more to go. Then rest.

They weren’t the targets right then. Benson, Frank W. was the target, and Benson, Frank W. hadn’t appeared yet. If he shot Captain America through the head before Benson, Frank W. appeared, then he might not appear at all.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

If the soldier failed to neutralize Benson, Frank W. that afternoon, he would only have to track him down later. And if he had to track him down later, then he was further and further away from rest.
Seventeen targets neutralized. Thirteen or more to go then rest.

The soldier hated Captain America. Captain America deserved to die. Captain America deserved to have a bullet put through his head. And the soldier would do that.

Seventeen targets neutralized. Thirteen or more to go. Then rest.

But he would do it later.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

After the rest of the targets had been neutralized. After he finally got his rest.

Seventeen targets neutralized thirteen or more to go then rest.

Benson, Frank W. appeared, and the soldier wasted no time in putting a bullet through his head. He spoke into his earpiece and informed the extraction team that the mission had been completed. He dropped off the roof and waited for pick up.

Eighteen targets neutralized. Twelve or more to go. Then rest.

---

Too much time.

The disposal of those elements which could be dangerous to HYDRA’s future, which could imperil its very survival, was taking too much time. Already too many of them had gone to ground or been captured, and with each passing day the number of them within easy reach was dwindling rapidly.

They were running out of time, Lukin thought angrily, and using up too much of it. So when the extraction team called in and reported a successful mission, he was quick to tell them to return post-haste so that the Winter Soldier could be debriefed, reconditioned if necessary, and given his next dossier. But when the team returned and he went to the Winter Soldier’s quarters to debrief him, he was not pleased with the condition he found the Soldier in.

“He’s been like that for the past few hours, sir,” the captain of the extraction team said when Lukin demanded to know the reason for the Winter Soldier’s seeming catatonia. “He was sitting in the back of the van looking at the floor, and then he just… went away, it looked like. In his head. Sir.” The man straightened up. “We brought him here to his quarters and put him on the bed, sir. It seemed like the only thing to do.”

“Eyes on me, Soldier,” he snapped, ignoring the captain.

No response.

“Soldier! Mission report!” His voice was considerably louder and quite a bit more insistent this time.

Still nothing.

He dealt the Winter Soldier a ringing backhand blow across the mouth.

“I want a mission report out of you, Soldier. Now!”

---

Eighteen targets neutralized. Twelve or more to go. Then rest.
Twelve or more to go. And then eleven. And then ten. And then another and another and another, until finally all the targets had been neutralized and the General would let the soldier have rest.

Twelve or more to go.

Twelve or more.

He was tired.

He was so tired.

*You’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep,* a small voice whispered, and the voice even smiled. He didn’t know how he knew that.

*Got to get your twelve hours, after all.* And then he was allowed to lie down. Not on a cot, but on a bed. A big comfy bed, and usually he wore sweatpants and a t-shirt to sleep in, but that day he was only wearing underwear.

*Oh, come on* - The voice dropped away for a moment, then it came back and it sounded cheerful. Relieved. *Sleep like a human being, would you?*

And then tomorrow they would go to a big store. And they would buy furniture. Because the old furniture had been broken somehow. They would go and get new furniture, and everything would be okay.

He was so tired.

He wanted to go buy furniture and have everything be okay. He wanted to lie down in a big comfy bed. He-

The General slapped him hard across the mouth, and suddenly the soldier was sitting on a cot in a room with bright lights, and the General was looking at him with such hatred and anger, and the extraction team had their rifles out and pointed at him, and-

“I’m so tired.”

That was the wrong thing to say.

He tried again.

“Target neutralized, sir. Eighteen targets neutralized. Twelve or more to go. Then rest.”

He was so tired.

---

The Winter Soldier was fraying, Lukin realized. Hardly capable of his best work, and his best work was what HYDRA needed. Rodchenko had been wheedling at him to authorize a turn in cryostasis for the Winter Soldier ever since the reacquisition two weeks previous, but there was no time. The Winter Soldier would just have to deal with his exhaustion and make the best of it.

He made a note, though, to talk to Rodchenko about using stimulants on the Winter Soldier to keep the fatigue at bay during missions. And possibly heavy sedatives to ensure that the Winter Soldier would sleep deeply and restfully in the few hours he would have between missions. That would keep things running smoothly. And when the last name was crossed off the list, Rodchenko could do what he pleased with the Winter Soldier.
At least until he was needed again.

“That is all?” Lukin looked very hard at the Winter Soldier, whose bloodshot eyes were beginning to glaze over again, and then at the captain of the extraction team. At least he might be in the proper state of mind to render a reply.

“Target confirmed dead at scene, sir.” The captain nodded. “It couldn’t have gone more smoothly. Captain America and his SHIELD agent friend didn’t even know we were there, and they were flanking the target when he went down.” The man smiled triumphantly. “They were probably still in shock when we left.”

It took a moment for what the man had said to fully register to Lukin. And then something snapped in his mind.

“Do you mean to tell me,” he said in a dangerously low voice that the members of the extraction team began to back away from, “that Captain America was standing right next to the target?”

He rounded on the Winter Soldier, furious. “And you let him live?”

---

The soldier wanted to lie down for a bit and close his eyes.

He wanted rest.

The target had been neutralized. There was no video dossier waiting for him. He could lie down on his cot and close his eyes and go to sleep.

Maybe he could go away for a while.

Maybe he could think about buying furniture at a big store. That would be nice. It had probably been a mind trick, but it was a nice mind trick.

Maybe-

The General was angry at him again.

He looked at the General in confusion. “Sir?”

He wanted to go away.

He wanted to go away for a while.

“The target…” His gaze dropped away from the General and drifted off somewhere. “Was neutralized… sir.”

Eighteen targets neutralized. Twelve or more to go.

Then rest.

“I heard you the first time, Soldier.” There was something dangerous in the General’s tone. Extreme anger, of course, but something more than that. Something that hinted at darkly sadistic images and thoughts lurking just around some narrow corner in his mind.

The soldier looked at him in exhausted confusion.
The General advanced a step towards him. “And you’ve deliberately refused to answer me. You had Captain America in your sights. You neutralized your target while Captain America was standing right next to him. And yet Captain America is still alive!”

He thrust his face close to the soldier’s and began yelling. “You told me only a handful of days ago that you despised Captain America! That you hated him, that you were going to eliminate him on sight! And yet you let him walk away!” He backhanded the soldier across the face again, hard enough that the crack rang out across the room. “Explain yourself!”

The soldier tasted blood in his mouth. The General was very angry; he hit the soldier sometimes, but not usually twice in a row. He was very angry at him.

His stomach twisted into a queasy knot, tighter and tighter until he thought he would be sick. He leaned forward slightly on the cot, swallowed the blood and saliva that had pooled in his mouth, and tried very hard not to be sick right on the floor.

He should have neutralized Captain America when he had the chance. He should not have focused solely on neutralizing his target. He should have neutralized his target and Captain America and maybe even the SHIELD agent that had accompanied him.

The sick feeling roiled in his stomach. His gaze drifted unfocused to the far wall. The General wanted an explanation and would not tolerate silence for very long.

He hadn’t neutralized Captain America because he didn’t want to reveal his presence to the target. If the target had realized his presence, he might have tried to run away, and the soldier would have had to track him down. And if he had to do that, he would have been further and further away from rest.

After the target had been neutralized, he had failed to neutralize Captain America because….

Because...

“Next time…” he started to say, but his thoughts unraveled and spiraled away somewhere.

He wanted to close his eyes and go away. Wherever his thoughts had gone, he wanted to go there. Just for a little bit.

Maybe.

He didn’t know.

“I…” He couldn’t collect his thoughts to explain himself. He didn’t know what to say.

He wanted to go away.

---

“Next time?” Lukin roared, livid. “And what exactly makes you think there is even going to be a ‘next time’?”

The extraction team were casting uneasy looks at one another. Fortunately, they were still holding their weapons at the ready and not neglecting to keep the Winter Soldier in their sights.

Something had gone very wrong, Lukin thought. Yes, he was furious with the Winter Soldier for his lack of action against Captain America, but the anger merely cloaked his very real fear that whatever conditioning they performed upon the Winter Soldier would only be temporary. That his exposure to
elements of his past had awoken something long buried in his damaged mind, and that he might without warning simply shut down one day. Or, even worse, that he might remember everything.

No.

No! He had come too far for that, worked too hard to make the Winter Soldier his own. He had made the Winter Soldier something altogether different than Karpov had envisioned, and now the Winter Soldier belonged to him. To him alone, and only through him would the Winter Soldier be made to do HYDRA’s bidding. And he would not permit any force in the world to change that.

He considered striking the Winter Soldier across the face one final time, but didn’t think it worth the effort. He glared balefully at him instead, then strode purposefully to the intercom on the wall and jabbed a savage finger at the button. “Doctor Rodchenko to the laboratory at once. Prepare to recondition the Winter Soldier.”

He removed his finger from the button, then turned to glare at the Winter Soldier, who was still sitting on the bed. “You will obey your orders, Soldier. I will see to that. I will tolerate no disobedience.”

Chapter End Notes

I've received a few very touching comments from people who are concerned about Bucky. And I get that, because I adore the character and feel quite emotionally attached to him. So while I'm not going to give away any major plot developments, I'll say this much: the darkest hour is just before the dawn.

As always, comments, feedback, and random proverbs are always warmly welcomed.
Whatever the End

Chapter Notes

As before, if Lukin or Rodchenko are present, assume everyone is speaking Russian. No [language brackets] needed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

aboard the UNN Alpha Helicarrier
the same day, November 2014

Steve sat there in the car as Sharon kicked in the afterburners and brought them up above cloud cover. How much time had passed? Was it even important?

Was anything important at all anymore?

He shuddered at the memory of the hot splatter of blood and brains against his unsuspecting face. The sudden, casual violence of Benson’s head bursting like an overripe melon. The sickening and horrifying realization that Bucky could have killed him every bit as easily as he’d killed Benson.

Sharon tried several times to talk to him on the way to the Helicarrier, but words would not form on his tongue to respond to her. He just stared ahead, numb in body and mind, the blood on his face drying into a gruesome mask, and Sharon stopped talking after a while.

Once aboard the Helicarrier, he made straight for his quarters, stripping off his uniform as he entered the room and stuffing it into the laundry chute, realizing he’d left the shield with Sharon and not caring, getting into the shower and turning it on full blast. The water came away brown, Benson’s blood sluicing off of him, and bone splinters dug painfully into his fingertips as he scrubbed frantically at his face and his hair, the water coming away clear now but the feeling of gore still on him.

Everything seemed to be converging on him at once. The three years he’d been back in the world had only just barely gotten him acclimated to how radically different it all was. Everything he’d been familiar with as a child was gone or so changed that he hardly recognized it. People were different. Clothes were different. Music was different. Morals were different. Every person he’d known was either dead or frighteningly old.

Everyone but Bucky.

And he’d gotten Bucky back after so long believing him dead, and things had been going so well, and now he’d lost him again. And this time…

It was too much. All of it, too much to handle at once, and he felt the bile rising in his throat and only just made it to the toilet before it all came up.

What am I even supposed to do now?

---

The last mission had gone poorly.
Tony’s algorithm had narrowed down the hit list to twenty possible targets slated for the next efficient killing, and while there was no way they could cover them all with such a small group, they could attempt to at least cover some. With that in mind, Natasha and Clint had been dispatched to a swanky Boston suburb to try to convince some corporate head honcho type that it was better for him to surrender directly to SHIELD rather than be killed by HYDRA.

Only said corporate head honcho had gotten nervous and fortified his residence until it more closely resembled a fortress instead of a McMansion. And by the time Natasha and Clint had cleared their way through the masses to get to their target, he had killed himself.

“Mr. Green. Poison capsule. In the library,” Clint had said, and Natasha hadn’t had the energy to even whack him in the arm for that.

“So they’re back to using poison capsules,” Coulson said at their post-mission debriefing. “Interesting.” He drummed his fingers along the edge of the table. “Very interesting.”

Natasha didn’t care enough to ask why that was very interesting, though she did accept Carol Danvers’ offer of a cup of Peruvian hot chocolate. Apparently her mission with Sam had gone just as poorly, with the target ending up just as dead as their Boston head honcho.

Maria barely looked up from her tablet, though she too had a cup of Peruvian hot chocolate in hand. “HYDRA’s getting nervous.”

“So not only are we racing against HYDRA assassinating their own,” Clint leaned all the way back in his chair, propping his feet up on the table, “but HYDRA just doing the job for all of us and self-assassinating?”

Maria looked up at that. “Don’t you mean suicide?”


Before she could respond, Sharon came into the conference room covered in blood and bone chips and carrying Steve’s shield. A few minutes after that, Natasha had seen and heard enough.

They were losing, and they had hardly started.

Natasha found Steve in his cramped bathroom, naked and wet and crouched in front of the toilet.

“Well.” She found a towel and tossed it at him. “This is new and different.”

---

Steve spat once, twice, the taste still not leaving his mouth.

“Peanut oil.” He fought down another retch. There was nothing left to bring up. “Did you ever notice how it always tastes like hot peanut oil?”

He was babbling. Incoherent and naked. He spat again and awkwardly wrapped the towel around himself before pushing himself back from the toilet and sitting in a hunched position with his back against the wall.

“Never thought about it overly much.” Natasha folded her arms and leaned against the doorframe. “Are you going to debrief like that? Careful around Coulson. You might start a trend.”

Steve shook his head, eyes fixed on the empty towel bar. “We made it to Benson. We had him, and
we might have even gotten him to come with us, but Bucky was there.” His hair dripped in his face and he pushed it back off his forehead. “He shot Benson through the head while Sharon and I were standing right there. He could have shot either one of us. He might have even had us in his sights, and we wouldn’t have been able to do a thing about it.”

The sickening horror of that fact, that the best friend he’d ever had in the whole world could have blown his head apart without flinching, made his stomach wrench again. HYDRA had taken everything from Bucky, and Steve hadn’t been able to do a damned thing to stop them from doing it. And now his best friend was their killing machine once again.

He looked over at Natasha, gradually registering that she was there. Remembering her stake in this horrible business.

“He could have killed us, but he only took the one shot.” He shook his head. “And I don’t know whether that means he didn’t want to, or if he was just in too much of a hurry.” He felt another wave of nausea wash over him and bit down on it hard. “How insane is that?”

“The whole thing is insane.” Natasha didn’t smirk or even raise an eyebrow. “The fact that we’re having this conversation right now is insane.”

Steve shook his head. “When I first woke up, Nick Fury wanted to make sure I got acclimated to the world.” He drew his knees up to his chest, feeling a sudden chill as the water cooled on his still-wet skin. “So he assigned Sharon to me as a liaison. To show me all the ways the world had changed.”

Endless days of watching documentary films. Going out into an impossibly bright, neon-lit city that was supposed to be New York but looked like something out of the 1939 World’s Fair. Telephones that you could put in your pocket and carry around with you. Machines that could think. Television and Thai food, gay pride and gangsta rap. It had been a lot to get used to.

“I don’t think I ever really got used to it.” He breathed in and out, a deep and shaky breath. “I mean, how do you get used to a thing like that? I was born in 1918, and now it’s 2014. I’m ninety-six if you count it that way, but it still feels like I’m only thirty.”

He shook his head, feeling his chest begin to constrict. “Peggy Carter was the most capable woman I’d ever seen during the war. I watched her face down a speeding car with only a pistol in her hand, and now she can’t even get out of a hospital bed.” His voice caught in his throat. “She forgets who I am. She’s so old I can’t get my head around it. She’s dying, and I’m watching her die every time I visit her, and it’s the same with everybody I ever knew.”

He was spiraling now, out of control and he knew it. “Dugan died in the field in the 1950s. Falsworth retired from being Union Jack in the 60’s and died of old age in the 80’s. Dernier went back to France and opened a bar; he got sick sometime in the 90’s and died. Morita was the only one left alive by the time I woke up. He told me I’d just missed Gabe Jones by a couple of years, and then he died a year after that.” He hugged his knees tighter. “They wanted me to speak at his funeral, and I don’t know how I managed. So much time. I missed so much time, and now…”

He clenched his jaw against the anger and nausea. “Now my best friend doesn’t even know me anymore.” His voice came out strangled by hopeless, helpless, impotent rage. “I thought I’d gotten him back. I thought I could help him, fix him, make it all work out the right way, but they stole him. And he just killed a man standing right next to me, and he could have killed me, and I just don’t know what to do about anything anymore.”

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It struck Natasha then how odd the moment was. How incongruous it was for her to be standing there, fully equipped in her standard black jumpsuit - she hadn’t even disarmed - while Steve crouched naked against the wall, clad only in a small towel. The bathroom was barely big enough to fit the shower stall, tiny sink, and toilet, let alone two fully grown adults, and one of them a super soldier.

And yet, she didn’t want to leave him alone there.

If anyone thought too long and hard about the fact that a ninety-six year old super soldier, who barely looked a day older than thirty, was sitting naked on the floor and talking to a former Russian spy-turned SHIELD agent-turned Avenger-turned who the hell knew anymore, who also looked barely thirty but was of an undetermined age, well…

That person would probably be naked and vomiting on the floor, too.

“We do what we always do.”

She hesitated a moment, then lowered the lid on the toilet seat and sat down. If Steve had sudden need of it again, well, she could move pretty quickly.

Still, she wasn’t very good at this sort of thing.

Her very specific training had left her with a very specific skillset, and none of it covered things like emotional breakdowns or grief or suffering. Or rather, she had been taught that those emotions were weaknesses to be exploited, and exploit them she had, for a long damn time and in the service of those who would have snuffed her out the second she ceased being useful to them.

Kindness and compassion she had been left to figure out on her own, and she still didn’t know if she was very good at it. If she would ever be very good at it. But it was what kept her from turning and fleeing right then and there.

Maybe.

“We get back up, we go back out, we fight.” She looked at him. “What else is there? What other choice would you even make if you could?”

An absurd burst of laughter bubbled up out of Steve from somewhere. “I don’t know.” He shook his head, the look on his face somewhere between agony and hilarity. “I honestly don’t know. I had about the same conversation with Sam not too long ago, and I don’t think things are any easier to figure out now than they were then. I am what I am and I do what I do because I don’t know how to be anyone else or do anything else.”

After a long moment, Natasha said, “I understand that.”

Steve sagged against the wall. “Does that mean that I don’t get a choice? That everything’s already plotted out for me, and I’m just going through the motions?” He looked at her suddenly. “What would you do, if you had it all to do alone?”

She raised an eyebrow at that. “All alone?”

All alone, she would have just continued to do what she had been doing for a long time. All alone, she wasn’t sure how she would have gotten out, or if she ever would have.

“But we’re not all alone. That’s the point.” She leaned forward, crossing her arms over her knees. Her head practically touched Steve’s forehead, the bathroom was so cramped. “Isn’t it?”
“We’re not alone.” Steve looked up at Natasha again. “But he is.”

It all came back to Bucky. Bucky, who had come back against all odds after Steve had believed him dead. Bucky, who had sought him out after what had happened in the skies over the Potomac and opted to stay with him despite HYDRA’s very clear orders to the contrary. Bucky, who had seemed to be improving every single day that he’d stayed with Steve.

Bucky, who had been dragged away from all of that and remade into the Winter Soldier all over again.

“He’s all alone. And that is the point.”

That, and the terrifying fact that every day Bucky remained in HYDRA’s hands, more and more awful things were likely being done to his mind. Which meant that he was growing farther and farther beyond their help.

“So what should we do?” He pushed himself into a more upright position. “He could have killed me back there. He could have killed me and Sharon both, but he didn’t. I don’t know why, but I hope to God it’s a good sign. So what do you think?”

Natasha frowned slightly, then, “I think we need to keep moving. What other choice is there?”

The soldier had disarmed and was going to change into his black cotton Kronas uniform, but the General was already angry and impatient, and so he removed the leather top of his combat uniform and the base layer underneath and then he went to the doctor’s laboratory and sat there for a long time.

The doctor and his technicians worked around him. They always did.

The General was very angry at him for not neutralizing Captain America. The soldier hated Captain America, and so there had been no good reason not to neutralize him after he had neutralized the target. He had no excuse.

He had been disobedient.

But it wasn’t the first time he had been disobedient, was it?

Stop.

He had gone to Captain America’s house once, hadn’t he? He had gone to his house once and waited for Captain America to come home. And then when he had come home…

Sit down.

He had held Captain America at gunpoint.

Tell me who I am.

And they had talked.

No.
Captain America had given him food. Sandwiches. And soup. And he had asked the soldier to take a shower and then given him clean clothes and then let him spend the night in a comfy bed. And then the next day, they had…

What had they done?

Mind tricks!

It was just mind tricks. The soldier knew they were mind tricks, but he was listening to them anyway. He glanced at the doctor, but the doctor was looking at the monitors attached to the chair and talking to the technicians, and so he didn’t notice the soldier looking at him.

He was supposed to tell the doctor about mind tricks. He would tell the doctor about the mind tricks, and the doctor would make the mind tricks go away.

But…

What if they weren’t mind tricks?

He looked at the IV line stuck in his hand. “Just a mild sedative,” the doctor had told him, and then the doctor had turned away and focused on other things.

It would have been very easy to pull it out.

But then what?

---

The General had been furious when he’d ordered Rodchenko to the lab over the intercom. But then again, Rodchenko had thought as he heaved himself to his feet and walked to the laboratory, the General was always furious.

So he’d gone to the laboratory and prepared the chair for another reconditioning session, and the General had stormed in while he was in the midst of his preparations and started haranguing him about the Soldier’s conduct while on his mission. Rodchenko winced every time the General’s angrily-flashing eyes contacted his own, and wished for nothing so much as to be left in peace to do the work that needed doing.

Working for this madman has taken years off my life…

But he did not ignore what the General was saying. The Soldier’s conditioning with regards to Captain America seemed to have failed, and that hinted at a troubling possibility: the bond which the Soldier had formed (or re-formed, more appropriately) with Captain America might have been stronger than they had believed. Strong enough, possibly, to require a very deep and precise reconditioning to eradicate, though not so strong as to be impossible to eradicate. No human memory was that indelible.

The Soldier sat there in the chair, docile, with an IV line dripping sedative into his veins, and Rodchenko realized that he needed to speak with him rather urgently. Urgently, and alone.

He ordered the guards out. Ordered the techs out. Waved away their questions and their looks of wary confusion, and when the room was empty save for him and the Winter Soldier, he dragged a stool over and sat down to look the Soldier in the eyes.

“The General is angry with you again.” He sighed. “I’ve told you many times, he is a man to be
cautious around. Why did you not kill Captain America?"

The Soldier looked at him with drugged, unfocused eyes. “I… I didn’t… “ He chewed on his lip. Looked away. “The target would have… would have … the target would have gotten away, and…”

Rodchenko looked back at the Soldier for a long moment, not quite believing what he’d just heard. Who was the Soldier attempting to deceive - Rodchenko or himself?

“Listen to me, Soldier.” He spoke without the whipcrack of authority in his voice that the General often exaggerated when speaking to the Soldier. Rodchenko didn’t think he even had the ability to imbue his voice with such a quality if he’d tried. “You do not need to tell me lies.”

This was actually something of a disturbing turn, if Rodchenko were honest with himself. He hadn’t thought the Soldier even capable of deception, much less the sort he was witnessing now. Rodchenko knew that the Soldier’s expertise was such that he could very easily have put down Captain America and the target both, and still been able to get to the extraction point with no trouble whatsoever. So why hadn’t he?

Whatever the reason, it would require reconditioning to correct. But the reconditioning would not work unless Rodchenko knew exactly what he was looking for in order to excise it.

And who was to say it would even be permanent?

“I need to know the reason, Soldier. The real reason.”

The Soldier looked at Rodchenko for a long moment before his gaze wandered to the far wall. He chewed on his lip.

Rodchenko waited.

Finally the Soldier shook his head. Said nothing.

Rodchenko bit back a sigh.

The Soldier had the habit - or had had the habit ever since the events of a decade and a half ago - of sometimes trailing off into silence when spoken to. Rodchenko had learned to deal with it, while the General had not. It was simply a matter of patiently asking the question again, perhaps rephrasing it slightly, once the Soldier’s attention had been refocused.

Except this was not simply a case of the Soldier losing focus. At least it did not appear to be, and Rodchenko was growing increasingly worried. Unlike the General, though, he would not stoop so low as to berate or strike the Soldier to bring him back to his senses.

“Soldier.” His voice was firm, but not angry. Insistent, but controlled. “Look at me. Look at me and answer my question.” He paused. “I need to know why you did not neutralize Captain America. The truth, now.”

The Soldier looked at him for a long moment. Finally, slowly, he said, “Didn’t…” He shook his head. “Didn’t want to.”

Well now.

“I see.”

Rodchenko reminded himself as he shifted his position on the stool, his hands on his knees for
support, that he had asked for the truth. He had not specified, as the General might have, that it needed to be a truth he found pleasant or palatable. And he certainly would not react to unwelcome truths in the same manner the General might.

“Why didn’t you want to?”

This was disturbing in many ways, and Rodchenko found himself calculating exactly the sort of reconditioning which might be required to counteract it. But he would need more information for that - information which the Soldier had yet to give him.

Again, the Soldier was silent for a long moment before he spoke. “I…” His expression settled into a deep frown. “We… we had food. Sandwiches. And soup. From a can. And there was a bed and a hot shower.”

Rodchenko froze.

“It’s not mind tricks.” The Soldier shook his head slowly. “It’s not. I don’t… it’s not mind tricks. I don’t want them to go away.”

Rodchenko felt a bolt of panic rush through him, urged himself not to let it show on his face or in his voice. This was far worse than he’d expected.

He had it in mind to get up right then and go to the General. To tell him exactly what the Soldier had said, and to use it as leverage to force the General to concede to his point that the conditioning would not be as effective without immersion in cryostasis.

*If he’s recalling this much information, of this degree of specificity, this quickly after reconditioning - after multiple reconditioning sessions, even - then you must understand that we are fighting a losing battle. You have to let me put him into cryosleep.*

But he knew what the General’s answer would be. Worse, he knew what the General’s solution would be: subject the Soldier to another harsh session of punitive reconditioning, scraping his mind raw, and then put him back into the field and expect him to perform perfectly. And if he did not? Then the punishment would be worse the next time.

Stupid. Stupid, callous, and counterproductive.

Rodchenko knew there was no hope in convincing the General of the truth when he had already made up his mind to believe what he believed. He would not be swayed by rationality or reason, he would not hear or believe the facts, and nothing would convince him of the foolishness of his path short of being murdered by the Soldier in the throes of the psychotic episode he was sure to provoke the longer this madness went on.

No, the cryo would have to wait until the Soldier had finished the ridiculous number of missions the General had laid out for him. No matter what the cost.

Carefully Rodchenko said, “But you know they’re mind tricks. You know that your mind plays tricks on you. You’ve known it for years. And there’s always a protocol to be followed in those cases.”

“But…” The Soldier shook his head again. “No.” His unfocused eyes landed on the IV line in his hand. “It’s not… it’s not mind tricks. There were... sandwiches… and soup… It’s not mind tricks. I did those things.” He reached with slow fingers for the IV line, as if he meant to yank it out. “I don’t want them to go away.”
“Leave it.” Rodchenko gently pushed the Soldier’s hand aside. “Leave that alone, Soldier, and listen to me.”

A part of him was beginning to resent this after so long. General Karpov had had a much better handle on the Soldier. Under his command, the Soldier had suffered the occasional mishap, but never as severe or as frequent as those he suffered under General Lukin. And General Karpov had wanted the Soldier to remain a man, to become as great a Soviet patriot as Karpov himself had been.

General Lukin, by contrast, had wanted the Soldier to be nothing more than a cipher - a machine that killed. And when the Soldier had shown his humanity once too often…

Well, there was no going back. No means of undoing what had been done, and so why dwell on it? Best to look for a means of correcting the current problem.

“What do you imagine will happen if I don’t take them away?” He leaned in closer, hands heavy on his knees. He was not as young as he’d once been, and two decades under the General’s command had left him feeling even older. “The mind tricks can become intrusive. You know that. And if the mind tricks were to become intrusive in the midst of a mission…”

He didn’t even want to contemplate it.

“No.” He shook his head and reached for the rubber bit. “Come now. You know what to do.”

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“No!”

The soldier looked at the bit with wide eyes, and even though he felt sluggish from the sedative, panic kicked in suddenly and he shook his head wildly.

“No, I don’t want to!”

Before he could think to stop himself, he slapped the bit out of the doctor’s hand. With his natural hand, of course, not his metal hand. He would never hurt the doctor, not on purpose, but he didn’t want the bit either.

He didn’t want it.

He didn’t want it!

The doctor recoiled in shock. The stool tipped over as he leapt to his feet and backed away, a horrified expression on his face.

The panic was replaced by a hot flood of shame and fear.

He had hit the doctor.

The soldier had never done that before. He hit the technicians sometimes. Even killed one or two of them, though he couldn’t remember why anymore. But he had never laid hands on the doctor. And he had never refused conditioning either.

Never.

The doctor would be angry at him, and the doctor was never angry at him.

He stared into his lap, eyes wide, breathing heavily.
“Easy, Soldier,” the doctor said softly. Breathlessly. He held out his hands. “Get a hold of yourself. Just take a breath, calm yourself, and try to think. Listen to reason.” After a moment, he righted the stool and sat back down. “You don’t want to hurt me, do you? What good will that do you?”

A long moment of tense silence stretched out between them.

The soldier continued to stare into his lap with wide, confused eyes. He didn’t want to hurt the doctor. He never wanted to hurt the doctor.

Slowly he shook his head. No, he didn’t want to hurt the doctor. No, he hadn’t meant to scare the doctor.

But…

His gaze skittered across the room, landing on the bit on the floor.

He didn’t want conditioning.

“I don’t…” He couldn’t bring himself to look at the doctor. “They’re not… mind tricks.”

The soldier had gone to Captain America’s house. He had held Captain America at gunpoint. And Captain America had given him…

Had given him…

He had...

The image unspooled and drifted away somewhere, and the soldier continued to stare at nothing, a feeling of hot shame burning deep in his stomach and making him feel uncomfortable and sick.

“I don’t…” He closed his eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

---

Once again Rodchenko felt a hot rush of anger at the General. The Soldier had not always been so confused, so prone to undesired and intrusive flashes of memory. Under General Karpov, he had been a man. A man General Karpov had taken pride in, had groomed to be the greatest covert operative the Soviet Union had ever known…

But General Karpov was dead. The Soviet Union was dead. And the man the Soldier had once been was dead as well.

*Burn it out of him.*

The General had not wanted a man. He had wanted a weapon. And so the Soldier had become one - albeit one which had the tendency to malfunction. And the malfunctions had grown steadily worse.

“That isn’t your fault, Soldier.” He sighed, exhaustion writ large on every one of the many lines in his face. “None of this is of your making.”

He felt old suddenly. Old and tired. Living and working under the command of a tyrant like the General for two decades and watching the systematic deterioration of his life’s work had sapped him of any enthusiasm he had once had for his profession. The seven years he had spent in bare subsistence after the fall of the Soviet Union, working in shoddy state hospitals for no money and scrubbing floors and toilets at night to keep a roof over his head, had wrung the last drops of passion from him. He thought only of survival now. And yet…
And yet he could not bring himself to write off the Soldier. Because it was true that none of it had been the Soldier’s fault. He had merely had the misfortune to be alive in the same place as the rest of them, at the same time.

“Come now.” He got up and retrieved the bit. The Soldier did not resist. “What must be done, must be done.”

Whatever the end.

Chapter End Notes

Comments? Questions? Concerns? Contact me!
The algorithm was working pretty well lately. Oh, they’d gone looking for a few suggested targets only to find them dead when they arrived, and a couple had poisoned themselves rather than be taken alive, but they’d actually taken a handful of HYDRA operatives in for questioning.

“Mental note,” Steve said aloud as Carol piloted the Quinjet towards their current target’s last-known location. “We need to look into a fast-acting antidote to the HYDRA poison. I don’t want these guys to have any more ways out than they already do.”

“Good luck with that.” Carol snorted. “Hill’s had the military looking into that for a few days now, and apparently no one can even figure out what the poison itself is. It changes composition the instant it begins to take effect in the body, which means none of the original compound is present by the time autopsy results come through.”

He grimaced. “Which probably means HYDRA knew someone would start looking for ways to counteract it. They were smart enough to throw a roadblock up in our way.”

“Well, perhaps this Mr. Scarpiano wants to live more than he wants to protect HYDRA’s secrets?” Wanda tapped on the screen of the tablet that rested in her lap. “It says here he has five children, two of them in university. If we’re lucky, he’ll want to cooperate.”

“Rather than drag his children into public disgrace, you mean?” Carol banked the Quinjet gently to the left.

“Exactly.” Wanda nodded. “And as a Chief Justice on Rhode Island’s Supreme Court, he knows exactly what would happen to him if goes to prison.”

“Better to make some kind of plea bargain with SHIELD.” Steve could practically hear the smirk in Carol’s voice.

“Better from a rational point of view, maybe.” He looked over at Wanda grimly. “But the kind of people who join HYDRA don’t value life that highly.”

He’d seen far too many of them sacrifice themselves out of misguided fanaticism to believe there was a very high chance any one of them could be persuaded to value their own lives above HYDRA’s success. He’d watched as they hurled themselves recklessly into the forefront of every battle, seen them bite defiantly into their poison capsules and take their secrets to the grave with them, and always watched more rise to fill their places.

_Cut off one head…_
“Still, there’s always hope where you look for it.” He tried for a smile. “Someone who doesn’t value life might not have gone to the trouble of having children at all, let alone five of them. And I know how desperate people in high positions are to protect their public reputations.”

The Quinjet banked sharply, losing speed and altitude as Carol expertly cut in the Harrier-style VTOL engines to bring them in low. Scarpiano lived in Newport, but seemed to spend a great deal of time at an apartment in downtown Providence - which, incidentally, had been paid for with money filtered through far more dummy corporations than any legal transaction needed. They couldn’t very well land the Quinjet on the crowded street or on the roofs of any of the local buildings, but (Steve smiled) they didn’t need to.

The rear hatchway opened with a push of the button, and Steve clipped the shield into position on his back. “Ready when you are, ladies.”

He dived out the hatchway, arms and legs out to catch the wind, and felt himself gathering speed. The wind in his face felt as good as it ever had on any insertion jump, parachute or no parachute, and he actually felt a slight bump of disappointment when Carol latched onto his waist to bring him in for a soft landing on the roof. Wanda landed gracefully a moment later, tendrils of red energy curling around her.

He gestured towards the door. “All right. I’ll take the fire escape. Carol, you take the window. Wanda, the front door. Don’t leave him a way out.”

A moment later, Steve found himself standing on a fire escape that led into what appeared to be Mr. Scarpiano’s sumptuously paneled study. The window was suspiciously unlocked, and so he had no trouble climbing in. The walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling - either Mr. Scarpiano was a well-read man or he preferred to keep the appearance of one. Either way, he wasn’t present in the room.

He moved into the hallway, also empty and dark, and crept around the far-too-quiet, much-too-spacious apartment in silence until he bumped into Wanda. They spent a wasted few seconds making shushing motions at each other, but no guards came out to try to kill them and the silence remained undisturbed.

“Hey, guys.” Carol’s voice boomed out across the length of the hallway, and Wanda nearly jumped out of her shoes. “You’ll want to come see this.”

They found Carol - and Mr. Scarpiano - in the bathroom. Only Carol was standing by the sink, while Mr. Scarpiano was sprawled on the floor, a halo of blood splattered across the white tiles and against the far wall.

“Body’s still warm. Also,” Carol gestured toward the floor-to-ceiling window, its large panes marred by a single bullet hole, “there’s that.”

Wanda closed her eyes for a moment, leaned her back against the sink. “Well, I guess they found him first.”

“Dammit.” Steve flexed his fingers in frustration, his knuckles exuding a volley of pops, and stowed the shield on his back. He didn’t bother checking the body; a single shot had gone through Scarpiano’s right temple and the entire left side of his head looked like raw hamburger. “We should have had him.”

“Should’ve,” Carol said flatly.
“Wait.” He looked over at her. “How long ago do you think it happened?” He walked into the center of the room, trying to line up the hole in the windowpane with the place Scarpiano must have been hit. It was difficult to do by eye, but if he could, he might be able to see where the shot had come from.

Carol walked over, pulling her gloves tighter. “I’d say no more than ten minutes ago, if that. It’s been a while since my forensics course, but the body’s warm enough that I think we just barely missed it.”

He nodded, looking out the window at the tangle of buildings. Trying to find a likely spot for Bucky to have stood. Because if such a short amount of time had passed, and they knew which way to head, maybe the mission wouldn’t be a total loss. Maybe they could catch up to Bucky in the Quinjet, and maybe Scarpiano would be the last victim…

Twenty-one targets neutralized. Nine or more to go. Then rest.

The soldier had shouldered his M40A5 sniper rifle and was turning to leave when a blur of movement in the target’s bathroom caught his eye. Without hesitation, he dropped back into position on the roof of the Hilton Hotel and pulled out a small pair of binoculars.

Intelligence had said the apartment was supposed to be empty that evening, aside from the target. But of course, intelligence wouldn’t have counted on Captain America being there at all.

Something ugly and angry clawed at the soldier’s mind, and he pulled up his rifle and nearly shot Captain America through the head right then and there.

He hated him.

Hated him.

And not only did he want to kill him on sight, he was allowed to. Ordered to, even. The General had said that rest might come sooner if the soldier killed Captain America. He had said that the only reason there were so many targets was because Captain America had interfered with - and ruined - HYDRA’s plans, and so if he were neutralized, everything could stop.

The soldier could rest.

The doctor had agreed.

He was about to pull the trigger - it would have been so easy, so very easy, and he could have shot the other two just as quickly as well, but the presence of the other two stayed his hand.


He cursed, nearly fired on all three of them anyway, but…

Fuck.

“General Lukin, sir?” He spoke into his earpiece. Lately the General had ordered the soldier to
maintain contact with him on most of his missions. “Captain America is in the target’s home.”

He wanted to take the shot. Very badly.

But…

“Captain Marvel is there as well, sir.” He peered through the scope. It would only be the work of a moment. “Should I take the shot?”

---

General Lukin slammed back in his chair, his clenched fist coming down hard on the table in front of him. He wished he could blame what he’d just heard on technical difficulties, but not so much as a single crackle of static marred the transmission. He’d insisted on only the best equipment for their operation here in the United States, and he’d gotten it.

He’d had the headset on from the moment the Winter Soldier’s support team had reported being in position. Listened to the play-by-play as the target was silenced. Even sketched out a picture of the extraction in his mind as he waited for the transmission to end.

And then the Winter Soldier had broken in to tell him of Captain America’s presence. He’d nearly leapt out of the chair with enthusiasm, eager to listen to the crack of the Winter Soldier’s rifle as he fired the shot that would put to rest the past few weeks’ worth of trouble. Eager to hear the Winter Soldier murder the man who had once been his friend, and to savor the knowledge that he had done so on Lukin’s orders.

But then came the rest of the information, and he nearly swore.

“No.”

There was bitter resentment in his voice. It would be the trade of a queen for a rook in chess - the worst sort of strategic gambit. Captain America would die, certainly, but the Winter Soldier did not have weapons at his disposal that might be capable of harming Captain Marvel. Nor could he outrun her or even hide from her once he had given his position away. He would be captured, and there would be no retrieving him once Captain America was dead and Captain Marvel was in charge.

“You know the protocol, Soldier.” The resentment was even more audible now. “Do not engage.”

The Winter Soldier was silent for a long moment. Then, “Sir? Are you sure, sir? He’s right there. I can take the shot, sir.”

“That is a negative, Soldier.” He spat the words out harshly, angered that he’d been forced to say them at all. Having to repeat them was insult added to injury.

He bit back a curse at Captain Marvel for being there, preventing his killing machine from accomplishing the one goal that would have put him on the same level as his predecessor. General Karpov had presided over the Winter Soldier’s assassination of President John F. Kennedy. One day, Lukin swore, he would watch as the Winter Soldier murdered Captain America.

But not today, apparently.

“Now safety your weapon and prepare to evacuate.”

He tore the earpiece off and peevishly tossed it onto the table, then stood and stalked off. The swivel chair pirouetted emptily in his wake. And he made a mental note to have his research teams begin
developing weaponry that might be capable of overcoming Captain Marvel’s energy-absorption powers. It would not do, after all, to have her remain on the do-not-engage list.

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An order was an order, and the soldier wasn’t made to question orders, only follow them.

He shouldered his weapon and made his way off the hotel roof, and before long he had been evacuated by the extraction team.

They hadn’t even made it to the helicopter yet - he was still disassembling his rifle - when he began to wilt. All the energy seemed to rush out of his body at once, and he ended up slumping against the getaway van’s interior and taking apart the rifle piece by very slow piece, as if he had never done it before.

The captain of the extraction team looked at him warily, but they always did that, and the soldier had long since learned to ignore them.

He drifted off in the helicopter to the rhythmic whirl of the rotor blades, and only woke up when the captain started barking at him - on the ground and at a distance, waiting by the van that would take them the last ten miles to their base.

Again, the captain yelled at him to wake up, and once again, he did it when the van was parked inside their base and he could shout from well outside the van.

The soldier didn’t present himself to the General for debriefing and he didn’t go to the doctor’s laboratory. He went right to his quarters, and without taking off his boots or anything else, he curled up on his cot and closed his eyes.

Rest soon.

Hopefully soon…

...

…..

He lay with his head in her lap, and her fingers grazed over his hair. Softly. Gently. It took him a moment to realize she was petting him.

“We both survived.” Her voice was warm, but guarded somehow. He was too tired to ask why.

“And now here we are.”

He didn’t know how long he lay there, her fingers threading gently in his hair, but eventually she suggested that he go to bed.

“I think sleep will do you some good,” she said, and before long, he was undressing in the bedroom and climbing into bed. She pulled the blanket over him and began petting him once again.

“Why are you doing this?” he whispered, eyes already heavy with sleep.

“Because I want to. Because you need it.” She brushed the hair out of his eyes. Smiled. “It will be all right.”

… wouldn’t it?
He drifted away under her gentle touch.

It would be all right...

“Wake up now!”

Abruptly the soldier jerked out of sleep. He sat up, eyes blinking rapidly under the bright lights, and she wasn’t there, she wasn’t anywhere to be found, she-

The doctor stood there instead.

“I…” He put his face in his hands, tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes, tried to force himself into a state of alertness. “The General is… mission… already? Mission?”

He was so tired.

---

The Soldier had been sprawled out on his cot when Rodchenko opened the door, his arms and legs askew and his field uniform still on. He had not even unlaced his boots or unholstered his pistols. He appeared to have simply passed out from exhaustion.

Rodchenko felt a familiar wave of aggravation sweep over him. The Soldier needed rest, needed it badly enough to have been begging for it for weeks now, and the General still refused. But worse, he had ordered Rodchenko to keep the Soldier alert with stimulants so that he would not flag in the field. A suicidally high dosage, naturally, to overcome the Soldier’s serum-borne tolerance. And such a high dosage would consequently be followed by an abrupt and heavy torpor.

Rodchenko suddenly and inexplicably felt the urge to put a hand on the Soldier’s shoulder. To reassure him in a way that words could not accomplish. He knew better than to attempt such a thing, of course, but the urge was there.

“No. No mission.” Rodchenko gestured down at the Soldier. “But you’re still dressed. Sleeping in field gear will just leave you exhausted tomorrow.”

He didn’t add that the Soldier would likely not have been able to sleep for long at all without the aid of the sedatives Rodchenko had been administering of late.

The Soldier simply stared blearily at him.


As the Soldier haltingly began to do so, Rodchenko removed a syringe filled with a heavy sedative from the pocket of his lab coat. Once the Soldier was soundly asleep, he would go and speak to the General. And perhaps finally, the General would concede to allowing the Soldier to rest.

“Absolutely not, Doctor.” The General’s tone was harsh and flinty. “I’ve given you the same answer every time you’ve asked that ridiculous question. I’d have imagined you might be able to extrapolate by now.”

Swallowing his resentful anger, Rodchenko tried the only approach he had ever known. He spoke rationally.

“He’s falling apart.” He quivered under the strain of holding his ground. His heart beat madly in his
chest, whether out of anger or fear he could not tell. “His reconditionings won’t hold for more than a handful of days now, and the stress the stimulants are putting on his body will cause permanent damage if things are allowed to continue as they are.”

He was aware that he was pleading, and he hated it, but what choice did he have? “The only chance of stabilizing him now is to wipe his mind clean:”

“Doctor…”

“- of all that has happened in these past weeks and -”

“Doctor…” The General’s voice was growing stormier, as was his expression.

