Summary

You can't choose what you want to remember, and you can't choose what you want to forget. The Asset learns this the hard way.

Meanwhile, Steve tries desperately to get his best friend back. Nothing goes according to plan.

Sam tags along because Steve doesn't understand the concept of self preservation. Also because nobody says no to Captain America, even if he's actually kind of an asshole once you get to know him.

Notes

Update: “We Were Like Lions” is currently a WIP. It’s prequel spinoff of sorts, covering the origins of the Black Widow and her connection with the Winter Soldier.
Find me on tumblr: yourmorningwar

See the end of the work for more notes.

- Inspired by We Were Like Lions by morningwar
He was trembling. Not mission compliant. The pen slipped a little bit in his fingers, and he grasped it tighter and pressed it to the paper. The splotch of ink grew unsteadily. The Asset's hands never shook.

Someone else's hands did. Not him, not the Asset.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

He could not remember. He put the pen down gently and took another swig of his drink, blinking stonily at the empty page. You must remember something, the Asset told himself. Clink of glass all around him, civilians murmuring comforting sounds at each other. Laughter, people-sounds, civilian-sounds. Irrelevant noise. He couldn't remember anything.

The paper stared back at him.

"You doing okay, man?" The bartender slid easily to the end where he sat.

He ran a hand self-consciously through his mane of hair. Too long. He'd have to remember to get it cut soon. Remember. Cut. He snatched the pen up and scrawled hurriedly, as if the thought would vanish the next instant, like a bolt of lightning passing through his brain.

THINGS TO REMEMBER
CUT HAIR

He set his pen down in satisfaction, then looked up. The bartender was looking at him expectantly, his eyebrows raised. The Asset cleared his throat. He hadn't spoken in days. The back of his throat tasted of cheap bourbon and seawater.

"Sorry. Yes." He tried to look sorry and okay. "I'm okay."

The bartender flashed a quick smile and nodded at the book on the table. "You a writer or something? What 'cha working on there?"

"No, just trying to." He paused, then worked his mouth hesitantly. The muscles of his face were stiff from disuse. He tilted the book away from the bartender, ashamed of its lack of content. "You ever feel like. There's something you really need to remember."

"Mostly when I'm on the job," the bartender shook his head and huffed out a laugh, then leveled him a concerned gaze. "You look like you're having a rough night."

"Actually. I haven't felt. This great. In a long time."

"That's... good," the bartender drawled, frowning slightly, as if he didn't believe what the Asset was saying. "Well, if you need a little pick-me-up, you know what they say - "

"Who." He cut in, a little sharply. Was it HYDRA? They had to be looking for him. He was supposed to report in after the mission. Even if it was mission failure. But he hadn't, and he didn't want to. He tried not to think about how badly they would punish him if they caught him. He tried not to think of THE CHAIR. He did, however, think about what Rumlow must be doing now. He wouldn't be happy with the Asset for not coming in.
The bartender raised his palms as if surrendering, leaning backwards a bit. " - I mean, it's kinda just what I like to say. Like, when I'm feeling down in the fucking dumps. You know where I go?"

"Where."

A toothy grin spread across the bartender's face. "Disneyland, motherfucker."

It was clear that he was expected to laugh in response, though he didn't get the joke. The Asset let loose a low chuckle anyway, nodded an affirmative, and downed the rest of his glass like a salute. The man didn't move away.

"I'm Oliver." His face was young and bright, and he had a gap between his front teeth. His eyes were not blue. Narrow, sloping shoulders. Small wrists. Not everyone is a threat.

"Noted." He picked up his pen again.

THINGS TO REMEMBER
CUT HAIR
OLIVER THREAT NEGATIVE
DISNEYLAND MOTHERFUCKER

Oliver's gaze was open and expectant. He was waiting for a response. Exchange pleasantries. What is your name?

Asset, you have no name.

Fuck you too, HYDRA. "Nikolai." The name pushed past the Asset's reluctant lips before he could stop it, but he hid his cringe well. It was a name. It would serve.

"Wow, exotic! Cool, cool." he added hurriedly. "Nice to meet you, Nikolai. Well, if you need anything else, you know where to find me." Sloppy wink, then he slid away.

The Asset let out a slow, controlled breath, and rolled the pen once between his flesh fingers.