“- put him into cryosleep for at least six months, General, or else we may lose control of him entirely!”

“Enough, Rodchenko!” The General slammed his hand down on the desk in front of him, and Rodchenko recoiled in fear. “I have heard everything you have to say. And now you will listen to me.”

The General stood, fingertips on the desk, and leaned forward. “The Winter Soldier will rest when I say he is to rest. Which will not happen until he has completed his missions. All of his missions. And you are not to trouble me again with this argument, or I will be very angry indeed.” Softly he added, “Is that clear?”

He didn’t care, Rodchenko realized all over again. The General didn’t care, and he never would. The Soldier was just another tool to him, one he maintained only to a bare minimum of necessity. And if the tool broke? Perhaps it wouldn’t matter to him. Perhaps it wouldn’t matter that he had finally succeeded in destroying Rodchenko’s life’s work.

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to go, humiliation and anger hot on his back. He would return to the laboratory and wait. What else could he do?

Chapter End Notes

Comments, feedback, and shared zen moments are warmly welcomed.
Insubordination

Chapter Notes

If you see [language brackets], then Russian is being spoken. Unless several Russian characters are in the room; then just assume Russian is being spoken without [language brackets].

See the end of the chapter for more notes somewhere in Jersey City late November 2014

[“I failed my mission in Odessa.”] she told him. [“Do you remember?”] She looked at him very seriously then, searching for an answer that he didn’t have.

[“I’m not the priority.”] He shook his head, but she only smiled. [“I shouldn’t be.”]

[“I do understand.”] Her eyes were piercing. Green. He could look into them forever. [“I know what it’s like to fail a mission.”]

They stood on the sidewalk for some time, staring out at the water, and there were no snipers on the roof, and none on the river, none hiding in unmarked vans in the street. And then she left, and he was sitting down to eat pizza and garlic knots.

He didn’t like the garlic knots so much, but he could have eaten all of the pizza, and probably another one, too.

“There are a lot of priorities,” the man on the bridge told him, only he wasn’t on a bridge and they weren’t fighting. He was sitting at the table, eating garlic knots and pizza. “I’m going after HYDRA…” His voice faded away for a moment, then, “I’m not going to stop until it’s a memory.”

The soldier continued to eat the pizza, only he wasn’t the soldier anymore. Just like the other one wasn’t the man on the bridge. They had names, didn’t they?

They had names once.

“I want you to come with me,” the man said.

“You’re not going after HYDRA all by yourself,” the man said.

“You need help,” the man said.

“We can do all of it together.”

“I’m not damaged,” the soldier said, but that wasn’t his name. He had a name once.

He had a name.

“You’re pretty damaged,” the man said. And he put a hand on the soldier’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”
He didn’t know how to reply to that.

“None of this is your fault.”

The soldier stared at his plate.

“None of this is your fault.”

He should have gone after HYDRA. He should have gone a long time ago. Had he gone after HYDRA-

“None of this is your fault.”

He shouldn’t have stayed. He should have left weeks ago. If he had left, maybe, if he had left-

“None of this-”

The soldier jerked awake suddenly, gasping for air. He lunged forward in his cot, reaching for - he didn’t know what he was reaching for, but his legs tangled up in the blanket and he tumbled out of the cot and onto the floor, and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, he couldn’t breathe.

He scrambled away from the cot, pushing the blanket off, and his back hit the wall, and he was sweating, he couldn’t breathe, his hands were in his hair, and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe-

“None of this is your fault,” a voice whispered insistently in his ear, but there was no one in the darkened room.

There was no one in the goddamn room!

“Stop it.” He clenched uselessly at his hair, squeezed his eyes shut against the voices in his ear. “Stop it, stop it.”

None of this is your fault.

“Stop it.”

His stomach twisted violently until he thought he would be sick, and still the voice murmured - None of this is your fault - over and over again.

“Stop.”

He squeezed his eyes shut until they watered from the pain or the confusion or maybe something else. He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything anymore.

“Stop, I want it to stop, I want it to stop.”

---

General Lukin blinked the sleep from his eyes and looked at his clock. Still a comfortable hour before dawn.

He set no alarms, nor did he need to. His years in the Soviet military had meticulously trained his body to function on four to six hours of sleep at a time, and to snap to instant alertness immediately upon waking - a trait which had helped him immensely in his transition into the private sector. The business world never slept, which meant he could scarcely afford to.
Speaking of which, he thought as he rose and prepared for the day, he had been away from his Kronas Corporation for long enough to count as neglect. Oh, he could put in an appearance at the offices in Manhattan, but he would need to fly back to the main office in Moscow soon. There were matters there which needed his attention in person.

But there were matters in the US which needed his attention more urgently. Such as the Winter Soldier’s next target.

He strode down the hall and pushed open the door to the Winter Soldier’s room as he always did, without preamble. The Winter Soldier was required to be prepared for his appearance at any time, with or without prior notice. And it was generally without.

The Winter Soldier got to his feet when he entered the room, but there was a certain lack of fluidity in his movement - a jerky and overly hurried quality that did not seem natural. Perhaps it had something to do with the stimulants Dr. Rodchenko had been giving the Winter Soldier to keep him alert in the field? The doctor had certainly been making annoying noises about it lately…

“Your next target, Soldier.” He held up a USB drive for the Winter Soldier to see. “One target. Isolated. Heavily guarded private residence on a large piece of land outside of Cleveland. A very straightforward mission.” Meaning, of course, that no imperfections of any kind were to be tolerated.

He set the drive down on the Soldier’s small table.

“You leave in two hours.”

---

The soldier had lost track of time, but maybe it had been hours?

Hours of him curled up on the floor, wanting it to stop, wanting everything to stop, but not knowing how to make the voices go away, not knowing how to make everything - anything - just stop.

He had tried to sleep, but he never made it back to his cot, and the voices - voice, really, just the one, one insistent voice whispering to him over and over and over-

None of this is your fault.

He had clawed at his head and wrapped his arms around himself and laid on the floor whispering help, someone help, someone help help, but no one came, no one would ever come, and none of it was his fault, none of it was his fault, none of it-

At some point he must have gone away in his head or maybe he had fallen asleep, but someone pushed open the door suddenly and he snapped into some kind of alertness and jumped to his feet - swayed, but jumped, and he was up he was standing he was on his feet - and there was the General with another mission another goddamn mission another mission in two hours in Cleveland he’d have to leave in two hours for another mission another one rest was so far away and-

He looked at the drive for a long moment, but didn’t take it.

“No…” The word tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop it. “I don’t want to. No more.”

No more.

The General was silent for a long, dangerous moment.

“Say that again,” he said quietly. Too quietly. “Say that again, damn you, and find out what
happens.”

The soldier said nothing, but he didn’t take the drive either.

“You’ll do as you’re ordered, Soldier.” The General spat the words out through gritted teeth. “And if you ever refuse a direct order from me again, I will give you bitter cause to regret it.” He stepped in close, looking the soldier in the eye from a very close range. “Do you understand me?”

The soldier understood him, and he was supposed to say he understood him, and he was supposed to nod and tell him that yes sir he understood him, and he was supposed to take the drive and he was supposed to prepare for a mission that left in two hours, and he was supposed to shut up and follow orders never question orders never refuse orders-

He was so tired, rest would never come, the missions would never end, he would never have rest he would never have rest he would-

The General was looking at him he would never have rest he was supposed to say he understood he-

Before he knew what he was doing, he wilted. His knees gave out, and he managed to stumble back the few steps until he bumped into the cot. He sat down on the edge of it and put his head in his hands.

“I don’t want to.” He was so tired. So tired, so tired. “No more. I don’t want to.”

He would never have rest.

---

Something let go in Lukin’s head.

“Get up,” he said through gritted teeth, his temper just barely controlled as he clenched his jaw around the scream that desperately wanted to escape. “Get on your feet this instant, Soldier, and look at me!”

It was all too much. The strain of the situation with HYDRA, the constant nagging anxiety over the tenuous security of even being where they were, Rodchenko’s irritating whining about putting the Winter Soldier into cryosleep when he was most needed, his own absence from Kronas for far too long, and a thousand other things had built up a thrumming level of stress that he was just barely able to keep in check. But this blatant refusal by the Winter Soldier to do the simplest job pushed him over the edge.

The Winter Soldier would never have dared show this kind of disrespect to General Karpov. The Winter Soldier had worshiped the old man, had thought of him as though he’d been his own father. And as much as Lukin had ordered that the same deference, the same obedience, the same loyalty be conditioned into the Winter Soldier with regards to him, it had never fully succeeded.

And this was the final result. Insubordination. Outright disobedience. Mutiny.

He would get Rodchenko in there and watch him inject the Winter Soldier with enough stimulants to keep him awake for days. He would slap him across the face until his hand started to bleed. He would scrub every last iota of free will from his feeble mind, and he would make sure he was awake for every second of it. He would…

The Winter Soldier was still sitting down.
“I said, on your feet!” He shot out a hand and grabbed the Winter Soldier by the hair, jerking his head back and forcing him to look Lukin in the eyes. “You have a job to do. You have one job, one reason for existing - only one!”

The Winter Soldier looked back at him in idiotic confusion.

Lukin tightened his grip in the Winter Soldier’s hair and glared into his eyes with barely-controlled fury. “You will do your job, Soldier.” His voice was just barely above a whisper, but his rage thundered through every syllable he spoke. “Or you will learn the true meaning of pain.”

---

The soldier wanted everything to stop.

Everything.

The missions. The insistent voice in his head. The conditioning. The mind tricks. All of it. Every bit. He wanted it to stop, and he wanted to lie down and close his eyes, and he didn’t think he ever wanted to get up. Not if it meant everything could stop.

Just stop.

But…

He knew what happened next, and he hated it, but it didn’t matter.

It never mattered.

In the next minute, he would get up and prepare for the mission. He would visit the doctor. He would go to Cleveland and complete the mission. He would return and maybe get to sleep for a while. And then he would complete the next mission. And the one after that. And after that. And on and on, until the General finally decided that he was finished and could finally rest.

There was no stopping.

Quietly he said, “Yes, sir,” and climbed unsteadily to his feet. He would change into his combat uniform. He would see the doctor, who would give him more of the drugs that kept him awake. He would go to Cleveland and complete the mission.

There was no stopping.

..................

Tony’s algorithm was going strong lately. Which, on the one hand, meant that they had been able to get to several HYDRA members before they’d been killed and capture them alive. Steve had literally punched the poison tooth right out of the mouth of one of them.

On the other hand, though, it meant that a great many HYDRA operatives had been killed before Steve and his team had been able to get there. Rhodey hadn’t been exaggerating about the effectiveness of the algorithm; it had only become more accurate after a significant number of murders.

The next target on their list was one Barry Edgerton, some bigwig CEO out in Cleveland, Ohio. It was anyone’s guess what they might walk into there.

“Lot of security,” Clint remarked as he looked around the expansive grounds of the not-so-safe
house in suburban Cleveland. He gestured to the body of a uniformed guard, the front of his shirt soaked through with the blood that had poured out of his slashed throat. “Not that it did any good…”

“Stay alert.” Steve’s voice carried all the tension he felt as he unclipped the shield from his back and held it at the ready. “We don’t know if anyone’s still here.”

Wanda seemed to take Steve’s words to heart, hunkering down slightly and twisting her fingertips through complicated patterns. Steve knew just how versatile - and how powerful - her magic could be, and was grateful for the thousandth time that she’d accepted his offer to come aboard the elite team he’d assembled.

Clint, meanwhile, had unlimbered his bow but held it loosely, not seeming to anticipate having to use it. His eyes, though, had taken on that odd quality they sometimes did when he was looking for a target. He could appear to be staring off into space, not focusing on anything in particular, and yet see the minutest detail that anyone looking for with all the concentration in the world might miss. It was one of his gifts, and one of the reasons Steve was thankful for his presence as well.

“It’s quiet.” Clint said finally. “No birds or squirrels, even. I’m not seeing any movement from anywhere either. Nothing from any of the guard posts.” He shook his head. “If there’s anyone here, they’re better at hiding than I am at seeking.”

“Or they’re all dead,” Wanda said grimly. “The birds and squirrels, even.”

Steve looked askance at her for that comment, but she shrugged it off.

Even the moon had chosen to hide that evening, and so they crept along in total darkness for what felt like far too long. For a brief second, Steve considered asking Wanda to create some light, but there was likely a reason the grounds were so shrouded, and so any light would be like a beacon that drew all attention to them. Or maybe it would just draw the attention of one very good sniper, and if Bucky saw them before they saw him, that would be the end of things.

Darkness, then.

Wanda nearly tripped over a body - another guard, his shirt soaked with blood from the stab wound in his chest. A moment after that, they came across another guard, similarly indisposed.

“Perhaps he has already been here this evening?” She frowned slightly. “And has already left as well?”

“I wouldn’t count on anybody still being here.” Clint gestured toward the house. “Nobody that doesn’t need a mortician, anyway. Look, there’s no light coming from the house and all the guards are dead. I’d say Cap’s buddy got here before us and cleaned house.”

“Wait.” Steve held up a hand. “Let’s not decide anything for sure until we at least check out the house. The guy could still be there, for all we know. Maybe he’s got a panic room, or a hidden bunker, or an escape tunnel.”

What he didn’t say - and perhaps didn’t need to - was that there was a chance Bucky might still be there as well. And even if they’d come too late to apprehend the rogue HYDRA agent, they might still have a chance to save Bucky.

“Hang on, Cap.” Clint’s brow furrowed as he looked over to Steve’s left with that faraway look in his eyes again. “I think I found something.”

Clint took off at a jog, his bow still in his hand. Steve gave Wanda a glance, then motioned for her to
follow him as he started off after Clint. And after a few dozen yards, they came to where Clint was crouching - a slight rise overlooking the house. There were no trees to obstruct the view, and from here they could see the house, still a few hundred yards away, perfectly silhouetted against the dark background of the trees.

“This is weird.” He gestured down to the ground. A heavy-powered rifle lay there, a flash suppressor on the end of the barrel and a complicated scope mounted to the top. Scattered on the grass around the gun were enough spent shells to make it look like it had snowed brass.

“Here’s his grassy knoll,” Clint went on. “He had a perfect view of the house from here, and he had to have taken out the guards before he set himself up here. That way he’d have a nice undisturbed place to snipe from.” He frowned. “But he should only have needed one shot to do the job. Why’d he go full rock-n’-roll and blow through the whole clip?”

“I think we need to check the house.” Steve was beginning to feel very uneasy. “Right now.”

They crept slowly down the hill.

Wanda’s nerves seemed taut enough that she kept one hand clenched; she’d need only flick her fingers to unleash a spell that would both put up a shield and create a shockwave that would hurl any assailant clear across the lawn.

Even if said assailant were Bucky.

They walked past a covered pool, and Steve was relieved for that small favor, though the relief was short lived. The remains of a sliding glass door lay broken against a patio table, almost as if someone had wrenched the door off its hinges and flung it aside.

Very likely that was exactly what had happened.

Their boots crunched over shards of glass, and then they crossed the threshold into the house and found themselves standing in a large sunroom filled with wicker furniture and huge, potted plants. Several of the sunroom windows had been completely blown out, leaving only pieces of jagged glass hanging in the frames.

“Look there.” Clint pointed to the far wall that led directly into the house. It was scarred with what seemed like dozens of bullet holes. “Mr. Boddy. In the sunroom. With a sniper rifle.” He frowned. “So where’s Mr. Boddy?”

Wanda looked at him. “Mr. Edgerton, you mean?”

“No. Philistine.” Clint snorted, and on seeing Steve’s similarly blank expression, added, “You too, Cap?” He shook his head. “Natasha would have gotten the joke.”

Wanda rolled her eyes. “Only because you’ve made her listen to it dozens of times.”


Steve shook his head. No amount of mild joking could bleed off the tension. If anything, it made him feel the need to move, to resolve the ugly story that was unfolding before them.

Wanda shivered suddenly. “We’re going to find something in the next room. I can feel it.”

She darted out of the room, both Steve and Clint right behind her. They went through what appeared to be a billiards room. That room led into the hallway, and the hallway led to-
Wanda stumbled to a halt and pressed her back against the wall. “Found him.”

Mr. Edgerton, that was. He lay on the floor in a pool of blood, and Steve could count at least three bullet holes in the man’s back.

Steve stood there, the shield strapped to an arm that hung limply, stunned by the seemingly random, destructive chaos that had been unleashed in the house. There was something about it that sickened him even more than being peppered with fragments of Benson’s head. Something deeply disturbing. Something wrong.

“I don’t understand.” He shook his head. “This doesn’t look like Bucky at all.”

When they’d been kids, and Bucky had gotten his Daisy air rifle for his combination birthday/Christmas present, Bucky had put every other kid in the neighborhood in awe of his marksmanship by putting neat holes in every tin can anyone could scrounge up. He’d done it effortlessly, from no matter how far away, aiming and firing as though the BB gun were part of his own body. When they’d gone out to Coney Island as teenagers and young men for the carnival games, Bucky had won so many prizes at the target-shooting game that the carnies wouldn’t let him play anymore. When Bucky had been drafted, his marksmanship scores had been high enough to draw the attention of his superiors, who had promptly packed him off to specialized sniper training in England and then the state of Georgia. During his time on the Howling Commandos, Bucky had racked up well over a hundred and fifty confirmed kills. He rarely needed more than one shot to bring his target down.

“The outside wall’s chewed up with bullets.” He gestured at the corpse on the floor. “So’s Edgerton. This looks like the work of some know-nothing thug, not a master assassin.”

“He missed.” Clint’s voice cut in suddenly, and both Steve and Wanda turned to look at him.

Clint shrugged. “He missed the first shot. It would’ve alerted Edgerton. Spooked him, made him go for cover. So he switched to full-auto and hosed the room. Tried to scare Edgerton, flush him out into the clear for a kill shot. But that didn’t happen, and the clip ran out.” Clint looked grim. “So he ditched the longarm and hoofed it to the house to hunt the target down.”

The target. Not ‘Edgerton’, but ‘the target’. That would have been how Bucky thought of him, Steve realized with a sickening twist of his stomach, which was why Clint was saying it. He was trying to get inside Bucky’s head.

Steve felt positively ill as Clint walked them through what had happened. “He ripped the sliding door off to get in and chased the target down. Found him in the hallway -” He indicated a spray of blood against the lower part of one of the hallway walls. “- and shot him in the leg to stop him from running. But he tried to crawl away, so he stood right over him and shot him dead.” Clint stood over Edgerton’s corpse, one foot on each side of the dead man’s waist, and mimed firing a handgun down at the man. “Pop. Pop. Pop.”

A cold sludge seemed to have gathered around Steve’s vitals. The thought of his best friend doing these cold-blooded, heartless things was bad enough, but the fact that he’d been kidnapped and brainwashed into it by the very people he’d ostensibly died fighting made him want to vomit. And perhaps the worst part of all was the knowledge that Bucky had very nearly lost his mind because of what HYDRA had done to him.

Maybe he was losing his mind again, Steve realized with a dull horror. Maybe what HYDRA was doing to him now was worse than what they’d done before. Steve remembered how frightening it had been to come into the spare room and find Bucky sitting up in bed with blank eyes and a slack
expression, awake but unconscious, his mind lost in untold awfulness. Maybe Bucky would skip right past the catatonia now and plunge headlong into some kind of psychotic breakdown.

“That’s why he missed.”

A long moment passed before Steve realized he’d said it out loud, the odd looks Clint and Wanda were giving him being his only clue. “I think I know why Bucky missed the first shot.” He flexed his hand, gripping the straps of the shield. “Something must have happened in his mind. One of his memory flashes or something, enough to jar him and throw him off for just that split second.”

And as soon as he said it, that cold sludge seemed to freeze solid inside him. Because he knew what HYDRA’s answer to that would be. They’d just strap him into that chair and sandpaper his mind until they’d ground away everything they didn’t like. And if it hurt him in the process? Well, they hadn’t cared before.

“We have to find him.” His voice was hollow. “Time’s running out.”

…………………

thirty minutes prior

The Winter Soldier was found slumped against the wall by the body of the target, a SIG Sauer P226 pistol clutched loosely in his hand.

After several attempts to engage him, the captain of the extraction team ordered that the Winter Soldier be dragged to the waiting the van before any SHIELD agents or law enforcement arrived on the scene.

A full report was made to General Lukin on the flight back to New Jersey.

Dr. Rodchenko met the extraction team upon their return to the base, and the Winter Soldier was deposited in the doctor's laboratory.

The soldier did not remember any of that happening.

Chapter End Notes

I always enjoy the comments readers leave for me. It's very nourishing. Thank you all for that. Also, *ahem*, if anyone gets Clint's bad joke in the sunroom, kudos to you forever!

As always, feedback, concrit, and actual Russian language tutorials are warmly welcomed.
At the Precipice

Chapter Notes

As before, assume everyone is speaking Russian.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A few hours prior
same day

The soldier slashed one guard’s throat, drove the knife deep into the chest of another, and then he dropped another, and another, and another. Faster and faster, the quicker he could get it done, the closer he was to rest.

Maybe that part took minutes, but if it took longer it wasn’t his fault-

None of this is your fault.

It didn’t take long to clear the grounds maybe it took too long but probably not no one had said anything and none of this is your fault and it didn’t matter anyway-

He had one job to do, one reason for existing, only one.

The target should have been an easy kill once the grounds were clear, and he had only one job to do, and it wasn’t a very hard job at that. He found an easy spot for his easy kill, and he set in to wait, and the target moved into the room with the many windows, and the soldier drew an easy breath and gently squeezed the trigger-

“We should probably finish this,” he said, and pounded the vodka back and then handed it to-

“We probably should,” said the man on the bridge, and he looked at the vodka bottle - there wasn’t much left - and he took a final slug. “And then we should probably go home.”

The soldier’s breath hitched and the shot went wide and the target screamed and the soldier cursed and opened fire, emptied the entire clip in seconds, but the target had already run away and the soldier had no choice but to pursue.

“Why no more rest?” he asked the man on the bridge, and they were eating pelmeni and knish, only they had both thrown several of the pelmeni to the seagulls flapping around the beach.

“Because I’m not letting anyone stick my best friend in a damn freezer, is why,” the man on the bridge said, and they watched the seagulls attack the pelmeni and then angrily squawk for more.

The soldier followed the target into the house and the target was running screaming and he followed the target into the hall-

If he finished, he could rest. If he finished the mission, then rest.

He could stop.
The soldier shot the target in the leg and the target screamed and tried to crawl down the hall tried to crawl away and the soldier stood over him and aimed the pistol and-

He could stop.

He wanted to stop.

- fired several times into the target’s back - one, two, three - and the target was dead and he spoke into his earpiece and said the target was dead confirmed dead and-

He wanted to stop.

None of this is your fault.

He slumped against the wall and slid into a crouch and he couldn’t breathe he couldn’t breathe-

He wanted it all to stop.

---

“Target has been eliminated. We are en route to base.”

Rodchenko had decided to start listening in to the field conversations between the Soldier and his handlers over the secure communications line. It might not have given him the ability to step in and prevent any more field work, but it would certainly prepare him for whatever work he might need to do on the Soldier upon his return.

“There was some trouble with the Winter Soldier, though…”

He met the extraction team on their way in, two of them holding the Soldier up by the elbows. The Soldier was limp - just shy of being dead weight - his head hanging and his booted feet barely finding purchase on the ground as the men hauled him out of the van and over to Rodchenko. For a frightening moment, Rodchenko thought that it was too late, but then the Soldier looked up, his glazed eyes flickering in and out of focus.

“Bring him to the laboratory.” Rodchenko’s voice was worried, worn, but still carried a sense of urgency. “Quickly now.”

The extraction team deposited the Soldier in the chair and left as quickly as they’d come. The techs prepared the Soldier, carefully disarming him and removing both his leather jacket and his base layer shirt. And Rodchenko wasted no time in connecting the various monitoring devices to the Soldier before coming close and attempting to speak to him.

He knew, even as he coded in the sequence to prepare for a reconditioning, that it would not last. It had only been a little more than forty-eight hours since the Soldier’s last reconditioning, and already he had deteriorated to the point of being incapacitated by whatever had happened inside his mind during his mission. Without the cryogenic hibernation to set the conditioning, there was no reason to expect that this latest round of reconditioning to hold for any longer. And in all likelihood, there would be a thirty-six-hour window this time rather than a forty-eight-hour one. Even so…

“Soldier?” He looked into glazed and bloodshot eyes that stared blearily out at nothing in particular. “I need to know what happened out there.” He lowered his voice. “The General is going to be angry if I don’t give him some explanation for it. Talk to me.”

---
“We should probably finish this,” he said, and pounded the vodka back and then handed it to-

Help.

“We should probably finish this,” he said, and pounded the vodka back-

Someone help.

“We should probably finish this,” he said, and-

Someone help help.

“We should probably.”

He couldn’t breathe.

“We should.”

He couldn’t breathe.

“We-

Why couldn’t it just stop?

Stop.

Please stop.

Someone was talking to him, someone was standing there and talking to him, someone was standing there and staring at him and talking to him, “Soldier talk to me Soldier talk to me,” and the soldier was supposed to talk he was supposed to talk he was-

“Stop,” he said aloud.

There was nowhere to go there was nowhere to run nobody was coming.

“I want it to stop.”

Nobody was coming.

“Stop what?” The soldier thought he heard the doctor’s voice somewhere. “What was it that made your mission turn out so poorly?”

No more.

No more, no more.

He wanted it to stop. He wanted everything to stop. He wanted to close his eyes and lie down and wait for everything to go away.

No more no more no more.

I’m sorry, a voice whispered. I’m so sorry. I know it hurts, and I wish to God it had all worked out differently.

“No more.”
Had he said the words aloud?

_I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I know it hurts._

“No more.”

_I’m sorry I’m so sorry I know it hurts._

How could he make it stop? How could he make it all stop? No more missions and no more voices and no more General and no more doctor and no more chair and no more no more no more.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts_

His breath hitched.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts_

He sat up abruptly and looked at the doctor with wide eyes, before crumpling over, fingers digging into his hair.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts_

“Stop!” His eyes burned hot, then overflowed. “Make it stop!”

“Of course.” Through a blurred haze the doctor came forward, rubber bit in hand, a strange note in his voice. “I’ll make it stop. Now-”

The door banged open. The doctor flinched and almost dropped the bit. “Explain yourself, Soldier!”

The soldier looked up to see the General stride into the room, and his stomach twisted so violently that he thought he would be sick on the floor.

He would kill him, he would leap out of the chair and wrap his metal hand around the man’s throat and crush it, he would smash his head into the floor, he would kill him he would kill him he would-

Stop!

Stop stop stop, where had that come from? The soldier wasn’t allowed to do that, he wasn’t allowed to attack the General, he wasn’t allowed, that must have been a mind trick, he was supposed to tell the doctor about mind tricks, he wasn’t allowed he wasn’t allowed-

He lowered his hands and looked at the General through a curtain of hair. His fingers gripped the seat of the chair so hard that if he weren’t careful, he’d leave marks.

The techs wordlessly vanished, their footsteps hurriedly trailing away, the door clicking shut behind them.

“When I heard all that gunfire over the communications channel, I assumed there had been some sort of a battle with the target’s private security forces.” The General’s face was stormy. “But now I learn from the extraction team that you botched the shot and ended up having to resort to the crudest measures possible. I could have found some addict on any street corner in Moscow and gotten the same results for the cost of a dose of his drug of choice. What is the matter with you?”

“The target…” The soldier was breathing so heavily, he could hardly speak, his eyes so watery, he could hardly see. “… was eliminated.”
Was eliminated, sir, the soldier was supposed to address the General with deference and respect, the General expected deference and respect, he expected to be called sir.

The word stuck in his throat.

_I’m sorry Bucky_  

No stop it stop it stop it STOP IT STOP STOP STOP  

_I’m sorry Bucky_  

STOP  

He gritted his teeth. “What more do you want?”

“To begin with,” the General spat, “I want the last word out of your mouth to be sir whenever you speak to me.”

The soldier glared at him.

“The target was eliminated,” the General mocked, his voice taking on an ugly, sing-song quality. He shook his head. “I heard the report from the extraction team. You were lucky to have succeeded. The target very nearly got away from you, do you understand that?”

“But…” The soldier’s chest heaved with exertion. The edge of the seat began to crack under the pressure of his grip. And still the General continued to glare at him. “He didn’t get away.”

“Did you not hear a word I said?” The General was very close to the soldier suddenly, his voice rising in anger. “You almost failed your mission, and yet you have the unmitigated gall to look at me the way you were just a moment ago? To forget the respect you owe me?”

The soldier hated the General. Hated him, _hated him._

No!

That was wrong.

That was wrong. He didn’t hate the General. He hated Captain America. He hated Captain America, he was supposed to kill Captain America, Captain America had ruined HYDRA’s plans, Captain America was the reason he wasn’t allowed rest.

He hated Captain America.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts_  

“No!” He squeezed his eyes shut, tried to make the voice go away, tried to make everything go away so he could lie down.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts_  

No stop it stop it stop it STOP IT STOP STOP STOP  

_I’m sorry Bucky_  

“I didn’t fail.” He gasped the words out and opened his eyes to look at the General through a blurred, watery haze. “The target was eliminated. I didn’t fail.”
“You did fail, Soldier.” The General’s voice grew uglier. “You failed to eliminate the target cleanly, you failed to destroy the mountain of evidence you left in your wake, and you are failing as we speak.”

“I’m not…” he started to say, but the General cut him off with a stinging slap across the face.

The soldier bit down hard on his lip and said nothing.

The General glared at him. “You are failing to maintain discipline. Failing to do as I ordered you to do only a moment ago and refer to me as ‘sir’ when you speak. Failing to acknowledge your own inadequacy. You performed that mission like a rank amateur, and yet you tell me you did not fail? How dare you try to claim your performance tonight as anything but a failure?”


The soldier’s eyes widened at that.

Not another reconditioning. No more. No more no more, he didn’t think he could take another one, didn’t think he could take it anymore.

Again, his stomach lurchèd, and he swallowed the sour taste that had gathered in his mouth, but he couldn’t catch his breath. Couldn’t focus long enough to steady his breathing.

There was no stopping.

There was no rest.

I’m sorry… the voice started to say, but then it unraveled and slipped away into the darkness somewhere, and all the soldier could do was watch it fall.

Nobody was coming.

“I don’t want…”

He swallowed the words down. It had never mattered what he wanted. It would never matter what he wanted. The General gave the orders, and the soldier’s job was to follow them without question.

He was a killer. No more, no less. He had never been more than a killer.

Nobody was coming.

The words bubbled up anyway and spilled out before he could stop them. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

For a long, deadly moment, the General was silent.

The doctor closed his eyes.

Softly the General said, “Do you imagine it matters what you want to do?” He was shouting suddenly, his voice thunderous and ugly, muscles tense, veins throbbing in his head. He thrust his face close to the soldier’s. “Do you imagine it ever did, or ever will? You are mine, Soldier! You belong to me!”

He turned on the doctor suddenly, the smaller man flinching back from him. “Condition him. Now! Wipe this insubordination from his mind! Scour it clean until he is fit for duty, and if this ever fails
again, I swear I’ll have your head for a paperweight!”

“Yes, sir.” A strange expression crossed the doctor’s face “I will see to it.”

The General glared at the soldier one last time before turning on his heel and stalking out of the room.

---

As the General walked out, Rodchenko felt a wave of relief wash over him, dispelling the terror he had felt a brief moment ago. He had never seen the General in such a rage before. He had known the man was malicious, had tried to warn the Soldier about it many times, but he had not known just how unbalanced he was as well. For a moment, Rodchenko had even feared that he might actually lay hands on him.

_You are mine, Soldier! You belong to me!_

The General was a madman, he realized with sudden, dull horror. An absolute egomaniac, wealthy and powerful enough to have convinced himself that he was the master and final arbiter of all their destinies. And he had set them on a course which he would not permit them to alter. A course that would see the Winter Soldier completely destroyed, and Rodchenko’s own life made meaningless…

He felt suddenly unsteady from the adrenaline, his knees shaking, his normally steady hands trembling.

Tired. Tired of it all. Worn out, worn down, all but worn away.

He steadied himself against the table, feeling helplessly and impotently angry at the situation. There was nothing he could do about it, he knew that much, but did that mean the Soldier had to be forced to bear the brunt of the General’s aggression? Did it mean that Rodchenko’s fate would be to stand by helplessly and watch his life’s work be further destroyed before his very eyes?

“I’m sorry.” He sighed, shook his head. The writing on the wall was beginning to become clear. There would be no salvaging this. The General would force the Soldier to keep going without rest, force him to endure conditioning after conditioning until the chair no longer had any effect. And when that happened, not even the longest immersion in cryosleep would be able to fix things. The Soldier would be damaged beyond repair, and then…

Rodchenko did not want to think that far. He was sixty-four years old and looked and felt older. He’d barely made it through the collapse of the Soviet Union; he would not be able to survive whatever would befall him if the Soldier was gone. But it was not the Soldier’s fault.

“It’s not your fault, you know.” He looked over at the Soldier, tired eyes meeting tired eyes. “None of this is your fault.”

The Soldier was breathing very loudly. “I know. He said.” A strange expression skittered across his face. “Not the General. The man said. The other man.”

“What other man?” Rodchenko asked pointlessly, already knowing the answer.

The Soldier shook his head. “I have a name,” he said quietly. “I know I have a name.”

_It all has to end somewhere._

He suddenly felt very old. Older by far than his sixty-four years, aged by the knowledge that no
matter what he did, he would never be in control of his own life.

He wondered suddenly whether the Winter Soldier felt the same way. Whether he even had the capacity to feel that way any longer, after everything that had happened to him. After everything that had been done to him.

Everything Rodchenko had been forced to do to him.

It would all end soon; he could sense that. It was like being on a train with the throttle jammed open as far as it would go and the crew nowhere to be found. No way to stop. No way to slow down. No way off. Nothing to do but wait for the inevitable crash.

“Then what is it?” He heard the exhaustion, the defeat in his own voice. “Tell me your name, Soldier.”

“I…” The name seemed to hover just out of reach. Rodchenko watched the hope die on the Soldier’s face until all he could do was shake his head.

Rodchenko suddenly felt very small. Petty and shallow, for having asked the Soldier such a question. Of course the Soldier would not have been able to answer. How could he have, when Rodchenko himself had been responsible for the past four decades for making sure he did not remember such things?

*It all has to end somewhere.*

Again that thought. He remembered when he’d been a young boy in the 1950’s, hearing his grandfather speak those exact words.

*Even the worst of things cannot endure forever,* he’d said. *Like we learned with Stalin. Lenin. Trotsky.* The old man had shaken his bald and spotted head, heedless anymore of who might overhear him. Heedless of the fact that those words might have brought about the end of his own life. *Everything in this world will one day be gone, my boy. It all has to end somewhere.*

The only question, he supposed, was how. How would his own part in this come to an end? What would he contribute to the end of the project? To the end of his life's work? Did he even have a choice in the matter?

“James,” he heard himself saying, and somehow was not surprised. “Your name is James.”

He was so terribly tired…

“James.” The Soldier seemed to savor the name for a long moment. He looked hopefully at Rodchenko. “Can I keep it?”

Looking at the Soldier right now, seeing him as vulnerable as he’d ever been - indeed, more so - Rodchenko suddenly felt a strange feeling he had no name for.

The Soldier hadn’t aged. Not one single day in four decades. Not one single day in nearly seven decades - he’d seen the photographs in the file from before he had joined the project. The Soldier looked no older now than he had in 1945. A young man then, and so he still appeared to be.

But Rodchenko had aged. Beyond his years he’d aged, and he felt it as well as looked it. And perhaps over the years he’d grown accustomed to a role he hadn’t realized he’d been playing. Perhaps he simply hadn’t given much consideration to the fact that although the Soldier was older than he was, Rodchenko looked far older than the Soldier. Old enough to have been his father.
He sighed heavily.

It was all going to end, wasn’t it? There was no salvaging it, not this time. Perhaps there never had been any real hope in doing so. And if not…

“Yes.”

If not, then the Soldier deserved at least this.

“You can keep it.”

He picked up the bit from where it sat, knowing what still had to happen even if he did not like it. He would let the Soldier keep his name, yes. And he would also grant the Soldier the peace in his mind that he wanted so badly.

It was all he could do.

---

“Fine.” Lukin fought to maintain control of his temper and to keep his voice even. “I will be there by nine o’clock tomorrow morning, and I will deal with it myself.”

He disconnected the call with an angry jab of his finger, longing for the days of being able to satisfyingly slam down a receiver into its cradle at the end of a particularly frustrating call, and cursed inwardly. It would have to be now, he thought bitterly, just when everything else was going poorly as well. Of course Kronas Corporation would require not just his input, but his physical presence as well.

He stormed down the hallway, anger boiling in his chest. There was nothing for it now except to give the Winter Soldier his next assignment, leave Rodchenko in charge for the twenty-four hours it would take to deal with his Kronas obligations, and to hope for the best. Or rather, to put the fear of God into the doctor and the Winter Soldier and promise them untold suffering if anything at all went awry in his absence.

He flung open the door to the doctor’s laboratory. The Soldier sat in the chair, lolling in semi-consciousness, looking as though he had just been conditioned. The doctor stood nearby, logging an entry into the chair’s computer.

“Listen to me, both of you, and listen carefully.” No preliminaries, no greetings, no niceties of any sort to be observed. He was far beyond any such thing at this moment. He strode over to the chair and grabbed the Winter Soldier’s jaw in his hand, yanking his head up and looking into his unfocused eyes. “I said listen, Soldier!”

A slap brought them back into focus.

“I will be leaving for Manhattan first thing in the morning. I will be gone for twenty-four hours, if that.” He tossed a USB thumb drive onto the table in front of Rodchenko and addressed the Winter Soldier directly. “This is the dossier for your next mission. The extraction team will collect you at 1900 hours.”

He turned back to Rodchenko. “I am leaving you in charge, Doctor.” His eyes blazed. “And if anything at all goes awry in the time I am gone, I will hold you personally responsible. I expect absolute success with regards to the Winter Soldier’s mission, without any of the clumsiness of last time. I expect the target to be professionally eliminated and any sensitive information in his possession either recovered or destroyed. And I expect a drastic improvement in behavior and morale
here, on both your parts. Is that understood?"

“The Soldier has just been reconditioned,” Rodchenko said haltingly. “Last night’s conditioning didn’t hold, and I fear—”

“What did you not understand about my instructions, Rodchenko?” He rounded on the doctor angrily, rage crackling in his eyes. “You have until 1900 hours to see that the Winter Soldier is fit for duty, and I will tolerate no further delays!”

He spun on his heel and stalked out of the room before his anger could take physical form.

---

Rodchenko managed to breathe again once the General had left the room.

Things couldn’t go on as they were.

A quick glance at the Soldier told him that while the Soldier might have remained focused long enough to be the target of the General’s anger, that focus hadn’t held. He still lay limp in his restraints, gaze fixed on nothing in particular.

Things couldn’t go on.

“Stay here,” he said pointlessly to the Soldier, then turned and hurried from the room.

Before he could lose his nerve, he forced himself down the hall and into the General’s makeshift office, where the man was angrily shoving a laptop into a briefcase.

“Sir.” He took a deep breath and plowed forward. “I… please reconsider this. The Soldier’s conditioning hasn’t been holding and is, in fact, getting worse. I fear he… I fear…”

The General turned slowly to regard Rodchenko, and he must have easily seen the fear evident in every facet of his posture and bearing and heard it in his quavering voice.

“He can’t…” Rodchenko took another unsteady breath. His hands shook. “He can’t… go on like this. He needs to be thoroughly reconditioned and put into cryostasis, before his mind is destroyed completely.”

Silence stretched between them for a long, tense moment.

“Listen to me very carefully, Doctor.” Lukin set the briefcase down on his desk with exaggerated care and turned towards Rodchenko. He advanced on the doctor with slow, deliberate steps, the smaller man retreating before him. “Everything hangs by a thread. The entire nature of our work is in jeopardy. My corporate holdings are beginning to suffer. The Winter Soldier is the key to setting everything right.”

His hand shot out suddenly and fastened itself in a murderous grip around Rodchenko’s throat. Rodchenko’s hands immediately went to his neck, trying to pry the choke loose, but his strength was nothing next to Lukin’s rage-fueled power. He was shoved violently backward across the room and slammed against the wall.

“And you are wasting my time with the same ridiculous requests I have denied time and time again! The Winter Soldier will go into cryostasis when I say he will, and not a moment before!”

Rodchenko’s fingers scrabbled desperately, uselessly, against the General’s iron grip. His vision crinkled dark at the edges, then burst into a field of dancing black spots.
He was going to die.

Lukin leaned in close, seeming to relish the primitive terror in Rodchenko’s eyes. “Now.” His voice shook with rage, his eyes blazed with anger that bordered on madness, and his hand did not relinquish its grip. “There will be no more difficulties with the Winter Soldier, will there?”

He was going to die in a bunker in America, and who would ever know?

“Is that understood?” the General whispered, and Rodchenko opened his mouth to speak, but only managed a mewling choking sound.

He was going to die with the Winter Soldier only meters away and unable to help him.

He was going to die.

The General released him suddenly, and Rodchenko dropped limply to the floor, glasses askew and every nerve in his body screaming in fear.

“Yes.” He barely choked the word out. “Yes, it’s understood.”

Chapter End Notes

The notes I have gotten on this story so far have been so nourishing and encouraging. If I haven't responded to yours, please know that I appreciate all of the notes so incredibly much.

Feedback, concrit, and questions are warmly welcomed.
Showdown

Chapter Notes

I bring you an experiment in two voices. A chapter of smoke and explosions. Maybe some other things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clifton, New Jersey
late November 2014

According to the algorithm - which was now projecting with close to 95% accuracy - the next target was going to be Mr. John Santini. Another big-money man, one with no government ties but a great many suspected connections to organized crime. None of it had ever been legally proven, of course, but it was as blatantly obvious as it was possible to be. Santini ran several large businesses in the tri-state area and ran a major shipping line that had been investigated several times for suspicion of supplying several Third World countries with dangerous military contraband.

“You’re not supposed to call them Third World countries anymore, Steve,” Sam had said. “I think the acceptable terminology now is ‘developing countries’.” Which Steve had understood, and was trying to correct himself on, but was taking some time. Just like every other adjustment he’d had to make since coming back.

At any rate, Santini had gotten wind of all the other HYDRA-led assassinations and become understandably paranoid. He had holed up in a large warehouse in the middle of a big industrial park in northern New Jersey, surrounding himself with dozens of members of his company’s private security force and refusing to leave. Which meant that they weren’t going to be able to infiltrate directly in the Quinjet.

“All right, here’s the plan.” Steve pulled his gloves tight, checked the straps of his shield. “We drop at 5,000 feet. Sam, you get me down safely and head right for the building. Be careful. You’ll be drawing a lot of fire.”

“Sounds fun.” Sam clicked his goggles into place. “Carrying you around while I fly is doing great things for my arms. They say beach bodies are built in the wintertime, after all.”

Steve smiled tightly and continued. “Natasha, you parachute in and cover me while I move in. We converge on the building and work from the ground floor up, cutting off all exits. We trap Santini in the building and make sure there’s no way in or out. Got it?”

“Got it.” Natasha tightened the straps on her chute. “You know, the odds are getting higher all the time that we’re going to run into him face-to-face.”

He knew who she meant. “That’s the plan. So everybody keep your eyes open for him. Two top priorities: secure Santini and secure Bucky.” He took a deep breath, jabbed the bay door controls, and shouted to be heard over the sudden rush of wind. “And don’t get shot.”

---
The doctor had sat the soldier down in his laboratory and told him him very seriously that the General was very angry with them both and that neither of them could afford for the soldier’s next mission to be anything less than perfect.

“Promise me, Soldier,” the doctor had said, and the soldier couldn’t help but notice the bruises around the doctor’s neck. “Promise me that you will work at your best.”

The soldier promised, because there wasn’t any other choice. He didn’t comment on the bruises. He watched the video dossier on John Santini and equipped himself for the upcoming mission.

He didn’t tell the doctor that he was tired and needed rest. He didn’t tell him that he had sat on the beach once eating pelmeni and drinking vodka with the man on the bridge. He didn’t tell him anything, because he promised to work at his best.

The factory where the target was hiding was heavily guarded to the point where the soldier’s support team decided to drive straight through the gates in two heavily armored trucks and begin opening fire. Which created enough of a distraction for the soldier to slip in elsewhere.

Go in. Neutralize the target. Leave.