Ivan? The red woman. She lay in red red sand.
Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. The man on the bridge. His eyes were blue.

He blinked rapidly and scrubbed distractedly at his face. It didn't matter anymore. Names were trivial, could be changed. Nikolai would serve.

THINGS TO REMEMBER
CUT HAIR
OLIVER THREAT NEGATIVE
DISNEYLAND MOTHERFUCKER
CALL YOURSELF NIKOLAI

He surveyed the short list, then nodded to himself. It's a start.

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"I've heard stories about you."

That was the first thing Nikolai had said to him, after he had sat down and gazed calculatingly at him for a minute. His voice was a gentle murmur.
"What do I call you?"

"I am the Asset." Then, out of habit, "Ready to comply."

"Thank you, Asset," Nikolai's lips curved upwards slightly. His shoulders were relaxed and stooped with age, and his eyes seemed to be permanently crinkled. It was not a young face. It was a pleasant face. The Asset gazed straight ahead. Some handlers did not like direct eye contact.

"I'm Nikolai, and I'm your new tutor."

"Request permission to speak."

"Yes, of course."

"Where is the other tutor."

"I'm... not at liberty to disclose," Nikolai admitted. He looked sad. There was a deep line in the middle of his forehead that deepened a little more. "I hope that doesn't upset you."

It wasn't a question. The Asset gazed straight ahead.

"Were you fond of your old tutor?"

The Asset was confused. It was an odd question to ask, and he could not see the relevance it had to his learning.

"He taught me how to speak Russian, and Mathematics. He fulfilled his purpose." He did not mention the other things the tutor had fulfilled. The things that made bile rise in his throat, the things he had to do when the tutor felt he was not learning quickly enough. Unimportant. Remember your mission.

"I see," Nikolai said softly. "I've been tasked to ease you into the new century, for your upcoming mission in London. From what I've heard, you haven't been briefed about current affairs since 1989."

"Request permission to speak."

"Yes, of course."

"What year is it now."

"2002."

The Asset nodded. "Cultural update would be necessary."

"It would," Nikolai agreed.

Nikolai turned out to be his favourite tutor, though he would never admit that to anyone in any circumstance. The Asset wasn't allowed to have favourites, but Nikolai was different. In the little room, Nikolai wasn't just a tutor or a handler. In the little room, Nikolai made him tea and hid poems and books for the Asset to find.

The Asset called it the little room in his head because it was small, and because there was nothing else in it. It made sense.

The Asset devoured these books as if they would disappear if he didn't read them quickly enough. Sometimes they did disappear before he could finish them, in between learning sessions. The first
time it happened, he was almost surprised. Then he wasn't. He was no stranger to surprises by then, pleasant or no.

He had been reading a play called Macbeth, by a man called William Shakespeare. He enjoyed it. Macbeth had to kill a fair few people, just like him. He didn't really want to do it, just like him. He did it anyway, just like him. They would have made good comrades. He secretly looked forward to finishing it the following day. Was it worth it, Macbeth? Did you achieve your goal?

When he came into the little room the next day, a new book had replaced it. It had a German title.

"Nikolai." By then, the Asset had already learned that this tutor was receptive to being called by name, and got upset when he requested permission to speak. Nikolai must not have been briefed about protocol, or maybe he just chose not to follow it. Rumlow had sneered and threatened to report Nikolai a fair few times, but the Asset knew it was pointless. Nikolai was just a tutor, not a handler. Strict orders with the Asset were unnecessary, especially when the Asset was already well-trained and compliant.

"Asset." Nikolai nodded in response, but didn't raise his head from the report he was writing.

"The book. Macbeth. I haven't completed it."

Nikolai raised his eyebrows slightly, and his head shook so fractionally that the Asset almost didn't notice it. But the Asset noticed it, because he'd been trained to notice everything. "There is no such book, Asset. You may commence your lesson."

The Asset was confused, but he understood well enough. The book did not exist because it was not supposed to exist, not to him. He understood perfectly. He picked up the German book and began to read it out mechanically, and Nikolai gently corrected his pronunciation and answered his questions if he didn't understand the words.

Weeks later, the Asset found Macbeth hidden inside a book called The Internet for Dummies. Some pages had been cut into the inside to make a small niche. The Asset looked at the book, then looked at Nikolai. Instructions unclear. What is the mission?

"You have 30 minutes to study this book, Asset. Make it quick." Nikolai's voice was clipped, and gave nothing away. He tapped at his teacup serenely, clink clink clink.

The Asset finished both books in 24.

That night, the Asset dreamed.

He didn't usually dream, because they made sure he wouldn't. He'd stopped dreaming years ago. Or maybe he'd just stopped remembering them, because some nights he woke with a snarl on his lips and the ghost of electric currents running through his brain, as though automatically trying to wipe the fresh memories all on its own. He would let it happen and lie in the cold dark, shuddering and twitching through the discomfort, because his brain pretending to be THE CHAIR was better than THE CHAIR itself.

He dreamed he had only his flesh arm, and he was climbing a wall with no end. His weak fingers scrabbled at the flinty handholds built of bone, with rotting flesh sliding off it in slick slabs as he clung on and tried not to scream for help. Above him, the sound of a train grew distant, and he cried because it was the only train that mattered that he was supposed to catch. He looked down, and the three witches laughed back at him. They spoke to him, and their mouths were impossibly wide, but he heard no sound.
They made sure he wouldn't hear anything in his dreams, either.

He woke up and his face was wet, his brain crackling between his ears. He'd been thrashing, and the tech crew had come into his cell. He stilled immediately in his cot, but it was too late.

THE CHAIR. Always THE CHAIR.

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Nikolai ended up in Disneyland, motherfucker. It was a good suggestion, since he didn't have any more HYDRA missions to do. Never again.

He'd worked his way to the West Coast slowly from Washington, sometimes hotwiring old cars, sometimes hitchhiking and sometimes stealing the right bus tickets. It was coming to midsummer and the days were long and hot, so he stole a few supplies from a small town hospital to make a cast. It was his favourite form of disguise; the sling supported the weight of his metal arm, and he could go without a thick jacket and the odd glove if he was meticulous about it.

He was always meticulous about it.

He had also decided against cutting his hair because he had not been trained to do it, and he didn't trust any barber with his hair. He guessed that he used to be a vain person, several lifetimes ago. Instead, he made sure it was well-washed and tied away from his face, for optimal functionality. He kept his face clean-shaven. Nothing like what the Winter Soldier had looked like. It was too easy to blend in.

"Diggin' the hipster look, buddy," a sniggering teen had called out, when he was exploring the streets of San Francisco. That's when he found out the name of his hairstyle. He was an average man, with a hipster look and a broken left arm, and he was going to Disneyland, motherfucker.

It was a Sunday. He'd spent the whole morning walking to Lombard Street from his motel, and felt confused and upset when he finally saw it. It was not what he had expected. Somehow, he thought it'd be bigger. He followed a tour group to Alcatraz, and concluded that it was not so impossible to escape. The swim wasn't difficult, even factoring in the weight of his arm. The only challenge was the cold water, but cold water he could handle, it wasn't as cold as Serbia, or when-

Monday. He'd managed to steal a motorcycle and cruised down the coast towards Los Angeles, cool wind wicking away the tears streaming out of his eyes. The tears were from the wind, biting sharp into his eye sockets. It was a good feeling, and it reminded him of freedom. On the way, he rested on the curb outside a gas station, chain-smoking a pack of cigarettes. They didn't taste the same as they used to. What used to? What did cigarettes used to taste like?

Tuesday. Grocery shopping at a Walmart in the middle of nowhere. A little girl in the line had pointed to his arm, and asked shyly if it hurt when he broke it. “Yes. But they put metal in it,” he said quietly, seriously. “Now I’ll never break it again.” She smiled and seemed satisfied with his answer, turning to her mother excitedly and exclaiming loudly:

“Mommy! If I hurted my arm, would you put metal inside it too? Please?”

He’d dropped his groceries and walked out of the store empty-handed, his mouth tasting strangely of rust.

Wednesday. He'd bought ice cream by the pier and stood barefoot in the sand, watching the sun go down over the horizon as it dribbled over his fingers, forgotten. By the time it was dark, his face itched and his hand was a sticky mess. It was the best sunset he could remember. He wondered when
he’d last seen a sun set at all.