He had to work at his best.

---

The wind whipped at Steve’s face as Sam swooped down towards the ground, making him glad of the goggles he’d donned. It roared in his ears as well, right through the thickness of his helmet, but even that level of noise did little to drown out the cacophony from down below.

“Looks like they started the party without us.” Sam’s voice came through in his earpiece, the rush of wind filtered out by Tony’s electronic noise-canceling whatever-it-was. “Some people’ve just got no class.”

“How about school in the summertime.” Steve gripped the shield. “Looks like we might have an easier time getting in than we thought.”

Sam leveled off with the ground at about ten feet, moving fast enough to sweep leaves off the ground into furious little whirlwinds with the current of his passing, and let Steve go a few dozen yards from the main building. He corkscrewed away in the air, dodging around the corner of the building as bullets zipped through the air after him, and Steve tucked himself into a roll as he hit the ground, coming up in a crouch with the shield up.

Bullets rang off the surface of the shield, and he waited for the telltale pause in the rhythm of shots that signaled a reload before hurling the shield at the nearest shooter. The shield ricocheted off the man’s head, then off the weapon of the man next to him, and then the knee of the man coming up from the side, before angling back toward Steve, who sensed the man coming up behind him and leapt straight up into the air in a graceful backflip. The shield passed beneath him and hit the fourth man in the belly, doubling him over as Steve came down and caught the shield on the rebound.

Easy enough thus far.

The door was locked, naturally, and defended by a handful of guards, all of whom raised their weapons in unison and fell almost in unison as several shots rang out from above and behind Steve.

“Need help with the door?” Natasha dropped neatly to the ground, shrugging out of her parachute harness and reloading her pistols. “Or were you just taking a breather?”
“I brought my key.” He chuckled at Natasha’s persistent streak of dark humor and brought the shield to bear on the door. “Ladies first?”

---

Over the soldier’s earpiece, the captain of the support team informed the soldier that SHIELD - and Captain America in particular - had entered the compound and engaged with forces on both sides. He ignored the message.

First priority: neutralize the target.

Second priority: neutralize Captain America.

The General would be very angry if he completed the mission without also neutralizing Captain America. That would be considered a critical failure, and he had promised the doctor he would work at his best.

He wouldn’t think about the man on the bridge. He wouldn’t think about how they had sat on the beach and eaten pelmeni and drank vodka. And maybe they had eaten pancakes too - fluffy, American-style pancakes, not blinis - but not on the beach. They had eaten pancakes at- No!

First priority: neutralize the target.

With all forces engaged at the northern end of the factory, the southern end was in a heightened state of over-alertness. The militia was nervous, wary… and facing in the entirely wrong direction.

The soldier struck.

He took five of them down with his Yari II Tanto knife before a single one of them opened fire.

---

Fighting indoors was terribly claustrophobic. Even in a large space like the lower floor of the factory, with no dividing walls, it was hard not to feel closed in. There was still a ceiling, after all, and there were large stacks of crates and shipping containers that reduced Steve’s visibility to a few yards and made for far too many ambush locations. A fact he recalled very quickly when he just barely got the shield up to fend off a spray of bullets from a guard who’d taken up a position on top of one of the large shipping containers.

Natasha, meanwhile, had thrown herself into the midst of another knot of guards. The whirl of motion that was her unorthodox and confusing combat style resulted in at least two of them wounding each other. The rest wound up nursing broken or dislocated limbs, or were stunned into unconsciousness by her electroshock discs, or knocked cold by her powerful kicks. And when a dozen more formed ranks to fire on her, Sam knocked them all sprawling like bowling pins as he careened into them with a twisting dive.

“Talk to me, Natasha!” Steve flung the shield at another set of guards, turning a twisting aerial cartwheel over the head of one and narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets. “Tell me you’ve got a location on Santini!”

“Hold, please.” He heard the sounds of furious combat in his earpiece, but Natasha’s voice betrayed no strain whatsoever. “Your call is very important to us.”
Above the factory floor was what appeared to be office space, a slapdash mess of cobbled-together plywood with a window cut into it for observing the factory work, its ancient paint peeling in green layers. It was accessible by a flight of metal stairs from the factory floor, but Steve remembered a covered connecting walkway, linking that side of the building with an adjacent office building. Could that lead to Santini?

“Keep ‘em busy here.” He dashed up the metal stairs. “I’m going to check out the office building.”

The tiny office did indeed have a door that led to the connecting walkway. And the walkway did indeed lead to the adjoining office building. But when he kicked open the door at the end of the walkway, he was greeted by a staccato flurry of clicks as a dozen machine guns were trained on him.

My lucky day.

Santini had to be here somewhere, he thought furiously as he blocked shots with the shield and floored the guards as quickly as he could. Behind all his layers of security. The question was, where exactly was he?

---

The soldier made his way onto the second floor loft of the office building, a trail of fallen guards in his wake. He hadn’t needed to unshoulder his M4 rifle yet, but judging by the chatter emitting from the guards’ headsets, the target was being moved from a secure location on the first floor of the building to a waiting van outside.

From the loft, he could shoot the target before he made it outside. If the target did make it outside, the van could be disabled via grenade. If the van was armored, there were other ways to neutralize the target. He would not leave the compound alive.

He sheathed the knife, readied the rifle, and moved along the edge of the loft. He had a clear view of the office below. At the far end of the loft, a dozen guards raced away from him toward the walkway that connected the office to the factory.

They could be ignored for the time being.

A half-dozen guards quietly entered the office below. The target was in the middle of the cluster, being held at a walking crouch.

The soldier lined up the shot-

A blurred projectile whirled toward his head-

He turned, knocked the projectile aside with his metal arm, and opened fire, but all he hit were several of the guards at the end of the hallway who had been staggering back onto their feet.

Down below, the guards aimed their pistols toward the loft.

The soldier shifted and hosed the guards below, but the target was no longer with them and he hadn’t even sighted Captain America yet and-

---

Steve had gotten rid of the guards in his way and made it to the end of the connecting hallway, only to catch sight of something that gave him both an overwhelming feeling of relief and an overwhelming feeling of dread. Bucky stood there at the edge of the loft floor, rifle at the ready,
drawing a bead on something down below. Steve didn’t have to see what he was aiming at to know it was Santini, and that if he waited a moment longer, Bucky would hit the shot he was trying for.

He flung the shield straight down the hallway, not trying for a fancy carom shot or even planning ahead for the ricochet, just trying to get the shield to Bucky before he could pull the trigger. And though Bucky pivoted and slapped the shield aside, Steve had accomplished his goal: Bucky had lost his shot.

But he brought the rifle up. And this time, he aimed it towards Steve’s end of the hallway.

“Sam!” He took cover behind the corner as Bucky’s full-auto return fire chewed up the hall and dropped all of the guards. “Santini’s on the ground floor of the office building! Heavy fire from both sides. Get here fast but be careful!”

More gunfire from Bucky, in the other direction this time. Was he hosing the ground floor in the hopes of hitting Santini?

He didn’t waste another moment. He rounded the corner and dashed down the hallway at a full sprint, burst out into the loft area just as a bullet from below whizzed past him. And there Bucky was, firing his rifle down at the ground level.

“Bucky, stop!”

---

Something loosed in the soldier’s head then.

I’m sorry Bucky, I’m so sorry, I know it hurts

The man on the bridge had said that.

I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts

The man on the bridge had said that while they were sitting on the beach eating pelmeni sitting on the couch in the living room eating apple pie sitting in the dining room eating pizza or pancakes-

I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts

The man on the bridge had said that to him he had said that to him he had-

“No!”

He turned to fire at Captain America - at the man on the bridge- but he had emptied his M4, and he tossed it aside, pulled out the SIG-Sauer P226R pistol and-

Captain America was only the second priority. First priority: neutralize the target.

Neutralize the target.

He had promised the doctor his best work.

A flurry of gunfire came from down below. He blocked the shots with his metal arm, then vaulted over the side of the loft and landed on the one remaining guard. A shot through the head finished him, but where was the target?

I’m sorry Bucky I’m so- no!
No!

Where was the target?

---

Bucky tossed his rifle aside, the empty weapon clattering to the floor and over the side of the loft, and aimed a pistol at Steve.

He’d fire. No, of course he wouldn’t. He’d been brainwashed; he was capable of anything. He’d been brainwashed last time, and he still hadn’t been able to bring himself to take the shot. He’d shot him four times, and stabbed him, and beaten him almost to death. Yes, but then he’d saved his life. It was Bucky. Bucky would never hurt him…

The shield lay there on the floor of the office loft, almost mocking him with its uselessness - Steve could see it, could map out the exact sequence of movements he’d need to reach it, and still knew he could never get to it in time. Not in time to use it to deflect Bucky’s shots, and not in time to fling it again as a distraction.

He stood there as if cast in bronze, waiting for the shots. And when the crack of gunfire did split the air, he recoiled in shock. Bucky wouldn’t have. He couldn’t have…

Where was the pain?

But Bucky hadn’t fired at him. He hadn’t fired at all. The guards down below had, and Bucky had whirled and held up his metal arm to ward off the bullets. And before Steve could even breathe, Bucky had leapt over the edge of the loft floor down to the floor below. There was a thud as he landed on what must have been a guard below, heard a single shot and then nothing else.

He scooped up the shield from where it had fallen and went hurtling over the edge himself, not even bothering to look down until he was in the air. Bucky was there, pistol still in hand, the guard shot through the head at his feet and a lost, angry expression on his face.

Steve landed on his feet and launched himself at Bucky without preamble. If he could only pin him, hold him still, then maybe he could talk sense to him. Maybe he could make him remember.

Maybe…

“Bucky, hold still and listen to me! It’s Steve, don’t you remember? It’s Steve!”

---

Captain America the man on the bridge tackled the soldier to the floor and he was shouting, shouting his name was Steve, shouting shouting, and they both went down and-

*I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts*

“No!”

They had eaten pelmeni they had eaten apple pie he had eaten pizza with the man on the bridge on the beach on the couch and-

“Get away from me!”

He grabbed the shield with his metal hand - Captain America remained stubbornly attached to it - and he rolled and hurled the shield - and Captain America the man on the bridge it’s Steve it’s Steve
it’s Steve - at the far wall.

The wall cracked under Captain America’s weight, showering a heavy dusting of sheetrock everywhere.

The target!

The target was the first priority.

The dead guard’s earpiece announced that the target was under cover from heavy fire in the warehouse, something about an unidentified assailant with mechanical wings, and they had lost sight of the Black Widow.

He spared a glance at Captain America.

*I’m sorry Bucky it’s Steve it’s Steve I’m so sorry Bucky don’t you remember me I know it hurts it’s Steve it’s Steve*

He gritted his teeth, raised the pistol at Captain America. He could shoot him right there, shoot him right in the head, and it would stop, everything would stop, everything would STOP.

NO!

First priority: neutralize the target.

He turned and ran up the stairway leading back to the loft. He would get across the walkway to the warehouse and fire at the target from above.

---

Bucky grabbed hold of the shield like he had on the causeway, but Steve was ready for him this time and locked his arms through the straps to make sure Bucky couldn’t wrench the shield away from him. He hadn’t reckoned on the sheer raw power of Bucky’s mechanical arm though and he was hurled across the room, smashing into the wall and cracking the plaster, filling the air with white dust.

And Bucky was aimed the pistol at him again, his jaw clenched and his teeth gritted, and Steve knew that there would be no getting out of the way, no dodging the shot…

But the shot never came.

Bucky turned and dashed up the stairs, back into the loft, and as Steve awkwardly clambered to his feet and started after him, clipping the shield to his back as he ran, the thought kept hammering at the inside of his skull that Bucky had *chosen* not to fire. That something was there in his mind, maybe a memory, maybe an instinct, maybe something different altogether, but something that had stopped Bucky from pulling the trigger not once, but twice.

He sprinted down the covered walkway after Bucky, saw him running into the office, and knew that he would have a clear shot at anyone down below if he made it into the warehouse. He lunged forward, putting everything he had into a diving tackle. He locked his arms around Bucky’s ankles as his own chest and stomach hit the floor, wrenched for all he was worth and brought Bucky down to the floor with a thud. And then he was scrabbling for the gun, fingers grasping for the weapon to wrest it away, to throw it away as far as he could.

“Bucky, stop it! Don’t try to kill him, that’s just what they want you to do! That’s all they’ve ever
wanted you to do, is just kill whoever they point you at, and it’s got to stop!”

---

The soldier almost made it across the walkway to the warehouse when Captain America the man on the bridge it’s Steve it’s Steve it’s Steve tackled him and sent him slamming face first into the floor.

*I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry I know it hurts*

“Stop it!” He tasted blood pooling in his mouth and his eyes had started to burn. “Stop it, stop it!”

He hated him, he hated him he hated him. If he killed him, it would stop. If he killed Captain America, it would stop it would stop it would STOP.

*I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry it’s Steve I know it hurts*

Captain America the man on the bridge scrabbled for the SIG-Sauer pistol, his hand clutching over the barrel, and the soldier let go of the grip, then slammed his elbow into Captain America’s face or neck or whatever was behind him.

“I hate you!”

Captain America gagged choked made an awful sound, and the soldier clambered out from under him and unholstered his MP-443 Grach pistol.

His eyes burned hot, overflowed, and he hated Captain America, he hated him, he hated him, he wanted it to stop wanted it stop wanted it to stop just stop just stop-

He aimed the pistol-

First priority: neutralize STOP

First priority: STOP IT STOP IT HE WANTED IT TO STOP

He aimed the pistol and he wavered on his feet and the first priority was the target and his eyes were hot burning overflowing and he wanted it to stop wanted it to stop wanted it to stop.

---

Blood streamed from Steve’s broken nose, his own tears blinded him, but he was on his feet again and ready to take a beating one more time if it meant walking out of there with Bucky. He’d risk being put in the hospital if it meant he could have his best friend back. He wasn’t afraid of pain, of injury, of most things that he probably ought to have been, because there was more at stake here than himself. There always had been, and that made all the difference. In all his years and in all the fights he’d been in - win or lose - he’d never been fighting merely for himself but for something far greater than himself. And this may have been the most important fight of his life.

Still, Bucky’s words lanced into him with a tearing pain far worse than any physical injury could ever be.

“Just let it go, Bucky.” He reached up, pulled off his helmet, and let it drop to the floor. Spread his arms wide, didn’t go for the shield but instead looked deep into Bucky’s eyes and refused to look away. “You don’t have to do this anymore.”

Bucky hesitated.
Suddenly the world tilted crazily sideways. A huge wave of pressure slammed into Steve, blowing him off his feet like a rag doll and peppering him with tiny hard sharp missiles. All equilibrium was lost, the floor dropped out from under him, and he fell insanely downward.

He landed hard on his side, a massive jolt of pain surging through him as he smacked the ground, and then another, worse pain slammed him as something huge and heavy landed on his legs. Smoke was everywhere, stinging his eyes and clogging his nose, making it impossible to breathe.

Gradually the smoke cleared, and Steve realized what must have happened.

He was lying on the ground between the factory and the office building, directly below where the covered walkway had been just a moment ago. It was now in smoking ruins, jagged teeth of metal and stone and glass protruding from each building and heaps of rubble on the ground. One of the men fighting on the ground had fired a grenade up at the walkway, and from the looks of it, had been crushed by the falling debris. Steve’s own legs were trapped, pinned beneath a girder. He struggled to free himself.

Bucky staggered to his feet, a blurry figure in the drifting smoke, and turned to look right at him. Turned and looked him dead in the eyes and raised the pistol again.

“Bucky, listen to me!” Steve fought, twisted, tried to yank his legs free of the debris that wouldn’t budge. “Remember who you are! You don’t have to be the Winter Soldier anymore! You don’t have to be what they tried to turn you into! You can walk away from this, you can walk away and we can just go home again, and all you have to do is put the gun down! Please, Bucky!”

---

For a long moment - too long - the soldier had remained on the ground, blood and sweat and tears streaming down his face. He could end it, he could end it now, it could stop, everything could stop. He couldn’t breathe.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m sorry it’s Steve I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry it’s Steve it’s Steve I know it hurts_

All he had to do was stand up and pull the trigger, and everything would stop, it would be all over, he could pull the trigger and everything would stop.

_I’m sorry Bucky I’m sorry it’s Steve I’m sorry Bucky I’m so sorry it’s Steve it’s Steve I know it hurts_

He struggled to his feet. He raised the pistol.

_Just let it go Bucky_

All he had to do was pull the trigger and it could stop.

_Just let it go Bucky just let it go you don’t have to do this anymore_

All he had to do was pull the trigger and it could stop. It could stop it could all stop.

He could stop.

He could rest.

_Just let it go Bucky_

He looked at Captain America the man on the bridge looked at Steve it’s Steve it’s Steve for a long
moment.

He took a breath…

He could stop. He could rest.

… and turned the pistol on himself.

---

“Bucky, no!”

Steve thrashed insanely, but the girder pinning him wouldn’t budge; reached back for the shield, but it wasn’t there; fought and stretched and clawed at the ground to free himself and nothing would work!

He had been inches away once before. Had reached out for Bucky and grasped nothing but air and watched him fall, screaming, to his death. To far worse, as it turned out. And now it was going to happen again. He was going to have to watch from less than ten feet away as his best friend - his only link to a world that no longer existed, the most important person in every way that had ever mattered - blew the back of his head off and he would have to live with that for the rest of his interminable life.

“NO!”

“Nyet!”

A blur of motion, black with red highlights, darted through the air and lashed out with a booted foot. The gun flew from Bucky’s hand, clattering to the ground far beyond Bucky’s reach. And then Natasha was there, speaking words that Steve couldn’t understand as Bucky seemed to crumple to the ground.

Steve reached down and pulled with all his might at the girder and managed to wrench his left leg free and pop something in his ankle loose at the same time. He ignored the stabbing pain as he kicked hard at the girder again and again until his right leg was free, and then he was hobbling, crawling over to Bucky, and he couldn’t see for the smoke or was it for the tears?

“Oh God, Natasha, he almost…”

---

[“This isn’t how it ends,”] the Black Widow said to the soldier. [“Not like this. Not today.”]

And maybe she said more after that, but the soldier’s knees gave way beneath him and he crumpled to the ground.

He had failed.

He had failed everything.

His mission. The doctor. Rest.

He had failed.

Captain America the man on the bridge Steve was there suddenly, and they were talking over and around him, talking talking talking, and the words rushed by him senselessly, just a lot of loud
roaring in his ears.

He had failed everything.

Everything.

The roaring grew louder in his ears and his vision seemed to slip away somewhere and the whole world clouded over and shrunk and became distant and he could go away he could go away somewhere…

He could go away…

---

Steve knelt there, ignoring the burning pain radiating from his ankle - he must have broken it, but it hardly mattered now - and reached out in alarm as Bucky’s eyes lost their focus and stared blankly up at nothing at all.

“Bucky?” His voice rose in pitch as he patted Bucky on the cheek, then slapped him, with no response whatsoever. “Bucky, come on! Wake up! Don’t do this to me! Not now!”

“Rogers, stop it.” Natasha reached out to stay his hand, grabbing hold of his wrist when he didn’t stop on her command, finally raising her voice. “Steve!”

He turned to look at her, falling apart and he knew it and he didn’t give a good Goddamn, but she hardly ever used his given name. With her, it was almost always ‘Rogers’.

“He’s catatonic.” She reached down with surprising tenderness and smoothed the hair off of Bucky’s forehead. “We need to get him out of here.” She reached up to her earpiece. “QJ-C119 descend for evac, stat. Sam, you there?”

“Just getting a collar on our stray puppy here.” Sam’s voice crackled in Steve’s earpiece. “Stubborn bastard. Had to sing him a lullaby. We heading home now?”

“Quinjet’s on its way down. Meet us in the courtyard with Santini.” Her eyes flicked over to Steve, then back down to Bucky as she spoke again. “We’ve got Barnes.”

We’re going home, Bucky.

He felt the downdraft from the Quinjet’s engines as it landed in the courtyard. He found the energy to climb to his feet, to shoulder Bucky between him and Natasha, and to walk on an ankle that had no business trying to support him. Slowly they made their way toward the waiting plane.

We’re going home.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if it'll be that easy for them? I JUST WONDER.

Notes, poetry, and random comments are warmly welcomed. And seriously? I've gotten some of the BEST COMMENTS lately. Really, they just light up my whole day. I find myself reading them and thinking 'STAAAWWWWNP! THIS IS ALL TOO MUCH!'
Nah, just kidding. Never stop. I have AWESOME readers. Even the ones who don't comment. I appreciate every kudos.
“It’s all going to be okay now, Bucky.” Steve patted Bucky’s hand, carefully avoiding the IV needle. “You’re going to be fine.”

He wondered who he was trying to reassure. The doctor (called in mid-flight and dispatched immediately from Westchester…) had sedated Bucky heavily enough to keep him immobile until morning, which meant he probably wouldn’t hear anything. So… not Bucky. Which begged the question: why did Steve need to be reassuring himself? Didn’t he believe that things were going to be all right now? Hadn’t he believed that getting Bucky back home and out of the hands of HYDRA would be the key to it all?

Seeing Bucky lying there in the hospital bed in the medical bay of Avengers Tower, pumped full of sedatives to help him sleep deeply enough not to have nightmares, Steve began to realize that it wasn’t going to be that simple. For one thing, HYDRA had wiped Bucky’s mind clear again - enough to make him believe that he actively hated Steve - which meant that nothing they’d accomplished during those three weeks in Brooklyn would be there. They’d have to start all over again. And for another…

He sagged in the chair, hit by a sudden wave of exhaustion. He was so tired. His ankle had stopped throbbing, but he wasn’t sure whether it was from the medicated wrapping Natasha had done on the Quinjet or from the fatigue he was feeling.

Maybe he’d close his eyes. Just for a minute…

A shrill chirping startled him awake after who knew how long, and he looked around wildly for a moment before realizing it was his phone. He answered it with sleep-befuddled hands, not even checking the caller ID first.

“Steve?” Sharon’s voice was crisp and clear for three in the morning. “It’s a good thing you’re awake.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m awake.” He rubbed a hand across his eyes, somehow even more tired than he had been before he’d closed his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Colonel Rhodes and I have made an arrest.” She paused, then, “You’ll want to come up to the helicarrier for this. Now, really.”

“An arrest?” He sat forward, elbows on his knees, and desperately tried to will himself into alertness. A large yawn escaped him nonetheless. “What, did Santini roll over on someone already?”

“No.” Another pause, as if she were choosing her words carefully. “No, we received an anonymous
tip-off that led to an arrest at a warehouse in Jersey City. You’ll want to come up for this. Should I send a Quinjet down?"

“Look, Sharon, Bucky’s pretty much in a coma right now from the sedatives.” Steve ran a hand through his hair, thought about getting up, and hurriedly dismissed the idea. “And I can’t remember the last time I slept properly. Can this wait until morning?”

“IT really can’t. He said he’ll only talk to you.”

He sighed, slumped forward. “Why? Does he want to curse me out for killing his Nazi grandfather or something?”

Sharon returned the sigh. “No, he’s Russian. His name is,” she pronounced the words slowly and haltingly, “Dmitriy Stepanovich Rodchenko. Doctor. HYDRA scientist. Hang on, I’m transmitting a picture of his lab.”

“Rodchenko?”

The name rang a bell, but Steve couldn’t be sure. He’d heard it before, not too long ago. Hadn’t he?

His phone beeped, and he thumb-swiped over to the image Sharon had sent him. An image of a cluttered room, thick cables running from all directions to lead into a bank of monitors and a highly-technical looking chair.

“Oh my God.”

Now he remembered the name. And in an instant, he was alert. On his feet, the pain in his ankle a memory. Moving quickly down the hall to shake Natasha awake, because she deserved to be there as well.

“I’ll be up there in half an hour.”

Twenty-six minutes later, he and Natasha were being led through the hallways of the Helicarrier by Sharon, who was very awake and all business.

“Colonel Rhodes is still securing the warehouse, more of a bunker, really, along with Agent Barton. Oh, and Agent Coulson.” Before anyone could comment, she held up a hand. “He wanted to see the lab.”

“I’ll bet he did,” Natasha said dryly.

“Yes, well.” Sharon led them into an observation room and gestured at the two-way mirror. “There you go. Doctor Rodchenko.”

On the other side of the glass sat a small, mousy-looking man with messy hair that had long since gone gray. He had been handcuffed to the tabletop, though he hardly looked like any kind of flight risk.

He stared at Rodchenko, a roil of emotions rushing over him. Karpov and Pushkin were long dead, but here was a man who had been involved with their ghastly work for the past forty years. He might have expected to see a twitching, cackling madman - a ghoul whose appearance mirrored the horrific things he’d done. But instead, he saw an old man. Gray-haired, bespectacled, a man he would have passed on the street and perhaps held the door for.

He was reminded of what he’d read about the trials of the Nazi elite. How people had remarked that
to a one, every one of the war criminals had been so much smaller and so much less intimidating than they’d expected. How they’d mostly been small men, unassuming men, the sort no one would look twice at.

“He said he wanted to talk to me.” He balled his hands into fists in his pockets. “Fine. I’ll talk to him. I’ve got a few things I think he needs to hear.”

---

The local news feed on Rodchenko’s laptop had been overflowing with breathless reports of a SHIELD raid in Clifton, New Jersey, and by the time a member of the support team had contacted him to tell him that the Winter Soldier had been captured, Rodchenko knew that it was over.

It was only a matter of deciding on the manner of his undoing.

Finding SHIELD’s anonymous tip line was the work of a moment, though he was somewhat surprised to discover that the call was live. He had rather expected to leave a message, but of course, someone like Captain America would certainly value expediency.

Expediency of the sort that saw the front door blown open precisely twenty-seven minutes later. Captain America wasn’t on-hand to make the arrest, but the Avengers known as War Machine and Hawkeye were, along with two other agents that Rodchenko didn’t recognize.

In no time at all, they had handcuffed him, and then he was being taken up to a helicarrier, and quite suddenly his unfortunate career as a HYDRA scientist was over.

For what, who knew? A show trial and execution, most likely, but that remained to be seen.

He had few words for the previously unidentified female agent that he now knew to be Agent Carter, though he did give her his name. But what would have been the point in telling her the whole story? She would only relay it to Captain America, and given the nature of the story, he would only be made to repeat it.

And so he waited, and before long, Captain America himself was in the interrogation room, looking surprisingly filthy, though alert and unsurprisingly angry.

“Captain America.” The man took a seat across from him. “I apologize right now for my English.” He said the words slowly and carefully. “I do not often speak it.”

---

The words came haltingly out of Rodchenko’s mouth, his English rusty and disused by his own admission. Which only served to spark a fireball of anger in Steve’s chest.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t, would you?” He tried to keep his voice even, but tremors of barely concealed anger turned it jagged. “Not even to the American man you held prisoner for decades.”

He leaned forward in the chair, hands on the table, and leveled a red-hot glare at Rodchenko. This small man, gray-haired and unassuming, had been the reason for Bucky’s twisted mental and emotional state for forty years. And now that SHIELD had captured him, Steve was going to do his level best to make certain he paid for every single minute of it.

“I know who you are.” Barely-controlled anger throbbed in every syllable. “I read the file. Pushkin died in 1973, and you took over.”
Rodchenko was silent for a moment, then, “Yes, Doctor Pushkin died in 1973. I was his…” He seemed to search for the words, came up short, and tried again. “While I was in school to be doctor, he was… He liked my work. My student work. He was… maybe… advising my work.”

Steve couldn’t help but ask. “And what was your work?”

“Truth serum,” Rodchenko said carefully, and Steve dimly remembered mention of one in the file, sometime around 1973 when Bucky had tried - and failed - to make it to Brooklyn.

So long ago.

The doctor continued. “My name is Dmitriy Stepanovich Rodchenko.”

The tangle of unfamiliar syllables coming out of the doctor’s mouth was impossible to unravel. His accent was thick, bordering on impenetrable. Thicker by far than Wanda’s or Pietro’s - they had lived in the United States long enough to become more comfortable with the English language and reduce their natural accent to a level that made conversation easy. But it was as Rodchenko had said himself: he was not used to speaking English, and so he did not do it well.

Rodchenko must have caught the look on Steve’s face, for he added, “But perhaps call me Doctor Rodchenko?” He flattened the ‘r’ in a vague approximation of an American accent. “Easier for you, I think.”

“Doctor Rodchenko.”

Steve locked eyes with the man, who did not seem to falter under his gaze. He must have known who he was speaking to; he’d apparently told Sharon he wouldn’t speak to anyone else. And yet he seemed unafraid. Why? What did he have in mind?

Keep him talking, said a voice in his mind that sounded like Natasha. Even if you miss something now, it’s all being recorded and computer-analyzed.


Just like the doctor they had made the panicked call to mid-flight. The one who was carefully attending to Bucky as they spoke. A curious coincidence?

Steve didn’t know whether he even believed in coincidences anymore.

“A real doctor.” He nodded slowly, the anger boiling up again. Even men of great brilliance and education were not immune to the lure of evil. Johann Schmidt had been a great scientist as well, hadn’t he, before he’d become the Red Skull? Arnim Zola, too, had been a genius.

Intelligence was no shield against evil, he thought bitterly. In fact, intelligent men seemed to have a greater capacity for it than anyone else.

“I know a biochemist.” He kept his eyes locked on Rodchenko’s. “Dr. Henry McCoy. One of the X-Men. A brilliant man, and I can’t count the number of lives he’s saved with what he can do. And you? What have you done besides tear my best friend’s mind to pieces?”

“Not much else.” Rodchenko winced. “In truth, not much else.”

No one would fault him for it, Steve realized even before the notion had fully formed itself in his
mind. And then, as the thought took full shape in his mind and he was able to fully comprehend it, he stood captivated by it for a long moment.

He could avenge Bucky right there.

At least in some small part he could. Karpov was dead, Pushkin was dead, both of them architects of Bucky’s suffering, and they were beyond the reach of any punishment but God’s own. But Rodchenko was right there in front of him. And no one who knew anything about Bucky and what had happened to him would be able to fault Steve if he reached out and wrapped his hands around Rodchenko’s neck and…

No. No!

He recoiled mentally. That wasn’t who he was. It had never been the way he believed in doing things, and it never would be. Rodchenko was defenseless, an old and tired man handcuffed to a table. A man who had even just admitted that his life had amounted to nothing. Killing him would be the act of a coward.

And the anger was becoming entwined with something else as he sat there staring at this small gray-haired man. Grief. Loss. Sadness for his friend and everything he might have been if not for one instant. A bad misstep, a loss of balance, a reach that was inches too short…

He found himself asking the only question that mattered.

“Why?” He clenched his jaw against the sudden tremors that shook his frame. “Why did you do it?”

Rodchenko sighed, then seemed surprised by the sound. As if he hadn’t expected himself to seem so obviously old and tired during his own interrogation. “Do what? What part? This is very long story, Captain. What part do you want to know?”

“All of it.”

A voice in Steve’s mind - one that sounded a lot like Wanda - told him he was making a mistake. That hearing the story would be like reading the file had been. That he was asking for a lot of pain for no real reason. That he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

But he had to know. For Bucky’s sake, and for his own. Because maybe somewhere in that story was the key he’d need to bring his friend back. Maybe Rodchenko knew of a way to reverse what the Soviets and HYDRA had done. Maybe it would all be worth it this time.

But more than that, he had to know because he needed to know what had made it possible for Rodchenko - a doctor, a scientist, a man who must have known precisely what his actions would result in - to wreak havoc inside the mind of his best friend. The world had to be made to make sense.

“How at least enough to understand. Because I don’t.” Steve shook his head, grief and anger mingling in his voice and tearing at his heart. “I don’t understand how anyone could know exactly what they were doing to my friend and willingly do it anyway. Choose to do it, even. So tell me.”

---

“Choose?”

How very American.
Rodchenko would have waved away such a ridiculous notion, but he was handcuffed to the table and so couldn’t do much more than look incredulously at the man.

The Soldier knew better than to ask about choice. Of course he did, though Captain America would want to insist that his friend was still an American. But indeed, he knew better. They all did.

“What is this, ‘choose’?” He shook his head impatiently, before the captain could give him some sort of definition. “Yes, I know this word. I know what this means, ‘choose’.”

His gaze strayed over to what was obviously a two-way mirror. He wondered who might be on the other side of it. The Black Widow Romanova, perhaps?

She would know all about how little one got to choose anything.

“If I could choose, I would have been, what do you call this? To study language?” He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then settled his gaze back on Captain America. “Linguist, I think. But my examination marks were good.”

Too good.

“And so when I am just sixteen, they tell me I will go to Lomonosov University and study science. And then I am very good at that, and they tell me I will next study biochemistry and become doctor.” He paused. “And then I do that, and Comrade Doctor Pushkin is pleased with this, and they tell me I will come work for military. Very secret military, on very secret project, and so I do that.”

He shook his head suddenly. He was talking too much, and for what? What would it matter in the end.

“Where is this ‘choose’, Captain? What do you mean, ‘choose’?”

---

Steve found he had nothing to say to that.

The documentaries he’d watched during the first few months of his return had gone into deep detail about the loss of personal freedoms in the Soviet Union. About how the government had implemented a cradle-to-grave system in which they had control of nearly every aspect of the lives of their citizenry. About how the life of a Soviet involved very little choice, if any at all.

But had that extended even to the choice to do such unconscionable things to an innocent man?

He was on the point of telling Rodchenko that there was always a choice. He nearly challenged him to consider what might have happened if he had simply refused to rewrite Bucky’s mind, and then realized exactly what would have happened. The documentaries and his own research had provided more than ample evidence, and Natasha had filled in the rest.

A gulag, or death, or the Winter Soldier project. Those would have been his choices.

“But you still know what you did to him.” He had to clench his jaw again as the grief threatened to take control of him. “You saw what he was, you knew who he was and where he was from, and now look at him. He didn’t even remember his own name. Are you telling me you didn’t feel any way about that?”

For a long moment, Rodchenko said nothing. Then, “By 1973, when I join project, your friend has been Winter Soldier for nearly thirty years. Longer than… than he had not been Winter Soldier.” He
shook his head. “Why, then, does it matter who he is or where he is from?” He stared at his hands, still locked to the table. “But I feel many ways about that. He was… different. Before. He was different. Soviet Winter Soldier is very different than HYDRA Winter Soldier.”

Something in Rodchenko’s voice, something in the sudden shift in his posture, told Steve that he was thinking about very uncomfortable things. Things he’d done, been a part of, that maybe in retrospect he wished he hadn’t. Things that were the stuff of Steve’s nightmares.

Quietly Rodchenko said, “Who would choose that? Nobody.”

Quite suddenly - and startlingly - Steve realized that Rodchenko must have preferred Bucky as he was under the Soviets. Not that he’d had any choice in that, or apparently in anything else. No matter how he might have felt, which Steve still had no answer for.

More than that, though, there was the suggestion that something had drastically changed for Bucky between Karpov’s death and the time HYDRA acquired him. Whenever that was. So what had changed? How had HYDRA even managed to get hold of him from the Soviets? The abrupt ending of the file had raised so many questions, unanswerable questions, and maybe now they could be answered.

“You worked for the Soviets.” Steve reached for another thread, one that they could follow to untangle the Gordian knot of Bucky’s past. “And you worked for HYDRA. What happened there? How did HYDRA end up in control of the project?”

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Well, there it was.

Rodchenko had wanted to talk to Captain America, had he not? Otherwise he would have taken poison and been done with it. Not that he had a poison tooth like some low ranking foot soldier, but he had an ample supply in his laboratory.

And so there he was. No poison. Time to talk. He would spill all of HYDRA’s secrets and then perhaps watch HYDRA burn before SHIELD did away with him. Or perhaps HYDRA would find a way to simply set him up as their scapegoat, and things would continue as they always had.

Regardless, time to talk.

“Maybe first you will open these?” He rattled the cuffs gently and, at Captain America’s raised eyebrow, added, “I am sixty four years old. You think I am going to fight you, win, fight all of your Avengers, and then jump off helicarrier?”

The barest hint of what might have been a smile crossed Captain America’s lips. “All right.”

Captain America turned to look at the mirror, directing his eyes to where an agent must have been standing, and nodded his head once. Then he went to the door and waited, and a moment later, Agent Carter entered and dropped a key into his hands. The look on her face was one Rodchenko didn’t care to explore too deeply.

It was the work of a moment to unlock the cuffs. “There.” Captain America sat back down. “Now. You were saying?”

Rodchenko sat back in the chair and massaged his wrists. Briefly he considered requesting a cup of tea, but Captain America was clearly not a patient man and he had no wish to antagonize him. Perhaps he would ask later.
“HYDRA ended up in control because there was no Soviet Union to be in control.” He thought of
dank hospitals and cold communal flats, and his expression darkened. “No, there is more than that,
but my English is not very good.”

At the captain’s sudden stormy expression, he held up a hand.

“So you must give me time to think of it and then say it.” He took a breath. “Comrade General
Karpov died in 1988. Soviet Union is already falling apart, but of course, no one wants to say this.
The project is… one day, just closed. And Department X is one day just closed, too. Just like that.”
He snapped his fingers. “I come in one morning and Politburo man is there, and he say that we are
all no longer working, we are all to go home, project is over, Department X is over.”

Just like that. Gone.

“We are sent away, and our work was very secret, and so… and… Soviet Union is falling apart.” He
looked hard at the two-way mirror. “There is no work. Not for doctor who works fifteen years on
project he cannot talk about. I find work in state hospital. Pharmacist. And then in 1991, Soviet
Union falls apart, and just like that, it’s over.”

His stomach clenched at the memory and he found himself absently massaging his wrists.

“There is no money. I work at hospital, they pay me potatoes. Sometimes carrots. At night, I clean
toilets. Money for shared flat with cold water and sometimes electricity. And this I do until 1995.”

---

The first huge shock came when Steve realized that ‘they pay me potatoes’ was not a euphemism or
a metaphor, but a very literal fact. That Rodchenko, a man so brilliant that he’d gone to college at
sixteen and probably gotten his doctorate by the time he was twenty, had found himself reduced to
working in a shoddy state-run Soviet hospital and being paid in bags of produce. He thought back to
the history and civics classes he’d taken in school as a young man, reading about the frontier doctors
who would be paid in eggs or vegetables because money was all but useless out in the wilderness.
Or to the doctors sometimes mentioned in the newspapers in the 1930s, out in the Dust Bowl, who
were paid in much the same way. But that wasn’t what affected him the most.

Rodchenko had cleaned toilets at night just to afford a dingy apartment with no hot water and no
power. An apartment probably very much like the one Steve himself had lived in with his mother
when he’d been young. Rats and roaches for company, peeling paint and cracked linoleum, pipes
that clogged and froze and backed up filthy water into the sink and the tub, and always the smell of
decomposing vegetable peelings and rancid grease.

It was a staggering thing, to realize that they had something like that in common. Staggering, and
sobering.

“What happened in 1995?”

“I was ready to defect.” Rodchenko sighed. “You think maybe it’s not so hard? No Soviet Union.
No risk of assassination, but… I wanted to do it right. Not end up in New York washing dishes until
I die. Like so many others. I wanted to do it right. Finally I am in touch with British government, and
it seems maybe I will go there.”

He lapsed into silence again, one that stretched out long enough that Steve nearly prompted him to
keep speaking.

“But… HYDRA finds me at state hospital.” Rodchenko hesitated. Over a name, maybe? Who
knew? “He has been put in charge of closing Department X properly. So much has gone missing. So much people. So much projects. Must all be found and documented properly.”

Another long silence. The language barrier seemed insurmountable suddenly.

“He tell me I can come work for HYDRA. Lots of money there. More than I could ever make or use. Lots of money, and I can use it to buy dacha on lake.” A sigh slipped from Rodchenko’s mouth. Again he seemed surprised by it. “And I can start my work again. And…”

He sat in hard silence, then finally:

“He shows me my letters to British government. I can come work for HYDRA, or…”

Rodchenko seemed to age as he told his story. It must have been a trick of the light, the changing of his posture as the bitterness of his lot in life was recounted, but it didn’t look like it. The lines on his face actually seemed to deepen, the light in his eyes to dwindle, his body to slump under the weight of decades. He looked old now, older than his professed sixty-four years - still far younger than Steve himself, but worn and beaten from the hardship his life had been.

And this man had wanted to be a linguist.

What if he had been? How would everything have changed for Bucky? For all of them? Would it even have made a difference, or would the still-unnamed madman who ran HYDRA have simply found another doctor capable of running the chair and brainwashing Bucky into being the Winter Soldier for HYDRA instead of the Soviets?

The latter, probably, Steve thought with a mixture of anger and bitterness. If he had been willing to kill Rodchenko rather than let him defect, then he must have known others who could have filled the doctor’s role in a pinch.

“Who is he, Doctor?” Steve leaned in close. “The man who found you. He needs to be brought to justice. Bucky can’t tell me his name, but you can.” Insistently now. Urgently. “Who is he?”

“Bucky?” The name sounded ridiculous rolling off Rodchenko’s tongue. “Is that what you call him? Bucky? World’s deadliest assassin you call Bucky?” A beat, then, “You think you can bring this man to justice? You think you will just go and arrest him? This man who survives fall of Soviet Union and makes so much money and has so much power? You think you will just arrest a man like this?” He snorted. “He is probably already on private jet back to Moscow, and you think you will just arrest him, Captain?”

“Yes.”

All through Steve’s life, when the odds had been stacked against him, when people had told him that what he wanted to do was impossible, he had always had the same reaction. The same series of reactions. His eyes would harden, his jaw would clench, his chin would lift, and his will would turn to iron. And the more they insisted that he couldn’t do it, the more dead-set he was on doing it. On beating the odds.

Sometimes he succeeded. Sometimes not. But right then, success was the only option. To fail would be insufferable.

“Money and power don’t put men above accountability.” He felt his anger rising again. “And any man who believes that his wealth or his position or his connections make him untouchable is a blight on the whole human race. That’s the whole reason the Avengers exist. It’s the whole reason I exist. So that no one needs to live in fear of men like that.”
He turned a hard glare on Rodchenko. “And yes, my friend’s name is Bucky. I was calling him that before you were even born. Before before Karpov and Pushkin forced him into becoming the Winter Soldier, before they stole his memories and ripped open his mind, he was my best friend. He was there for me the day my mother died. He was there for me every time I needed him. And I’ll be damned if I’ll let the man responsible for what happened to him get away with it.”

His eyes were hard as stone as he looked into the mousy doctor’s eyes. “So I’m going to ask you one more time. What is his name?”

“I know how this ends, Captain.” Rodchenko returned the stare, though perhaps his eyes were not quite so hard. “I give you name, and my government will protect him. They will have to. Such big name. Such important man. But me?” His gaze drifted to his hands, curled tightly in his lap. “I am not big name, but I am… good for show they will need to have. Big HYDRA scientist. Long time ago Soviet military scientist. Looks very good for them, very good on television. Look how we clean our past away. Look how we take care of HYDRA.”

He looked up at Steve suddenly. “Maybe they will kill me for big show. Or maybe I will end my life in gulag.” He raised an eyebrow. “Many Soviet scientist did best work in gulag, so maybe they will let me work again. Or maybe… perhaps… he will find me in gulag and have me killed. That is how it ends for men like me.” His voice turned bitter. “And men like him keep going.”

“No if I can help it, they don’t.”

The fact that this still-unnamed man was apparently very highly placed either in Russian government or business did not escape Steve. If he was an important enough figure to warrant a cover-up of the magnitude Rodchenko was suggesting, then he was definitely important enough to drag out into the light and expose as a HYDRA operative for all the world to see. And if a few important people ended up being embarrassed by it, then maybe that was for the best. There would be no better way to show the world that no one was above the law, and that there was no insulation from justice.

“I swore a long time ago that I would see HYDRA stamped out.” He could still feel the chill of the winter air as he sat at that table in that bombed-out cafe in 1945, the wine doing nothing to warm him and even less to quiet the heartbreak of Bucky’s death. He could still hear the words he’d spoken to Peggy as he stared out into space, not seeing anything but the gorge whipping past him as he stared down into the abyss that had swallowed up his friend.

I’m not going to stop until all of HYDRA’s dead or captured.

Yes, he’d sworn that. But would justice be served by turning Rodchenko over to the Russian government, if they would transfer all the punishment onto him and let the real culprit go free? Yes, Rodchenko deserved punishment, but no more than his fair share. And to scapegoat him in order to let an evil man continue business as usual flew in the face of everything Steve believed, and everything the country he loved was supposed to stand for.

“And I keep my promises.”

---

“Yes.”

Rodchenko was quite suddenly acutely aware of just how exhausted he was. He sagged slightly in his chair and reached to clean his glasses just to keep himself moving. His hand stopped on his throat instead, still tender and best not thought about too deeply. He ended up pushing his fingers through his hair, and then he was at a loss for what else to do, so he dropped his hands back into his lap.
“I am sure you do try to keep your promises.”

He wondered where they were keeping the Soldier. What sort of justice would the Americans want him to face? If they were at all merciful or rational, then none. But the Americans also liked their big spectacles, and what a spectacle it would be to publicly punish the man responsible for killing an American president.

He sighed. Considered asking for that cup of tea, as the captain didn’t seem eager to end the conversation any time soon.

“Tell me, Captain.” He looked at him with tired eyes. “What will you do for your friend now? Your Bucky, as you call him.”

“The same thing I did when he first came to me.” Captain America’s face hardened momentarily. “Even if I have to start all over again. He’s in Avengers Tower right now, asleep.”

For a moment, Rodchenko was surprised at how readily the captain had given away the Soldier’s location. But then again, what could Rodchenko do about it? What would he even have wanted to do about it, if he were able?

Captain America continued. “Once he wakes up, I’m going to bring him back home. And then I’m going to start helping him remember again. Unless there’s a way to undo the damage to his mind. Is there?”

“No,” Rodchenko said firmly. “No, there is not.”

A lie would have been very easy. Something to keep Captain America interested, perhaps so interested that he would not seek to extradite Rodchenko quite so soon. And what would keep him more interested than a dangling promise of hope?

But he was so very tired of lies.

“A long time ago, before…”

Before the General had ordered him to burn it all away.

“Before HYDRA, perhaps. But now?” His sigh was one of bone-deep exhaustion. “Now best thing to do for him is keep him comfortable. And… be kind.”

He was so very tired.

“Be kind to him.”

Captain America raised an eyebrow. “I plan to be kind to him. But I know my friend is still in there somewhere.” He looked down for a moment. “He remembers things. Bits and pieces, and not always in the right order, but it’s there. All I need to do is help him find it.”

Rodchenko said nothing.

“It wouldn’t be kindness to leave him this way.” Captain America shook his head. “Not when I remember the way he was. Not when I saw him getting so much better while he was staying with me in Brooklyn. He needs more than kindness. He needs help.”

Another moment of silence. Abruptly Captain America stood to leave, but he stopped. Peered closely at Rodchenko. “Where did you get those bruises?” He gestured at Rodchenko’s neck. “Did the
agents who brought you in do that?"

Rodchenko’s eyes widened slightly before he dropped his gaze into his lap. “No. Your agents were very…”

Efficient? Professional? They had blown the door open and stormed the bunker with the precision one would expect of agents and soldiers of their caliber, and they had not been unnecessarily rough with him. Of course, he had been absolutely cooperative, which likely went a long way toward their treatment of him.

Regardless, they had nothing to do with the bruises on his neck.

“They were as expected. This is from…”

He suddenly felt very awkward. Embarrassed even, which was quite strange, considering his circumstances. But there it was.

“From HYDRA.”

Captain America eyed him with something that seemed like sympathy. “And you’re still not telling me this guy’s name.” A beat, then, “You’ve probably got a lot to think about, Doctor.” He opened the door, turned to leave. “I know I do. But I’ll be back.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, I’ve been getting such awesome comments from people lately. So nourishing and encouraging. I love it.

Of course, even more comments are always, always welcomed and appreciated.
The Morning After Redux

Chapter Notes

And now for some levity...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Avengers Tower
late November 2014

The soldier awoke to the sun streaming in his eyes.

He blinked slowly - once, twice, he could count the blinks - and held up his hand to shield his eyes, but his hand moved as if he were underwater. He tried to push himself into a sitting position, but his whole body was sluggish and uncooperative.

As if he had been sedated, probably. The doctor did that sometimes.

Only he didn’t seem to be in the doctor’s laboratory or his own quarters. He didn’t seem to be in their Jersey City base at all. And though their usual Kronas headquarters in Moscow was a modern construction of chrome and glass, it didn’t look like the gleaming infirmary that he seemed to be in right then.

He finally managed to sit up and look out the window. Which wasn’t hard. The entire opposite side of the room was made of floor-to-ceiling windows, and it was clear that the building was very high up and overlooking… Manhattan, maybe.

The truth came to him by degrees.

He had failed his mission last night. Or maybe it had been even longer? He had no idea how long he had been sedated. But he had failed his mission. He had failed to neutralize the target. He had failed to neutralize Captain America, even though the opportunity had presented itself several times.

Captain America. The man on the bridge.

Steve.

Captain America has said that his name was Steve. And that… didn’t feel incorrect. Maybe.

He had failed to neutralize Captain America, even when he had been trapped under debris and helpless. And instead… he had turned the pistol on himself. Only the Black Widow had stopped him.

And then…?

There was an IV line in his hand, held down with a single piece of tape. He scrubbled at the tape clumsily for a moment, then ripped it off and tossed it aside. The IV he unsteadily but carefully managed to ease out of his hand. And then he followed, or he tried to. He rolled out of bed, nearly sank to the floor when his knees gave out from under him, and then spent a moment hanging onto the edge of the bed and trying to focus.
The sedative would wear off eventually, but he had to move.

He staggered awkwardly, slowly, for the door and spent a very long time fumbling for the latch, only for the door to finally swing open and reveal a large bathroom.

The other door was so far away…

He braced himself against the door frame and took a deep breath. And another.

“Well, my good man,” a cheerful voice said behind him. “You’re standing on the corner of Dream Street and Siesta Boulevard, and the bus will be along shortly to take you to the Slumberland Hotel.”

The soldier turned - tried to turn - only his hand slipped on the doorframe, and suddenly someone had gotten a shoulder under him.

“You’re lucky I’m here,” the voice continued. “Because you were about to add a nasty concussion to your already long list of troubles.”

The soldier managed to turn his head slightly and got a face full of… blue fur.

The sedatives were very strong.

“I take it you were looking for the bar.” Blue fur smiled and patted the soldier on the back as he helped him stand more or less upright. “What’s the matter, didn’t I give you enough to relax on?”

The soldier tried to form words, but none wanted to come to him.

Blue fur peered critically at the back of the soldier’s organic hand and winced. “Oh, dear. You’re going to have quite a bruise tomorrow. You can’t just go pulling IV needles out, you know. There’s a procedure to follow.”

Again, the soldier searched for something to say, and again he came up with nothing.

Blue fur eyed the bathroom and smiled a toothy, canine smile. “Or were you about to answer a call of nature? I’d have sworn I left a bedpan there, but I can’t blame you for wanting to do it the old-fashioned way.” He shuddered exaggeratedly and shook his head, ponytail swaying. “I can’t abide bedpans myself. Demoralizing things. Though I think you could do with a catheter after this.”

For a very long moment, the soldier merely stared at him. Then finally, “You’re… blue.”

“Yes, well.” Blue fur didn’t miss a beat, helping the soldier over to the toilet and propping him upright. “Let that be an object lesson in the dangers of Manic Panic hair dye. I’ve learned my lesson thoroughly, I can tell you that.”

The soldier was still feeling the effects of the sedative far more than he realized. Yes, he’d been able to get out of bed and stagger to the doorway, but blue fur had to do everything short of aiming for him to get him to take a piss.

“Go on, give it a shake. I’m not going to do it for you, you know.” Blue fur considered a moment. “Though in the interest of not having you emasculate yourself, I’ll operate the zipper myself.”

“But…” The soldier fumbled with the drawstring of his pants. It was the first time he had noticed what he was wearing at all. Gone was his combat uniform, replaced with blue pajama pants patterned in what looked like cartoon dog bones and a blue t-shirt. “There is no zipper.”

“Can’t put anything past you.” Blue fur grinned. “Come on, now, back to bed.”
After a lot of stumbling - and mostly guided by the enormous, cat-like… doctor? - the soldier ended up right back where he had started. Blue doctor even pulled the blanket up, before taking another wincing look at the back of the soldier’s hand where he’d pulled the IV out.

“I can see we’re going to have to tape this one down just a little bit more securely.”

Three times around the hand, as it turned out, then twice around the wrist and spirally around the forearm. The soldier watched it all happen, and he wanted to say something about it, but the blue doctor worked very fast and the soldier’s thoughts trailed very far behind.

All that tape would be hard to peel off. Probably that was the point.

“What, me take chances?” Blue doctor chuckled and admired his handiwork. “Perish the thought, Mr. Neuman. Get out of that, if you can.”

The soldier blinked - once, twice, he could still count the blinks - and was about to say something about ‘Mr. Neuman’, but the blue doctor announced something about breakfast and zipped out of the room.

For such a big… man? (A furry blue man? He was probably a mutant.) For such a big man, he moved very fast. He was back in the room a moment later, rolling a tray table that fit neatly over the bed. On top of the table was a platter of what appeared to be crepes stuffed with scrambled eggs and sausage. There was also a glass of milk and a glass of orange juice, each with a straw poking out of the top.

“There!” Blue doctor gestured to the tray. “Breakfast.”

He looked at blue doctor for far too long in response.


“Ah, but what if I don’t?” Blue doctor raised a furry blue eyebrow and leaned in conspiratorially. “What if I’m doing exactly what’s expected of me?” He paused, considered. “It would certainly be the first time.” He gestured to the tray again. “Go on, then, try one of the breakfast burritos. Steve tells me you’re partial to pancakes, but the complexities of operating a fork and knife simultaneously are likely to elude you at this juncture.”

The soldier stared at him.

Blue doctor tried again. “Dig in. Just pick one up and take a bite.”

As the soldier did - slowly and haltingly, but he was very heavily sedated - blue doctor continued to talk.

“My name, by the way, is Dr. Henry McCoy. I’ve stepped into the role of primary care physician for the time being, and the primary care you can expect to receive from me over the next several days is a great deal of sleep.” He smiled genially. “From everything your friend Steve has told me, you’re in dire need of that kind of rest. But you look quite a bit better now than you did last evening. How do you feel?”

“I…” The soldier looked at blue doctor - Dr. McCoy? - for another long moment. “I don’t know.”

He ate the… breakfast burrito, blue doctor called it… in stupidly slow bites. One bite, then another, and another. He could count the bites.
The burritos, too. Once he finished off the one, he counted five more. Five burritos. Many burritos. A pile of burritos.

He hoped the sedative wore off soon.

“Where is… Steve?” He pushed half a burrito into his mouth and ate it that way. Easier than trying to take multiple, small bites. “Captain America? The… the man on the… the...”

He trailed off and stared unfocused at the wall of windows. Talking felt difficult. Eating felt difficult. And he still didn’t know where he was or what his next mission was supposed to be or even if Steve and Captain America really were the same person.

He didn’t know anything.

“Steve is very likely still asleep.” Dr. McCoy rattled his claws against the edge of the tray table. “He was called away rather late last night after having sat up with you for several hours while you slept.” He chuckled at the memory. “And when he returned, I took one look at him and told him that unless he got himself to bed right then, I was going to give him a glass of warm milk and put him to bed myself.” He paused a moment. “Of course, I may have said ‘pump you so full of narcotics you’ll think you didn’t sleep through the Sixties’, but I think he knew what I meant.”

The soldier shoved another piece of breakfast burrito into his mouth.

“Anyway, you’ll see him nearer to dinnertime, I’d expect.” Dr. McCoy raised an eyebrow. “Speaking of which, I’ll need to see if there’s enough food in the kitchen to give you both dinner. We may have to divert humanitarian aid from a small African nation.”

The soldier looked at him blankly for a long moment. “What… what the fuck… are you talking about?”

“Well, you see, you eat so much,” Dr. McCoy gestured to the tray, “that I didn’t know if there was enough food in the…” He sighed. “Look, if you have to explain the joke, it’s not funny.”

The soldier’s only response was to shove more burrito into his mouth. Dr. McCoy checked the monitors around the bed, seemed to find everything in order, and leaned back in his chair.

“Well, it looks as though you’re doing well.” He buffed his claws on his shirt. “But no getting up on your own anymore, do you hear? Doctor’s orders. And I am a real doctor.” He frowned. “Not technically an M.D., but you won’t tell anyone, will you? I mean, it’s not as though I prescribe anything. And I’ve never been sued for malpractice. Not yet, anyway…”

For what felt like a long time after that, the soldier slowly ate his way through the pile of burritos and drank the milk and orange juice.

Blue doctor - Dr. McCoy - talked the entire time, and most of it just flowed right past him. He talked very fast and laughed a lot, and the soldier found it too difficult to keep up with him. So he didn’t, and instead focused on finishing what was on his plate.

When the last burrito was gone and the milk and orange juice had been drained, Dr. McCoy wheeled the tray out of the room. The soldier thought he would try to pry the tape off of his hand, but Dr. McCoy returned too quickly for him to do anything at all.

He hoped the sedative wore off soon, except Dr. McCoy was already fiddling with the infusion pump.
“Wait.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to… I don’t… want to be here.”

Again his gaze drifted to the windows, out to what was probably the Manhattan skyline. Only very high up.

“Where…?” He looked at Dr. McCoy. “Where is here?”

Dr. McCoy looked at him. “Well, that solves the great mystery of why I don’t have an M.D. I’ve neglected the most important thing, haven’t I?” He moved away from the infusion pump and found his seat. “I’m terribly sorry, Sergeant Barnes. Or do you prefer ‘Bucky’?”

Sergeant Barnes?

Again, the soldier wanted to point out that blue doctor had the wrong guy, but again, blue doctor rushed forward with the rest of the conversation before the soldier could even put the words together.

The General had always been like that. But unlike the General, Dr. McCoy didn’t seem angry at him for not keeping up.

“Bucky, then.” Dr. McCoy nodded. “You’re in the medical bay of Avengers Tower in Manhattan. Your friend Steve brought you here last evening after you’d suffered a mental breakdown.” He furrowed his brow. “But going back to your other statement, if you don’t want to be here, where did you want to be? Apart from the Bahamas, of course.”

The conversation had already gotten away from him. He tried to put some thoughts together, but the sedative was slowing him down. He frowned, curled his fingers around the edge of the blanket. Dr. McCoy had asked him a question, but he couldn’t seem to put an answer together.

He wasn’t really made to think anyway.

Finally he said, “I don’t know.”

“Well, then.” Dr. McCoy gave him a warm smile and inclined his furry head, pushing his spectacles up on the bridge of his nose. “I can see one or two reasons why you might want to be here after all. One, your friend Steve is only a floor or two away, and he’s going to want to see you soon enough. Two, you’ve been through a great deal of trauma over an extended period of time, and you’re going to need a comfortable and secure place to recuperate.” He frowned slightly. “As well as a multi-stage outlined plan for said recuperation, likely involving more kinds of therapy than I’m licensed to provide.”

The soldier's gaze wandered down to the blanket before settling, unfocused, back on blue doctor.

Dr. McCoy grinned suddenly. “And three, there are breakfast burritos here. You can’t go wrong with breakfast burritos. Now I ask you, is there any reason in the world to be anywhere else right now?”

“I…” The soldier lapsed into silence for a long moment, then shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“See?” Blue doctor grinned broadly again. “Dr. McCoy always knows best. Now, if I’m not mistaken, you have an urgent appointment to be keeping, and I’ve eaten up enough of your precious time.” He stood up and adjusted the infusion pump. “Unconsciousness in five… four… three… two…”

The soldier wondered when he would see Steve - Captain America - the man on the bridge again. He opened his mouth to ask, but the words seemed too difficult to form.
“Oh dear,” he heard as he drifted away. “You’re going to have an awfully sore neck if you sleep like that…”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback, comments, and random X-Men cameos are warmly welcomed and appreciated.
Natasha had slipped into the room after Hank left and spent a few minutes studying the readouts on the monitors. She knew enough about the way the instruments worked to be able to understand what she saw, and from what she could tell, Hank McCoy was planning to keep James asleep for some time. The levels of sedative in his system were high enough to make her eyes widen - more than enough to have killed a normal person twice over - but the monitors showed normal vital signs. Blood pressure 100 over 70. Body temperature precisely 98.6 degrees. Breathing rate 6.46 per minute. Heart rate 48 beats per minute.

She sat by the side of the bed for a long time, watching James as he slept soundly under the influence of the sedative. The IV line was taped very securely to the back of his organic hand, and she smiled to think just what might have happened to prompt Hank to do that. Her fingertips were within easy reach of his metal hand, and it would have been easy enough to give in to the urge to reach out and touch him.

"Love is for children."

But it wasn’t as easy as that anymore, was it? What had happened between them couldn’t be dismissed as callously as that now that she knew what had been done to him. The file hadn’t told her everything, dead ending with the Soviets in 1988 and revealing nothing about HYDRA - but there had been enough for her to guess. Enough for her to realize that everything she’d convinced herself about James after Odessa had been the product of a desperate need to stay sane.

And there would be more to come now that Rodchenko was in custody; she would see to that personally. There was no better interrogator than her in all the world, and she knew that she could have him spilling his deepest secrets to her within half an hour. Less, maybe, if the methods were unrestricted.

"Don’t start that. You don’t want to go down that road."

No, she didn’t. She vastly preferred sitting there beside James, watching him as he slept, and waiting for him to wake up.

"Evening, Natasha."

She noted Hank’s approach, though he moved with remarkable agility and silence on his enormous paws. Now there was a man who had the physical gifts to have been one of the world’s greatest spies - and one of its worst ones. He was quiet, strong, agile, dexterous, intelligent, and observant. Unfortunately, he also happened to be huge, blue, furry, and catlike - thoroughly impossible to render inconspicuous. She had to smile at the thought.
“I see you’ve been keeping our patient company.” Hank took the infusion pump in his massive paw, studied it for a moment through his John Lennon glasses, then tapped out a sequence with the claw on the end of his index finger. “But I’m going to wake him now. He needs to eat dinner and handle the necessaries.” He checked the clock. “He ought to be awake in about fifteen minutes. I’ll be back by then”

Natasha nodded at Hank as he left, gave a small smile of agreement, and sat back to wait. After a near-precise fifteen minutes, James slowly blinked his eyes open.

“Natalia…” The name slipped out in a whisper and he smiled faintly. For a moment, it seemed like he meant to try to reach for her, but his hand dropped limply back onto the blanket.

The name reached out to her from across a yawning gulf of years, jarring loose memories she’d buried long ago. The two of them younger, at the peak of their careers with the Soviet Union. Executing missions with flawless perfection and then disappearing to make love in secret. Their illicit romance discovered, the two of them separated, only to find one another again. Always again. Until she looked into his eyes over the barrel of the gun he had trained on her, saw only an icy void there and felt a terror she could never have explained -

No.

That hadn’t been him. He hadn’t been James in Odessa. HYDRA had made him a different man. Perhaps not even a man, but the Winter Soldier in his most-distilled form. A killer, and nothing more.

But before he’d been that, he’d been James. The man who’d helped to hone her skills, who had spoken such perfectly-accented American English that she’d tried to model her own speech after his. Who had never called her Natasha, or Nata, or Natushka, because he’d found her given name beautiful. With him, she’d always been Natalia.

He’d found that memory, that instinct somewhere. What else was there to be found, she wondered, buried deep inside his damaged and rewritten mind?

[“It’s me, James.”] She reached out a hand and tentatively touched the back of his metal hand, thankful for Hank’s absence at the moment. [“I’m here.”]

---

The soldier awoke to a hazy vision of red that coalesced into a woman with long red hair and startlingly green eyes.

How long had it been since they had seen each other? Too long. Far too long, but they always came back together, even if it took days or weeks. Once it had taken a month. Maybe two? Time always ran together for him. It had never been easy to keep track.

His eyelids were already drooping and he didn’t think he’d stay awake for very long, but she’d understand. She always did. And they’d have later in the evening…

[“Nice to see you…”] he murmured, but he couldn’t keep his eyes open and he found himself drifting…

The soldier awoke in a hospital bed, and that wasn’t the first time such a thing had happened. Or even the fifth time, or the tenth, and all it meant was that he had been awoken from rest and there would be a mission waiting for him.

[“What…?”] He scrabbled for the IV needle that he knew would be in his organic hand, but there
was so much tape, and it just seemed to go on and on. [“What year is…?”] But he couldn’t finish the words and…

The soldier awoke in a hospital bed, but one very slow glance around the room showed him that blue doctor wasn’t there.

The Black Widow Romanova was there though.

He stared at her in dim confusion. [“Why…?”]

Was she there to kill him...?

He didn’t know. Too much to think about. Wasn’t ready for that.

[“Why are you…?”]

---

James seemed to swim in and out of lucidity. Not surprising, given the positively insane concentration of narcotics in his system - Natasha wouldn’t have been shocked to see levels like that put an elephant into a coma - but also hardly the best way to have a conversation.

She felt a stab of anger at his question about the year. He’d gotten so used to being frozen for long periods of time that he evidently expected waking up in a hospital bed to coincide with an unknowable amount of time having passed. She could only imagine what such a question would have done to Rogers, and considered it a very good thing that he wasn’t there to hear it.

[“One question at a time.”] She smiled at him and moved her chair closer to the bed. [“First of all, it’s still 2014. You’ve only been asleep for a few hours.”] Her smile faded slightly. [“And I don’t think you’ll ever need to ask that question again.”]

Certainly Rogers wasn’t going to stand for putting him back into cryo. And she didn’t much care for the idea either, now that she thought about it. To the point where she likely would have garrotted anyone who suggested it.

[“And I’m here because I wanted to see you.”]

He stared groggily at her. [“Mission…?”] A faint shake of his head. He tried again. [“Why would you…?”] He stumbled over the words, his tongue thick and heavy with the effect of the sedative. [“Want…? Why would…?”]

Slowly he lifted his organic hand and stared for a very long moment at the tape. It wrapped several times around his hand and his wrist and even up his arm. He sighed and began to clumsily work his fingers over the tape on his forearm without much success.

[“No, don’t do that.”] Natasha reached out and gently pushed his metal hand away from the IV. There wasn’t much resistance; she might just as easily have been nudging a child’s hand away from a plate of cookies that lay tantalizingly within reach. [“I don’t think Dr. McCoy would be very happy with either of us if you did that.”]

He looked back at her wordlessly, but he didn’t reach for the tape again.

She leaned forward, folding her arms atop the mattress, then resting her chin on her forearms. [“There’s no mission. You’re not with HYDRA anymore. You’re in Avengers Tower in New York.”]
The thought of mentioning that Rodchenko had turned himself in occurred to her, but she decided against mentioning it for the moment. Better for him to focus on getting better than to consider going after any kind of revenge. Besides, Rodchenko needed to stay alive long enough to talk.

[“And I wanted to see for myself how you were doing.”] She smiled slightly, a genuine smile that she was surprised to feel and even more surprised to have let show. [“You weren’t doing very well the last time, after all. How do you feel now?”]

[“Hungry,”] he said instantly, though the word seemed to drag on forever. Golodnyyyyyy...

For a long moment, they simply stared at each other. His eyes, glazed and unfocused as they might have been, were as blue as she remembered.

She stamped down on that train of thought before it could go much further. Her own feelings were for her own time. And even if she had sorted them out by now, which was ridiculously far from the case, she wouldn’t be doing him any favors by bringing them up. Not when he could hardly form a complete sentence and still had no idea who he was. He needed her help, not her affections. If it turned out that her affections were directed towards him at all.

She could have made a list three miles long of things she didn’t know right then.

[“Why did…?”] Again, James’ words slurred together. [“Why did you… stop… stop me?”]

[“I told you why.”] His question about his failed suicide attempt reached out to her, reminding her in equal measures why she cared about him and why she had to keep her distance for the time being. [“Because that wasn’t the way it ends for you. You just needed a chance to see things clearly.”] She looked into his eyes, searching. For what, she didn’t know. But searching nonetheless. [“So I gave it to you.”]

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then, [“How does it end then?”]

It was her turn to be silent, turning the question over in her mind.

She could have gone for the Rogers-style optimistic answer and told James that everything was going to be all right. That he was going to remember everything in a little while, and that HYDRA would never find him again, and that he could just relax and worry about nothing but recovering his strength and then enjoying his life afterwards. But she didn’t come anywhere close to believing that.

Her own gut feeling was that HYDRA would never stop hunting him, whether to capture and reprogram him or simply kill him so that he could never turn against them. And that even if HYDRA were not a consideration, the governments of the United States and Russia would both want him prosecuted for the multiple assassinations he’d carried out over his seventy-year-long career. He’d have to disappear if he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life in a windowless room or be executed to great public fanfare. And that would mean no contact with any of them ever again.

She couldn’t tell him that. She didn’t want to believe it herself. And so she thought for a long moment before smiling and giving him an answer that was somewhere between the two. A bit of Rogers’ enthusiasm tempered with a bit of her own realism.

[“Well,“] she said, edging her upper body a bit further over onto the bed. [“I suppose that’s up to you, isn’t it?”]

[“Not up to me.”] He looked into her eyes for a very long moment, then held up his hand so she could see the IV line. [“If it were… wouldn’t be here.”] He dropped his hand back onto the mattress.
She adjusted her position, recrossed her arms so the other one was on top now, and laid her chin back down on them. “I know Steve’s going to want to bring you back to Brooklyn with him when Dr. McCoy says you can leave. You were very comfortable there last time. What about going back?”

It was more likely that he would go back to his old refrain of taking off on his own and going after HYDRA. Which was even more unthinkable now than it had been a month ago. He was in no condition to be left alone for any stretch of time, even in a place as secure as the Tower. His mind was in tatters, and the only reason he hadn’t committed suicide was because she’d been perfectly positioned to stop him.

And if she were that thoroughly convinced that he shouldn’t be going off on his own, then she could only imagine what Rogers must have been thinking. James would be lucky to get to go to the toilet by himself.

“All your clothes are there, if nothing else.”

James stared at her in hazy confusion. “What are… are you talking about?”

Before Natasha could begin to explain what she was talking about, Hank breezed cheerily into the room, wheeling a tray table covered in dinner dishes.

“I think you may need to order a la carte, Natasha.” He smiled apologetically. “These are all for him. You do eat rather a lot, don’t you, Bucky?”

James nodded.

“And on that note - or actually, on an entirely different one - I think this may be a fitting moment for you to go off in search of your own meal, Natasha.” Hank adjusted his glasses. “There are things that need doing, and for which privacy is paramount.”

Natasha rose from her seat. “Rest easy, James.” She gave him a look - a long look - before turning and heading out. “I’ll be back later.”

---

Steve had slept like a rock all morning.

After getting in only an hour or so before sunrise after his talk with Dr. Rodchenko on the Helicarrier, he’d gotten back to the Tower and positively crashed in one of the guest suites. He’d set the tint controls on the floor-to-ceiling windows to stay fully opaque even in mid-morning sun; otherwise, the glass would have gone gradually transparent on a time delay and he’d have been woken up after a couple of hours by the sunlight. Tony had rigged all sorts of helpful little gizmos to turn the mundane into luxury, but Steve couldn’t help but wonder sometimes whether it actually made things any easier. He’d have been just as happy with heavy drapes…

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

_The girder pinned him to the ground._

_He fought, struggled, screamed desperately, but to no avail._

_Bucky stared down at the gun._

_Put it slowly into his open mouth._
Pulled the trigger.

Blew the back of his head off in a fountain of red.

Steve sat bolt upright in bed, sweat pouring off his forehead and the sound of the gunshot still ringing in his ears. It took him a moment to remember where he was, so real had the dream felt. The room was still dark, and when he fumbled with a shaking hand for the clock, he found that it was past lunchtime.

*Bucky* was the first thought that went through his mind, and he was quick to head over to the medical bay. Bucky, though, was sound asleep under a heavy blanket of sedatives, and so after spending a minute or two sitting by his friend’s side, grateful and relieved beyond belief, Steve headed down a few floors to deal with the business of getting SHIELD properly installed in the Tower’s upper-middle levels.

Hours later, around dinnertime, he headed back up, encountering Natasha as he exited the elevator. “You’re in luck, Rogers,” she said with a smile. “He woke up not too long ago.”

He found Bucky laying in bed, an empty dinner tray on the rolling table beside him. Hank stood nearby, fiddling with the infusion pump attached to Bucky’s IV line, in the middle of extolling the virtues of something called theremin music.

“The inventor was Leon Theremin,” Hank explained jovially. “But in his native Russia, he was known as Lev Sergeyevich Termen, and he really doesn’t get enough credit for being the father of electronic music.”

Bucky said nothing, but that didn’t seem to deter Hank in the slightest.

“In 1930, Termen and ten thereminists performed at Carnegie Hall.” Hank smiled a very toothy smile. “And do you know how you get to Carnegie Hall?”

Bucky looked at Hank warily. “No?”

“Practice, my friend. Practice.” Another smile. “So anyway, I think when you next wake up - which will be in the morning, by the by - I’ll play some of the more widely recognized pieces of theremin music, including the famous introduction to the classic film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.”

Steve hesitated, feeling oddly like he was intruding on a private moment. He took the chair next to the bed, cautiously taking in Bucky’s appearance. “Hey Buck. How are you feeling?”

Hank stepped away from the infusion pump. “You’re all set, ready to return to Morpheus’ sweet embrace for the next fifteen hours or so.” He looked at Steve. “You’ll have about ten, perhaps fifteen minutes to talk to him before he either goes loopy or just drifts away mid-soliloquy. So use the time wisely.” He patted the top of the blanket. “Good night, Bucky.”

Then Hank was gone, leaving Steve alone with Bucky for the first time in weeks.

Bucky stared at him wordlessly. Finally he said, “Why are you here?”

Steve turned back to him. “I missed you before. You were asleep when I got in.”

He decided not to mention - for the time being, at least - where he’d been the previous night. The last thing Bucky needed right now was to know that Rodchenko was on the Helicarrier. If that happened, Bucky would try everything he could think of to get up there and kill the doctor, and that was something Steve didn’t want Bucky having any part of. There would be no more assassinations,
no more murders. Not if he could help it, anyway. Bucky was better than that.

“I also ended up sleeping for most of the day, and when I got up and went to check on you, you were asleep too.” A short chuckle - a single breath of it, really. “You do a lot of that these days, I’m finding.”

Steve smiled, thinking of Bucky’s sleeping schedule over those three weeks in Brooklyn. He’d routinely slept anywhere between ten and twelve hours a day, and Steve didn’t imagine that was going to change anytime soon. Especially once he got back home and they were able to start getting him back to normal again. Remembering his life had been an exhausting ordeal for Bucky last time; there was nothing to suggest it would be any different now.

“But this is the first time I’ve seen you awake since we brought you here. So, how are you feeling?”

---

The soldier didn’t know how to answer that.

If he told Captain America that he didn’t want the IV - or the catheter, but the IV was more important - it probably wouldn’t change anything. The Avengers had taken him prisoner, even if they weren’t saying so yet. And so nobody was going to let him take the IV out.

Or maybe he was wrong.

He had tried to kill himself, but Romanova (Romanoff? He didn’t know which she preferred anymore…) had stopped him. And he couldn’t remember what happened after that, but blue doctor said he had had a mental breakdown, and so…

And so…

He didn’t know anything anymore.

He looked at Captain America. “I hate you.”

Except that he had failed his mission. He had failed to neutralize the target. He had failed to neutralize Captain America, even though there had been more than one chance to do it. Three chances, at least.

Why?

“No…” He chewed on his lip. “No, I don’t think that’s right…”

---

The words hit Steve like a slap. Rocked him to his core, burned a hole right through the center of him. And somehow, Bucky’s confusion and hesitant denial made it worse.

They’d done their work well, the Soviets and HYDRA. They’d torn open Bucky’s mind and put their fingerprints on every surface of it. Rearranged things, ripped things out, cut and pasted and twisted and remodeled at their whim, until they’d had him believing that he hated his best friend. And when he instinctively resisted, it was only in a halfhearted, lip-biting fashion. There was no refutation, no declaration of opposition to their lies. Because their lies had been forced so deeply into his head that his mind had grown around them.

And yet, Bucky had resisted. If only in that halfhearted and hesitant way, he had fought against a
notion he must have instinctively known to be wrong. At least, Steve told himself, that was a place to
begin.

“No,” Steve said slowly. “No, that’s not right.”

It hurt to hear those words come out of Bucky’s mouth, even if Steve knew they weren’t true. They
weren’t Bucky’s own thoughts; they were HYDRA’s. And yet, hearing Bucky say it was still
enough to stagger him.

“We’ve known each other since we were born, Bucky.” He leaned forward in his chair, wanting to
reach out a hand and lay it on Bucky’s shoulder. “We were always there for each other. You were
there for me the day my mom died, and I went out on my own all the way across Europe to get you
out of that HYDRA camp.”

He gave in. Reached out and put his hand squarely on Bucky’s shoulder. The real one, not the metal
one, so he could feel it.

“The worst times in my life were the times you weren’t in it. I know you don’t hate me, and I think
you know it too.”

---

The soldier didn’t know what to do with any of that.

His gaze lingered on the hand on his shoulder, and he thought maybe he would push it away or
shrug it off, but…

But he didn’t. And eventually he turned his head away and focused on the far wall so that he didn’t
have to look at the hand or the person attached to it.

He didn’t know what to do about anything.

“I hate you,” he said quietly.

Captain America had ruined HYDRA’s plans. Captain America was the reason that he hadn’t been
allowed rest. Captain America was the reason there had been mission after mission after mission
without end. They had told the soldier that if he neutralized Captain America, he could rest.

He hated Captain America.

Except… that didn’t feel right.

Maybe.

Captain America had been trapped under the remains of the walkway and the soldier hadn’t taken
the shot.

Remember who you are! You can walk away from this, you can walk away and we can just go home
again!

Why hadn’t he taken the shot?

“Why…?”

He trailed away, unsure of which question to ask. There were so many. Finally he said:
“Why did you say we could go home… again? Why again?”

---

“Because I brought you home only a couple of months ago.”

The words came slowly out of Steve’s mouth, the repetition of that horrible phrase having bludgeoned him again. The quiet, matter-of-fact way in which Bucky had said it…

No. He would not to fall victim to thinking that Bucky actually believed what he was saying. That would have been just what HYDRA wanted, and he was not going to give them that kind of satisfaction. Though he was beginning to feel the very strong urge to head back up to the Helicarrier and vent his frustrations on Rodchenko.

And yet, Rodchenko had been a victim himself. A victim of Soviet brutality and callousness, and a victim of the as-yet-unidentified head of the Winter Soldier project under HYDRA. It was that man who deserved punishment more than anyone else, and Steve didn’t even know where or how to begin looking for him yet.

But punishing the guilty parties would feel hollow if it were not accompanied by Bucky’s recovery. It would be a Pyrrhic victory, the capture and trial and imprisonment of that man, or even the smashing of all of HYDRA, if Bucky stayed the way he was right then. Bucky needed to be healed, and for that, he needed to come home. Again.

“But why would…” The soldier frowned. “Why…?”

They had eaten apple pie on the couch. They had shared pelmeni on the beach. They had talked over pizza at the table.

The images drifted slowly, almost leisurely across his mind, not at all like the confusing frustration - even terror - of the mind tricks. Just one calm moment after another. Almost as if he were being invited to examine each one. Maybe the sedative had slowed the mind tricks down.

“When did…?”

Again he didn’t know which question to ask. He had too many, and maybe it was the sedative that was making it hard to focus on choosing one.

The sedative was to blame for everything.

Maybe.

“We had… apple pie?”

From a box. He licked his lips; he could almost taste it.

“We did.” A strange look of hope flashed across Captain America’s face. “After we put my living room back together. And Swedish meatballs.” He smiled. “Which you really liked. Do you
remember those?"

The soldier didn’t remember, and he didn’t like the hopeful look on Captain America’s face either.

As if he were supposed to remember Swedish meatballs, and that it would be disappointing if he didn’t. That Captain America would be personally disappointed if the soldier didn’t remember Swedish meatballs. And even though he hated Captain America, he didn’t want him to be disappointed either.

Maybe.

Probably.

Why?

He frowned slightly.

"None of that…" He stumbled over the words. "... matters. None of that matters."

What actually mattered was that he had failed his mission in every way possible. He had tried to kill himself. And when he had even failed at that, he had given up and allowed the Avengers to take him prisoner. And…

And…

Except that he hadn’t wanted to do the mission. He hadn’t wanted to do any of the missions anymore. He had wanted them to stop. He had wanted everything to stop.

He wasn’t supposed to think that.

He had wanted everything to stop.

“Blue doctor said… he said…”

His tongue felt heavy, along with his eyelids. The sedative was beginning to take effect, and before long he wouldn’t be able to continue the conversation. He needed to take the IV out then.

“He said… mental breakdown. The other night.” His metal fingers scrubbled clumsily at the layers of tape wrapped around his hand. “So why… why…”

He needed to stay awake. He needed to be able to talk.

“Why am I here?” He couldn’t seem to get his fingers under the tape. “What do you want… with me? What do you want?”

“No, Bucky, leave that be.” Captain America reached out and moved the soldier’s hand away from the IV. “Hank… uh… Blue Doctor told me why he taped it down that way in the first place. You’re not in such great shape, and you need to stay here in bed and rest.”

The soldier glared at him. Tried to. He was beginning to lose focus.

“And you’re here because it’s the safest place for you.” Captain America - Steve, he knew his name was Steve - moved his hand back to the soldier’s shoulder. “We’ve got more than a few heavy hitters here. HYDRA wouldn’t dare try coming here after you, not with Wanda and Tony and Carol and everyone else around.”
The soldier’s gaze drifted to the hand on his shoulder. Captain America - *Steve* - continued talking.

“And you’re also here because there are people who care enough about you to stop you from making the worst mistake a man can make.” Steve gripped the soldier’s shoulder very tightly suddenly and his voice shook oddly. “You’re here because I’m not going to lose my best friend after I just got him back. And as for what I want with you…”

Another long pause. Steve seemed to be considering his words very carefully.

“I want you to get better,” he finally said. “And right now, that means rest.”

The soldier understood that Steve meant sleep, not actual rest. There would be no actual rest. He had failed his mission - he had failed everything - and so there would be no rest.

Maybe not ever.

“But… but I…” The words came out very slowly. “I don’t want… to… to sleep.”

He wasn’t tired.

Except that he was. Because of the sedative. The sedative was making him drift away, and no one would let him pull the IV out. And he had to…

He wasn’t sure what he had to do.

Talk, probably. Before he fell asleep.

“Don’t... want to... sleep.”

His name was supposed to be Bucky. Or James. Bucky or James. He wasn’t sure which one. Romanova had called him James. The doctor had said his name was James. But Captain America and Dr. McCoy continually called him Bucky.

Bucky or James. James or Bucky. Which was it?

He was losing focus.

“Bucky? Or James?” With the way he stumbled the names, he knew there wasn’t much time left. “Which… which is it? Can’t be both.”

He had to get the words out before he fell asleep. He had to make himself focus on whatever Captain America’s (Steve’s?) reply would be. And then he had to remember it.

“Can’t be both.”

He blinked several times. Forced himself to stay awake. Tried to explain that Romanova called him James, but Captain America and Dr. McCoy called him Bucky. As soon as he opened his mouth, he knew it would be too much. Too much to try to say in too little time.

“Which?”

He needed to stay awake long enough to understand the answer.

“It’s both, actually,” Steve said, and the soldier worked hard to listen. “Your real name is James Buchanan Barnes, but I think the only one who ever called you that was Father Jeremiah.” Steve smiled briefly. “There were so many other kids in the neighborhood named James that all the
nicknames got taken up. So everybody just called you Bucky.”

The soldier’s eyelids were drooping fast, and he felt himself slipping away. Still, he fought to stay awake. He needed to hear what Steve had to say.

Steve continued. “Listen, Buck, you need to sleep. I know you don’t want to, but you need it if you’re going to get better. And you are going to get better.” He said the words so firmly that the soldier almost believed him. “You’re going to remember all the things they tried to make you forget. And then you’re going to decide where your life’s going to lead. Not the Soviets, not HYDRA, just you.”

He didn’t move his hand from the soldier’s shoulder. “And I’ll be right here whenever you need me, Buck. To the end of the line.”

The soldier was asleep before Steve left the room.

Chapter End Notes

This feels like a love triangle, y/n?

Comments, questions, and really awesome suggestions for love triangles are warmly welcomed and received.
Avengers Tower
the following morning, late November 2014

“Bucky, no!”

The gun wavered in Bucky’s hand.

“No!”

Bucky opened his mouth. Put the barrel of the gun inside.

“NO!”

The sound of the gunshot jarred Steve awake, sweat running down every part of him, eyes wide with terror, and when a loud banging echoed through the room, he sat bolt upright in bed and reached for the shield. But it was only the door. Someone knocking on the door of the guest suite in Avengers Tower.

Just a nightmare, he thought as his heart began to slow down. Another one.

He ran a hand through sweaty hair as he calmed down and became aware of his surroundings. The sheets were rumpled. The room was dark; he’d turned off the dimmers on the windows again. But the clock said it was eight-fifteen in the morning.

The knocking sounded at the door again.

“Sir, I believe you have company,” JARVIS’ ever-imperturbable voice cut in. “Shall I ready the shower for you?”

“Go on,” he said groggily to JARVIS as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, then called to the door in a louder voice. “Hang on a second. Just getting up.”

He didn’t want to know how he looked, but judging from the expressions on Sam and Sharon’s faces when he opened the door, it must have been pretty bad.

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It had been a long night.

HYDRA had clearly gotten desperate and scared. Its members were fleeing like rats on a sinking ship, only instead of trying to slink away quietly into the night, they were going out with literal bangs.

On the one hand, good. Better that SHIELD could track and catch them before they got away. On
the other, part of Miami had lit up like a torch last night because some top HYDRA commander had decided he’d rather take everyone out with him instead of just going quietly.

“Didn’t even have the courtesy to just off himself,” Clint had muttered after the fact, and Sam had a hard time disagreeing with that.

In the end, they had managed to bring the guy in - along with several of his buddies - but not before the Miami Fire-Rescue Department had been brought in to control the blaze, and that had taken hours.

“The whole thing is shaping up to be a PR nightmare,” Agent Hill had muttered over a very strong cup of Peruvian hot chocolate.

“But not your particular nightmare to deal with,” Agent Coulson had said of the agents involved - Sam, Clint, Sharon. “Go get some rest. Come back tomorrow night. We’ll put out the metaphorical fire.”

Back at Avengers Tower, Clint and Sharon had gone straight to their guest suites, and Sam had followed suit. Only after a shower and an hour or so of laying in bed, convincing himself to get some sleep, he found he was too wired to do so.

Apparently Sharon had felt the same, as she had come looking for him not too long after. A quick check on Clint - JARVIS informed them that he had left strict instructions not to be disturbed unless the world was “as he says, quite literally blowing the hell up.” And so they decided to check on Steve instead.

“Now that I think of it, I’ve kinda of lost track of him,” Sam said to Sharon as they waited at Steve’s door.

And judging by Steve’s general countenance when he finally threw the door open, he had lost track of himself, too.

“Hey man,” he started to say, but then Sharon cut in with:

“You look terrible.”

Sam shrugged. “She said it, so I don’t have to. You had breakfast yet?” He raised an eyebrow, looked Steve up and down. “I’m guessing no.”

“You guessed right.” Steve reached up to rub the sleep out of bleary eyes, then gave Sharon a look that seemed to be a halfhearted attempt at a glare, but in reality was more of a facial shrug. “And if I look half as terrible as I feel, I’m doing pretty well.”

Sam raised an eyebrow at that. At quick glance at Sharon confirmed she had done the same.

“Come on in.” Steve beckoned and held the door open. “The place is a sty, I’ll warn you. I haven’t been here to do much but sleep for the past couple of days, and JARVIS doesn’t pick up after me.”

“That is hardly one of my primary functions, sir,” JARVIS murmured from the walls. (Sam still hadn’t gotten used to that little bit of weirdness.) “Though I have taken the liberty of readying the shower for you. And I should caution you to avoid the mirror until after you’ve bathed.”

Sharon snorted. Sam followed suit.

Steve shook his head and gestured toward the couch. “Make yourselves comfortable. I’m going to go
try and shower myself human again.” He left Sam and Sharon in living room.

“So.” Sam glanced at Sharon. “Want to raid his kitchen and see where he keeps the granola bars?”

Sharon rolled her eyes. “Does he seem like a granola bar kind of guy to you? It’s protein or nothing with him.”

Sam grinned at that. “True, true.”

Ten minutes later, Steve reappeared - showered, shaved, combed and dressed. “So, what’s new on your end?”

“We’ll tell you at Mr. Sunnies.” Before Steve could ask, Sam held up a hand. “Ms. Potts recommended the place. She says it’s right down the street, just opened, freshly squeezed juices and granola and all that, and don’t worry, plenty of protein, too.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were squeezed into a booth at Mr. Sunnies. The restaurant was just as bright as its name, painted in shades of yellow and orange and decorated in a cheerful motif of smiling sunshines and roosters. Even the menu had theming.