Thursday. He’d found a place called the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the early evening. It was crowded, but he endured it. There was a square patch of lights arranged in an orderly pattern. It was a pleasant sight. He’d settled down against one of the poles, cross-legged, head tilted back and eyes half-closed. His vision blurred, sharpened, blurred again. This is the meaning of rapture. He felt drunk from the beauty of it, and stared until his eyes watered. They tended to do that more and more these days. Frozen in time, he’d stayed until dawn came and the sky got too bright to stare at. Then he closed his eyes as they watered some more, but the water was warm and his heart was full.

Friday. He’d made it to Disneyland. It was easy blending in with the crowd outside, nicking a ticket, going in. It was another bright and hot day, and his face itched even more. He ignored it, and stole a pair of sunglasses off a rack. They were strangely-shaped: three circles, two smaller and one bigger, intersecting one another. They served. He wore them the whole day.

He queued for every ride, and found that he liked the Peter Pan one the most. Space Mountain was unpleasant. It was dark and children were screaming. He’d experienced this before, but it was not at a place called Space Mountain. Space Mountain did not have any fire. He came out sweating and shaking. Never again. He’d have to remember that, too.

He stayed until the light show, which had fireworks. It surprised him a little to see them, because he thought fireworks were only used on birthdays. Birthday? Whose birthday?

A dull throb radiated from his left shoulder joint and travelled down his spine. It passed as a wave of numbness all through his body, and the drink he was clutching in his right hand fell to the ground as his grip slackened involuntarily.

When it passed and he was able to feel again, he was on his knees in a puddle of cola, breathless and stunned. If he’d paid more attention, he would have realised that his face had twisted into a mask of pain, but his mind was preoccupied. He was thinking to himself, quickly and urgently and desperately. You forgot about the serum. Asset is compromised.

He was on his feet again, weaving through the small crowd of concerned civilians who had gathered around him. Are you okay, man? Hey, this guy spilled his drink. Is he here alone? God, that’s kind of sad. He smiled the almost-real smile he knew, breaking free from the small circle and melting into the sea of people.

There was one thing he knew for certain then: he was never going to be free.

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THINGS TO REMEMBER

CUT HAIR
OLIVER THREAT NEGATIVE
DISNEYLAND MOTHERFUCKER
CALL YOURSELF NIKOLAI
WHAT DID CIGARETTES TASTE LIKE?? DID YOU SMOKE?
WEDNESDAY GOOD SUNSET
MUSEUM LIGHTS. YES
SPACE MOUNTAIN NOOO
FIREWORKS?? BIRTHDAY?? LINK
FIND THE THE THING HYDRA
His earliest memories were of snow.

When he opened his eyes, all he saw was white: he was up to his eyeballs in it, choking on tufts and inhaling clumps of ice through his nose. His entire body jerked uncontrollably from the cold of it, and blood dribbled over his bottom lip as he gasped for air. His jaw chattered violently, but he was numb. He had bitten through his tongue, but he was too numb to know it. He wondered distantly at the thickness in his mouth, viscous and choking.

His body gradually succumbed to the cold around him. The erratic movements slowed. His consciousness narrowed down to struggling for each breath as his blood and spittle spilled down his chin and froze, as his eyes lolled madly in the throes of a long-suffering death. White, everything was white. He must have gone blind. There was no white as white as the snow what was squeezing him in its death grip. He had to be dreaming, he had to be blind. It was too cold. End it.

In his panic, his mind was blank. He had no memory of how he came to be lying there fighting for his life. Was he thrown, had he fallen? Was this the beginning of his existence, and the end? Who would have dug him, birthed him wet and gasping in the ice, and left him there to die?

It didn't matter. The end was coming. He knew, somehow, that in the end, he would be sleepy and warm. Not a bad way to die. Still, he wished he could see something else other than the blinding white. He was sure that more colours existed, somewhere in the world, even though he could not confirm if he had ever known anything other than his tomb of snow.

Fleetingly, his mind threw up an image of a boy. Who was he supposed to be? His mind desperately grasped at the fading image: pale skin stretched over birdlike bones, tight scowl on a face, a tiny raised fist. A soft glowing head of flaxen hair. A smile like the sun, and blue, blue eyes.

Blue. It was a good colour. He'd like to see that shade of blue again, before the end.