Sam studied the menu for a moment. “So I think I’ll try the Sunnyside Deluxe and an orange juice. What man doesn’t want to start his day with six eggs and toast and a platter of bacon?”

“A man who doesn’t want a heart attack, maybe?” Sharon handed her menu to the waitress. “The Healthy Heart-Smart Fresh Start, please.”

That would be the freshly-made yogurt with granola and fruit. At Sam’s raised eyebrow, Sharon added, “And a big orange juice. Of course.”

“Don’t forget to try the juice bar,” the waitress said cheerfully. “And get your juice card punched. Ten fresh juices, and the eleventh is free.”

Sam smiled. “I think I can do that.”

At the rate they were going, they’d pull enough all-nighters to warrant needing a juice card or two or ten.

Steve consulted the menu for a minute, then ordered a Super Sunrise Sampler, which promised ‘a platter piled high with six eggs your way, toast, a thick Belgian waffle, and a generous helping each of bacon, sausage, and hash browns.’

“The orange juice seems almost like an afterthought,” Steve murmured, handing his menu to the waitress before shifting to look at Sharon. “And you just want yogurt?”

Sharon shrugged. “There’s fruit in it. And granola.”

Steve shook his head. “I couldn’t get through the morning on nothing but a bowl of granola yogurt. I don’t know how you do it.”

Sharon glanced at Sam, the unspoken ‘told you so’ written clear across her face. “I never said I wasn’t going to steal some of your bacon.”

It was Steve’s turn to shrug. “Fair enough.”

The waitress came by to deliver three gigantic, frosted glasses of orange juice.
Steve immediately took a big gulp of his. “So how are things progressing with the HYDRA hunt?”

Sam and Sharon exchanged a glance.

Sharon said, “Well, we burnt down Miami last night.”

Steve nearly spit his drink out, and Sam couldn’t help but laugh. “Easy there, man. Easy.” He held up a hand.

“So she’s exaggerating?” Steve said hopefully.

“Well…” Sam took a long pull on his orange juice. It was pretty good stuff.

Steve looked like he was about to burst.

“Not exactly exaggerating.” Sam set the glass down. “Our HYDRA boy didn’t want to go easily and he decided to try to set the city on fire rather than be taken in.”

“He only set part of the city on fire.” Sharon toyed with the straw in her own glass of orange juice. “The fire department managed to put the fire out, but it took hours.”

“Agent Hill’s calling it a PR nightmare.” Sam shrugged at that. “But I’m thinking they can call it whatever they want, it could have been far worse. He didn’t get away, for one.”

“Maybe not.” Steve’s face darkened in visible anger. “But how many innocent people did he manage to kill first?” He shook his head. “These people are dangerous, and they’re getting worse.”

“Horribly enough,” Sharon said, “that’s probably a good sign.”

Sam looked at her for a moment, then nodded. “Like an animal in its death throes.”

“Exactly,” Sharon said.

Steve looked from Sam to Sharon and back with a grim, but determined look on his face. “Lashing out at anything it can reach because it knows it’s dying. It means we’re hitting them hard, and it means we’ve got to hit them harder next time. But we’ve got to be careful how we do it, too.”

For a moment, everyone concentrated on their orange juice.

Steve turned to Sharon suddenly. “I think it might not be a bad idea to call up a few more people to help out. What about Dr. Banner?”

“Banner?” Sharon snorted into her drink. “Who knows where the hell he is. SHIELD was keeping track of him for a while, but…”

They kicked a few more names back and forth.

Thor? “Busy in Asgard for the most part,” Steve said.

T’Challa? “New wings are great.” Sam sat back in his seat. “Running Wakanda’s a full-time job though.”

Stark? Sharon raised an eyebrow. “Don’t we see enough of him every day?”

Sam drained off his orange juice and flagged the waitress for another.
“But Hill and Coulson have been vetting former SHIELD employees in other departments. HR, statistics, finance. Areas none of us have much experience in, but are critical all the same,” Sharon continued. “That should get SHIELD back to full-strength at least.”

A few minutes later, the waitress delivered their ridiculously enormous breakfast platters. Even the yogurt combo was swimming in what looked like a half-gallon goblet, and for several long moments, no one spoke. It took concentration to work through that kind of meal.

“So?” Sam looked at Steve over a large piece of rye toast. “Where’s your head at? You don’t seem to be part of the vetting process. You’ve barely slept in days. What do you need?”

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“More orange juice, for one thing.”

Steve gave them both a tired, but grateful smile. For as exhausted as he was, and for as much as everything with Bucky had taxed him to the limit these past couple of days, he was glad to see them. It was gratifying, and humbling, to be reminded that while he was devoting all his energy to helping Bucky, he had good friends too.

Especially Sam, though Sharon had been present as well. But Sam had been a friend when friends had been in short supply. When Steve had been questioning his place in the world, when every operation he’d been on had seemed like another one of Fury’s little exercises in deceit, when he’d found out about Project Insight and didn’t know who to turn to anymore, Sam had been there. When Thor had been rebuilding Asgard and Tony had been rebuilding his business and neither of them could be there to help him rebuild his own faith in everything he’d ever stood for, Sam had been there. And Steve would never forget it.

He swallowed the mouthful of waffle he was working on, caught the waitress’s eye, and held up his empty glass as a signal. Turning back to the table, he sighed. “And for another, I need to figure out how to actually start helping Bucky.”

He thought for a moment about Bucky, lying there in a hospital bed in the Tower, sedated into a sleep he desperately needed but couldn’t have without narcotics, so horrible would his nightmares have been. He thought about Bucky, and the fact that no matter how much walking and talking they’d done over those weeks in Brooklyn, no matter how angry Bucky had been at reading the file that presented him with clear, black-and-white evidence of what the Soviets had done to him, no matter how much calmer he’d gotten or how many meals and movies the two of them had sat through together, that Bucky had still not gotten all of his memories back.

Bucky hadn’t thought of Steve instinctively and intrinsically as his friend because he hadn’t been able to remember everything they’d been through. He’d only been able to recover tiny fragments, shreds of his tattered past that remained somewhere in his mutilated mind.

And that was the real objective, Steve thought as he chewed on his bacon and waited for another glass of orange juice. To do what Rodchenko had categorically stated was impossible. To undo the damage that the Soviets and HYDRA had done, and to give Bucky back his own mind.

“He’s going to need an awful lot of help, and I don’t think I can do it all myself.” He sighed. “And I’m going to be needed back out in the field too, it looks like.”

The conversation lapsed for a bit and everyone focused on eating their piles of breakfast, though Sharon ended up taking half of her yogurt in a plastic container.
“More than half,” Sharon said as they all stood around to get their juice cards punched. “Though I might have snuck some bacon slices in there.”

Back at Avengers Tower, a dark-skinned woman dressed in a powder blue business suit, her hair done up in a complicated series of braids that twisted around her head several times, waited for them in the lobby. She handed Steve a card and introduced herself as Tameka Johnson, HR Director of SHIELD.

“I’ve been HR Director for twenty years, Captain, and I’ve worked in SHIELD HR for twenty-five, and quite frankly, you need me.”

The four of them walked through the lobby toward the elevators as she continued.

“I represent the entire back office of SHIELD. I know who’s good, who’s not, and who’s worth rehiring. And there are many of us willing to relocate to New York if it means retaining our jobs, including Murray Abramson, the Finance Director, and Ajay Patel, Compliance Director. Both good people, both backed by teams ready and willing to return to SHIELD.”

Steve looked at Ms. Johnson for a moment, taking in her crisp appearance and eye-catching hairdo, and considered their meeting a stroke of very good luck. With someone who knew her employees that well, the process of restaffing SHIELD would go much faster and allow for more people to be committed to the increasingly important fieldwork.

Ms. Johnson stopped at the elevators and gave Steve an appraising look. “And I know you’re busy on the field side of things. Let me set up the back office and get things up and running once again.”

They talked for another minute or two, Ms. Johnson briefly outlining her approach to restaffing SHIELD with maximum efficacy.

“It’s been a real pleasure to meet you, Ms. Johnson,” Steve said with real gratitude, offering her his hand. “I’ll tell you what. If you’d like to head up top with me now, I’ll see to it that you have a meeting with Deputy Director Maria Hill before lunchtime.”

They all parted ways at the top, Steve putting in a call to Maria, who seemed very relieved to hear about Tameka Johnson. She agreed to meet with her immediately, and Steve headed onward towards the medical bay. Bucky was asleep, however, and Hank informed Steve that he wouldn’t be getting him up until at least ten. Which gave Steve about an hour to go down a few floors and check the progress that had been made setting up SHIELD in the upper-middle floors. And, as it turned out, he had even more time at his disposal than that.

“I said I wouldn’t be waking him up until ten, Steve.” Hank looked at him with an expression like one of the stone lions outside the library. “I said nothing of him being ready to have visitors by then. He needs a bath and a visit to the facilities, among other things, and I’d just as soon he had some privacy for that.”

An hour in the gym it was, then.

Chapter End Notes

YOU GUYS LEAVE THE BEST COMMENTS.
SERIOUSLY.

I CAN'T EVEN WITH HOW AWESOME SOME OF THESE COMMENTS ARE. I'M FLAILING AND SQUEEING LIKE THE FLAILY, SQUEALY FANGIRL THAT I AM!

No joke, I start my morning checking the comments, because you guys leave such awesome stuff. It's nourishing and encouraging. IT MAKES ME WANT TO WRITE A REALLY HOT SEQUEL. (And by hot, I mean Bucky should be getting it on as often as possible.)

And now back to the regularly scheduled plot. In which Bucky is currently in absolutely no condition to get it on with anyone, but hey, at least Hank's been feeding him a lot of food.
Emotional Moments

Chapter Notes

If they're speaking Russian, they're doing it in [language brackets.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avengers Tower
same morning, late November 2014

The soldier vaguely remembered the blue doctor waking him up and taking out the catheter and then taking him to the bathroom. Blue doctor got him to brush his teeth and have a sponge bath, and maybe some other things happened, but the IV hadn't come out yet. So while he was awake enough to be moving, there was still enough sedative in his system to keep him groggy.

“It'll be another day or two before you're well-rested and refreshed,” blue doctor - Dr. McCoy - explained while reinserting the catheter and tucking the soldier back into bed. “But this is exactly what your mind needs right now: complete bedrest.”

Dr. McCoy left the room and returned a moment later with the rolling tray table. Breakfast was an enormous pile of silver dollar pancakes and sausage, along with a carton of milk and a bottle of orange juice.

“Now you eat up.” Dr. McCoy gestured to the pancakes. “And as for my earlier promise... JARVIS?”

“Yes, Dr. McCoy?”

The soldier was too hazy to feel even somewhat startled by the English-accented voice coming from the walls. He dipped a pancake into the syrup cup and shoved the whole thing into his mouth.

Dr. McCoy continued. “The Day the Earth Stood Still soundtrack, if you please.”

“Yes, Dr. McCoy?”

Blue doctor flashed a toothy smile at the soldier. “It's on YouTube. I didn’t even have to special order it. Ah, YouTube. How did we ever get by without it?”

A few minutes into the strangely ululating soundtrack, Captain America walked into the room. The soldier watched him warily, but didn’t say anything. He stuffed another pancake into his mouth instead.

“Uh… Bucky?” Captain America glanced around the room, eyebrows raised. “Why does your room sound like a science fiction movie?”

“Good ears, Captain.” Dr. McCoy walked over, another big grin on his blue furry face. “This happens to be the soundtrack from one of the greatest of them. You must have heard me waxing poetic about it yesterday?”

“I guess I must have.” Captain America winced as the orchestra-backed wailing hit a particularly
high note. “Any chance you’ve got the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra coming up next?”

“Philistine,” Dr. McCoy replied, but still requested that JARVIS lower the volume. A moment later, he nodded to Captain America and left the room, though not without first stopping and reminding the soldier to “eat up every last bite of pancake. Doctor’s orders.”

The soldier watched Dr. McCoy leave the room with a vague sense of discomfort. He wanted to ask him to stay, to not leave him alone in the room with Captain America, but everything happened so fast and the sedative made him so sluggish.

“So, Buck.” Captain America took a seat next to the bed. “Feeling any better this morning?”

The soldier didn’t know how to feel about Captain America.

Captain America, who wanted him to remember Swedish meatballs and friendship, and would be very upset when the soldier didn’t remember either. Captain America, who told the soldier that he wanted him to stay in bed and get better, but wouldn’t tell him what the Avengers really wanted with him.

Carefully he ate a pancake and then another, and all the while, Captain America was looking at him with a strange expression on his face.

Finally he said, “What happens when the IV comes out?”

A big smile spread across Captain America’s face. “Then we get to go home. We can go back home to Red Hook and start getting you back to normal. Maybe we can go out walking again, or maybe we can find a nice place that makes pancakes, or…”

The soldier stared at him. Shoved another pancake into his mouth.

Captain America took a deep breath, blew it out, and tried again. “You’ll be here for a couple more days, I think. But as soon as Dr. McCoy gives you the OK, then you don’t have to be here anymore. Which means we can go back home to Brooklyn. Would you like that?”

“I...” The soldier sagged against the pillow and stared at the large pile of pancakes still left on his plate. Tentatively he started to reach for one, then changed his mind and let his hand drop into his lap. “I don’t know.”

Captain America had lay trapped under the remains of the walkway. The soldier had a clear shot at him. All he would have needed to do was raise the pistol and fire, and it would have been all over. Quick and easy.

Captain America - Steve, he knew his name was Steve, he knew it - had pleaded with him to put the gun down and walk away. Just walk away, and he didn’t have to be the Winter Soldier anymore, and they could go home.

And in the end, the soldier hadn’t been able to take the shot.

After a long moment, he said, “I didn’t want to kill you.”

Do you imagine it matters what you want to do? He could hear the General’s voice clearly in his mind. Do you imagine it ever did, or ever will? You are mine, Soldier! You belong to me!

Quietly he said, “I didn’t want to do any of it anymore.”
He didn’t look at Steve.

“I know you didn’t, Bucky.” Steve reached out and put a hand on Bucky’s right shoulder. He gripped it solidly, wishing he could give him a hug instead but knowing this would have to do for the time being. “I know you didn’t want to do it anymore. And I swear to you, I’m going to make sure it never happens to you again.”

*I’ll die first* was the thought that sprang to mind, the thought that almost made it out of his mouth into the air for Bucky to hear, but he managed to keep it to himself. That being said (or, thankfully, not said) he felt it with every fiber of his being. He would fight HYDRA with every breath in his body, with every weapon he could bring to bear, all by himself with his bare hands and his teeth if it came to that, before he would let them have Bucky again. And when he found the one responsible, the man Bucky’s conditioning and Rodchenko’s fear would not allow them to name, he would see justice done to him that would put the fear of God into the rest of HYDRA and scatter their ashes to the four corners of the earth.

“I know you didn’t want to do it anymore, and I know that’s why you tried to… end it.” He closed his eyes momentarily against the pain, against the horrific images that had plagued him in his sleep the past two nights, but forced them open again and continued. “But I don’t want that for you. Natasha doesn’t want that for you, and I think once you can look at things through your own eyes again, you’ll find you wouldn’t have wanted that for yourself either.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want to do.” Bucky stared very hard at the pancakes, a nauseated, miserable expression written clearly across his face. “It never did and it never will.” His gaze drifted to the needle in his hand and he began scritching half-heartedly at the tape wrapped around his arm.

“No, Bucky.” Steve reached out and gently lifted Bucky’s metal hand away from the tape. “Leave that be.”

He had become used to the metal arm during the three weeks Bucky had spent in Brooklyn with him. Used to it enough that he now regarded it as just another part of Bucky’s body, though the red Soviet star on the shoulder still hit him with a dart of anger every time he saw it. They’d branded him with their logo, marked him as their property for as long as that symbol remained. And they’d tried to do the same to his mind.

But Bucky had fought back. Was still doing so. And he needed every ounce of support he could get.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bucky continued. “I belong to…” He choked, maybe on a name before it died on his lips. “They’ll come for me, and it won’t matter what I want.”

“You don’t belong to them, Bucky.” Again Steve gripped Bucky’s shoulder as he spoke. “Not now, not ever again. And maybe it didn’t matter what you wanted when they were running the show, but it matters to me. It matters now, because they’re not running your life anymore, and they never will again. You’re your own man, or at least you will be once we help you remember everything they tried to make you forget.”

Bucky said nothing.

Steve’s face darkened. “And if they come for you here, they’re fools.” He felt an angry lump rise in his throat. “Because then they’ll be dealing with every single one of the Avengers I can find to fight them. Iron Man. War Machine. Thor. Hawkeye. Scarlet Witch. Black Widow. And that’s just for openers.”
A small part of him, the part responsible for urging him back to his feet every time he’d been knocked down by some bully in his childhood, the part that had made him stand back up with - blood running from his mouth or his nose or with his eye swelling shut - and take another swing, hoped that HYDRA would be foolish enough to come looking for Bucky at Avengers Tower. Because then he could fight them all in the open and give them the beating they deserved. Because it would be satisfying in the most visceral of ways to watch them drop one by one to Clint’s or Natasha’s deadly accuracy, or to watch Tony and Rhodey pummel them with missiles, or to watch them all vanish in electric blue flares as Thor called down bolts of forked lightning on them.

But most of all, it would be satisfying to take their leader by the throat himself, after all the others had been dealt with, and drag him in front of a court for the whole world to see. To show the world the consequences of trafficking in murder and chaos. To show every coward and bully and would-be tyrant the world over that justice would be done.

But that part would have to wait for its satisfaction. Because a more rational, and more fearful, part of Steve said that HYDRA had come for Bucky before. And they’d gotten him.

It was a terrifying thought.

“I won’t let them take you back. Not again.” He shook his head with all the conviction he’d ever felt. “I’d die first.”

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“I don’t…” The soldier frowned. “I don’t want you to die.”

He knew that was supposed to be wrong. He was supposed to have killed Captain America. He was supposed to hate Captain America. He knew all those things, but…

Maybe he didn’t care.

He wasn’t sure.

Steve had said he wouldn’t let them take the soldier back again. So how many times had they taken him back? How many times had that happened, and so how could Steve even say it wouldn’t happen again?

How could anyone know anything?

“I don’t… I won’t…” He chewed on his lip. “If they take me back, I’ll put a bullet in my head.”

He didn’t want any of it anymore. Ever again. Not the General, not the chair, not HYDRA. And if that meant ending things, he could do that. No matter what they said or who he belonged to, he could do that much.

They couldn’t stop him from doing that.

Steve looked at the soldier in aghast horror. “Bucky, no. God, no. Don’t even say that.”

The soldier put his face in his hands, felt the faint prickle of overgrown stubble poking against the tape wrapped around his palm. Slowly he pushed his hands up and through his hair before letting them fall to his sides. He didn’t know what he was supposed to say.

Steve reached out suddenly and gripped the soldier’s organic hand. “If you don’t want me to die - and I believe you when you say that - then just think for one second what losing you would do to
me. God, I’ve had nightmares every night since we brought you back here about being trapped under that beam and having to watch you blow your own head off. If I had to watch it happen and it wasn’t a dream.”

The soldier looked at him with wide, confused eyes. Why would Steve have nightmares about that? Why would anybody?

“I can’t lose you again. I wouldn’t survive it. What kind of life would that be?” Steve shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “If it wasn’t a dream, then I think I’d just tuck the gun under my own chin and follow you.”

The soldier’s whole face crumpled at that. He didn’t mean for it to, but it happened all the same. “That’s… that’s stupid.” He shook his head. “I don’t… you shouldn’t…”

He wasn’t very good with words, but he searched for them anyway. Quickly - or as quick as he could under the effect of the sedative - before they unspooled and slipped away from him.

“I don’t want you to do that. I don’t want you to die. If I wanted that, I would have… I would have…” He looked away. Anywhere but at Steve.

He wasn’t very good with words.

“I don’t want you to die.”

So… then maybe he didn’t hate him after all?

Maybe.

“I don’t want you to die either, Buck.” Steve gripped the soldier’s hand and shoulder very tightly. “I don’t want you to die, I don’t want them to take you away again, and that’s why I need you not to give up.” He took a deep breath. “You’re going to get better, you’re going to have your life back, and I’m with you every step of the way. But you need to believe it can happen, or you’ll be fighting for nothing. Please, Bucky, you’ve got to believe it.”

The soldier wasn’t sure about that part. But he was absolutely sure about the other thing. The thought of Steve dying unsettled him in a way that he didn’t know how to explain. It felt wrong. Deeply wrong, even if he couldn’t say why.

What to do with those feelings, he didn’t know.

He didn’t know anything anymore.

Dr. McCoy chose that moment to come back into the room, and he did not look very happy at what he had walked in on.

“He’s supposed to be eating his pancakes, Steve.” He looked sternly down his lion’s nose over the rims of his glasses. “Not being exposed to existential vagaries. Am I going to have to put you in the time-out chair?”

“We were just talking.” Steve started, but blue doctor cut him off with a raised paw as he looked over at the monitors and frowned at what he saw there.

“About something that’s elevated his heart rate far above where it ought to be for this level of sedation.” Blue doctor shook his head, his ponytail swaying. “Your friend needs rest above all, at least for these next few days. I know how important his recovery is to you, so please do try to
remember that.”

“All right.” Steve’s shoulders sagged. “Sorry, Hank. You take it easy then, Bucky.” He squeezed the soldier’s hand one final time, then stood up. “I’ll be back to see you when you wake up for dinner.”

The soldier watched him go.

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Rogers left the room after Hank’s kid-glove dressing-down, and Natasha decided to wait until after Hank had readjusted the sedative for sleep to make her own appearance.

A part of her said she was being a fool. Setting herself up for disappointment, pain, and who knew what else. That she was ignoring every instinct that had been trained into her by years of surviving in a world whose purpose was to weed out non-survivors. But there was another part of her - maybe the little bit of her that was still human after everything she’d been through, she thought with a wry twist of bitterness - that needed to see him again. That needed to know if he could come back from what they had done to him.

She had come back, after all.

She timed it perfectly - of course she did; she’d had plenty of practice over the decades - and found herself at the door to James’ room just as Hank was leaving. And since James was just beginning to drift when she sat down in the chair beside his bed, he didn’t seem to mind when she reached up a hand and tentatively began to stroke his hair.

[“Are you still awake?”]

Something like a smile slipped across his face. [“Didn’t think… you’d come back.”]

She smoothed back a stray lock of his hair. [“I’m full of surprises.”]

Was she deliberately timing her visits to coincide with him being either entirely unconscious or right on the verge of it? The question branded itself on her mind as she brushed the hair back off his forehead. Was it because she didn’t want to see him fully conscious and aware? Did she not trust him, or herself?

She didn’t trust very many people at all. Clint, Laura, Rogers… that was about it. She’d trusted Nick Fury once, but he had chosen to disappear, and who the hell knew when he’d come back. And before that, well… there weren’t many surer ways to die in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia than by trusting someone.

James, though, that was an entirely different story. She’d trusted him once - loved him more than she’d believed possible - and had her life shattered and nearly ended because of it. But not because of him. Or, technically speaking, not because of any choice that he’d made. There wasn’t any arguing with that mental recalibration chair, after all, and HYDRA had even managed to make him hate Steve.

She was still trying to wrap her head around that one. That entire other aspect of James, the completely unknown part of the Venn diagram that was Bucky Barnes. And if Natasha were having trouble with it, she could only imagine how hard it was for James.

[“I just wanted to see you.”] She smiled at him. [“Make sure they were treating you well.”]

Again, the haziest of smiles pulled vaguely at the corners of his mouth. [“Even if they weren’t… it
wouldn’t matter.”] He wiggled the fingers of his flesh hand to indicate the IV line. [“Will you tell them…? What will you tell them… about me?”]

[“Only the good stuff.”] She gave him a wry half-smile. [“The rest they’ll figure out on their own”]

She wondered absently why she was driven to do these things. Why she sat there beside his bed and stroked his hair. Why she did it when no one else was there, and crept away before anyone else could get there. Why all her instincts were to be ignored when it came to him.

Love is for children.

Was it love, though? She’d buried her own love for him long ago, out of simple self-preservation. It had been either that or be driven insane by the knowledge that she’d been so completely taken in. Except she hadn’t been, had she? He’d loved her, but HYDRA had made him forget it. Turned it into hatred, turned it against her and attempted to make him kill her.

He hadn’t killed her. And he hadn’t killed Steve either. But what did that mean for her? For them?

She continued to stroke his hair. [“Are you all right, though? How do you feel?”]

James looked at her for a long, unfocused moment. [“Does it matter?”] He shook his head, more of a halfhearted flop across the pillow. [“We’re made of… the same stuff… you and I… You know there’s nothing… good…”] He stumbled over the words. [“… to tell. Nothing good.”]

He was drifting fast. Natasha wouldn’t have much time left with him.

[“Want to tell you… something important… You’d understand…”] His gaze was unfocused, but he tried to center it on her. [“If HYDRA… takes me back… I’ll put a bullet in my head. Don’t… don’t let Steve… stop me. Don’t you… stop me either.”]

The idea of that happening turned Natasha’s stomach so strongly, she nearly felt sick right there. She stopped stroking his hair for a moment to peer into his eyes. [“I stopped you before. What makes you think I wouldn’t stop you again?”]

She sat there, a tendril of his hair between her fingertips, and studied his blue eyes. They were glazed, unfocused, but he was working very hard at keeping them open. He’d probably had a lot of practice in trying to fight off sedation; she remembered every uncomfortable brush with such methods in her own past, and it showed on him. But he had never won in the past. Just like he wouldn’t win right then.

She wasn’t entirely sure why she did it. Or maybe she was, and she just wasn’t interested in dwelling on it or justifying herself. But she stood, and before she could think to change her mind, she’d climbed into bed with him and curled up next to him. And began stroking his hair again.

[“I’m not going to let them take you. And I’m not going to let you kill yourself either. I told you before, that’s not the way it ends.”]

James looked at her for a long moment, as if trying to memorize the green of her eyes or the curve of her lips. Or so Natasha told herself.

[“You don’t… don’t know how… how it ends… you don’t know…”] He managed to raise his hand, though it seemed weighted down with the barely-present weight of the IV line. Very tentatively he grazed his fingers along the fine strands of red hair at her forehead.

Natasha held her breath.
Another vague smile drifted across James’ mouth before floating away. “Brought out… your eyes…”

He drifted away. Couldn’t keep his eyes open.

“... Natalia.”

A moment later, he was asleep, leaving her still curled up next to him and with a whole crop of new things to ponder.

He had remembered.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on the way his fingertips had felt as they brushed her forehead. Maybe he only remembered bits and pieces, but those fragments were enough to cut through her carefully-constructed layers of defense and touch her heart. He had called her Natalia once before, but this was the first time he had recalled such a specific detail about the way she’d looked so long ago. She hadn’t sported bangs in a long time - such a long time - and she’d never known he’d liked them back then. He had never said a word about it…

She was beginning to share Rogers’ enthusiasm for James’ recovery, she realized as she got up out of the bed and left the room. Not only his enthusiasm, but his stubborn optimism as well. If she could have looked inside Rogers’ head, she probably would have encountered a idea along the lines of ‘He’s going to get better, because he’s got to. Because I won’t let him stay the way he is.’

And the frightening thing was, she was beginning to feel the same way.

Chapter End Notes

_The Day the Earth Stood Still_ soundtrack is available for your listening pleasure on Youtube. If you haven't given it a listen, you really should. It's exactly what you might imagine a cheesy, 1950's science fiction movie soundtrack should sound like.

In fact, it set the gold standard for cheesy 1950's science fiction movie soundtracks. Thanks, Leon Theremin! (If you do give it a listen, try to imagine Steve and Bucky having a moment while that weirdness plays in the background.)

As always, feedback, questions, and suggestions for other cheesy soundtracks are always welcome.
Steve had walked around aimlessly for a while after leaving the medical bay, turning Bucky’s words over in his mind. He was deeply worried - to the point of nearly feeling sick - about Bucky’s stability, given that Bucky’s greatest fear - the one that he’d admitted would drive him to suicide if it came to pass - was being captured and put through the torture of having his mind blanked again. And this worry eventually drove Steve to the Quinjet hangar, where he commandeered a jet and flew it up to the Helicarrier.

He left the Quinjet in the Helicarrier’s hangar bay and walked to the bridge, unimpeded by anything but a few surprised lower-rank agents saluting him as he passed. And once on the bridge, he stood looking out through the giant glass fishbowl until he heard footsteps coming up behind him.

Turning, he saw Rhodey.

“Colonel Rhodes.” He smiled and saluted by way of greeting, then broke the salute and extended his hand for a shake. “How are you liking it up here?”

Rhodey chuckled at the salute - “At ease, Captain,” - though he did go for the handshake. “It’s fine up here. Almost like a break, though not really.” He folded his arms loosely. “You have a moment? There’s something I want to show you.”

Intrigued, Steve followed Rhodey off the bridge, down the hallways of the Helicarrier, to a room secured by several layers of retinal and voice-print identification, one door after another.

“Feels a bit like it did when Fury showed me Project Insight,” Steve murmured, half to himself. Rhodey cocked an eyebrow at him, and Steve shrugged. “I’m not going to lie.”

Behind the last of the doors was a medium-sized room crammed full of technology. Monitors, monitoring stations, all linked by cables to the object in the center of the room. An object that Steve immediately recognized, and one that made his blood run cold.

“The mental recalibration chair,” he breathed, almost too reverently. The one that HYDRA, and the Soviets before them, had used to rewrite Bucky’s mind over the decades.

“Is that what you call it?” Rhodery shrugged. “We’ve just been calling it ‘the chair’, though I’m sure it has a proper, more technical name.”
“Where did this come from?” Steve turned to Rhodey, a million questions suddenly springing to life in his mind. “Who else knows about it?” His stomach turned to ice and he left the final question unsaid. Please tell me Tony hasn’t been messing with it...

Rhodey gave him a long, searching look. “I thought Agent Carter told you? From the warehouse raid in Jersey City the other night. The same warehouse where we picked up the Russian scientist.”

Had Sharon told him? Steve frowned. She must have, but he couldn’t remember. Too much had happened over the past couple of days, and-

His eyes widened in shocked anger.

“Jersey City?” He looked at Rhodey, fuming. “You mean to tell me that all this time we were searching for them, they had a base in Jersey City? I could have taken the ferry there in twenty minutes, for the love of…”

“Yeah. Well.” Rhodey shrugged. “As for who knows about it, right now we’re keeping it at me, Carter, Coulson, and Barton - the people who helped secure it - and Hill. And now you.”

“Not Tony, huh?” Steve nodded, looking at the chair. As much as Tony would mean well, he wouldn’t have been able to resist taking down its schematics and possibly building one himself. And that kind of power - the power over another man’s mind and memories - was something no one should have. “I think it ought to stay that way.”

“Right now, I happen to agree.” Rhodey picked up a tablet from one of the stations. “I’ve downloaded the schematics on the thing - the chair, as we’re calling it - but it’s all in Russian, and I’m hesitant to bring anyone else in on this. Been thinking about dragging the scientist in here and making him explain things.”

“Yeah.” Steve’s face darkened as he recalled Bucky’s confused and unfocused eyes. The way Bucky had claimed to hate him, but then told him he didn’t want to see Steve die. The way he had spoken about suicide as the only way out if HYDRA caught him again and stuck him in that chair. “I’ve been thinking about having him explain a few things to me too.”

“Look, Steve.” Rhodey gave the tablet one more glance, then set it aside. “We need to decide what we’re going to do with this thing, because I’ll be straight with you: the Department of Acquisitions is going to want this. And if not the Air Force, then the Army. Someone - General Ross, whoever - is going to want this, and we both know that they’re not going to want it for anything good.”

“No.” Steve’s blood turned to ice. “No one else gets this. It’s too dangerous.” His eyes widened. “They’ll want to use it to make Winter Soldiers of their own. Do to some other poor bastard what they did to Bucky, and that’s not going to happen.”

He took a deep breath, his mind racing with dozens of half-formed ideas. There was no reason to keep it, since they never intended to use it. No one else could be permitted to have it, or even to find out that it existed. And Bucky was absolutely petrified of it.

“Can you hang onto it for a while?” he asked Rhodey, his expression changing from frantic to calm. “And make sure nobody comes near it?”

Rhodey nodded. “Sure, I can do that. What’s up?”

“I’ve got a few ideas.” Steve smiled thinly. “But first I need to go talk to the doctor.”

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After the conversation with Captain America, Agent Carter had escorted Rodchenko to a cell and left him there.

The cell was perfectly adequate: cot, desk, sink, toilet hidden behind a small privacy screen. A shelf over the sink contained a small cup, a toothbrush, a hand towel, and travel-sized soap and toothpaste. No window, but he supposed there wasn’t much to look at when they were so high up. No books or paper or pens, but he wasn’t in a reading or writing mood.

It was all perfectly adequate, and they left him alone, which suited him just fine.

He didn’t sleep very well, but he hadn’t expected to. At some point, a grim-faced agent he didn’t recognize brought him a tray that contained a sandwich, an orange, and a carton of milk. Then later on, the same person brought him a tray of noodles swimming in an oily red sauce, along with a banana and a carton of milk. Then nothing for hours. Eventually he slept, again not well. When he awoke, he freshened himself as best one could with a hand towel and travel soap and no spare clothing. Some time later, the same unidentified agent delivered a tray of what appeared to be American-style pastries and an apple and a carton of milk, and so he assumed it was morning or around that time. He ate one of the pastries and half of the apple and drank all the milk, and still they left him alone.

Agent Carter appeared sometime later. “Captain Rogers wants to talk to you.” She insisted on handcuffs, and he didn’t resist - what would have been the point? - and she escorted him to an interrogation room with a giant, two-way mirror. Captain America was waiting at the table, and Agent Carter unlocked the cuffs and left the room, but not without first giving the captain a long look that Rodchenko couldn’t quite decipher.

The Americans, just as the Soviets, were quite fond of their pageantry.

He noted the dark circles under Captain America’s eyes. “You have not been sleeping. And here we are again.”

The English words felt clunky falling off his tongue, but what choice did he have?

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“Just FYI, Steve,” Sharon had said before leaving to collect Rodchenko. “We’ve held him for twenty-four hours now. We either have to formally charge him with something, in which case we need to contact the Russian Embassy and give him access to a lawyer, or we need to let him go. And you know the Russians are probably going to want to extradite this guy.”

Steve knew that, indeed. Rodchenko had known it too, and had brought it up when they had spoken. And they both knew exactly where it would lead - a frozen prison in Siberia or a shallow grave. Just thinking about it made his blood boil.

“Yeah.” He sat there and watched as Rodchenko massaged his wrists. “Here we are again.”

Rodchenko appeared to have been cared for pretty well, though the bruises on his neck weren’t gone yet. They stood out against the pale flesh of his throat, a reminder of the violence of a man who had no name yet. A man who had left his mark on Bucky as well, invisibly but very tangibly.

“Look.” He stifled a sigh. “My friend needs help. He’s sedated now, and he’s going to stay that way for a while, but he’s afraid. He’s afraid of being recaptured, and he even said he’d rather die than have it happen again.”

He shook his head, anger, fear, and sadness fighting for space in his mind and his heart, then looked
back at Rodchenko.

“I know you don’t think it can be done -” he held up his hand to silence anything Rodchenko might have said before he’d finished his piece. “And I’m not here to argue that point with you, but I’m going to help him remember who he is. And in order to do that, I need to know what happened to him. The Soviet file dead-ended in 1988, and according to you, HYDRA acquired him in 1995. I need you to tell me what happened to him then.”

For a long moment, Rodchenko was silent. Then, “He said this? That he wants to die?” Bitterness seeped into his voice. “How did he say this to you?”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean, how did he say it to me? He said he didn’t want HYDRA to take him back. And he said that if they did, he’d put a bullet in his head.”

Rodchenko said nothing, and so Steve pressed forward.

“I don’t want that to happen to him, Doctor, and I hope you don’t either. I’ll do everything I can for him, you can count on that, but I need to know what happened to him.” His eyes narrowed. “And I need to know the name of the man in charge of it all.”

“His mind is breaking.” Rodchenko stared down at his hands. “I said this would happen. Too many times rewriting, too quickly, and no rest. Not allowed, rest.”

Another moment of silence stretched out between them before the doctor spoke again.

“There is nothing to do for him except be kind.” He gave Steve an appraising look. “I said this to you. This does not change from yesterday to now, Captain. You cannot go back. You cannot…” He seemed to search for the word. “Cannot unmake what he is. Better you understand this now. You cannot make him this ‘Bucky’ again.”

Steve bit back another sigh. “I heard what you said yesterday, Doctor.”

Rodchenko continued. “I have never known ‘Bucky’, only Winter Soldier. He has not been Bucky in long time, Captain. Before I am born. There is no going back.”

“With all due respect,” Steve tightened his mouth, trying to keep himself in check, “I don’t believe you.”

But how could he make Rodchenko understand that Bucky was still in there somewhere? Under the layers of brainwashing, the mind-wipes, the amnesia, Bucky was still there. Little bits of him came bubbling up at odd times, out of his control, and they had to have come from somewhere, didn’t they?

“Maybe you didn’t see any of him because of all the rewriting and no rest.” Steve fought to keep the anger out of his voice. “Maybe you were too busy trying to make sure he stayed the Winter Soldier that you didn’t realize who he was underneath. That every time he did something you didn’t agree with, something you wrote over and tried to stop from happening again, it was coming from the person he really is - the person you say you never knew.”

Rodchenko looked at him for a long moment. “Fine.” He shrugged. “This is what you want to hear. This is your show, Captain.”

“No.” Steve looked across the table at Rodchenko. The doctor was so defensive, so resigned to his fate that he didn’t imagine there was any way he could change things. “No, that’s not what I want to hear. What I want to hear is the name of the man in charge of what happened.”
Rodchenko had laid out the consequences of his being extradited to Russia, but what he might not have known was just how little time there was to work out some means of escaping them. Steve didn’t want to see Rodchenko extradited any more than the doctor himself did, though not for the same reasons. He saw it as a miscarriage of justice and a prime example of excessive and cruel punishment; Rodchenko saw it as the looming end of his life. But perhaps it was possible to see justice served in a more appropriate manner.

“Look, Doctor.” Finally Steve did sigh. “You’ve been here for a full 24 hours. By law, at this point we’re obligated either to charge you with something or set you free. You know what’s likely to happen in either case.” He leaned forward, hands on the table. “If we set you free, then HYDRA will find you and kill you. And if we charge you, then you’re likely to wind up extradited, and you said yourself that the Russian government won’t go after the real man in charge. You’ll end up bearing all the blame for what he’s really responsible for, and let me tell you, that goes against everything I’ve ever believed about justice.”

He paused for a moment to make sure Rodchenko was following him, then continued. “I swear to you, if you give me the name of the man in charge, I will make sure he pays for what he’s done no matter who he is or where he tries to hide. And that’s the only way I’ve got of helping you.”

Again, Rodchenko looked at Steve for a long moment. His mouth thinned into a line and he stared down at his hands, as if he were carefully turning the English words over in his mind. Or so Steve hoped.

Finally the doctor spoke, slowly and carefully. “When I hear that Winter Soldier is taken by SHIELD, I know that it is all over. Finally. I know that… that…” He hesitated, perhaps over a name. “That… HYDRA boss will run away. And that SHIELD will hold Winter Soldier very tightly. Find way to care for him, even if you cannot… cannot remake him. You can care for him.”

Steve opened his mouth, but before he could refute anything, Rodchenko held up a hand to ward him off.

“But me? I am old man. Is all over for me. Death or gulag. No way out.” He shrugged. “So I make call to SHIELD, and they come for me, and here I am.”

Steve looked at him incredulously. “You called?”

A sigh escaped the doctor’s lips, but he pressed forward. “Why did I make call, you ask? Because you talk about ‘choose this,’ ‘choose that.’” Rodchenko regarded Steve carefully. “Winter Soldier is my life’s work, and I… I have been made to destroy this work. And Winter Soldier? He choose nothing.”

Steve’s face went slack as this information hit home. Sharon had said there had been an anonymous tip, nothing more, and he had taken that to mean that someone had called in a report of suspicious activity. He’d never suspected that Rodchenko would have made the call himself.

And yet, hearing the doctor speak this way about Bucky, he realized why he must have done it. He’d thrown his own life away - what there was left of it - because he knew what it was not to have a choice. And Bucky’s choices hadn’t been his own for decades.

“That was a brave thing to do,” Steve said slowly. “Not everybody has what it takes to do the right thing after so many years of wrong.”

He wondered whether, if things had been different, Rodchenko would have done well in America. If he’d have made a good linguist, or if he might have discovered another channel for his brilliance.
Anything but what he had become - what he had been forced to become.

“But you still think Bucky can’t be cured.” He held Rodchenko’s gaze, pleading with his eyes. “You keep on insisting it, but you didn’t see what I saw. He remembered that I used to drink Ovaltine with breakfast when we were both kids. He came to my apartment in Washington with root beer barrels in his pocket, and they were his favorite candies growing up. Even after you tried to make him hate me, he still looked me in the eyes not two hours ago and told me he didn’t want to see me die.”

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“So he did not want to see you die.”

It was quite obvious to anyone who might be listening that no matter what Rodchenko might say, Captain America would not be swayed. He wanted so desperately to believe his truth that he would cling to any evidence of it, no matter how small.

Rodchenko could not remember ever being so earnest about anything.

“And this breakfast drink, this candies.” Another shrug. “I have seen this, too. Mind…”

The captain would not want to hear that the Soldier had been taught to regard his flashes of memory as mind tricks. Rodchenko cast about for another word.

“Mind pieces. Memory pieces.” He shook his head. “This is always something that… that… come to him. And make him unhappy. Scared. Because it never come to him cleanly. Never come to him as… as real memory piece.”

He made a *tsk* of frustration. For a brief moment, he wondered if he would have made a good linguist at all. Certainly he didn’t feel like one in that moment.

“Just make him unhappy. Break his mind.”

For a long moment, he stared down at his hands. Then quietly, “This is my life’s work, and he is breaking. And he wasn’t always. Before HYDRA, Winter Soldier is very different. Before HYDRA, Winter Soldier is a man.”

A pained, angry expression flickered across Captain America’s face. “What did you do to him,” he said quietly, “to break him so badly that you say there’s no hope for him?”

Rodchenko was silent for so long that it seemed as if Captain America would leap out of his chair in tense frustration. Finally he began to speak slowly and cautiously.

“Comrade General Karpov dies in 1988. Department X is closed. In 1995, new military boss take over Department X. Is told to clean it, close it carefully. Many pieces are missing. Many scientists. This much you know.”

There was no point in dwelling on where his life might have gone had the General not found him, and so he wouldn’t allow himself the luxury of those thoughts right then.

“New military boss is HYDRA, and he is… also very powerful man in our new, better Russia.” He could not keep the bitterness out of his voice. “To survive fall of Soviet Union and still have money and power? Very important man. And he is very happy to find me, because he also find Winter Soldier. He go into cryostasis in 1988 and stay that way until 1995. And I did not know all this time where is Winter Soldier.”
His fingers pulled thoughtlessly at the hem of his lab coat.

“In 1988, when Department X is closed, we are… we are pushed outside right away. No time to close properly. So I did not… I did not know if Winter Soldier is still alive or not. But HYDRA boss is ready to start project again right away. Only for… for HYDRA now.”

Again he lapsed into silence. He stared at his hands, clutching the hems of his coat.

So many years, and for what?

“Winter Soldier is… not so happy about this. How can he be happy? For years, Comrade General Karpov make him proud Soviet. Make him proud to serve motherland. And now he is told Soviet Union is no more, nothing to be proud of, work for HYDRA now, and this is way it is.”

How many arguments had they gotten into? How many times had Rodchenko advised him to be cautious around the General?

How little had it mattered in the end?

“And for time, this is way it is. Only Winter Soldier is… is not… what… what boss wants.” He twisted the edges of his coat in his hands. “I don’t know why. His missions are perfect. Always perfect. No problem. But boss is not happy. He want him to be more… more…”

He shook his head and again fell into silence.

“I don’t know.” He could taste the despair on his tongue. “I never know.”

A tense silence stretched between them.

“Go on.” Captain America’s voice was dry, thin, anxiety in every syllable. “Tell me.”

Rodchenko sat there for a long time, twisting and retwisting the hem of his coat, but finally he made himself speak again.

“I tell Winter Soldier not to make boss angry. I try to… I… rewrite things… in his mind… so that… maybe… boss is not so angry with him.” He closed his eyes, licked his dry lips. “But boss is always angry with him. I don’t know why. He can’t tell me why.”

He fell silent again.

How many times had they had the same discussions? Over and over again, with nothing ever improving?

“He tell me… Winter Soldier is… legenndarnyy… mificheskiy…” He shook his head. “I don’t know these words. Legend, maybe. Legend story.” He pronounced the words with a hard ‘g’ sound.

Captain America said, “ Legendary?”

Rodchenko nodded. “Legendary, then. That Winter Soldier is legendary. Boss is promised legendary assassin, but is not good enough. Not enough respect. Not enough… not enough… It is never enough. He is never enough. And for years, it is this way.”

He wondered who might be on the other side of the two-way mirror.

Quietly, very quietly, he said, “He did not want man. He want perfect killing machine. He call him this, you know. His perfect killing machine.”
Steve winced at that, squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, tried to will down the burning in his eyes, but felt them prickle. Saw his vision blur and swim before him. Saw Bucky clearly in his mind’s eye, pleading with unfocused eyes for his life and what remained of his sanity.

He’d heard of stories like this before. Government secret projects that had tried to make men into super soldiers. Project: Rebirth had been intended as ‘not another step towards annihilation’, as Doctor Erskine had put it, ‘but the first step on the path to peace.’ And yet it had spawned dozens of copycat projects the world over whose aim had not been to create peacekeepers, but ruthless killers who could not be stopped.

But every one had been at the mercy of men who sought to create, as Rodchenko had put it, the ‘perfect killing machine.’ And the still-mysterious head of HYDRA was shaping up to be a man of the same caliber. A man who held the lives of others so valueless that he thought nothing of destroying everything they were, everything they had been, and everything they might have been.

And Bucky feared this man so greatly that he would rather have killed himself than be recaptured by him.

Whatever else Rodchenko was about to describe, it was going to be awful, Steve knew that much. Hard to hear and even harder to deal with. A large part of him wished he didn’t have to hear it at all, that he could simply stand up from the table and walk away and leave Rodchenko to his fate. Have Maria charge him with conspiracy to terrorism and let the Russians have him, or simply let him walk free and let HYDRA take back its own and deal with him however they wanted to.

But that made Steve sick to contemplate. It wouldn’t be justice. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be him.

No, he needed to hear what Rodchenko had to say. It was the only way forward, not only for Bucky’s sake but for his own. He had to know. And he had the feeling that Rodchenko needed to unburden himself as well.

“This man.” He had to clear his throat to make his voice work. Tried to blink the tears out of his eyes, to no avail. “What did he do to make Bucky into what he is now?”

Once again, Rodchenko began twisting at the hem of his coat. It seemed it was the only way he could make himself speak, and neither of them would be able to tolerate his silence any longer.

“Years go by, and Winter Soldier make... terrible mistake.” Rodchenko took a breath. “He fall in love. With your very own Black Widow Romanova.” He managed to detach one hand from his coat and held it up, warding off any questions. “She is not HYDRA. But in those early years, boss know it is good idea to work sometimes with Red Room. Sometimes work with new, better Russia. Good business practice, and so… Winter Soldier and Black Widow work together sometimes. And… do more than that. Fall in love. And this goes on for months.”

Steve closed his eyes against the terrible, sudden rush of imagery that his mind conjured up, but it was too late. A dam had broken, and they would both drown under the weight of its horror.

Rodchenko continued. “Boss start to think something is wrong. Photographs are made of them at train station, but this... I say this prove nothing. They work together. They will have photograph together. But...” He shook his head. “He know something is wrong, and Winter Soldier is... in love. I tell him to be careful. Not to make boss angry, but he is in love. Not so careful now.”
Like a young man in love would be. Like any stupid young man should have been allowed to be.

“And one day… they are caught. Romanova is sent away. Boss is…” The words slipped away from Rodchenko, and he fell into bleak, intolerable silence. “He is…”

Steve waited in silent horror.

Finally Rodchenko said, “I don’t know what boss say to him, but Winter Soldier… try to kill him. Fails, of course. And boss ask him… ‘do you think you are man? Is this what you think? That you can have these things?’ And then he tell me… he tell me…”

He choked on the words.

“Burn it out of him.”

Steve had to clench his jaw shut to keep himself at least somewhat in control. But his body was quivering, his throat closing, his eyes overflowing as he listened to the nightmare tragedy unfold, and it was all in the past.

There was nothing he could do about it.

They were all victims, he realized dully. Bucky, Natasha, even Rodchenko. Yes, the doctor had been the one who had pulled the switch on it, but he had never had a choice. And anyone could see that being made to do so had scarred him for life.

_Burn it out of him._

Burn out the humanity. The ability to love, to think, to remember. To care about the people he killed. To question why he did what he was forced to do, and who he did it for. Burn out the memories of who he had been. Burn out the hope of ever having a life beyond the wretched weeks of consciousness filled with torture interspersed with long periods of frozen sleep.

_Do you think you are a man?_

“Finish the story, Doctor.” He said it in a whisper, throat swollen shut with the sob he was just barely holding back. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but he held his eyes open and held Rodchenko’s pained gaze unblinkingly. “Please.”

“Two days.” Rodchenko broke away from Steve’s awful gaze. “It take… two days… to burn it out of him. Scrape his mind away.” He clenched so tightly at the hem of his lab coat that his knuckles had gone white. “Winter Soldier ask me to stop… and then… he stop asking.”

He would drown under the horror of it. He would drown, and he welcomed the tide and the perfect silence it would bring him.

“For two days after that… he lay there. He cannot speak. He cannot… he cannot…” Rodchenko stared at the floor, at nothing at all. “He cannot tell me her name. He cannot tell me anything. And boss is… he is…” He closed his eyes. He put his face in his hands. “He is so very happy with my work.”

For a long moment, Steve said nothing.

“Tell me his name, Doctor.”

The lump was gone from Steve’s throat, and the tears had stopped flowing. In their place a white-hot
anger like he’d never felt before in his life, but one that he could hold in check. One he could shelter and nourish and protect, fanning the flames to keep them high, until he was able to unleash it on the man who had forced Rodchenko to destroy Bucky.

“Tell me his name, and I swear to God I’ll bring him to justice.”

“Not so easy, Captain. Not so easy.” And yet, the doctor looked up from his hands anyway. “He was General in Soviet Army. Comrade General Karpov had long interest in him, and he was as teacher to him. He make his way from nothing. From poor village somewhere, and he make his way in Army. He make his name in Afghanistan. He make his name crushing country who try to leave Soviet Union. He is very good at crushing people.”

He let that statement hang in the air for a moment before continuing.

“But he is too smart to believe in just Soviet Union, so he make his way in business as well. Do you know Kronas Corporation, Captain?” He nodded at the look of astonishment that darted across Steve’s face. “How about Roxxon Oil? Lukoil? Cybertek Industry? Metrobank?”

Rodchenko waited, giving Steve a moment to absorb all of it.

“So you see, Captain, not so easy. Not so easy to bring to justice to man like Aleksander Anatolyevich Lukin.”

Steve nodded slowly, attempting to process the information. He’d expected something big, of course, but not quite as huge a bombshell as it had turned out to be.

He didn’t know the man by name, but he did know about the Kronas Corporation. It owned oil, technology, shipping, telecommunications, financial institutions, all on a multinational front. It was larger and more profitable by far than Stark Industries - a fact which Tony didn’t especially like - and even had its own private militia. Which was rumored to be every bit as well-equipped as any national military.

And the man who ran it all, who had risen from poverty in the former Soviet Union, who had been a General in the Soviet army, this Aleksander Anatolyevich Lukin, was the man who had been responsible for Bucky.

“Well.” Steve sat back and slowly - unbelievably - smiled. “A lot easier now that I know his name.”

They sat there in silence for a moment after that, Rodchenko lost in his own thoughts and Steve thinking about how he might go about proving the doctor wrong. Bucky could come back, he knew it. He felt it in a way he could never explain, and that Rodchenko could never understand. But he would have to acknowledge it when he saw it.

“I think we both have some thinking to do, Doctor.” He stood up and pushed in the chair. “And I think we’ll have a lot more to talk about over the next few days. In the meantime, I’d like to go and see my friend again.” He turned to leave, then hesitated and turned back to Rodchenko.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback, comments, and sighs of relief (anger? astonishment? however you sigh, bring
it here) are all warmly welcomed.
see the end of the chapter for more notes

the Helicarrier
same day, late November 2014

The walk back to Rodchenko’s cell felt very long.

“Looks like you’ve bought yourself another day, Doctor,” Agent Carter said to him. “Lucky for you.”

She didn’t use the handcuffs that time. Maybe she had finally decided that it was highly unlikely that she would be overpowered by a small, sixty-four year old man of no athletic ability. Or, and more likely, now that Rodchenko had given them all the information they required, they no longer felt any need for pageantry.

Which meant that his time was rapidly coming to a close.

Despite Captain America’s earlier reassurances, he wondered which it would be: death at the hands of HYDRA or extradition to Russia, followed by a show trial and then death at the hands of the government or a lifetime sentence to a faraway gulag.

Time would tell.

Agent Carter led him into his empty cell. He turned and watched her close the door, then turned back and the Black Widow Romanova was waiting for him.

[“So…”] His knees gave out quite suddenly and he sank down onto the cot. [“My time has come very quickly then.”]

[“Captain America is a sentimental man.”] Her expression was hard with coldness. [“But you and I know better than to waste our time with that.”]

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Natasha stood there with her arms folded and her feet apart, head slightly lowered, and eyes unblinkingly fixed on Dr. Rodchenko. Making herself appear to be whatever she wished to be had been an integral part of her training all those years ago, and it had been a skill she’d always excelled at. She could appear meek, nonthreatening, naive, sultry, frightened, or frightening, and change from any one to any other in the blink of an eye. And right then, she was going to make Rodchenko feel cold terror.

She had been on the other side of the mirror in the interrogation room when Rogers had heard Rodchenko’s confession. Sharon had come in after leaving Rodchenko in the room, but had left when Natasha had asked her to. And it was only the fact that she knew she was alone and unwatched that had afforded her the luxury to react the way she had done. Her emotional response
had been unprofessional, to say the least, but she’d learned since leaving Russia that allowing herself
the occasional release of a good hard cry could prevent her from falling to pieces when it mattered
the most.

[“You destroyed his mind.”] She did not advance, did not shift her stance, did not even move her
shoulders as she spoke. [“Because of me.”]

And that had hurt worse than anything else. Hearing from Rodchenko’s own mouth the confirmation
of what she’d suspected ever since she’d read that file: that James had indeed loved her, and that their
love had been the reason HYDRA had turned him into the mentally and emotionally scarred wreck
he was now. That it hadn’t been hatred or even indifference that had made him do what he’d done in
Odessa. That they had deliberately stolen from him not only their love, but the possibility of any
future love at all.

[“Did you imagine that one day there would not be a price to pay?”]

[“I have always thought there would be a price to pay.”] Rodchenko’s hands shook, but he didn’t
bother hiding them. [“It was only a matter of when.”]

Natasha said nothing.

Quietly he added, [“And how.”]

His terror was obvious, but she would give him this much: he faced his death like a man. Afraid, yes,
but accepting. No begging or pleading for his life, no bribery, no falling to his knees in hysterics as
she’d seen many supposedly brave men do. He knew death when he saw it, and looked it in the eyes
when it came.

If she’d meant to kill him then, though, he would never have even seen it coming.

[“You have things to tell me first, though, haven’t you?”] She lifted her chin a few millimeters, her
cold eyes locked on his. [“Things you didn’t tell Captain America, things he didn’t ask. Things he
didn’t know to ask, or perhaps didn’t think to ask because of his grief.”]

She had many questions she wanted to ask the doctor just then. Questions he would answer whether
he liked it or not, and which he would answer truthfully without her persuading him any further than
she had already done. But she would get to them in time. All of them.

[“Aleksander Anatolyevich Lukin.”] She said the name with an almost ironic reverence, given that
she planned to watch the man die in a most undignified manner. [“Where is he now?”]

He looked at her for a moment, his face pale with nausea. [“I don’t know. Not for certain. He went
into New York City to deal with business, but…”] He shook his head. [“I imagine as soon as he got
word of what happened, he fled back to Moscow.”] Despite his fear, he couldn’t seem to help the
bitterness that seeped into his voice. [“Where he’s safe and nothing can be proven against him.”]

[“That hardly matters, Doctor, and I think you know that.”] She tilted her head slightly, looking
down at him as he sat there on the edge of the cot. [“I’m not interested in proving anything about him
one way or the other. Leave that to the bureaucrats. I’m only interested in where to find him.”]

Rogers would want to make sure Lukin was prosecuted according to the letter of the law, she knew.
He would insist on Lukin’s being captured, read his rights, and tried before a real court. Which was
fine for him to want, and in accordance with what she knew he believed about the world.
Unfortunately, much of what he believed about the world simply did not hold up against the reality
of the world. And the reality was very much as Rodchenko had said it was: Lukin would be
sheltered by the Russian government, insulated from punishment by his massive wealth and political-economic position, and entirely above legal justice.

But nothing could protect him from her.

[“You’re afraid of him.”] She resettled her shoulders, still not unfolding her arms. [“You were reluctant to say his name, but not out of loyalty. You were afraid of him - clearly you still are - but I think you want to see him pay for what he’s done, too.”] A significant look at his neck, where the bruises still stood out dark against the white of his old skin. Lukin hardly seemed to possess a great deal of self-control, did he?

She wondered whether that might work to her advantage.

[“But I don’t imagine he’ll be too difficult to find, one way or another.”] She looked from Rodchenko’s neck back up into his eyes. [“In the meantime, I’ve had a look at the information from your machine.”]

She’d done so immediately following Rogers’ conversation with Colonel Rhodes, in fact. Rogers was going to want to do something grandiose and symbolic to the recalibration chair, she knew it - he was almost criminally easy to read - and she wanted to make sure the information stored in it was preserved before he ordered it thrown into the ocean or something. Who knew how helpful it might end up being to counter any eventual charges brought against James?

[“And I’ve been wondering.”] Her face was stony. [“Did you do all that work yourself?”]

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The way Romanova’s gaze locked onto Rodchenko’s neck made him feel exposed. Naked and ashamed. He just barely resisted the urge to turn up the collar of his lab coat.

Pathetic, to have ended his life in such a manner.

He felt very old, and he was just sixty-four. Other men of his age, those lucky enough to enjoy good health, were just nearing their retirements and looking forward to prolonged holidays in their dachas and renewed attention to an assortment of hobbies and passions. And what did he have to show for his life?

Bruises on his neck, interrogation before sudden death, and the knowledge that his life’s work amounted to a drugged wreck of a man who would never recover his own mind.

Pathetic and pitiful.

[“If you’re asking whether or not I built the machine, I did not.”] He looked at her, resignation heavy on his face. [“If you’re asking whether the programming is all mine, from 1973 onward it is. Except for the weeks that he was with the Americans.”]

[“And you knew every facet of what you were ‘burning out of him’.”] She leveled her gaze at him, a look of frozen steel sharpened to a dagger-point, and let him sit in that thought for a long moment.

He had nothing he could say to that.

[“Was it Lukin’s idea to send him after me in Odessa?”] She stared at him from under lowered eyebrows, every inch the Black Widow. [“Did he want to test your handiwork?”]

[“Why are you doing this to yourself?”] He said the words so quietly, he wondered if she heard them
at all.

Certainly Romanova didn’t respond, and it was a long time before he could make himself respond either. A Black Widow always played with its prey before going for the kill, and he wondered how much longer she meant to torment the both of them.

When she did strike, he hoped she would allow for the mercy of a quick death.

Finally he said, [“He wanted to test my handiwork, yes. It had been years since the Winter Soldier had last seen you, and…”] He closed his eyes. [“And he thought it would be… amusing. He thought it would be amusing for the Winter Soldier to kill you.”]

A cold, damp feeling had spread from his stomach to the rest of his body. He wrapped his arms loosely around himself.

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[“I’m finding this man very unpleasant to even think about.”] Natasha continued to crush the old doctor beneath the weight of her cold, blank stare. [“And I’m beginning to have my own amusing ideas.”]

Ideas like strapping Lukin down to a table in one of the many abandoned sites in Siberia she knew about, sticking an IV tube in his arm, and leaving him there to go slowly insane. He had ruined James’ mind; a simple bullet through the head would be too easy, too fast, and far too unsatisfying.

She would never share Rogers’ idealistic beliefs about justice. For him, there was a very clear delineation between justice and vengeance. But in the world she lived in - the world that had always existed, and always would exist, beneath the veneer of civilization and respectability that nations sought to cultivate - there was no justice other than vengeance. There were no systems capable of addressing the great wrongs that were done, let alone righting them, and so the only justice was the one that was self-made.

More to the point, Lukin was a man completely devoid of anything even remotely resembling a conscience. He had risen through the ranks of the Soviet military and the Soviet political structure, and Natasha knew better than anyone the degree of inhumanity required to do that. He had built a multibillion-dollar business empire in much the same way every other such empire had been built: ruthless exploitation, bribery, deceit, and outright murder when necessary. And he had shielded himself from accountability by hiding behind his wealth, position, and alliances so that he could amuse himself in Odessa.

Lukin had to die, that much was clear. But part of her was beginning to doubt that Rodchenko did as well.

[“You regret what you did to James.”] She wanted to see the doctor’s reaction to the name.

[“James?”] He looked up at her, but her face betrayed no emotion except coldness. [“He knows that his name is James. I…”] His gaze drifted down to his hands. [“I told him… I told him that.”]

Natasha raised an eyebrow. [“You told him?”]

[“He’s always been James,”] he whispered. [“Not this ‘Bucky.’’”] After a long moment, he added, [“And what does it matter? What does it matter what I regret?”] He looked at her with tired eyes. [“We both know the price of regret, do we not?”]

She had not expected that. Maybe he was lying, attempting to draw out what he saw as his
impending execution by a few more minutes, but none of her instincts told her that was the case. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was telling the truth.

But why?

[“I never knew him as Bucky any more than you did.”] She looked down at him, mind still trying to process the revelation. [“I only learned who he really was by reading General Karpov’s file. Just as you did, I expect.”]

She still had no real idea of how to come to grips with the truth of James’ past. Perhaps she never would. But if it were possible to restore his memories - all of them - like Rogers wanted to, then it was something she was going to have to figure out sooner or later.

[“How did you tell him who he was?”] She felt confused for the first time since coming into the room to wait for him, and she didn’t like the feeling at all. [“And why?”]

Rodchenko looked at her for a long, exhausted moment. [“These past few weeks, his mind was starting to break. He was begging for rest.”] Even his sigh was one of bone-weariness. [“That is, cryogenic stasis. But the General would not allow it, and so the only way to keep him functional was through repeated reconditioning.”]

Through repeated use of the mental recalibration chair, in other words. They had tortured James continuously with it, instead of allowing him a moment’s peace.

Rodchenko closed his eyes, perhaps against the memories. [“But… it wasn’t working. At first, he would hold for days. Then merely hours. And still the General would not allow the Soldier his rest.”] He shook his head. [“Finally, perhaps from one of his mind… mind… flashes, he told me that he knew he had a name once. And so I asked him what his name was, and he couldn’t tell me. And I…”]

His voice slipped away for a moment.

[“It was all I had left to give him. His name.”] He stared at the floor. [“It should be such a small thing, a man’s name. And so I gave it to him.”]

Natasha wanted to turn away at that. Wanted to shut her eyes and block her ears and deaden herself to what Rodchenko was saying. Wanted to do anything she could to stomp on the feeling growing in her heart.

Rodchenko felt genuine remorse for what he’d done to James. Enough so that he could barely bring himself to recount what had happened, even in the face of his own death. Enough so that he had given James the gift of his name when he knew perfectly well that Lukin probably would have had Rodchenko killed if he had discovered it. Perhaps Lukin would have had James do it; certainly that would have amused him.

Had that been the reason for the bruises on Rodchenko’s neck?

She couldn’t kill him then; she knew that. She hated it, hated herself for it, hated him, but she couldn’t completely deny the sympathy she felt for him. He had done what he had done out of fear, just as she had been made to do as a child. And if even she had not had the strength to escape from her horrible life on her own, how could she fault him for not being able to? He had been a victim just as James had been.

Just as she had been.
[“You told Captain America there was no hope of restoring his mind.”] She dropped into a crouch beside the bed, bringing herself to eye level with him so that there could be no mistaking her intentions. [“But you’d better find a way to help him, or I’ll see to it you die screaming.”]

And then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Questions, comments, and suggestions are warmly welcomed.
And now back to our regularly scheduled updates. The past few weeks have been ridiculously busy, but things have calmed down, and so the saga continues.

As before, if they’re speaking [like this], it's Russian you're reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avengers Tower
the next morning
early December 2014

Steve had missed seeing Bucky off to sleep the previous evening, but the trade-off had been well worth it.

To begin with, Sam had stopped by to let him know that he’d made contact with a noted therapist, a man named Dr. Isaac Levitt. Dr. Levitt had apparently spent most of his forty-five-year-long career working with soldiers suffering from what they now called ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, a condition that had been simply called ‘shell-shock’ in Steve’s day. He also specialized in working with soldiers who had been victims of torture while prisoners of war. And apparently, he was very good at his work - he’d written several books, taught university courses at places like Princeton and Columbia, and made quite a name for himself among the people in his field.

“And he’s interested in working with Bucky,” Sam had said. “A big high note to end his career on. He’s getting ready to retire, but he said this was the kind of case he’d want to be his last.”

Wanda had also made some phone calls, and what she’d turned up was something just as important, if not more so - something that sent a surge of hope and excitement rushing through Steve’s every nerve. Something that would mean more to Bucky’s recovery than doctors or bed rest or time spent walking around the old neighborhood - if it worked.

“I talked to Jean Grey today,” Wanda had said. “A good friend from years ago. The most powerful mutant telepath in the world. More powerful than her old teacher, Professor Xavier. She’s done some successful memory recovery before, and she wants to try to help Bucky.”

And so Steve breezed into the medical bay of Avengers Tower that day brimming with good news for Bucky. Hank intercepted him just as he got inside the door to the wing.

“Morning, Steve.” Hank pushed his glasses up his nose. “He’s on something of a low dose of sedative today.”

“Is that…?” Steve tilted his head to one side and frowned as he heard what sounded like the slurred tones of some kind of drinking song coming from the direction of Bucky’s room. In what was probably Russian. “Is he singing?”

“In the manner of which only the semi-intoxicated are capable.” Hank smiled. “I’ve let him be since he finished his breakfast, and he’s been doing that for the past twenty minutes or so. I’ll be running a
series of psychological tests on him throughout the course of the day - very informally - and so long as I can rule out his being a danger to himself or anyone else, you can take him home tomorrow morning.” He held up a blue, furry paw before Steve could proceed into Bucky’s room. “Though he is going to require some sort of treatment plan going forward. Therapy for the mistreatment he has suffered, at the very least.”

“I’m ahead of you there, Hank.” Steve returned the smile. “So’s the director of your school. Bucky’s going to get the best care anyone in the world can give him, believe you me.”

He thanked Hank and pushed open the door to Bucky’s room, his objective as much to stop the Russian singing as to give Bucky the good news. Hearing that language out of his friend’s mouth set his teeth on edge.

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Blue doctor woke the soldier up that morning to the same routine as before. They did “the necessaries,” which once again included a sponge bath, and Dr. McCoy helped the soldier into a fresh set of pajamas - a grey t-shirt this time and a pair of blue pajama pants patterned in colorful spaceships.

“I picked those out myself,” Dr. McCoy said cheerfully. “In honor of your recent introduction to the wonders of theremin music.”

“Spaceships?” The soldier fumbled over the drawstring, but he managed to make something of a clumsy knot.

“Indeed. Though I do prefer to think of them as rocket ships.” Dr. McCoy grinned toothily. “They’ve much more of a cartoonish feel to them, wouldn’t you agree?”

Over breakfast - French toast sticks and sausage, along with orange juice and milk - Dr. McCoy explained that the soldier would be on a low dose of sedative until evening and that he should really try to just relax and rest throughout most of the day. And of course, he was more than welcome to listen to theremin music, which they did for the remainder of breakfast.

And then blue doctor left him alone in bed to relax, and the soldier found himself considering…

James or Bucky?

Steve called him Bucky, and so did blue doctor. But Romanoff (had he called her Natalia? Had she visited him the other day? Or had he just dreamed that part?) called him James. And so had the doctor.

He didn’t want to think about the doctor.

James or Bucky? Bucky or James?

He lost track of how much time had passed, and before long, he was singing to himself quietly. Though not so quietly that JARVIS didn’t intercede and ask him if he wanted orchestral accompaniment - he did not, but he considered it strongly for a moment.

[“Chizhik-Pyzhik, where have you been? Drank vodka on the Fontanka… Took a shot…”]

Steve was in the room suddenly, a funny expression his face. He wondered if Steve knew any
drinking songs.

[“Took another...
Got a headache…”]

“Hey there, Bucky.” Steve said the words very loudly and boisterously.

The soldier stopped singing and looked at Steve curiously.

“Got some good news for you.” Steve smiled a strained sort of smile. “Dr. McCoy says you’re clear, and it looks like we can go home tomorrow morning.” A beat, then, “And Wanda Maximoff and Sam Wilson have found a couple of people who can help you.”

Sam Wilson - guy with the wings. Wanda Maximoff - mutant witch. Both of them had stopped in briefly to say hello the other day.

The words tumbled out of the soldier’s mouth without a second thought.

[“Help me…?”] he started to say, and it was only Steve’s strange - almost horrified - expression that brought him up.

He had spoken in Russian because of the Russian drinking songs, but now he was supposed to speak English because Steve wanted to talk to him, and Steve probably didn’t understand Russian anyway, and he really hoped that blue doctor would allow the IV to come out soon.

Soon, because he was tired of feeling sluggish and confused.

He tried again. In English. “Help me do what?”

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“Help you get better.”

Steve might have said it a bit more forcefully than usual, but the Russian was beginning to get to him. He wanted it to stop at this point, whatever he had to do to make that happen. It was as much a reminder of what they’d done to Bucky as the HYDRA combat uniform he’d been wearing when they’d brought him back a couple of days ago. Or the fact that Bucky had ordered Russian snacks without a second thought the day they walked to the beach at Coney Island. They’d made him believe that he was Russian. That was how successful their campaign of brainwashing had been. That was how effective that horrible recalibration chair was.

God, how he wanted to pitch the Goddamn chair out the bay doors of the Helicarrier and watch it tumble end-over-end into the sea below. Or watch Thor smash it into unrecognizable junk with his hammer. Or let Clint test out some new explosive arrows on it. Anything to destroy it so that it could never be used again. Not on Bucky, not on anyone. Not by anyone.

He felt as though the long-dead Karpov were laughing at him from the grave. We made him more of a Russian than an American, he seemed to be saying. And there’s nothing you can do about it.

He brought himself back to the moment. Despite Rodchenko’s assertion that nothing could be done to bring back Bucky’s memory, that he was destined to be the burnt-out shell that had resulted from Lukin’s sadistic order for the humanity to be burned out of him, Wanda had brought a real ray of hope into the situation. The most powerful telepath in the world might be able to accomplish what psychiatric techniques or even that horrible chair could not. And Sam’s colleague Dr. Levitt would be able to counsel Bucky through it all after his memories were uncovered.
“Help you start to remember things.” Steve sat down at the edge of the bed and put a hand on Bucky’s arm. “Help you get out from under what HYDRA and the Soviets did to you.”

Bucky frowned at that. “The Soviets…?” He shifted around so that he was sitting up just a bit more in bed. “Do you mean Comrade General Karpov?” Another frown, then slowly, “The Soviet Union’s been gone a long time. Comrade General Karpov died a long time ago, too. He didn’t… he didn’t do… anything.”

“He did everything,” Steve said immediately. Petulantly, perhaps, but he was past the point of caring. “He just made sure you wouldn’t remember what he did. He made sure you wouldn’t remember anything about who you were or where you came from. He made sure you wouldn’t remember him and Dr. Pushkin torturing you. And every time it seemed like you were going to remember, they just stuck you in that mental recalibration chair and wiped it all away.”

He hated being reminded that Karpov, being long dead, was past the reach of justice. And he hated even more that the man had managed to warp Bucky’s mind to such an extent that Bucky didn’t realize how evil Karpov had been. That he still referred to him with the honorific of ‘Comrade General’. It was clear that Bucky both hated and feared General Lukin, even if he hadn’t been able to name him, but the fact that he seemed incapable of recognizing what a monster Karpov had been was even worse.

He looked Bucky in the eyes. “But that’s all going to change. You’ll never have to sit in that chair again. You’ll never have to go into cryo again. You’ll be able to come home with me tomorrow morning, and then we’re going to start your therapy.” He reached out and squeezed Bucky’s arm. “I’m going to make sure you remember everything, Bucky.”

---

At the best of times, the soldier sometimes had trouble keeping up with conversations. The General would say a lot of things very quickly and then get angry when the soldier became confused and struggled to form useful replies.

He didn’t think Steve would get angry with him, but he was talking fast and saying a lot of things that weren’t true, and the sedative was making it doubly difficult to keep up with it all.

“They didn’t… torture me.” He chewed on his lip. “Comrade General Karpov and Comrade Doctor Pushkin didn’t… they didn’t… do that.”

He didn’t like the sound of that at all.

Comrade General Karpov had died a long time ago. And so had Comrade Dr. Pushkin. How long ago, the soldier didn’t know, but the doctor had said it had been a long time. Ten years, at least. Or more.

Maybe.

He wasn’t very good at keeping track of time.

There were so many other things he was supposed to respond to as well - the chair and cryo and therapy - but instead he found himself clumsily scrabbling for the tape on his hand instead. If he could take the IV out, he could think properly, and then they could have a real conversation.

“No, no, leave that be.” Steve took the soldier’s metal hand by the wrist and gently moved it away. “Come on now, Bucky, just relax.”
The soldier looked at him. “They didn’t…” he started to say, but couldn’t figure out how to end the sentence. All the words felt wrong.

“They did.” Steve still didn’t sound angry, but he didn’t sound happy either. “Karpov and Pushkin wanted you to be loyal to the Soviet Union. They kept you from remembering who you really were. They put things into your head with the recalibration chair, and they were careful about what they let you remember.”

“That’s not true,” the soldier said automatically, followed quickly by, “I was loyal to the Soviet Union.”

For a long moment, he ended up simply staring down at the blanket. He had no idea which argument he was supposed to try to have first. And no matter which one he chose, he knew he wouldn’t do it properly. He wasn’t very good at thinking.

Thinking was for men, and he had never been more than a killer.

He sighed.

A question he could ask crossed his mind just then, and it was a good question, too. One that wouldn’t cause any arguments.

“So which should it be?” He looked at Steve. “James or Bucky?”

They had started to talk about that the other day, but the sedative had been very strong and he had drifted away while Steve was explaining the answer. But he knew his name was supposed to be James Buchanan Barnes.

“That should be settled. Can’t keep calling me both.”

“I don’t.” Steve smiled. “I’ve been calling you Bucky for pretty much our whole lives. In fact, I can think of exactly one time I called you James, and that was when we were having a fight at camp.” He chuckled. “We were eight.”

Steve began to recount the story - he seemed to remember it pretty clearly, and Bucky felt a flash of… envy? (maybe?) at that.

Steve and Bucky had spent a week away at a Salvation Army summer camp, which was a common, yearly occurrence for kids in their neighborhood and surrounding areas. “Poor kid camp,” they had once heard someone call it. “Charity camp,” was a kinder suggestion, but they had never cared either way.

Anyway, Steve explained, they’d worked out between them that Bucky would get the first three nights on the top bunk and Steve would get the following three nights. Being eight, though, Bucky had decided not to give up the bunk on the fourth night. He’d written his name on the rail with a pencil - “See, it says my name right here - Bucky Barnes. My name, my bed!” - and when Steve had raised a fuss about it, forcing the teenaged counselor to get involved, things got messy.

“Fine,” the counselor had said in exasperation. “Simon gets the top bunk. The two of you both get bottom bunks for the rest of the week.”

Steve had refused to speak to Bucky after that, except to tell him that he wasn’t speaking to him anymore. And that was when he’d called him James, to show that he was putting distance between them. “I won’t be speaking to you anymore, James,” he had said grandly. Bucky had responded in kind - “Well, who wants to speak to you anyway, Steven?” The following day and a half had been
miserable for both of them, but Bucky had finally come to Steve with a huge bar of chocolate as a peace offering, and they’d been back to being best friends by the evening of the next-to-last day of camp.

“Gee, I sure am enjoying my top bunk,” Simon had gloated that night. Both Bucky and Steve had responded in near-unison with “Oh, shut up,” and then looked at one another and nodded in their newly-rediscovered solidarity.

“The two of us against the world.” Steve smiled, his eyes far off in the distance. “Just like it always had been.”

The soldier was silent for a long moment. That had been a nice story. Happy. A nice, happy story. He hoped it were true. There was probably no way to prove it, but it had been nice all the same.

Steve shook his head suddenly, eyes refocusing. “Natasha’s probably going to keep calling you James, though. Is that all right with you?”

“Yeah.” He picked at a snag in the blanket. “That’s all right.”

For some reason, he couldn’t imagine looking the Black Widow in the face and asking her to call him Bucky. He could see her lips - she had very nice lips, he realized - curving into a smirk at the very thought of the idea.

He wondered when he would see her again.

As for his name…

“And I can be Bucky,” he said quietly. “I’m all right with that, too.”

The name felt…

He wasn’t sure.

Bucky…

An image drifted across his mind, very leisurely and slow, almost as if it were encouraging him to carefully examine it. He saw a gallery somewhere, shiny new images on walls with text that he couldn’t make out and lifesize models of men dressed in old clothing. And in the middle of all of that was a serious portrait of his own face and a somber narrator who talked about the schoolyard and the battlefield.

“It’s in a museum,” he said slowly. “My name is in a museum.”

“The Smithsonian.” Steve smiled. “You went there about a week before you came looking for me at my apartment in D.C. There’s an exhibit there about all of us.” He hesitated a moment, then, “The Howling Commandos. Ring a bell?”

“I don’t know,” he said automatically, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, they didn’t feel true.

There was a prominently mustachioed man in a bowler hat - always a bowler hat - passing around a pack of cigarettes, and another man with dark skin and a wry smile, teaching everyone how to say dirty words in French - _va te faire enculer_… but the soldier… Bucky… the soldier already spoke French… didn’t he?… There had been missions in France, and…
“No…”

He shook his head, stared hard at the blanket, but the image neither drifted away nor was replaced by another one. And that was better than the way it happened with most mind tricks.

“Mind tricks,” he murmured. “They’re just mind tricks, but…” He picked at the blanket again, pulling the snagged threads loose. “There was a man… teaching everyone French… j’en ai plus rien à foutre… except I already speak French, and…”

He glanced at Steve. He had a strange expression on his face.

“And… the man, he switched… from German to French…” No new mind tricks, but the words came to him all the same. “Said the girls were prettier… And there was another… maybe…”

The image shimmered and began to drift away. They always did.

“… in a bowler hat…”

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There was that phrase again. Mind tricks. The words sent a spike of anger through Steve every time he heard them. They’d lied to Bucky so often, so repeatedly, so blatantly that he’d taken it to heart. And now, he believed their lies as Gospel truth. That those tiny flashes, the desperate sputterings of his memory trying to reassert itself, were nothing but daydreams. Hallucinations.

Mind tricks.

“Not mind tricks, Buck.” He shook his head emphatically. “They were our friends. The one you’re talking about was Gabe Jones. He was our translator and linguist.” He smiled to remember Gabe. “I remember asking him once why he was in the Army instead of college, since students were supposed to be exempt from the draft. And he told me that the exemption didn’t apply to black men.” He frowned deeply. “Though he used an uglier word.”

Gabe had been a good man, when good men were needed the most. It had been a shame they hadn’t gotten the chance to meet again after Steve had come off the ice, but Jim Morita had told him that Gabe had passed on only a year or so beforehand.

“And there was Jim Morita, too.” He threw the names out there, hoping that Bucky would grasp hold of one of them. “Jacques Dernier. James Montgomery Falsworth. ‘Dum Dum’ Dugan - he was the one in the bowler hat. We were the Howling Commandos.”

A question came to mind, and he looked at Bucky curiously. “You don’t speak French. Neither did I, not past a few words. Gabe always used to make fun of us for how bad our pronunciation was. And Dernier used to laugh at us for it.”

Bucky frowned. “Je parle français - I do speak French. I have for a long time. I don’t know how long.”

Before Steve could respond, Bucky continued.

“I ya govoryu po-russki - and I speak Russian. Of course. Und auch Deutsch - and German, too. ‘Ana ’atakallam alearabiat ’aydaan - and also Arabic. Wǒ shuō zhōngguó huà - and Mandarin Chinese.”

Steve recoiled at each of the new languages, every one of them a slap in the face. Every one of them
a reminder of just how powerful the Soviets and then HYDRA’s hold over Bucky had been. How they could have almost literally opened up his head and rearranged things as they saw fit. Taken things out, put things in, switched things around, and left their bloody fingerprints all over every inch of Bucky’s mind.

It made him sick.


“Maybe you speak them now.” Steve’s voice came out slightly hoarse, and he had to clear his throat to keep going. “But you didn’t speak them then.”

He hated the Soviets. Karpov, who had engineered it all out of some twisted hatred for America and him in particular. Who’d thought it would make a wonderful joke to turn his best friend against him. Pushkin, who’d tortured Bucky with his drugs and the chair, who’d scoured away all traces of the man Bucky had been and scrawled propagandistic graffiti all over his mind.

And he hated Lukin as well, for what he’d ordered done to Bucky. For taking away even Bucky’s humanity, because he’d had the temerity to fall in love like a man instead of devote himself entirely to murder like the ‘perfect killing machine’ Lukin had wanted. And for imagining that his wealth and power would make him safe.

“They gave you those languages.” He looked at Bucky with real hurt in his eyes. “They sat you in that chair and stole everything from you, and then they put in what they wanted you to have. What they wanted you to know, what they wanted you to be. But it wasn’t you, Bucky. Not the real you.”

Bucky looked wordlessly at Steve for a long, uncomfortable moment, then returned to the task of pulling the loose thread out of the blanket.

“It’s useful to speak so many languages,” he finally said. “It’s useful for missions.” He glanced at Steve and must have seen something on his face that he didn’t like. “And it’s useful anyway. I’m talking to you. We’re talking… We’re talking… so…” His voice trailed away. He shook his head, a miserable expression on his face.

“I know, Bucky.”

Steve suddenly felt rotten to the core for making Bucky feel as if he had to comfort him or prop him up. It should have been the other way around; after all, Bucky was the one in the hospital bed right then, not him.

“It’s good that we’re talking.” He found a smile to stick on his face. “And you’re right; the languages are useful. I’ve been trying to learn another language myself, but it’s not as easy as I hoped. I’m still stuck with the little bit of French and German I picked up during the war, and a year or so worth of Spanish that’s shaky at best.”

He smiled thoughtfully. “I kind of envy people like Wanda and her brother as far as languages go. They speak a handful of languages each, because they had to. Because they grew up in a place where just one, even two, languages wasn’t enough to get by.” He shook his head. “We grew up speaking English, and nothing but English, and then I wake up to a world that’s so much smaller than it was before, and I feel like I’ll never be able to catch up.”

He sighed. “So yeah, the languages are useful, and I’m glad you can speak them. It’s the way you got them that I don’t like.”
Bucky looked at him curiously. “What way?”

“With the chair.” His eyes hardened. “Like I said. They got rid of what they didn’t want, and then they put in what they did want. That’s how they made you forget the torture. That’s how they kept you from remembering anything about yourself. Your name, your family, your home, everything. And that’s how you got the languages too.”

Bucky said nothing.

Steve’s expression softened again. “They took a lot from you, Buck. But I think we’ve got a way to help you get it all back.”

As soon as possible.

Chapter End Notes

I have a bunch of notes in my inbox that I need to catch up on, but let me just say that I love and appreciate each and every one. It's so encouraging and inspiring (and just makes me really giddy-happy) to hear from people who enjoy this story or have questions or observations. It's really great. I love it.

Keep it coming!

As always, questions, feedback, and random drinking songs are warmly welcomed!
The next morning, blue doctor finally removed the IV and told the soldier - Bucky - to get in the shower.

“You’ve been subsisting on sponge baths these past few days.” Dr. McCoy led Bucky into into the bathroom. “And your hair is beginning to look like a fright wig. And I say this as a man with blue fur. Believe you me, friend, I know from fright wig.”

Right before Bucky drew the shower curtain shut, Dr. McCoy added, “And don’t even think of taking a one minute military shower. I expect a full lather, understand?”

After the shower - and all the other necessities - blue doctor presented Bucky with a fresh set of clothes that did not look at all like pajamas.

“Natasha went and got them from Steve’s place last night,” he explained. “These are all yours, from last time you were there.”

Bucky was only just starting to realize how much it bothered him that everyone else seemed to know more about his own life than he did, but now that he realized it… it bothered him a lot.

Before he was formally discharged, he and Dr. McCoy had another long talk - there had been several the other day - which amounted to the following:

If Bucky thought he might try to hurt himself again, he agreed to tell someone. Preferably Steve, Sam, Natasha, or Dr. McCoy.

Dr. McCoy would be following up on him in the next day or so, and for several weeks after that.

Dr. McCoy was also going to be part of the team outlining Bucky’s treatment plan going forward, and once the plan was complete, they would all discuss it in greater detail.

Eat a hot dog. Eat several hot dogs. Coney Island was known for their hot dogs.

And that was that.

Bucky found he didn’t have much to say to Steve on the taxi ride home, so he said, “Blue doctor says we should eat hot dogs from Coney Island. Especially Nathan’s hot dogs.”

Steve smiled. “He’s right about that.” After a moment, he added, “I remember when Nathan’s used to be just a tiny little place on the boardwalk. Now they’re a multinational chain, can you believe it?
And the little place on the boardwalk takes up almost a whole block.” He shook his head. “Time
goes by.”

Bucky didn’t know what to say to that.

“How about we go out there tomorrow?” Steve reached forward with the fare as the taxi pulled up in
front of the apartment building, and held the door open for Bucky as he got out.

Immediately Bucky saw the snipers on the roof and the two unmarked vans on the side of the street
and the police boat on the river. He could hear the faint whirring of a helicopter - maybe two? - as it
drew closer to their location.

Steve was unarmed though, and so was he, and so he said nothing as they climbed the front steps
and Steve keyed the entry code into the front door access panel.

As soon as they were inside and down the hall and up the stairs to Steve’s apartment, Bucky said,
“There are snipers on the roof. There might be someone inside the house.”

Steve stiffened as the words came out of Bucky’s mouth, and his hand reflexively went to his back,
but he wasn’t carrying the shield with him. “You stay behind me. Let me go in first; my shield
should be right inside by the door. I’ll be able to cover you if any shooting starts. And if I tell you to
run, then hightail it back to the Tower as quick as you can.”

Unless whoever might be inside the house had taken the shield, but Bucky said nothing.

Steve slid the key in the lock and opened the door, and just as he said, the shield was right where he
had left it. He picked it up, sliding his arm through the straps, and moved into the middle of the living
room, checking the corners and the hall as he did.

The living room was empty, everything in its place. Empty, except for Steve and Bucky.

“I don’t get it.” Steve shook his head. “Where’d you see the snipers, Buck?”

Bucky stayed far away from the large living room windows, but he could still see the river. “Two
police boats now. Helicopters right overhead.”

Footsteps faintly down the hallway, moving quickly and orderly, and at any moment, they would
kick the door open.

If he went for the window, the police boats would have a clear shot at him, but he had a chance of
making it to the water. Unless he went through the window directly onto the sidewalk, but the
snipers were on the roof across the street and likely on the roof of Steve’s building, too. If he went
through the front door, he could take down most of the targets, but a stray shot from any of them
might hit Steve.

He only needed to disarm one of them to get into a good position. The front door, then.

The front door burst open and a stream of men in black SWAT gear, armed with Colt CAR-15 rifles
at the ready, flowed into the room, and one of them was screaming -

“Hands on your head! On your knees! Down on your knees!”

Steve whirled, shield poised to deflect any shots, his arm already reaching back for balance if he
might need to hurl it.
Bucky tensed. Glanced at Steve. He only needed to disarm one. Just one, and-

“On your knees! Now! On your knees, or we’ll open fire!”

Were they NYPD? State police? The FBI? Or disguised HYDRA agents? It didn’t matter. Their fingers were tight on their triggers, their bodies rigid with tension, and one false move would result in every single one of them opening fire.