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He opened his eyes and it was dark, and not so cold anymore. Someone hovered over him before his eyes slid shut again.

He opened his eyes and his body was on fire: every nerve burning right to his fingertips. His jaw ached from screaming.

He opened his eyes and he was drowning. There were hands all over him, and voices shouting in alarm. He did not understand.

He opened his eyes and tasted blood in his mouth. Smelt blood in the air, too, thick and stale. Someone was snapping tree branches out of his sight. Snap, snap. The shadow on his left loomed closer and the branch was bleach-white, dripping with blood and flesh. Flesh?

He opened his eyes and could not move. Pain radiated from his spine to his very core, a pain like he had never felt before. He managed to turn his head to the side and moaned uncontrollably. End it. Please.

"What do you mean, unforeseen? Your orders were to fix the arm, not - not destroy - " "I assure you, my idea was not to disable but to reinforce..." "How can he function with that!" "Functionality is guaranteed, only - " "What kind of functionality would a butchered spine -!"
He opened his eyes and the room was quiet. A small face, glistening with sweat, came into view.

The pain had subsided slightly, and he wiggled his fingers experimentally. His tongue was a bundle of cloth in his mouth, but he tried to speak anyway.

"Where..." he tried to whisper, but there was no sound, only a small exhale of breath.

The small face broke into a watery smile. "It worked... by God. It worked." The man's face trembled and broke, and his shoulders shook with relieved sobs. After several long moments, he scrubbed his face and straightened up. "You have been rescued from the jaws of death. What do you remember?"

What does he remember? Snow, and pain. His lips split as he answered. "Nothing." He could not bring himself to ask more.

"It does not matter that you don't remember. All you need to know is that you are our Asset. You are to be the Fist of HYDRA. You will shape the future. You will save millions of lives." His face gleamed in triumph. There were tears in his eyes. "Hail HYDRA."

They assumed that bringing the Asset to their side would not be an easy task. They knew who he was, even if he didn't know it himself.

In Austria, Sergeant Barnes did not break on the table. In Austria, they had peeled off his skin and plucked his fingernails from their beds. They gave him everything they had, and he continued to live, continued to recite his name and designation back at them. Sergeant Barnes was the lethal, uncompromising all-American nightmare, all salt and smoke and fire as he laughed through the heat of battle. They had to break him this time, and properly.

The Asset was not like Sergeant Barnes at all. He was quiet and afraid. When they first strung him up to beat him into submission, he was shocked and confused. Please, he said. Please stop. I didn't do anything. Who are you. Who am I.

It wasn't long before they realised that the Asset didn't need to be broken. There was nothing to break. Sergeant Barnes had died that day in the icy ravine. The Asset was already a blank slate: a blank state with no memories except for how to kill a man, a blank slate with no opinions, emotions or allegiance. A blank slate with a childlike eagerness to do right by his guardians. A perfect soldier, born of snow.
Sam

It's mornings like these that make Sam wonder why he ever had the noble thought of following Captain America on his stupid heroic hunt for his stupid anti-heroic best friend. Surely he had other better things to do. Mow his neighbour's lawn. File his taxes. Memorise all the episode names of *Friends*.

The room is barely lit with the early glow of dawn - all blue and soft at the edges - and Steve's honest-to-God *humming* to himself and bustling about the small hotel kitchenette, apparently trying to practise his percussion skills or -

"Morning, Sam! Eggs? I made coffee," Steve looks up and grins, pan in hand. Not a hair out of place. It's too early for this shit.

" 'S too *early* fr ths shhhhhhtttt," Sam mumbles, rolling over and burying his face in the pillow. Fuck the morning. Fuck *Steve*. "...ssss not ev'n mornin' yet."

"Suit yourself," Steve replies easily, and resumes his fucking annoying humming as he clangs about yet again. Okay, there's no way in hell Sam is going back to sleep now.

He groans and sits up slowly, blinking away the last traces of his interrupted sleep. He doesn't exactly hate mornings - army had really fixed his body clock good - but Steve is a whole new level of morning person, which is something he had unfortunately found out only after pledging his time and sanity to this stupid mission. It wasn't even an official mission. More like a roadtrip, Steve had promised, with a hopeful smile. And he fell for that, but who wouldn't? It's not like anyone can say no to Captain fucking America. Until you actually live with him. Sam finds himself coming to the bitter conclusion that he would be a whole lot less annoying if he didn't look so fucking *perfect* even at ass o' clock on Bumfuckday.

"Tell me you didn't wake up like this," he grumbles, eyeing the Captain and scowling at his stupidly awake face with not a hair out of place. Alert eyes. Unblemished, uncreased skin. Did he *iron his t-shirt*?

"Nah, I ironed my shirt," Steve replies easily, sipping his coffee contentedly and grinning. Then his smile falters. "Was that a reference? Sam, you know I don't get references that well. You gotta explain it to me, pal. Or I'm just gonna keep embarrassing myself."

"Beyonce." Sam rolls his eyes and crawls out of bed with all the grace of a zombie, eyeing the bedside clock. 6:42am. It's *way* too early for this shit.

"How much do I need to pay you to let me sleep till actual sunrise one of these days?"

"Sorry." Steve has the decency to look a little contrite, at least. Because he's a fucking boy scout and all. "I really wanted to this time, but I got a message in the middle of the night, and I was kind of excited about it." He's grinning again above the mug of steaming coffee, and Sam's annoyance melts away because his stupid face is like the stupid sun and nobody can stay mad at Captain America for long, especially when he looks like a kid in his favourite candy store who just got told that he could choose TWO things, not just one.

Still, Sam doesn't want Steve to get away with his obnoxiously optimistic morning attitude. "Tell me it's worth two hours of uninterrupted sleep."

"Nat just flew in last night."
Sam raises his eyebrows. How did she know where to find them? After all, they'd been on the road on the wildest goose chase for the past month, from Washington all the way to the freaking West Coast, all on the testimonials of flimsy eyewitness accounts about a "shady man who, I swear to God, sat outside the station and smoked cigs from morning to night", according to the latest one.

It's all they have to go on, when they're chasing a ghost who can disappear when he wants to. It's only their small fortune that this particular ghost is confused, disoriented and keeps attracting attention by behaving like a total basketcase in public. Just the other day, he'd spoken to a small town sheriff who claimed he "had words" with a "poor ol' nutjob" who had apparently bought out the whole shelf of Snapples in the store, sat in the parking lot under the sun, and opened all of them just to read the "Real Facts" under the caps.

Apparently, someone thought it was balls-crazy enough to report him as a public nuisance. He'd refused to believe the guy until he actually saw the footage taken from someone's car camera, and was appalled beyond words when the grainy footage really showed one Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the handicap lot, silently and methodically opening each bottle of juice and appearing to commit every fact to memory. He felt genuine fear for Bucky then - he obviously needed Serious Help and maybe some Serious Therapy. When he'd turned to Steve to secretly express some major feelings of dismay at this, he realised that Steve's shoulders were shaking. He almost shit himself with worry when he realised Steve was trying to control his laughter. Before he could react to how fucking weird the universe was suddenly becoming, Steve was asking for a copy of the tape.

"Dude, I've seen some messed up shit, but what the fuck?" Sam had hissed under his breath, as they walked out of the police station half an hour later, with Steve one thumbdrive heavier and still wiping tears away from his eyes as his chuckles faded away. "We just got solid proof that Eternal Sunshine is maybe two fries short of a Happy Meal, and you're giggling like a ten-year-old? What. The. Fuck?"

Steve had schooled his features and dipped his head, digging his hands into his jeans pockets. "Sorry. You're right. I should be more worried - I mean, I am - but. I don't know. It really looks like something Buck would do. Y'know, if nobody stopped him."

"What?!!"

"I know, it sounds crazy. You know, some people have weird habits? He used to be a total nerd about stuff. Science, facts. He used to drag me to, like, all the shows that Howard put up -"

"Howard? You mean, Howard Stark? God, you're old."

"Yeah. Good times." Steve's expression had turned wistful, then a little sad. "I don't know. I just thought - after seeing this video, maybe he's not so far gone after all."

Sam wrenches his mind away from that bizarre memory and remembers it's Natasha Romanoff they're talking about. He's not very surprised that she knows where they are.

"Natasha flew in... like, here? To see us? Why?" His sleep-addled brain struggles to keep up with the news.