“Hold it!” Steve spoke in his most commanding, authoritative voice. “Stand down, gentlemen. We’re unarmed, and we’re not your enemies.” He kept the shield up, his other hand held out in a way that Bucky realized was meant to keep him back. “Bucky, just stay calm. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Bucky didn’t move. Yet.

Steve continued. “What do you want?”

“Out of the way, Captain Rogers!” One of the officers, his posture never changing, his weapon never moving an inch, responded. “We have a warrant for the arrest of the man calling himself the Winter Soldier, on charges of conspiracy to commit terrorism and multiple counts of felony murder. He’s armed and extremely dangerous. Now get out of the way, Captain!”

“No!” Steve stepped deliberately between Bucky and the SWAT team. “Listen to me. Just everybody calm down!”

No one calmed down. Instead one of the officers shouted, “Now! On your knees now!”

Bucky could knock Steve aside and engage the SWAT team, but they would panic and open fire, and there was too much of a chance that one bullet - or several - would hit Steve. He could disarm any one of them easily, but again, that left Steve vulnerable to attack. He could go for the window - he had any number of options - but all of them left Steve unguarded, and Bucky didn’t trust that the SWAT team would aim only for him and leave Steve unharmed.

“On your knees! Final warning!”

Last chance, then.

Bucky raised his hands over his head. He dropped to his knees. A second later, several men had surrounded him, rifles held at the ready, and they had already shoved Steve aside. One of them drew out a set of shining chain restraints. Another two pushed Bucky down to the floor. The muzzle of a rifle just grazed his head.

They wanted the Winter Soldier. Not Steve. They had said as much. And so if he went with them - allowed them to take him away without a fight - they would leave Steve behind in the house. And then Bucky could do with them whatever might be necessary.

“Adamantium, pal.” One of the officers wrenched Bucky’s hands behind his back and slapped the cuffs over his wrists, then secured the chain around his waist and then his ankles. “Let’s see you break out of that.”

That would be difficult.

Difficult, but not impossible.

“Bucky, just stay calm!” Steve said, but his voice already seemed like it was miles away. “Who’s in
charge here?”

“I am.” The man who had spoken before lowered his rifle and flipped up the visor on his helmet. “Lieutenant William Myeong, NYPD.”

“Listen, Lieutenant.” Steve lowered the shield and stepped up to the man, who sported a day’s growth of dark stubble on a face that was hard and duty-weathered. “I need to know who issued that warrant, and where you plan on taking this man.”

Myeong didn’t hesitate. “The warrant came from the absolute top, Captain. I told you, the charges are conspiracy to commit terrorism and multiple counts of felony murder. This guy’s wanted in connection with the events in DC as well as a string of murders all up and down the East Coast over the past month. We’re taking him out to Riker’s now.” His eyes narrowed. “Hear he’s supposed to be a real powerhouse, but there’s a cell out at Riker’s that they used for Rhino. That’ll hold him till whatever federal orders come through.”

Two of the officers grabbed Bucky by the arms and hauled him to his feet. Unnecessary, but they had their orders.

Right from the absolute top, apparently.

“Federal?” Bucky could hear the note of fear in Steve’s voice, but he pulled himself together immediately and said, “I’m going with you.” He looked Myeong in the eyes - it wasn’t a question. “I’m coming with you, and we’re going to get this all sorted out.”

Bucky didn’t hear the rest of Steve’s conversation with the lieutenant. The officers frog-marched Bucky through the building and then outside to an armored van. He had a brief moment to observe the two helicopters overhead and the multiple snipers on the rooftop of the building opposite Steve’s apartment, along with what appeared to be a news van or two, before the officers pushed him inside the armored van and strapped him down securely.

The lieutenant had claimed to be NYPD, but that didn’t mean anything. SHIELD’s own STRIKE unit had all been HYDRA. Any or all of the NYPD could be as well. If the General wanted him back, he had found a very efficient way of doing it.

But if there was a chance those men were actually NYPD, then Bucky wouldn’t fight them. They said they wanted him for the events in DC and for the string of murders on the East Coast in the past month, and they weren’t wrong. He had done all of that.

He had done those things.

Several people climbed into the front seat of the van, and one of them sounded like Steve. So maybe he had convinced the lieutenant to let him come along after all.

Maybe they really were NYPD.

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Steve sat up front in the van that held Bucky, turned around uncomfortably because that was the only way to see through the narrow eye slit that allowed him to check on him. Bucky was secured with the Adamantium shackles, strapped into a restraining seat with what appeared to be thick polymer restraints, and surrounded by four guards whose submachine guns were trained on him constantly. Clearly they’d been told that Bucky was abnormally dangerous.

“It’s all going to be okay, Buck.” He wondered who he was trying to convince. “Just hang in there.”
The ride out to Riker’s was a stressful one, and Steve could only imagine how it must have felt for Bucky. They had chained him up like an animal, and it hurt Steve deep in his chest to see him that way. Maybe he should have pushed for riding in the back with Bucky, but he realized that the officers would never have allowed him to do it. They might have even refused to let Steve come along entirely, which would have ruined all the careful de-escalation he’d done back at the apartment. No, better to have had the chance to accompany Bucky in the same vehicle rather than have been left behind to chase the convoy on his motorcycle.

His stomach clenched. His heart pounded. He’d only just gotten Bucky back - against all odds for the second time, a thing he’d had no right to even hope for, let alone actually experience - and now it seemed as though he was about to lose him again. The thought of it was unbearable, and so was the notion of what might befall Bucky once they reached the prison. Extradition to Russia, to face the same fate Rodchenko had feared for himself? A HYDRA agent sent to infiltrate the prison, with orders to facilitate Bucky’s escape only to let him be recaptured? Or, in all likelihood, simply to cut his throat in his sleep?

“Don’t worry about it, Bucky.” He fought down the rising terror and tried to steady Bucky just as much as he was steadying himself. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

They arrived at the prison, and Steve stayed close beside Bucky the whole way in. Past all the locked doors and razor-wire-topped fences and grim-faced armed guards, to the very center of the modern-day castle. And there, the guards wouldn’t let him follow - something about ‘processing procedures’. Fingerprinting and mug shots and the cataloguing of personal effects. Steve fumed at it and insisted on seeing the warden. If anyone could straighten the mess out, it would have had to be him.

When they separated, Bucky gave Steve a long and questioning look that nearly broke Steve’s heart, but he told himself it was all going to work out. That if anyone tried to do anything to Bucky in that place, he’d lay waste to everyone and everything in his path until Bucky was safe again. No matter the cost, no matter the consequences.

The warden’s secretary kept him waiting for quite a while, even after he’d reminded her of who he was and why he was there. But finally, he was ushered into the office of Luis Obispo Diaz, a fastidious looking, dark-skinned man with salt-and-pepper hair, who appeared to be in his early fifties.

“Ah, Captain America.” The warden stood by a large window overlooking the water. “I must say, I’m surprised to see that you appear to be something of an ambulance chaser.”

“If the guy in the ambulance was your best friend, you’d chase it too.” He stood on the other side of the desk. “You know about the arrest at my apartment this morning?”

Warden Diaz raised an eyebrow. “Of course I know about it. The judge issued the warrant the other day, but NYPD felt it was best to wait until the suspect was no longer at Avengers Tower. That would have been terrible publicity for your people, Captain.” He waited a beat, then, “Harboring a suspected terrorist and assassin.”

“There’s a lot at work here, Warden. A lot you don’t know about.” Steve leaned across the desk, bracing his hands on it. “Starting with why the Avengers would be harboring the Winter Soldier in the first place. You don’t think we would have had him there if there wasn’t a damn good reason for it, do you?”

The warden regarded him over the top of his glasses, much like a teacher about to reprimand a misbehaving student. “Quite honestly, Captain, I haven’t thought of it at all. I’m not the one who issues the warrants.” Another long pause; he seemed to be considering his words very carefully. “But
I’ll tell you this much: NYPD was operating off an anonymous tip to the Winter Soldier’s whereabouts, and they suspected the Avengers weren’t fully aware of just who they were harboring.”

“Anonymous tip.” Steve’s eyes narrowed. He had a fairly good idea of just who might have issued such a tip, and for just what purpose. After all, what better way to get Bucky out of a relatively safe location and into the perfect position to be either killed or spirited out of the country for a show trial and a heavy sentence? He more than half suspected Lukin himself, but it could just as easily have been any of the surviving HYDRA agents. Or even someone operating on behalf of the Russian government, looking to protect Lukin for their own reasons…

“We knew who he was.” Steve looked over at Warden Diaz. “We managed to get him away from HYDRA. They were the ones manipulating him. They’re the real target.”

Another raised eyebrow. “Then I hope your friend has a good lawyer.”

Steve’s heart hammered in his chest. “I was hoping it wouldn’t need to come to that. He can’t stay here; he’ll be a sitting duck.” A coldness seeped across his body. “People are going to come looking for him. Dangerous and powerful people. How easy would it be for someone to slip in, amongst all the prisoners you’ve got here, and murder him?” He looked at the warden imploringly. “He can’t stay here.”

“What are you suggesting, Captain? That I let go a man suspected not only of multiple felony murder, but terrorism in the nation’s capitol? A man so dangerous as to require an entire SWAT team just to apprehend him?” Warden Diaz shook his head. “Surely you can’t honestly or realistically be suggesting that.”

“There’s nothing honest about imprisoning a man for something he was made to do against his will, much less putting him in a position to be killed or disappeared by the people who want to make sure their crimes are never brought to justice,” Steve said, fighting very hard to keep the desperation out of his tone. “And I don’t think it’s realistic to imagine that these things aren’t going to happen if he remains here. How could you realistically prevent it when there are so many prisoners here?”

“Captain,” the warden said flatly, “I’m not letting him go. That’s not even my call to make.”

“And what are you planning on doing with him?”

Steve forced himself to remain calm, but it was becoming harder and harder. The warden wasn’t concerned about protecting Bucky, and it would only be a matter of time before someone came to try to take him back to HYDRA or kill him. Either that, or someone would try to lay claim to Bucky during the inevitable trial. Maybe the Russians, maybe some other government that had lost someone to an assassination or who simply wanted to use him as their own assassin.

Maybe even his own government.

“I plan to hold him in solitary until the orders from federal come through. We even have a special cell for him.” The warden must have noticed Steve’s expression, because he added, “Of course I’m not going to put a man suspected of multiple murder and terrorism in general population. He’d be a target for several of the inmates who feel they have something to prove, and I rather suspect they’d come out the worse for it.”

That was understating the case pretty severely. Bucky had been a dangerous enough fighter even back during the war, and he’d fought like a demon every time Steve had encountered him as the Winter Soldier. Any ordinary prisoner, even a crowd of them, would last only a few seconds against
Bucky and look like hamburger after it was all said and done.

That being said, putting Bucky into solitary confinement was just replacing one problem with another. What would happen to him, all alone with his broken mind and disjointed thoughts? It was possible - likely, even - that he’d go insane.

“Warden, listen to me.” He heard the desperation in his own voice and hated it, but there was nothing to be done for it. “He’s not mentally well. He was brainwashed extensively over a very long period of time, and he needs help. Treatment, not prison. Not whatever orders come down from the federal level. Justice won’t be served by keeping him here.”

“Then I suggest you find him a very good lawyer, Captain.” The warden strode across his office and opened the door - a clear dismissal. “If you’ll just see my secretary on the way out, she’ll give you a list of visiting hours.”

He found himself back out in the hallway, the door shut behind him and a cold curtain of despair closing over him. He could feel everything slipping away. Everything that had seemed so hopeful, so good after so long, was crumbling around him. Bucky was in prison, on his way to solitary confinement, the warden wouldn’t listen to reason, and who even knew what was waiting around the corner when these federal orders were handed down?

He fumbled in his pocket for his phone, the desperation growing, and dialed.

“Natasha? I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

If you celebrate Steve's birthday, enjoy yourselves today! (I know Bucky won't, but nobody asked him.)

Questions, comments, feedback, and BBQ recipes are all warmly welcomed!
The Trial of Bucky Barnes

Chapter Notes

Okay, so... I know realistically that this sort of TRIAL OF THE CENTURY would take months to even make it to court. But whatever, that's the magic of comic books and movies. They're moving super fast because it's the TRIAL OF THE CENTURY, and people are looking to make (or break) their careers on this.

Also, I probably got some (or all) of the legalese wrong, but then again, I'm not sure there's much precedent for prosecuting a 96 year old brainwashed assassin who was actively assassinating (at his ripe old age!) a mere few weeks ago.

Finally, if you recognize who Bernie Rosenthal is, you're awesome.

Double finally, if you see [language brackets], assume those crazy kids are speaking in Russian.

AND AWAY WE GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 2014-January 2015

Hell’s Kitchen

Natasha knew enough about the way the Russians did things to know that they (and HYDRA, she had to assume) would now begin to search for any existing copies of the file on James. Those copies, if and when they were found, would be destroyed - and in all likelihood, so would anyone who knew of their existence.

She chided herself for her sentimentality as she sent an encrypted message to Belova, reminding the little spider to stay on her guard. And then reminded herself that maybe now they weren’t quite as even as they’d been before. That maybe Belova would wind up owing her again, and that such a favor could be useful in the future. Especially if James ended up becoming the international incident he was certainly capable of becoming.

But the original file in Rogers’ presence was dangerous to Rogers as well, particularly because of its authenticity. And so, after letting herself into his apartment to retrieve it, she made a copy to leave in its place and brought the original to another person who owed her a favor. One she intended to call in.

“You changed the locks, Matt.” She smiled from her seat on his couch as he walked in the door to his apartment, surefooted and unhesitatingly as always. She’d never been able to surprise him, and now was no exception.

“To no avail, evidently.” He propped his cane by the door and hung up his jacket. “I can make you a key if you want, you know. You’re always welcome here.”

“Oh, I know.” Natasha smiled; though she knew he couldn’t see it, she also knew he’d hear it in her voice. “That’s why I made myself at home to wait for you. Your Raisin Bran went stale, by the
way.”

“I have Raisin Bran?” Matt frowned.

Natasha grimaced. The box she’d found had probably been in a cabinet he’d never have used for cereal, and the only reason she’d looked there had been because she’d left it there herself when they’d been seeing one another.

Three years ago.

“No wonder,” she murmured, then took the file from the couch beside her and dropped it onto the coffee table. “I’ve got something here for you to hold onto for me, Matt. Something very sensitive and very important. And I also think I need the services of a lawyer. A very good one.” She smiled again, though this time a very different emotion made it into her voice. “Anyone come to mind?”

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Riker’s Island Prison Complex

“How are you holding up in here, Buck?”

Steve asked the question as more than just a formality. The last visit he’d made had been entirely useless, because Steve had spent the majority of it arguing with the guards about the shackles they’d forced Bucky to wear. He’d protested that the chains were unnecessary, that there was no need to chain him up like an animal when he was already in prison, that he didn’t want to see his friend bound with unbreakable Adamantium chains when all they would be doing was talking, but the guards had refused to budge on it. And finally, his time had run out.

So there they sat once more, Steve on one side of the table and Bucky on the other. Bucky, in his bright orange prison-issue jumpsuit, the chains on his wrists and ankles running through cleats bolted to the table and to the floor. And it broke Steve’s heart to see him reduced to that. To see the stark contrast between the pair of them.

Two boys from Brooklyn. Both soldiers. Both heroes from the same war. One a symbol of strength, peace, pride, and justice, and the other a prisoner for someone else’s crimes.

It just wasn’t fair.

Bucky took a moment to respond, but finally he said, “It’s quiet.”

“How quiet?” Steve leaned across the table, a worried look on his face. He’d hated the idea of solitary confinement, but it had been the only way to keep Bucky safe under the circumstances. “I’ll see if I can pull some strings, maybe get them to let me visit more. I don’t like the idea of you being alone for too long, Buck. It’s not good for you.”

Bucky’s gaze drifted to some vague point in the distance. “It’s good quiet.”

Steve frowned. “Oh.”

He wondered about that - about whether getting used to the quiet was a good thing; about whether getting used to prison was a good thing - but pushed those thoughts to the side. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be enough time for any of that to become a real problem. Not after recent developments, anyway.

“Well, I’ve got some good news.” He brightened. “I found you a lawyer. Well, Natasha did,
actually. A very good one, apparently.”

**CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**  
**RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL**


Memo: Have received translated dossier. Accepted client. Will meet with today. Rogers, Steven in attendance.

**PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF MEETING WITH BARNES, JAMES (henceforth “Client”) and ROGERS, STEVEN. AT RIKER’S ISLAND**

ROSENTHAL: The federal prosecutor is going to want to move very fast on this. The Russian government is involved as well, and they’re already pushing for extradition. So we have to move very fast, too.

CLIENT: Extradition?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, which prosecution is going to fight against, but not in your favor. I think it’s apparent that the prosecution is going to ask you to recount most, if not every, act that you were made to commit under HYDRA. And once more of the truth is revealed, they will probably want you to recount everything that you were made to do under the Soviets as well.

CLIENT: But I did all of it. I did those things.

ROGERS: Not by choice, Bucky. You didn’t choose any of it. Isn’t that what we need to show, Ms. Rosenthal?

ROSENTHAL: Indeed. The file provided by Ms. Romanoff makes this very apparent that you had no control or choice over your actions. This is the angle we’re going to pursue.

CLIENT: But… I did those things.

ROSENTHAL: I know you did, and prosecution knows you did, too. That’s not in question. But this bears repeating: the file makes it very apparent that you are the victim here. That you have been for seventy years. And that’s what I’m going to prove.

ROGERS: Listen to me, Bucky. I’m going to make sure they all know who’s really responsible for all of it. And when this is all over, I promise you, we’re going back home.

**CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**  
**RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL**

Chief Judge: Rizana Yeom  
District Attorney for New York County: Kenneth Parks  
Legal Attaché to Embassy of Russian Federation: Leonid Maratovich Demidov and Eduard Olegovich Ledovskoy

Due to the political ramifications of case, Demidov and Ledovskoy are pushing to keep the proceedings out of the public courtroom.

Parks is not amenable.
FROM THE NOTES OF DR. A. WIRASINHA - RIKER’S ISLAND

4:32 PM: Guards reported Prisoner #254743 - identified only as Winter Soldier - found unresponsive in cell.

Prisoner appeared to be in catatonic state and remained unresponsive. Lorazepam administered for sedation.

Prisoner’s lawyer informed.

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

Memo: Received notification from Dr. Ashan Wirasinha, re: Client found catatonic in cell.

Will request complete mental health evaluation from Wirasinha. Possibly subpoena for testimony. This may allow us to keep the proceedings out of public courtroom.

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Riker’s Island Prison Complex

Steve had gotten the call from Ms. Rosenthal - “Call me Bernie, please; Ms. Rosenthal’s my mother,” - and it hadn’t sounded good. Bucky had gone catatonic and the prison doctor had done just as Hank had done when they’d brought Bucky back to the Tower. He was now under sedation, Bernie said, and sleeping comfortably.

Steve, in his near-panicked conversation with Bernie, had mentioned that Bucky had gone catatonic once before. He’d laid out everything: the intrusive memory flashes that Dr. Rodchenko had called ‘mind tricks’, Bucky’s irrational fear of them, and especially the need for Bucky to be able to talk to Steve about them. Without context, without someone to fill in the gaps and reassure Bucky that these flashes truly were parts of his own memory returning, it was possible that Bucky would simply keep shutting down. Bernie agreed, thankfully, and assured Steve that she would speak to the prison doctor about it.

Bernie called again that evening, this time with more reassuring news. She had spoken to the prison doctor, who had examined Bucky once he’d regained consciousness and acknowledged that the solitary confinement was not helping his ‘already unstable mental condition’. The doctor had therefore signed off on an order to increase Bucky’s allotment of visiting hours.

Steve had immediately headed out to Riker’s to see Bucky, and what he found when he got there was not very reassuring. Bucky looked very subdued when the guards shuffled him into the room, to the point where Steve stood up again and actually pleaded with the guards not to chain him to the table.

“Just let him be, will you?” He gestured at Bucky, who sat docilely in the chair with a faraway, almost dazed look in his eyes. “Just leave him the way he is. He’s not going to do anything, I promise you.”

“C’mon, Cap,” one of the guards said uncomfortably, as another attached the chains to the cleats in the table. “You gotta know how it is. Those are the rules.”

“I know you’re just trying to do your job.” Steve gestured at Bucky. “But look at him, for God’s
sake. If he needs anything right now, it’s not to be chained up like an animal on a circus train.” He looked the guard in the eyes. “Please. Just let him have that much.”

Before the guard could reply, a heavy set, dark skinned man with thinning gray hair came into the room and introduced himself as Dr. Ashan Wirasinha, the prison psychiatrist.

“I had a call this morning from Dr. Henry McCoy, who says he is this man’s personal physician.” The doctor slid his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. “At Dr. McCoy’s advice, your friend is on a mild sedative today. Well, comparatively speaking; the dose would kill a normal man. But,” he shrugged, “it’s to help stabilize him.”

Steve nodded. “That’s what Hank did when we brought him home the first time.” He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at Dr. Wirasinha again. “His memories are trying to come back. He’s been conditioned to think of them as mind tricks.”

“I know very little about the patient’s prior mental state, but I can tell you that right now, it seems far from healthy. And while this information should be confidential, considering who you are…” Another small shrug. “His lawyer has requested a complete psychiatric evaluation within the next few days. Anyway,” Dr. Wirasinha pulled his hand from his pocket and glanced at his wristwatch, “you have extended visiting time, but I doubt he’s going to be good for much more than five or ten minutes, so make the best of it.”

Steve nodded his thanks and took the chair opposite Bucky as the doctor left the room. His eyes were still glazed and unfocused, staring off into some fixed point in space only he could see. His posture was slouched, his head nodding slightly forward, his hands relaxed.

“What did you remember, Bucky?” The words came out of Steve’s mouth quietly - not in a whisper, but very softly. As if loud noises had somehow become taboo. “What made you shut down?”

Bucky’s reaction was slower than expected, but after an almost painfully long moment, he pulled his eyes from the distance and focused his gaze on Steve. “Mind tricks.” His voice was just as quiet. “You’ll say they weren’t, but… it doesn’t actually matter, does it?”

“Of course it matters.” Steve reached out a hand across the table and laid it on Bucky’s limp right hand. “They’re not mind tricks. They never were. And that’s a big part of the problem.”

Bucky’s gaze lingered on Steve’s hand, but he didn’t pull away. “There was snow. Lots of it. Snow.” He licked his lips. “I’ve done… done this before. There’s no way out.”

“What did you remember, Bucky?” The words came out of Steve’s mouth quietly - not in a whisper, but very softly. As if loud noises had somehow become taboo. “What made you shut down?”

“Snow?” Steve’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand… what have you done before?”

Silence. Bucky shook his head.

“There’s a way out, Bucky. I promise you.” Steve’s tone grew urgent. “Wanda found someone who can help you remember. Someone who can go through your own mind with you and dig up everything they tried to bury.” He forced a smile onto his face. “A telepath. A friend of Dr. McCoy’s, actually. And Ms. Rosenthal’s going to make sure you don’t have to stay in here for very long at all.” He squeezed Bucky’s limp right hand. “We’re all going to make sure you have a way out.”

“But…” Bucky tore his gaze away from Steve’s hand to meet his eyes. “I did all of it. There’s no way out. I did those things.”

“I know you did, Buck,” Steve said, and he couldn’t help how miserable he sounded. “But that’s not what matters. The bullet isn’t responsible for the murder; it’s the hand that pulls the trigger.” He kept
his eyes on Bucky’s, trying to will him to make the connection himself. “Don’t you understand? You did what you did because no one ever gave you the choice. None of it was ever your fault.”

Again, Bucky shook his head. “I did those things.” Almost inaudibly, he added, “And no one is coming. No way out.”

“Not true.” Steve shook his head emphatically. “I came. I’m here for you, Buck. I came to get you when you were in the HYDRA camp in Italy. I came for you when HYDRA took you back a few weeks ago. And I’m here for you right now. I promise you, Bucky, there’s a way out of this.”

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

Memo: Initial out of court proceedings unsuccessful.

Parks pushing for public trial - conspiracy to terrorism and multiple felony murder.

Demidov and Ledovskoy adamant that case is settled out of court. Pushing for extradition.

Will subpoena key witness.

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF MEETING WITH RODCHENKO, DMITRIY S. and ROGERS, S. AT SHIELD HELICARRIER

ROSENTHAL: Can you tell me what this is, Doctor? (gives Rodchenko Dossier: Project Winter Soldier 1945-1988)

RODCHENKO: (spends several minutes perusing dossier before speaking) Notes for Winter Soldier program.

ROSENTHAL: And what was your involvement with the Winter Soldier program, Doctor?

RODCHENKO: Captain America can tell you this. I think he has already, yes?

ROSENTHAL: Perhaps, but I want to hear it from you.

RODCHENKO: (long pause) First with Soviet Union. From 1973 to 1988. From 1995 until some week ago is HYDRA. But Captain America... he know this.

ROGERS: I do. And I also know that you willingly turned yourself in to SHIELD custody. But we need to know about what was done to Bucky - to the Winter Soldier - during your time on the project.

RODCHENKO: Is all right there in notes.

ROSENTHAL: Doctor, as I explained earlier, court proceedings have already begun. Right now, we’re looking at two worst case scenarios: either the federal prosecutor has his way in a public trial and my client is exposed to the world as a HYDRA terrorist and assassin. Or the Russians - your
government - will have him extradited - that is, sent back to Russia to be dealt with by the Russian justice system. And you tell me what would happen after that.

RODCHENKO: (long pause) He will go to gulag. Or he will disappear. Back to HYDRA. Probably that.

ROGERS: And from all the talking you and I have been doing since you turned yourself in, I don’t think you want that to happen to him any more than I do. (pause) Am I right, Doctor?

RODCHENKO: … no

ROSENTHAL: So here’s what we’re going to do: I’m going to subpoena you as a key witness as the proceedings. Your testimony might be the key to turning this around for my client.

ROGERS: And I’ll go one step further. If you testify on Bucky’s behalf - if you tell them the truth about everything - then I’ll make sure you’re safe. No prosecution, no extradition, no being set free only to be picked up by HYDRA the next day. You will work for SHIELD, and you can make sure that some good comes out of this. (pause) What do you say, Doctor? How does that sound?

RODCHENKO: It sound like this is all I can choose. So this is what we will do.

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Riker’s Island Prison Complex

Seeing James in chains was something of a blow. The blank, resigned, almost hopeless expression on his face was worse. Natasha had a sudden inkling of the way Rogers must have felt upon seeing him here. A sudden flash of hot, sharp anger at seeing him reduced to this. Regret for what had happened to him. But now, in light of everything Rogers was trying to do for him, a measure of hope as well.

She took the chair opposite him, leaning forward across the table, and looked him in the eyes with a small smile.

[“How are you holding up in here?”]

His eyes strayed to the guards standing in the corners of the room, but their expressions were neutral. After a moment, he said, [“They won’t like that. Speaking Russian. They won’t like it.”]

She cut her eyes to the guards, cocked an eyebrow at them, and continued, her attention on James once more. [“They don’t have to like it. I’m not here to see them, am I?”]

He said nothing. And for a moment, neither did she. She simply sat there, taking in the sight of him and wondering what she could do for him.

Well, she could have broken him out, of course. The manacles may have been unbreakable, but they still had locks, and the lock hadn’t been made that she couldn’t pick. The guards would be a momentary distraction for the pair of them, at best, and there were plenty of ways out of the prison itself. But she knew, even as she was walking through the plan in her head, that it wouldn’t have helped James in any of the ways he needed right then.

[“Has the time been helpful to you?”] She knew how much a little bit of time and space to think - just to sort things out - could be.

His gaze drifted to the wall. After a while, he said, [“It doesn’t matter. They’ll extradite me, and

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then…”] He shook his head. [“It won’t matter after that.”]

[“Rogers is working on that.”] she said automatically. Though she knew that was a dangerous
gamble. If the legal approach failed, the only way to prevent the Russian government from
extraditing James would be to make him disappear. Which would mean sending him out into the
world on his own with strict instructions never to contact any of them again. She doubted Rogers
would agree to that. And to be honest, she was fairly certain she couldn’t handle it herself.

*Love is for children.*

*Well then, I suppose I’m a child.*

[“We’re all working on that.”] She leaned further across the table and smiled at him. [“I’ve got a few
things to discuss with your lawyer.”]

He looked at her. [“Maybe this is how it ends for me.”]

She looked right back. [“Not on your life.”]

She couldn’t deny what she’d begun to feel again. What had made her tear open old scars, what had
blown apart the elaborate walls she’d built around herself after Odessa. What had prompted her to
crawl into bed beside him when she’d had no business getting any closer to him than a closed-circuit
camera would allow. She’d loved him more than she’d ever imagined possible, and convincing
herself that it had never been real had torn the heart out of her. But now…

Now she didn’t even know if he’d ever leave prison. Let alone ever walk free again. Let alone
remember enough about himself to feel anywhere close to the way he did once about her.

[“I didn’t let it end for you that night in New Jersey.”] She steeled herself against her own cynicism
and went on. Imagined what Rogers might say if he were here. [“I’m not going to let it end for you
here either.”]

He looked away again. [“You… came to me.”] He said the words slowly. Haltingly. [“In the
hospital. In the Tower. You came to me.”] Very quietly he said, [“Into my bed, I think.”] He met her
gaze once again. [“Why?”]

She wanted to tell him. Wanted it so badly she could feel the words fighting to get out past the iron
door of her self-restraint. But what was the point, she asked herself, of laying her heart bare to James
when he didn’t remember anything more than fleeting impressions of their time together? She had no
right to unburden herself if it meant adding to the load he had to carry.

[“Because you needed me then.”] She reached out her hand and laid it gently on both of his, which
were folded on the table in front of him. Felt the textures - so familiar - of his metal hand and his
flesh one. Felt herself begin to wish things were different, which went against the first rule for
maintaining sanity in an unfair world.

Which meant there really was no hope for her.

[“You needed me then, and I suppose I needed to know that you would be all right.”]

There wasn’t much more to say after that.

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL
ROSENTHAL: Can you repeat that last bit, Doctor?

RODCHENKO: Reread notes…?

ROSENTHAL: No, please repeat what you just said.

RODCHENKO: Winter Soldier choosing own behavior is considered mistake. Mistake to be corrected.

LEDOVSKOY: Corrected by you, yes?

RODCHENKO: (says something in Russian)

PARKS: Objection, Your Honor.

YEOM: Sustained. Consider this a reminder that all proceedings are to be in English.

RODCHENKO: Corrected by me, yes. Corrected by Dr. Pushkin before me.

DEMIDOV: I object. Dr. Pushkin is not alive to give an account of the proceedings before Dr. Rodchenko came on board the project.

LEDOVSKOY: And the point of these proceedings is to confirm the need for the extradition of the man called the Winter Soldier for trial under the auspices of the government of Russia. As a relic of the Cold War, he is our responsibility.

PARKS: The Winter Soldier is hardly a relic if he was committing acts of terrorism and felony murder less than a month ago.

ROSENTHAL: As the doctor has stated, my client had no choice in his actions. Doctor, if my client’s behavior was considered erroneous - under either HYDRA or the Soviets - how was it corrected?

PARKS: Objection-

YEOM: Overruled. Answer the question, Doctor.

RODCHENKO: With chair. I don’t know English words for better name, but I have read this to you many times. With chair, his mind is rewritten. His behavior is corrected. His memory can be… can be taken away. Changed. And so he does not remember old behavior.

ROSENTHAL: It is impossible, then, to try my client for crimes committed as the Winter Soldier under either HYDRA or the Soviets. We have irrefutable proof that he was not in control of any of his actions.

PARKS: There is no irrefutable proof that your client was not in control of his actions from 1988 until just a few weeks ago.

ROSENTHAL: The dossier shows-
PARKS: The dossier shows that your client was not in control of his actions under the Soviets. There is nothing thus far to suggest your client was not in control of his actions under HYDRA.

ROSENTHAL: Dr. Rodchenko worked for both the Soviets and HYDRA from 1973 until present.

PARKS: And it’s his word against the actions of your client. I ask, where is this so-named ‘chair’? Or files proving of its existence?

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

Memo: Have collected a veritable mountain of evidence concerning ‘mental recalibration chair.’

Evidence: USB Drive: Project Winter Soldier 1995-2014 (Romanoff, Natasha)

Photographs: Mental Recalibration Chair (Carter, Sharon; Coulson, Phillip; Rhodes, James - Colonel)

Recording: Interrogation and Testimony (Rodchenko, Dmitriy S. and Rogers, Steven)

Memo: Will subpoena second key witness - Romanoff, Natasha.

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

OUT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS: DAY 9
PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF DISCUSSION RE: Client’s involvement with HYDRA
CHIEF JUDGE: Rizana Yeom
DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Kenneth Parks
LEGAL ATTACHES TO RUSSIAN EMBASSY: Leonid M. Demidov, Eduard O. Ledovskoy
ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Steven Rogers, Natasha Romanoff, Dmitiry S. Rodchenko

PARKS: Ms. Romanoff, can you describe your relationship to Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, also known as the Winter Soldier?

ROMANOFF: He was a one-time trainer of mine, and an occasional partner.

PARKS: Define ‘partner’, Ms. Romanoff.

ROMANOFF: He and I were… assigned missions together on a handful of occasions.

PARKS: From 1988 onward? Before you changed allegiances?

ROSENTHAL: Objection, Your Honor. Counsel is-

YEOM: Overruled. Answer the question, Ms. Romanoff.

ROMANOFF: The last such mission was in 2002. Before I ‘changed allegiances’, yes. I wonder what kind of idea you have of what exactly was done to Soviet and Russian operatives to ensure their allegiance, Mr. Parks.

PARKS: And what exactly was done to Soviet and Russian operatives to ensure their allegiance, Ms. Romanoff? Specifically to the Winter Soldier, as you knew him?

ROMANOFF: His mind was forcibly rewritten using what Dr. Rodchenko calls a mental
recalibration device. The chair, as you’ve been calling it. I submitted the files from the data banks of that chair as evidence. Have you had a look at them yet?

[transcript continues]

ROSENTHAL: Ms. Romanoff, can you please explain to the court why you downloaded the files from the mental recalibration chair onto a USB drive?

ROMANOFF: For security reasons. In case the chair itself were to have mysteriously vanished, you understand. Government agencies tend not to care too much about what belongs to whom in situations like these.

DEMIDOV: Why would you think the chair would mysteriously vanish? Did you think HYDRA would take it back?

ROMANOFF: HYDRA almost definitely has other chairs. The NSA, the CIA, the U.S. military? Not so likely.

[transcript continues]

ROSENTHAL: One last question, Ms. Romanoff. Can you please read the very last entry from the chair’s data bank? The one dated 28 November 2014?


ROSENTHAL: Dr. Rodchenko, please explain what all of that means.

RODCHENKO: Means that HYDRA wants Winter Soldier to follow orders. Not question, not delay, just obey. (pause) And take memories away. Days before, but not his name. (longer pause) I let him keep his name.

[transcript continues]

ROSENTHAL: And so, in light of the overwhelming evidence examined by this court, I move to dismiss the proceedings all together. The evidence shows that my client was clearly not in control of his actions at any point from 1945 until presently.

PARKS: And I move to have it proven that your client can speak for himself. If he’s not in his right mind, then prove it, Counselor.

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

Memo: Fine.

We’ll prove it.

Chapter End Notes

Natasha did totally date Matt Murdock, by the way. (Though they broke up in the 70's,
LOL comics.)

As always, comments, questions, and pseudo-legal advice about what the characters should do are warmly welcomed!
January 2015-February 2015

Riker’s Island Prison Complex

“So, Bucky.” Hank folded his blue furry hands on the battered tabletop. “As far as you understand it, why are you here?”

Ms. Rosenthal had requested that Hank run a battery of tests on Bucky, so that they might be compared to the tests that Dr. Wirasinha would run independently. Dr. Wirasinha’s examinations were likely to be a great deal less sophisticated than his - prison psychiatric evaluations generally tended to be - but Hank had little doubt that both sets of evaluations would return very much the same diagnosis: near-total mental incompetence.

He suppressed a sigh, reminding himself not to keep his prognosis in mind while performing his evaluation. There was no worse thing than for a scientist to conduct his experiments while wishing for a particular outcome. Things invariably went awry that way; data and outcomes were contorted to suit preconceived notions rather than being used to construct hypotheses. That being said, he would be surprised indeed if his tests showed anything but severe mental incapacity on Bucky’s part. The greenest amateur could have seen it; all that was missing was the official and data-substantiated diagnosis.

The two of them had opened by discussing trivial pleasantries, mainly so that Hank could have an opportunity to observe Bucky in a social situation. So far, Hank had classified him as withdrawn and detached - and they had barely finished saying hello.

Bucky’s gaze drifted to the far wall of the windowless room, and for some time, they sat in silence. Finally, quietly, he said, “I killed a lot of people.”

A very simplistic answer, thought Hank. Far too simplistic to demonstrate any nuanced understanding of the situation he was in. But perhaps Hank needed to drive that point home a little bit harder. “And why did you do that?”

Another lengthy silence.

Bucky chewed on his lip. “I…” His gaze drifted from the wall to his hands, manacled in Adamantium chains threaded through cleats in the table. He shook his head.

“Well, just think about it for a while. When you have an answer, tell me.” Hank smiled congenially, wondering about other approaches he might use. “In the meantime, what about the number of people? Do you know how many people you killed? Or when, or where?”

“There were…” Bucky stared very hard at his hands. “... many. All up and down the east coast of
the United States. And there have been…” He licked his lips. “There have been others. Other places. And… and…” His voice trailed away. Again he shook his head.

Hank noted the lack of eye contact, the fidgeting, the many nervous tics. All signs of acute distress at even the slightest of introspective questions. Not only had the poor man’s mind been severely tampered with, but it seemed as though those who had done the tampering had tried ham-handedly to prevent him from looking too closely at their work.

“Tell me about the most recent one you can recall.” He bridged his paws and leaned forward to brace his chin on them. “Anything you can remember.”

“I... it was... I failed.” The look of misery on Bucky’s face was unmistakable. “I failed the mission. I failed to neutralize the target. I failed to neutralize Captain America.” Very quietly he said, “I didn’t want to do it anymore.”

“Interesting.” Hank’s eyebrows knit. That was clearly an avenue worth pursuing. “Was this the first time you came to that realization? That you didn’t want to do it anymore?”

Silence.

Finally Bucky said, “I don’t know.” A beat, then, “Steve said I came to his apartment one time before, but I don’t... I don’t think…” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I don’t know.”

Well, if that wasn’t the most unintentionally truthful thing Hank had ever heard a man say.

“All right. Last question.” Hank smiled, already mentally compiling his presentation to Ms. Rosenthal. “If you could walk out of here right now with no consequences and do whatever you wanted, what would you do?”

“I can’t,” Bucky said instantly, shaking his head. “I can’t walk out. I killed those people. I did it. I did those things. I can’t walk out.”

Interesting, Hank thought as he packed up his recorder and got ready to leave. For as little as Bucky seemed to comprehend what had happened to him and why, he seemed very cognizant of consequences. And Hank had a fairly good idea of why - from what Steve had told him, Bucky had experienced more punishment at the hands of HYDRA than anything else.

A better case for sympathetic acquittal had never been made.

**CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

**RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL**

Memo: Psychiatric evaluations of Client independently filed by both Dr. Henry McCoy and Dr. Ashan Wirasinha each come to similar conclusions - Client is unable to fully comprehend, explain, or justify his actions.

Consider: file motion to have Client declared mentally incompetent? Will discuss with S. Rogers.

Memo: Successfully kept the proceedings out of public courtroom thus far.

Consider: Sgt. James B. Barnes - political assassin and terrorist or history’s longest serving POW? Will begin pursuing this angle in proceedings.

Memo: Lt. General Perry Fredricks, representing the interests of the US Army, will be joining the
proceedings. Will he be looking to have Client tried as a traitor?

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

OUT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS DAY 12
PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT
CHIEF JUDGE: Rizana Yeom
DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Kenneth Parks
LEGAL ATTACHES TO RUSSIAN EMBASSY: Leonid M. Demidov, Eduard O. Ledovskoy
ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Steven Rogers, Lt. General Perry Fredricks

ROSENTHAL: As I was saying, both Dr. McCoy and Dr. Wirasinha’s psychiatric evaluations conclude that my client is unable to fully comprehend, justify, or explain his actions. I move to dismiss him altogether from the proceedings-

PARKS: Objection.

YEOM: Overruled.

ROSENTHAL: I move to dismiss him from the proceedings, which will allow both of our governments to focus on pursuing our real enemy - HYDRA - who was controlling my client all of this time.

FREDRICKS: Your Honor, if I may, I would like to second that motion. In light of the fact that the Winter Soldier is now in federal custody, he can be an invaluable asset in tracking down and eliminating HYDRA as well as other grave threats to national security. I have been authorized on behalf of the United States military to enable such a utilization.

ROGERS: You mean the Army wants to use him as a weapon.

ROSENTHAL: Objection. This is-

FREDRICKS: With all due respect, Captain, there are too many dangerous elements loose in the world right now for us to consider taking any other path. If he doesn’t work for us, then -

PARKS: Objection, Your Honor.

ROGERS: Am I hearing this from a General in the United States Army?

ROSENTHAL: Objection! Your Honor, I-

FREDRICKS: Then he will end up working for Al-Qaeda, or the Iranians, or the Chinese, or any number of others who want to do us harm. This is pragmatism, Captain. It’s not the 1940’s anymore; this is the way the world is now.

ROGERS: Not in my country, it’s not.

ROSENTHAL: Objection!

YEOM: Overruled. General, please conclude your statement.

ROSENTHAL: Your Honor, this is completely irrelevant to-

PARKS: I have to agree, Your Honor, this-
YEOM: Overruled, Counselors.

DEMIDOV: This is preposterous. Either the Winter Soldier will be extradited to Russia and tried for his crimes there or we might consider Ms. Rosenthal’s plan.

LEDOVSKOY: If we can agree to some sort of arrangement, where we can all be mutually assured that the Winter Soldier will not be used as a weapon against anyone, then we may be willing to proceed with talks in that direction.

FREDRICKS: And what guarantee do we have that the Russian government won’t use him as a weapon again? Seeing as how he worked directly for the Soviet Union for forty years during the greatest period of tension between our two countries, and seeing as how the Russian government seems inclined to ratchet up those tensions again?

DEMIDOV: I… what?

LEDOVSKOY: That is a ridiculous assertion, and completely out of the bounds of this-

ROGERS: Are you out of your Goddamned mind, General?

YEOM: Captain Rogers-

PARKS: Objection, Your Honor. This is ridiculous.

FREDRICKS: Maintain some decorum, Captain Rogers.

ROGERS: What the hell are you talking about decorum for, when you’re telling me to my face that the Army wants to do to Bucky Barnes exactly what was done to him by the Soviet Union and by a Goddamned international terrorist organization?

YEOM: Captain Rogers-

FREDRICKS: Calm down, Captain, and look at this rationally. It is the policy of the United States Armed Forces to maintain a qualitative military edge at all times -

ROGERS: By using him as an assassin again?

FREDRICKS: By ensuring peace through superior strength, Captain.

ROGERS: Over my dead body. Is that clear enough for you, General, sir?

YEOM: Captain Rogers, if you cannot maintain decorum during these proceedings, then you’ll be escorted out.

ROGERS: *Fuck* your decorum, and *fuck* this stuffed shirt who thinks he’s going to - let go of me!

(Rogers is escorted out of the proceedings.)

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Starbucks
Uptown Manhattan

“Well.” Bernie looked at Steve from over the top of her Starbucks frappuccino. “You certainly have a way with people.”
Steve had sat outside through the remainder of the proceedings, spending part of it on the phone venting to Natasha and Sam and whoever else would listen, and the rest of it fuming quietly but restraining himself from walking past the guards and back into the meeting room. He wanted more than anything to give General Fredricks a piece of his mind, preferably in a demonstrably physical manner.

“Sorry,” he responded, perhaps more harshly than he should have. “I guess I’ve got a bad habit of telling people when they’re disgracing the uniform they wear, regardless of how many ribbons and stars they’re wearing on it.”

Bernie nodded. “Clearly. For a moment, I thought you were going to punch him, and that…” A small smile flicked across her mouth. “Well, I don’t need to tell you how badly that could have gone.”

“I know.” He blew out a breath angrily. “But I’ve always had a problem with people who know the difference between what’s legal and what’s right, and just don’t give a damn.” He shook his head, took a drink of his orange juice, and reminded himself that taking out his anger on Bernie wasn’t what he wanted to do. “I didn’t screw things up too badly, did I? What ended up happening?”