"She's found something." Steve is practically bouncing off the walls in excitement. "An old underground bunker in the outskirts of Minsk, Belarus. She won't tell me more over the phone, but I think -"

"Heavenly Father, let the next words that comes out of Steve's mouth be 'That's where they were
"Best Friend Forever. Everyone has one, and he's obviously yours. And if you pour me some of that coffee right now, I'll consider your application to become mine." Sam finally finds himself smiling despite the early hour as he takes the steaming mug from Steve's hands. Steve's good mood is infectious, and they finally, finally have something to do.

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They meet at a really hipster cafe two blocks down, with mismatched chairs and drinks served in weird mini-buckets and fries stuffed into mess tins. It's overly crowded and way too noisy, so they sit outside.

Sam starts in surprise when Natasha slides into the seat beside him. "One of these days I'm gonna have a heart attack, Romanoff."

"Good to see you too." She helps herself to a generous handful of the overpriced fries.

"Nice hair, Natasha," Steve comments, his eyebrows raised. "I almost didn't recognise you."

She fingers her now chestnut-brown hair. "Yeah, well, that's the plan. After I pretty much served SHIELD up to Wikileaks, it was the best idea to be unrecognisable until the public takes the time to cool off about everything."

"It's not fair that they even judge you about it," Steve begins hotly, insistently. "We all know it's in the past - and it's not like you were all bad, you've done way more good, you've more than made up -"

"Whoa, slow down, cowboy." Natasha chuckled. "I know. Give it two more months or so. One major disaster, maybe. Another alien army in town. Once I swoop in to save the day, they'll lap it all up and forget everything. Don't sweat it, Rogers." She shovels more fries into her mouth. "These are good."

"They're organic and they cost fifteen bucks. They damn well be fucking epic," Sam gripes, snatching some up too before she finishes it all.

Steve is obviously still a little worked up, and he worries at his lip for awhile. "So you said you have some new intel?"

Natasha grins and rolls her eyes. "Straight to it, then? Not even gonna buy me a drink first?"

Steve makes his sullen Captain-America-is-displeased face.

"Okay. It may not be anything, but like I said, I managed to decrypt a bunch of files and found a ton of coordinates. It was basically SHIELD's address book or something: thousands of locations under the company or its obscure subsidiaries. Tony helped me compile all the coordinates, the addresses they're tagged to and the main function of the buildings and all, and we found that some locations stood out as a bit odd."

"Odd?" Sam frowns.

"Really random. No clear function designated to the place. The rest were tied to some safehouses, or maybe small research facilities or component suppliers. The weird ones were just... there. Sort of like
"And these were HYDRA bases," Steve concludes.

Natasha nods. "Some of the coordinates were really outdated - HYDRA bases you'd already taken out in your Howling Commando days, bases that have since been swept out."

"So how many are there left?"

"If we trust the intel, possibly three. We're still trying to gather more intel about the other two, but the one in Minsk is our best bet so far. It's sort of in the middle of nowhere, but satellites have picked up activity in the past month."

Steve breathes a sigh, and manages a small smile. "That's great news, Natasha."

"Just doing my job." Natasha returns the smile. "Now I expect a reward. Could you be a perfect gentleman and help us order some real food?"

"Yeah, okay. Whaddaya want?" Steve makes to stand up. "Sam?"

"Whatever you're having, but half the amount. Thanks."

"Same for me."

Natasha watches as Steve ambles into the crowded cafe to order, then turns to Sam pointedly. "How's he doing?"

"Same old. Pining for his friend in a kinda disturbingly sickening way. Driving me up the wall. Do you know what time he wakes up some days? I swear, it's like he's not even in the same time zone as us. Or maybe it's just an old person thing. My gramps -"

"You think it's a good idea for him to check out this base?" Natasha murmurs out of the corner of her mouth, around another french fry.

"Hmm?" Sam snaps out of it. "I don't know. If going to Belarus means leaving Barnes to disappear... I'm not even sure he'd wanna go in the first place. He is kind of obsessed."

"He just needs something to do. This could be good for him. Hunting down actual HYDRA goons instead of chasing a ghost story all over the continent."