“Well, thereby hangs a tale.” Bernie took a long sip of her drink. “Demidov and Ledovskoy said they would escalate the matter to the level of international incident if General Fredricks insisted on pushing forward with his plan. Fredricks continued to claim that his way is the only way of ensuring that the Winter Soldier is utilized efficiently and properly. And Parks… well, Parks seemed mostly bewildered.” She shrugged. “This has gone way past simply wanting to try a man for terrorism, and I think he realizes that. And anyway, I think it’s time to call their bluff.”

“Call their bluff?” His heart sank, and his stomach turned a somersault. “How? By making Fredricks and the Russians fight over who gets to have him?” A wave of cold nausea swept through him as he pictured it: Bucky going back to exactly the same life he’d had with HYDRA, but under the auspices of his own country this time. A government assassin flying the Stars and Stripes… “What do you mean, call their bluff?”

Bernie swirled her coffee cup around for a moment. “Well, Demidov and Ledovskoy are threatening to take this public, and Parks would love that. He would love to publicly announce just who the Winter Soldier is.” She shrugged. “I say we beat them to it. ‘Sergeant James Barnes: political assassin and terrorist or war hero turned world’s longest serving prisoner of war?’ Throw this into the arena of public opinion. If anything, it will virtually guarantee that no side will be able to use him as their man in the shadows.”

Steve sat there for a long moment, mulling that over. “Well, Demidov and Ledovskoy are threatening to take this public, and Parks would love that. He would love to publicly announce just who the Winter Soldier is.” She shrugged. “I say we beat them to it. ‘Sergeant James Barnes: political assassin and terrorist or war hero turned world’s longest serving prisoner of war?’ Throw this into the arena of public opinion. If anything, it will virtually guarantee that no side will be able to use him as their man in the shadows.”

Steve sat there for a long moment, mulling that over. It would mean that none of Bucky’s past would remain hidden anymore. It would mean the possible tarnishing of everything good Bucky had accomplished in the war. It would mean filling the airwaves with opinion after opinion on the life of a man that the opiners were, in most cases, not fit to lace the boots of.

“What do you mean, call their bluff?”

“Do it,” he said finally, and looked up at Bernie, eyes shining with determination. “Throw it back in all their faces, and let’s see if any of them have any shame or decency.”

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NEW YORK TIMES - SERGEANT JAMES BUCHANAN BARNES: ASSASSIN AND TERRORIST OR WAR HERO TURNED WORLD’S LONGEST SERVING PRISONER OF WAR?

“I think this is forcing the nation to take a good, hard look at itself.” - Oprah Winfrey, The Oprah
“The gist of these documents seems to be that Sergeant James Barnes and the Winter Soldier are not the same man - or rather, that they do not have the same mind.” - Amy Goodman, Democracy Now!

“The Free Bucky Barnes movement is gaining momentum. Protestors are in front of the White House tonight.” - David Muir, ABC World News Tonight

“The man is an assassin. A monster. And we’re supposed to, what, have sympathy for him? He should be tried and executed. Publicly.” - Glenn Beck, Fox and Friends

“Guns don’t kill people, right? That’s the usual argument, but now it’s the other side making it! I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I guess the left and the right can occasionally share a syllable or two without wanting to set each other’s houses on fire - oh, wait. They want to try him as a terrorist now. Never mind!” - Bill Maher, Real Time with Bill Maher

“I don’t know. I have sympathy for the man. I have sympathy. How would - how can any of us know would that really would be like?” - Ellen DeGeneres, The Ellen DeGeneres Show

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Red Hook, Brooklyn

Steve had expected the newspapers to run with the story. He’d even expected the Internet to drag it all over the place, and in all sorts of directions. He’d tried to steel himself for all the possible points of view that would come out, though he had to admit that some of them made him angry in ways he hadn’t thought possible. But he hadn’t been prepared for just how huge an explosion there would be.

Reporters had thronged outside of his apartment. Outside the prison and the courtroom. Outside Avengers Tower and Bernie’s house, and everywhere else that was even remotely connected to Bucky’s trial. People were following him, asking him a neverending series of questions and snapping
countless photographs. If he hadn’t had a secure StarkTech phone, he’d have been willing to bet it would’ve been ringing off the hook with people begging him for interviews.

“I wasn’t ready for this,” he said to Natasha as they sat side by side on his couch. “I don’t want to just hole up in my apartment and shut this all out, but I didn’t think it was going to be this…” He shook his head in bewildered amazement. “Insane. That’s what it is. Did you?”

“They’re calling it the ‘trial of the century.’” Natasha muted Sean Hannity of Fox News on her tablet and set it aside on the coffee table. “Our last ‘trial of the century’ was for Michael Jackson, and that was in 2005.” She glanced at Steve. “Before your time. I guess we were due another one.”

“There can’t be more than one ‘trial of the century’ every century.” He raised an eyebrow. “That sort of defeats the meaning, doesn’t it?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Very astute, Steve. You’re learning.”

“I’m fuming, is what I’m doing.” Steve shook his head. “That jerk you were just listening to -” He waved a hand irritably at her tablet, now dark and silent on the coffee table. “Him and all the rest of his loudmouthed, know-nothing buddies out there who get paid to do nothing but sling mud in every direction they can just to stir up trouble, this is like a field day for them.” He glowered at the tablet, as though he could get through to Hannity and the rest of his cronies with nothing more than a dirty look at the blank screen he’d been on a few moments ago.

“Yes, I have considered silencing him in his sleep.” She glanced at Steve, eyebrows raising in an expression of mock surprise. “Oh, did I say that aloud?”

“Now who’s learning?” Steve gave her a wry smile. “I bet all you’d have to do would be to show up in his room at night and tap him on the shoulder. He’d have a coronary when he woke up and saw you.”

He let the easy banter brush the harshness of his anger gently aside. Natasha had a gift for dulling his anger by poking fun at him, and he was grateful for it. Because it wasn’t Hannity and the rest of them that were the real problem. A symptom, certainly, but not the problem itself.

“Well.” Natasha took a deep breath and sat back into the couch. “He’s not the one I really want to silence. Not really.”

And there it was.

They’d talked about Lukin, the two of them. Steve had wanted to name him in the information they’d released to the press, had wanted to do everything possible to connect his name to what had been done to Bucky and generate as much antipathy as possible for the man. But Natasha had pointed out two things that Steve had had to admit were infuriatingly true and unchangeable.

One, they had nothing even close to hard evidence implicating Lukin in anything related to HYDRA’s operations, much less Bucky’s involvement in them. Oh, they had Rodchenko’s testimony, of course, but Steve knew how little weight that would carry against someone of Lukin’s wealth and prominence unless there was a mountain of verifiable evidence behind it. And Lukin was far too intelligent and crafty a man to leave a legally accessible trail behind him.

More importantly, though, was the effect that naming Lukin outright would have had on the Russian government and their personnel involved in Bucky’s hearings. At the first hint that one of their most prominent businessmen and military veterans had been at the helm of the Winter Soldier’s activities under HYDRA, Natasha had pointed out, all Russian support would vanish instantly and an
impenetrable wall would spring up between Lukin and justice. It had galled Steve to no end to admit it, but Lukin could not be named publicly. Not yet, and possibly not ever.

“I don’t blame you, Nat.” Steve’s eyes narrowed as the thought of Lukin’s impunity brought his anger to the forefront again. “I’d have a hard time getting upset at you if you did go after Lukin. But you know that if there’s even a chance at bringing him to justice the right way, that’s the way we’ve got to do it.”

Natasha was silent for a long moment, her gaze fixed pointedly on the darkened tablet. Finally she said, “You should start taking the media up on their offers, Steve.” She looked at him. “Give interviews. Let yourself be heard.”

Steve’s head snapped around at that. “You think so?” He gestured at the tablet; Natasha’s significant look at it hadn’t escaped him. “Think that bozo would let me get a word in edgewise?”

She snorted. “I think they’d do practically anything to get you on the air.” A pause, then softly, “And what better way to turn public opinion in our favor?”

He studied her face for a moment, trying to decide whether there was any hint of a joke in what she’d said. Natasha had a habit of effortlessly mixing seriousness with sarcasm, after all, and it had taken him in more than once. But there was no playful smile in her eyes now, and no hint of one hiding at the corners of her mouth.

“All right,” he said simply. “I will.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure psychiatric evaluations are a bit more... psychiatric in nature, but just like my courtroom knowledge, everything I learned about psychiatric evaluations, I learned from TV. And TV's never wrong, right?

Feedback, opinions, and other stuff are always appreciated.
February-March 2015

**THE WASHINGTON POST - BUCKY BARNES AND THE LONG REACH OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM**

“What I’ve seen over the past few weeks is that no two people really seem to be able to get the same impression of Bucky from the information available. It’s difficult for people to wrap their heads around, I’d imagine, when there are so many competing Buckys out there in the popular consciousness. There was one image of him in popular culture - the fictional ten-year-old from the comics and the old TV show from the 1960s - and then there was the real Bucky that maybe only history buffs knew anything concrete about, and now there’s this other aspect of him.

It confuses people, I suppose, and I think the best way to overcome that confusion is for me to do what I’m doing right now - to go on TV and on the radio and on the Internet and just talk to people about who Bucky really is. What he means to me, and what he’s been through.”

- Captain America, speaking on Live! with Kelly and Michael

**THE ATLANTIC - FROM HOMETOWN HERO TO DEADLY ASSASSIN: THE TRAGEDY OF SERGEANT JAMES ‘BUCKY’ BARNES**

“Bucky Barnes was a hero in World War II, and what happened to him afterwards was a nightmare I can’t even begin to imagine. His memory was erased and his mind was rewritten so the Soviet Union, and then HYDRA, could make him do whatever they wanted. Holding him responsible for the actions of the Winter Soldier is about as immoral as it gets, and the people who suggest it have either forgotten what it means to be a real American, or never knew it in the first place.”

- Captain America, speaking on NBC’s Meet the Press

**THE NEW YORKER - TWO BOYS FROM BROOKLYN: ON HEROISM, TRAGEDY, AND WHAT LIES AHEAD**

“No, you listen. You get to sit here behind this microphone for three hours a day, every day of the week, and say whatever you want to say. I’m asking for five minutes. Just five minutes to speak up on behalf of a man who’s in no condition to speak up for himself, and you can’t stand to give that to me because you know that the garbage you’ve been spewing is going to fall apart next to the truth. Let me have the floor. I’ve caught your act, and I can’t say I’m impressed.

Bucky Barnes fought the Nazis before you were even born. He distinguished himself honorably in the last truly necessary war this country ever waged. He was taken prisoner by HYDRA in 1943 and tortured, and he helped me lead the Howling Commandos to victory on more missions than I can count. I don’t want to hear you or anyone else who calls him a terrorist or a monster or any of the other vile things I’ve heard people say about him - I don’t want to hear his name out of any of you anymore. You’re not worthy to even think it.”

- Captain America, speaking on the Rush Limbaugh Show
Riker’s Island Prison Complex

Prison was quiet, and the soldier - Bucky, he knew his name was supposed to be Bucky - liked it that way.

The routine was simple. Wake up and have breakfast served via a tray pushed through the door. Shower time - at first, it had been five minutes, but lately the guards had allowed him ten. After that, he would spend hours in his cell. The first week, he alternated between sitting quietly on his bed or finding ways to exercise within the confines of his narrow room.

He was very good at waiting. He was very good at routine.

The mind tricks - memory flashes - he didn’t think too much about. Tried not to think too much about. There was no one around to talk about them, and they would come and go when they wanted to. He had only gone away in his head once though, and the prison doctor had sedated him for that. After a while, the prison doctor gave him a notebook and a pencil and told him to start writing down the memory flashes as they came to him.

Disjointed fragments began to fill the pages of the notebook, but it was something.

The rest of the routine: lunch, served the same way; yard time, and he was the only prisoner ever in the yard; dinner, again via tray through the door.

He had examined the yard - its barbed wire fences, and towers staffed with guards most likely armed with M4 Carbines, and its wary guards patrolling the grounds - and had decided on at least three ways to escape.

Six, if he were being leisurely about it.

The third week, one of the guards asked, “Hey, Russkie, you want some books or something?” He said yes to that, and when the guard asked him if he wanted books in Russian or English, he shrugged. A few hours later, he was given two books: *The DaVinci Code* in English and *The Night Watch* in Russian.

They only ever addressed him as Russkie, when they called him by any name at all.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had read a book. Had been allowed to read a book. He read both in a few days, and when he finished, he asked the guard for two more. That time, he ended up with *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov and *The Help* by a popular American author.

“Chicks dig the fuck outta that one,” the guard said, then added, “It wasn’t so bad.”

After that, they brought him two new books every few days.

The fifth week, he asked for a paint set. He really only needed the one color, but they brought him a whole palette and little plastic brushes. And so, orange jumpsuit stripped to the waist, he worked carefully and steadily until the project was complete. And when it was, the red star tattoo on his metal arm had been successfully recolored bright white.

He wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but he liked it.

The next week, one of the guards shoved a copy of *The New York Times* through the slot in the door.
“What the ever loving fuck, Russkie?” The guard gestured at the front page. “What the fuck? That you?”

THE NEW YORK TIMES - SERGEANT JAMES BUCHANAN BARNES: ASSASSIN AND TERRORIST OR WAR HERO TURNED WORLD’S LONGEST SERVING PRISONER OF WAR?

Bucky stared at the large photograph on the front page and thought he had seen it somewhere before.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “I don’t know anymore.”

CASE #616 - BARNES v. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
RETAINER: BERNADETTE ROSENTHAL

OUT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS DAY 16
PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT
CHIEF JUDGE: Rizana Yeom
DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Kenneth Parks
LEGAL ATTACHES TO RUSSIAN EMBASSY: Leonid M. Demidov, Eduard O. Ledovskoy
ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Steven Rogers

PARKS: And in light of historic events that have most recently been brought to our attention, New York County has decided to drop the charges of terrorism and felony murder against the man now identified as Sergeant James Barnes.

ROGERS: Yes! Oh, thank God.

PARKS: However, that comes with a caveat.

ROSENTHAL: Caveat?

PARKS: New York County will only consent to fully drop the charges for one of two specific scenarios: either Sergeant James Barnes is extradited to Russia or opposing counsel consents to a program of monitoring and treatment for Sergeant Barnes, the details of which would be worked out in further proceedings.

DEMIDOV: Your Honor, I have been authorized to speak on behalf of the Russian government when I say that we no longer have any interest in the extradition of Sergeant Barnes.

LEDOVSKOY: What we do have an interest in, however - a very serious interest - is ensuring that HYDRA is rooted out of the Russian governmental and military structures. An interest I believe we all share.

ROGERS: I don’t have the authority to speak on behalf of the United States government, but I can speak for SHIELD. And I can promise you gentlemen the full cooperation of SHIELD in that respect. I plan to make it my business to hunt down every last member of HYDRA and bring them to justice - especially the men responsible for taking over the Winter Soldier Program after the fall of the Soviet Union.

LEDOVSKOY: We are certainly grateful to you for that, Captain. We can offer the sharing of information and other resources at certain levels of classification, as well as coordination of our joint efforts, and I will certainly petition for more if it becomes necessary.

DEMIDOV: Also, Your Honor, I believe it is in everyone’s best interest for the remainder of the
classified material in the Winter Soldier file to remain classified. The unlawful activities of the old Soviet Union are not those of the current Russian government, and I believe that distinction must be kept in mind.

YEOM: I agree. And if all are in favor of these plans going forward, then we are dismissed. Opposing counsel, you have one week to file the necessary paperwork.

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Starbucks
Uptown Manhattan

“My treat.” Steve put the money down on the counter and smiled at Bernie. “I owe you an awful lot more than a cup of coffee, but I guess we’ve got to start somewhere.”

He pulled a chair out for her as they reached a table, then sat and took a sip of his very expensive but freshly-squeezed orange juice. He felt as though he were walking on air after the fantastic news from earlier.

“So when can we go and get Bucky out?” He felt his smile slip a bit. “He’s already missed Christmas. I don’t want him missing anything else.”

“Well.” Bernie took a moment to sugar her coffee. “Based on the psychological evaluations we received, I’ve been thinking it would be best to push for a charge of mental incompetence.”


“Because,” she set the stirrer aside and leaned forward slightly, “we’ve already spent several weeks proving that Bucky wasn’t in his right mind when he was made to commit those acts as the Winter Soldier. You’ve said so yourself that he still doesn’t have all of his memories, that he hardly knows who he is. And so even when he’s released from prison, he can’t just walk, Steve. Not really.”

“He’s going to get help.” Steve leaned across the table, eyes shining with determination. “We’ve got a therapist lined up for him to help him work through his issues and a telepath to help sort out the mess in his head. And I’m going to be there with him every step of the way.”

“A charge of mental incompetence will guarantee that.” Bernie picked up her coffee, but didn’t drink it. “It means he’s assigned a legal guardian and a social worker and that a treatment plan is filed with the court. It guarantees that he gets the help he needs, because he also has a lawyer - that’s me - to ensure that the legal mandates are met. The social worker would liaise with this therapist you mentioned, and would also work with Bucky to help him readjust to regular, civilian life. And the charge is reviewed every year. It’s not a permanent step, but one meant to help him get back onto his feet. And it also helps protect him from people like General Fredricks. He can’t just be taken away if he has a legal guardian and a lawyer to intervene.”

“Okay…” Steve was still wary. “So what’s the catch?”

“No catch.” She shrugged. “It’s not a trick or a trap, Steve. We choose a legal guardian and assemble a core group - a Team Rehab, if you will - that are actively involved in writing and following the treatment plan. The team keeps in communication with each other and with me and we keep records for review in one year’s time. So,” she sipped at her coffee, “Team Rehab.”

Steve chuckled to hear her call it that. It sounded like something Hank might have come up with - a
silly name, poking fun at the names they all liked to give themselves, but very descriptive at the same
time. Honestly, though, it didn’t sound too different from what the group of them had already
decided. Dr. Levitt, Hank, and Jean would comprise the ‘Team Rehab’ she was referring to, along
with Steve, of course. And Natasha, if she wanted in.

“Oh, and he can’t live alone during this time,” Bernie added. “That’s that.”

“Why would he ever live alone?” Steve was surprised at the very suggestion. “He’s going to be
staying with me in Brooklyn. That’s where he grew up, that’s where all of his memories are going to
be connected to. That’s home.” He shook his head. “I just sort of figured that was a given.”

She raised an eyebrow at that. “Not Avengers Tower? He’d be safe there.”

“Sure.” Steve couldn’t argue with that. That had been the reason for bringing Bucky there after his
failed suicide attempt, after all. With people like Carol and Rhody and Tony around, Bucky would
be safer than he would be anywhere else. “But safety isn’t the only thing that matters. He belongs at
home, and that’s where I plan to take him.”

Things were looking considerably brighter than they had in months. Bucky had help lined up. Bernie
had worked an absolute miracle from the legal perspective. They had a plan going forward. And
Bucky was coming home.

A smile broke out on Steve’s face. That was the best part. After all this time and more hardships than
anyone had a right to bear, Bucky was coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Questions, comments, and media-influenced outrage are always warmly welcomed and
hoped for.
Riker’s Island Prison Complex
March 2015

Steve and Natasha had to push through a jostling crowd of reporters in order to enter Riker’s Island.

The media furor had not died down in the long weeks it had taken for the legal process to be completed. Reporters were clustered around the entrance to the prison, as close as the security system would permit, waiting to pounce on the first hint of what was about to happen.

“Captain Rogers, over here!”

“Captain, is there any truth to the -”

“Ms. Romanoff, can you comment on -”

“Look at the camera, Captain!”

Bernie’s plan had been a good one, Steve had to admit once they were inside. The declaration of mental incompetence had gone through, and Steve had been named Bucky’s legal guardian ‘for a period of not less than one year.’ He’d also met with the rest of what Bernie had jokingly named Team Rehab’ - which he would now think of them as forever - and sketched out a rough idea of Bucky’s treatment plan.

Sam, as it turned out, had worked his own miracle. He’d kept in touch with the social worker who’d counseled him after his wingman Riley’s death, and by an immense stroke of luck, the man - Darien Nash - had relocated to New York only a year or so beforehand. Sam couldn’t find enough good things to say about Nash, and he had assured Steve that Bucky would be in the best of hands as far as a social worker was concerned.

But all that could wait. Because Steve was at Riker’s Island to take Bucky home. No more bars. No more razor-wire fences. No more orange jumpsuits or Adamantium shackles or battered tables or solitary confinement. Instead there would be the apartment in Brooklyn. Home, and his best friend. Finally.

Bucky sat there in the waiting room, in a battered hard plastic chair in the middle of a row of bolted-together battered hard plastic chairs, alone except for a single guard who seemed preoccupied with his phone. No chains, for the first time in weeks, and no orange jumpsuit. He was wearing the clothes he’d been in when they’d arrested him, and he didn’t look entirely ready for what he was going to be walking into outside the prison. He stood when Steve and Natasha walked in, and Steve wondered if he’d heard any of the ruckus the news had been raising lately about him.

“Hey, Buck.” Steve was on the point of reaching out to put a supportive hand on Bucky’s shoulder
when he hesitated. That very first evening, when he’d come back to his apartment in D.C. to find Bucky there waiting for him, he’d reflexively gone for a hug. He’d wound up with a gun in his face for his troubles, sure, but that had been his first impulse. Wasn’t it high time to dispense with the shoulder-clapping? After all, if this wasn’t an occasion to warrant a hug, nothing was.

“Damn, it’s good to see you.” He wrapped his arms around Bucky in a hug that was as celebratory as it was affectionate. “Are you okay?”

Bucky stiffened, and for a moment, Steve was afraid he was going to pull away. But instead, Bucky’s arms came up slowly, hesitantly, and then suddenly tightened around Steve, as if he had also decided a hug was long past due.

“Yeah,” he muttered into Steve’s ear. “I guess. I have to be, don’t I?”

“You don’t have to be.” Steve tightened his arms around Bucky reflexively, thinking of just how long a road to recovery he had ahead of him. “But are you okay enough to go home?”

“No choice.” Bucky still didn’t pull away. “They’re kicking me out.”

Steve couldn’t hold back the sudden snort of absurd laughter. For that fleeting moment, it was almost as though he had Bucky back - the old Bucky, with his old sense of humor. And the fact that Bucky’s sense of humor seemed to be coming back, if only in tiny fits and starts, gave him hope.

“That happens when you don’t pay the rent.” Natasha’s voice cut in, the wry humor unmistakable as it covered a subtle undertone of relief. Or at least Steve interpreted it as relief; Natasha had always been difficult to read, but Steve knew how worried she’d been about Bucky’s legal troubles.

“Well, don’t worry.” Steve ended the hug with a final squeeze and stepped back to look at Bucky. “I’m not going to evict you.” He smiled. “Come on, Buck. Let’s go home.”

“Hey, Russkie,” the guard called out suddenly, and Bucky turned to look at him. “Or do we call you ‘Sarge’ now?”

“I don’t know.” Bucky shrugged, apparently oblivious to the stormy look Steve threw at the guard. “Whatever.”

“Well, good luck out there,” the guard continued. “Looks like you’re gonna need it.”

“Russkie,” Steve growled as they left the room. “Doesn’t he know you’re from Brooklyn? Or doesn’t he care?”

“Relax, Rogers.” Natasha’s voice exuded calm, just as it had in the computer store when she’d been racing against a very short clock and a very unforgiving A.I. system to find the way to Zola. The sort of calm that was designed to be contagious. “Not everybody’s the bad guy here.”

If Bucky hadn’t caught wind of the media furor before, he certainly did when the three of them left the building. The reporters exploded into a frenzy of movement and sound the very instant they caught sight of Steve and Natasha escorting Bucky to the waiting car.

“Sergeant Barnes, how does it feel to be a free man?”

“Over here!”

“Sergeant Barnes, can you respond to the allegations that -”
“Right here!”

“Captain Rogers, any comment on -”

Bucky looked close to panic, and Steve put an arm around his shoulders while holding the other one up to deflect the reporters and photographers. Natasha moved forward, putting herself strategically between Bucky and the lenses and microphones of the media. They hustled toward the car like that, and it was only when the doors closed behind them and they drove off, leaving the reporters in their wake, that Steve began to feel his muscles unclench.

“I don’t get them sometimes,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve been talking to them for the past few weeks, and they still haven’t got enough pictures or sound bites.” He sighed, then turned to Bucky. “You all right?”

Bucky’s gaze was fixed pointedly out the passenger-side window. “I don’t know,” he said after a long moment. “Should I be?”

Steve glanced in the rearview mirror, seeking Natasha’s eyes as she sat in the back seat. Looking for help, for answers, for a wisecrack to break the tension, for input of any kind. But she only raised an eyebrow, as if asking Steve what he was waiting for.

“Well, the media aren’t exactly low-pressure, are they?” Steve sighed again. “And you went from being alone most of the time for weeks on end to being mobbed by reporters in the span of a few minutes.”

Another long stretch of silence, then suddenly Bucky said, “I made a new tattoo.”

“A what?” Steve cocked an eyebrow at Bucky, startled. For a second, he actually checked Bucky’s face over to reassure himself that there wasn’t a black teardrop next to the corner of his eye. “Not one of those jailhouse tattoos they make with a needle and ballpoint pen ink?”

Something like a scowl flitted across Bucky’s face. “On my arm. I’ll show it to you later.”

Well, at least that meant there was definitely going to be a ‘later’. Steve found himself smiling broadly as he thought of everything they were about to embark on. Bucky’s recovery was poised to begin, a thirty-minute drive was all that stood between them and the apartment, and Bucky was talking to him about a new tattoo he’d made.

“All right,” he said, unsure of what to expect when he finally saw the thing but pleased that at least Bucky was willing to talk. “When we get home. Show me then.”

“Okay.” Bucky returned to staring out the window. “And then what happens?”

“And then you start your therapy.”

Steve and Bernie had visited Bucky earlier that week, in order to lay out the plan that Team Rehab had come up with. The therapy with Dr. Levitt would begin first, with a single session each week. After a few weeks of that, and following Dr. Levitt’s recommendation, Bucky would be ready to add a weekly session with Darien Nash to his schedule. And once he’d gotten used to that, he could begin monthly sessions with Jean Grey.

“Just like we talked about.” Steve looked over at Bucky again. “Remember?”

“I remember.” Bucky scowled, then muttered, “That’s a lot of fucking therapy.”
Steve had to laugh at that. You could take the boy out of Brooklyn, as it were… “Yeah, I guess you
could say that.”

“There’s a lot of benefit to be found in all that fucking therapy, James,” Natasha chimed in from the
back seat. “And you’re going to need every bit of it.”

“What about HYDRA?” Bucky said, and no one could mistake the sudden bristling anger in his
voice. “Being out of prison doesn’t mean there’s no HYDRA. All that fucking therapy doesn’t mean
there’s no HYDRA.”

“We’re going after HYDRA.” Steve looked at Bucky, then at Natasha in the mirror, then back at the
road. “Just like we did in the war. And maybe we don’t have the Howling Commandos anymore,
but we’ve got the Avengers and SHIELD instead. The new SHIELD.”

“HYDRA has a lot to answer for.” Natasha kept her voice carefully neutral, but Steve knew exactly
how much her heart was in this. She’d worked for the old SHIELD thinking that she could use it to
counterbalance all she’d been made to do by the Russians, and she’d been absolutely devastated to
learn that she’d been working for HYDRA all along. HYDRA had cost her more than she would
ever let on, and Steve knew that she owed them as much as he and Bucky did.

“We’re going to hunt down every last one of them and bring them in.” Steve spoke with real
conviction. “Try them, convict them, and show the whole world that we won’t stand for that kind of
evil. And we’re all going to do it together.” He gave Bucky a long, questioning look. “Even General
Lukin. Especially him.”

Bucky’s eyes widened at that, his jaw clenching very tightly for a long moment. Finally he said,
“You can convict them, if you want. I just want… I want... “ He shook his head and said the words
very quietly. “I owe them.”

Steve shook his head emphatically. He’d been afraid that something like this was coming. Hoped it
wouldn’t come, but known deep down that it was going to. And being the man he was, he had to
confront it now, before it got any worse.

“Listen to me, Bucky.” His voice was quiet, but urgent. “I know you owe them. You owe them for
more than I can even say, and more than you can remember yet. But if you mean what I think you
mean, it’s not going to go down that way.”

He took a deep breath and continued. “They made you believe that killing was all you were good
for. That it was the only reason you existed. And I’m telling you right now that if you decide you’re
just going to go out there and shoot them all down, then you’re proving them right about you. And
I’m not going to let you do that, because you’re the best friend I ever had in the whole world and I
know damn well you’re good for more than that.”

Steve was going strong now, the familiar righteous anger building in his chest the way it always had
when he was younger. When he’d seen injustice and unfairness and stood up against it even though
he was too weak to fight.

“There’s going to be justice for them - all of them, even Lukin - but it’s not going to come from the
end of a gun. It’s going to be you and me and Natasha and the rest of the new group I’ve put
together at SHIELD bringing them in front of the world and showing them for who and what they
are. And they’ll be remembered forever as the ones who kept the Nazis’ work going. Who almost
ruined the world, but who didn’t get away with it. And you’ll be a big part of the reason this
happens.”
He glanced at the rearview mirror, wanting to see Natasha’s reaction, and found himself captivated by the look he saw on her face. She had a look in her eyes that was completely unguarded; a look that told him that something he’d said had struck a deep chord with her. That whether he’d intended it or not, his words had been as much for her as they had been for Bucky.

After a moment, Bucky sighed. “Maybe… When?”

“In a couple of weeks, probably.” Steve changed lanes back and forth, maneuvering the car around a slow construction van. “You’re going to need some time to acclimate and unwind. And then there’s the therapy - you’re going to be starting with Dr. Levitt in a week or two. But I guess you could say that being on the team’s a kind of therapy, too.”

That much was more than true. Steve couldn’t imagine a better way of overcoming what HYDRA had done to him than being part of the team that was going to crush HYDRA once and for all. And if anyone deserved to be a part of that team, it was Bucky.

“But first, I think you deserve some plain old unscheduled downtime.” Steve smiled. “Nothing to do but relax, make yourself at home, and get used to being in the world again.”

Bucky said nothing.

For a while, it was quiet in the car. Bucky and Natasha were both silent, and Steve didn’t say anything until he was almost ready to get off the expressway.

“Hey Bucky, listen.” He brought the car into the exit lane. “You need to know something. They let you out of jail on a few conditions, and I need you to promise you’ll follow the rules.” He ticked off the points on his fingers. “First, the therapy isn’t optional. You’ve got to do it. Not just because the court said so, but because believe me, it’s going to help you get better.”

“And you’re not going to get any leeway from me on that, James.” Natasha leaned forward, the right-hand corner of her mouth quirking upward ever so slightly. “SHIELD started me on therapy as soon as they brought me on, and I still go every couple of months. I needed it, and believe me, you need it too.”

Steve nodded emphatically, looking at Natasha in the rearview for a moment and then returning to Bucky. “Second, if you’re going to go off on your own, you’ve got to let me know first.” He smiled. “I got you a cell phone and everything. A really nice StarkTech one. My number’s already in there, and so is Natasha’s and Sam’s and a few other people too. So somebody always knows where you are, just in case.”

He didn’t have to add just in case of what. He knew he’d never forget what it had felt like to find the bag of muffins on the sidewalk and know that Bucky had been captured again.

“Third.” He took a deep breath. “If it ever gets bad, and you feel like…” He swallowed. “Hurting yourself, I want you to call somebody. Me, Sam, Natasha, anybody, before you do it. We’re all going to help you through this.” He felt a lump rise in his throat, a lump he tried to swallow down but couldn’t.

In his mind’s eye, he lay beneath the girder, his legs pinned, watching in screaming horror as Bucky turned the gun on himself. “But I swear to God, Bucky, if you hurt yourself when I could have helped you, I don’t think I’d ever be able to forgive myself. I thought you were dead once, and it tore me apart. I’m not going to lose you again.”

Natasha leaned in again. “Neither of us is prepared to lose you, James.” She spared Steve a quick but
significant glance, then turned back to Bucky. “Least of all because you choose not to follow the rules.”

Again, Bucky said nothing. His lips thinned into a line and his brow furrowed, but he couldn’t seem to find any words.

Steve sighed. “Look, Bucky, I know I can’t make you stay. There’s nothing I can do to force you to go to therapy or live with me in Brooklyn.” He turned to Bucky with a half-pleading, half-determined look in his eye. “But if you do choose to stay, and I really hope you do, then you’re going to have to follow the rules. So can you promise me and Natasha that you’ll do it?”

“We lived together before,” Bucky said slowly. Tentatively. “You said we did. And…” He chewed on his lip. “We built furniture.” He glanced at Natasha in the rearview mirror. “And you were there sometimes. And there was apple pie. And records.” He closed his eyes. “I know there were records. But the apple pie wasn’t real pie. We made it in a microwave. Not like real pie.”

Steve couldn’t keep the hopeful, sappy smile off his face as he heard Bucky talk about the memories HYDRA had tried so hard to steal from him. Memories from just a couple of months ago. Memories that weren’t even all that meaningful - except maybe they were. Maybe every memory Bucky had managed to hold onto meant something special to him. Maybe that was why they’d stayed despite HYDRA’s best attempts to delete them.

Maybe that was where the therapy could begin.

“That’s right, Buck.” He smiled broadly as he turned onto 9th Street. “You liked living with me. And I have records, yeah. You liked it when I’d play Vera or Duke. I found a little store in Park Slope where they still sell records. Apparently the kids like them a lot.”

“Hipsters.” Natasha smiled. “It’s trendy to listen to music on vinyl now. And to tell everybody you were interested in it before anyone else was, which naturally makes you cooler than they are.” She paused a moment, a faux-pensive look coming over her face. “In fact, Rogers, that should make you the king of all hipsters.”

Steve snorted. “If only because I’m old enough to have been interested in that music before any of them were even born. I don’t know if that makes me cool, or just elderly.”

He pulled into the parking garage of his building. Thankfully, the garage was inaccessible to the media, though he had spotted them camped outside the main building. He found a visitor’s space and parked the car; Natasha would bring it back to the SHIELD motor pool when she left, whenever that was. He didn’t mind if she decided to stay until night, or even spend the night if she wanted; he was just overjoyed to have Bucky back home, and he knew she was too.

A few minutes later, they were upstairs. And Steve couldn’t have felt happier when the door closed behind them.

He smiled, turning to Bucky. He considered just putting a hand on his shoulder, but paused. He’d held back for far longer than he should have, afraid of provoking a nervous reaction from Bucky. And yet just half an hour ago, he’d given Bucky the hug he’d wanted to give him that very first night in D.C. Why, then, should he go back to distant shoulder-clapping?

“All right.” He slung an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, pulling him into a half-hug the way Bucky had used to do to him when they were younger, and gestured with his free hand at the apartment. Bucky slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket, but he didn’t pull away. “Here we are, Buck. Back home again.”
“Are you going to give him the grand tour, Rogers?” Natasha asked, coming up alongside them.

“Naturally.” He smiled. “You coming?”

Natasha nodded, a small smile of her own playing over her face, and Steve guided Bucky around the main part of the apartment. There was no wall between the living room and the dining room, and only a row of low cabinets topped by a counter to separate the kitchen from the main room. The huge warehouse windows, set in an unfinished brick wall, provided him the view he loved so much. Out in the harbor, Lady Liberty enlightened the world as she’d done since thirty years before Steve was born.

In the gourmet kitchen (the real estate agent’s words, not Steve’s), Bucky took a look at the island counter, the large refrigerator, and the picture windows overlooking the street…and frowned. “Where’s the bathtub?” he said abruptly, and just as abruptly, his frown turned into a look of confusion.

Steve almost answered reflexively before he realized where Bucky’s question had come from. That realization made his heart jump, just as it made it sink a moment later. Because he’d explained this to Bucky once before, only for it to be wiped from Bucky’s mind when HYDRA had stolen him back after three too-short weeks.

“They don’t put them in the kitchens anymore, Buck.” He tightened his arm around Bucky’s shoulder protectively, telling himself that this was the last time he’d have to explain. That nothing more would be stolen from Bucky, and that things were only going to get better from then on. “They stopped doing that right around the end of the war, I think. And this building didn’t used to be condos. It was a warehouse - nobody remembers for what - and after the company went out of business, the building just sat here empty until somebody decided to buy it and turn it into condos.”

He wondered whether, somewhere deep in his battered mind, Bucky remembered the bathtub in his own kitchen. The board they’d put over it in the daytime. How Steve had needed to climb into it in order to scrub it down the day he’d helped Bucky with all his chores after he’d been suspended from school. How the pipes had always clattered and shaken in the walls whenever too many people were running the water at once.

He wondered what other pieces of Bucky’s life would come floating to the surface as he stayed in Brooklyn.

They walked fairly quickly through the rest of the apartment: the master bedroom, the bathrooms, the one small guest room that Steve had converted into a weight room - before stopping at the room Bucky had slept in last time. The one Steve had kept ready for when they brought him back.

“You room, Buck,” he said, waiting for Bucky to respond. He didn’t, though he did look somewhat longingly at the bed. Steve had turned the blankets down and laid out a T-shirt and sweatpants for Bucky to change into.

“You’re a lot more domestic than anyone would believe, Rogers.” There was gentle ribbing in Natasha’s voice, but genuine warmth in her eyes when Steve looked her way.

Bucky took off his baseball cap and pushed a hand through his hair. His eyes looked tired, and Steve reminded himself yet again that Bucky had been through more than could be reasonably expected of anybody over the past few months. Besides, if Bucky’s eating and sleeping habits were anything like they’d been the last time he’d stayed there, then he’d be both famished and exhausted by now.

“Hey, I tell you what.” Steve beat his palms together once. “I’m going to order from Turvino’s. In
the meantime, why don’t you go grab a shower?” He gestured at the hallway. “There’s towels and soap in the bathroom, and there’s razors and shaving cream in the hall closet.” He looked critically at Bucky’s unshaven face. “You need a shave pretty badly.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, but it wasn’t until Natasha laid a gentle hand on his arm and murmured something in Russian that he actually moved. And Steve found himself thinking yet again that Bucky’s recovery was going to be a long and difficult one.

Still, he reminded himself as he dug out his phone to order food for the three of them, it hadn’t been very long ago at all that everything seemed hopeless. Bucky had gone from being in HYDRA’s employ to being home for a brief moment, back to HYDRA, then to prison, and there had been the looming fear of his extradition or continued imprisonment. Now, though, everything seemed to have come together perfectly. There was not going to be an extradition. Prison was done with. HYDRA was on the ropes, its leader’s name revealed and its operatives hiding for their lives. The governments of America and Russia had put aside their many differences to work together toward the common goal of crushing HYDRA out of existence. And Bucky was home. Back in Brooklyn, where he belonged.

Natasha stood by the picture windows in the living room, staring out at the harbor. “So which do you think is going to win out: food or sleep?”

Steve walked over to stand beside her. “I don’t know.” From the other end of the apartment, he heard the sound of the water running in the shower. “It’s always a toss-up with Bucky.” He smiled slightly. “It always was, even when we were kids.”

He dialed Turvino’s. “Yeah, I’d like two pies. One sausage and pepperoni, one peppers and meatballs. Also an order of garlic knots and a large house salad.” He took the phone away from his ear and turned to Natasha. “And what did you want?”

She rolled her eyes, though a smile played at the corners of her mouth. “Spinach ravioli. Tell them not to skimp on the vodka sauce.” A beat then, “And you’d better order a second salad. Don’t want to deny you boys your full complement of veggies.”

Steve finished the order, smiling as he did, and put the phone back in his pocket. “So you’ll be hanging around for a while, I hope?” He looked out the huge windows, watching the boats meander through the harbor and listening to the water run in the bathroom down the hall. He smiled to think of Bucky allowing himself the luxury of a nice long shower after what he’d had to make do with in prison. “I don’t really want you to feel like you have to eat and run.”

Natasha smiled faintly, her eyes fixed on the boats out on the water. “Oh no, Rogers, you’re stuck with me now. That’s what you get for asking me to translate that file.” She looked at him, raised both eyebrows. “Or didn’t you realize?”

“I realized that a long time ago.” He chuckled briefly. “Around the time you started trying to set me up with every single girl you could think of.”

“Or didn’t you realize?”

“Well,” she shrugged, and down the hall, the water in the shower stopped abruptly. “That didn’t work out as well as I might have hoped, though I suppose I could start trying again.”

“Nah, don’t bother.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and kept looking out the window. “I meant what I said about shared life experience. Don’t get me wrong; I’m sure everyone you’d have found for me would’ve been perfectly nice.” He shrugged. “But I don’t imagine I’d have too much in common with them.”
“You never know.” Another small smile. “There might be a vinyl-loving Brooklyn hipster in that bunch. Just have to keep looking.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “I’m not a hipster.”

“No.” Natasha looked at him, her expression perfectly neutral. “You were just into Ella Fitzgerald and button-on suspenders before anyone in this neighborhood was born.”

“Yeah, but where’s my beard?” He folded his arms and tried to scowl at her, but succeeded only in biting his lip to keep from smiling too much. “Or my oddly-flavored craft beer? Or my vegan dinner?”

“Does my ravioli count as vegan? It might count as vegan.” She tilted her head slightly, studying his chin thoughtfully. “And I could see you with a beard, though it might give you a bit of a ‘small liberal arts college professor’ look.” She shrugged. “Which, by the way, plenty of people would go for.”

“I am not growing a beard.” He shook his head emphatically, still scowl-smiling. “It’d make me look more like a lumberjack than a college professor. And I know you; you’d start calling me ‘Man-Mountain Murphy’ or ‘Grizzly Adams’ or some such thing.”

“Please, you know nothing.” She flopped onto the couch, resting her feet against the coffee table. “I’d call you Paul Bunyan.”

“Besides,” he said, trying to retain control of the conversation and knowing he was failing even as he spoke, “beards itch.”

He sat on the couch next to her, sighing as he leaned back. And for a while, neither of them said anything. Before long, he lost track of time, and when the doorbell rang, it startled him out of their companionable silence.

“Okay, I’ll get that.” He jumped to his feet. “You get Bucky.”

He paid for the food, laid everything out on the table in the dining room, and was in the middle of putting out the glasses when Natasha appeared in the doorway with a bemused smile on her face.

“Come see this, Rogers,” she said, beckoning. “You’ll get a kick out of it.”

He followed her down the hall to Bucky’s room, where she gestured for him to look through the half-open door. Bucky was sprawled facedown on the bed with his arms and legs flung out in his unique sleeping posture. He’d put on the sweatpants and T-shirt Steve had left for him, but he’d apparently been too tired to wait for lunch.

“Guess it’s just the two of us for lunch, then.” Steve chuckled softly, shaking his head, and turned to leave the room. But before he turned away, something caught his eye in the dim light filtered through the closed Venetian blinds.

High on the shoulder of Bucky’s cybernetic arm had been emblazoned a bright red Soviet star, which had galled Steve to no end whenever he’d seen it or thought about it. But now, the star shone white. Bucky had indeed given himself a prison tattoo, Steve thought as a lump rose in his throat - a tattoo to cover up the brand of the Soviets. A tattoo that more closely resembled one of the stars on the American flag. Maybe that hadn’t been Bucky’s intention - it probably hadn’t - but it warmed his heart all the same as he left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

He felt a spark of real hope, despite everything that had gone on over the past months. Hope that
maybe - just maybe - things would work out in Bucky's favor from now on.

“Welcome home, Bucky.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaand here we are! THE END! Finally!

If you've followed this story all the way to the end, THANK YOU SO MUCH. Your feedback and comments have been so incredibly nurturing and encouraging. I don't think I would've kept editing and posting chapters over these months without such warm support. Wow, this story is over 160,000 words. That's over 360 pages! No way I would've kept going without the amazing group of readers I've been lucky enough to have.

SEQUEL?

So you might have noticed there's about a million dangling plot threads. Lukin's still at large, HYDRA hasn't been dismantled, Bucky doesn't have his memories back and relationships haven't been resolved. And that means, dear readers, that a SEQUEL is coming. I've already outlined and started writing it, so it's definitely coming. Watch this space. Bookmark and/or subscribe if you like. It's been a great ride, and I hope you follow me to the sequel - Waffle House Jogs and Memory Walks.

Thank you so much for reading!

UPDATED: 11/7/16: Sequel is up!

- FrostyEmma

End Notes

Feedback, concrit, and just popping in to say 'hi' is always warmly appreciated.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!