"I know, I know." Sam suppresses a grimace as he remembers the first few weeks after the helicarriers went down. Steve had practically crawled out of his hospital bed in an attempt to help Natasha and Stark trawl through the massive dump of SHIELD information for any leads on HYDRA and the Winter Soldier, and they'd let him because he wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd spent two full days tracing the source of a monthly-recurring coded bulk order before finally realising it was for toilet paper in all the SHIELD facilities. On the verge of tears and sagging with defeat, he finally relented and allowed Sam to manhandle him back onto a bed to rest.

They eventually came to a conclusion that Steve was useless with actual spywork and needed to do something tangible. Like follow a world-class assassin like a lovesick puppy. It was something Natasha, Sam and Stark all agreed to indulge Steve on, if it meant that he would be much easier to handle. Naturally, Sam's the designated babysitter, given that he's neither an ex-Soviet spy nor a billionaire genius.

It's not fair that they're treating Cap like an emo teen these days, and talking behind his back, but his
judgement is way too clouded when it came to the Winter Soldier. Sam hopes he can handle the fallout if Steve suddenly goes insane. Or if Barnes suddenly does. Heh. Sam's half-sure that ship has sailed, at least.

"So Belarus it is then. Though when we get back, we probably won't be able to pick up the trail anymore." Sam ponders that for a moment. Would Steve willingly leave when he feels like he's getting closer?

"Trail? The Winter Soldier doesn't leave any trails," Natasha states, nonplussed and a little sharp, almost like she's insulted and thinking, *we were trained better than that.* "The Red Room trained us better than that."

Alright, Sam. You're a telepathic babysitter. Add that to your resume. "Well, he's different now. Finally taking a leave of absence or something, because you wouldn't believe the crazy sh -"

"Are you talking about me behind my back again?" Steve settles back down into his seat, with a tray balanced on each hand. Sam surveys the mountain of food, and tries not to think about how much that must've cost.

"Aw, hell no, Cap. I feel fat just looking at that much food. Next time make it a quarter."

Steve chuckles. "Don't worry, Sam. It's mostly mine. I got you the mini vegan tofu wrap. The nice lady said it's for fussy eaters."

"You see the shit I put up with? Unbelievable. Captain America, everyone. He's mostly a hero, but he moonlights illegally as an asshole." Shaking his head, Sam reaches out for the wrap Steve's handing over.

"Stop ruining my reputation, Wilson."

"You're doing it all on your own."

Steve finishes handing out the food to the both of them - he'd actually gotten Sam a full breakfast set as well, the angel - then starts on his food with gusto. Sam will never get used to being both amazed and disgusted at the amount of food he has to eat to fuel his serum-enhanced body. They eat in comfortable silence until Steve clears his throat and wipes his mouth pointedly. "So when do we leave?"

If Natasha's surprised, Sam has no way of knowing it, but he knows his own eyebrows instinctively lift in surprise. "We're leaving?" He asks tentatively.

"That base isn't gonna smoke itself," Steve says pointedly, frowning a little as he bites into a sausage.

"That base is also halfway across the world, about six thousand miles away from here," Sam reasons, equally pointedly. "Six thousand miles away from Barnes."

A heavy sigh. "I know," Steve mumbles, his face falling into the familiar brood when he thinks about his best friend. "But at least we know he's kind of harmless now. If we can't find him, HYDRA probably can't either, right? We can always... try to find him again after. It's not like he's in any immediate danger. Plus, I've been itching to be of more use lately."

"I can't say I disagree with you here," Sam relents. Then, "Does this mean we just wasted, like, a whole month doing nothing?"

"Well." Steve looks sheepish. "Not nothing. I mean, we know some of his habits, anyway. His
pattern. He's just kind of visiting all over the place now, isn't he? If anything, we'll probably pick up his trail if we looked for news about mystery Snapple hoarders or something."

"Am I missing something here?" Natasha cuts in, confused. "He's hoarding Snapple?"

"Oh, that's just the tip of the iceberg, Romanoff. Wait till you see the damn video."

The video's on Steve's phone. Sam had offered to put it in ever since they'd gotten a copy of it on a thumbdrive, because he knew how badly Steve wanted to watch and rewatch it over and over again. Looking for clues. Looking to see if there was anything about that man sitting in the parking lot was Bucky at all. Natasha watches it with an unreadable expression, and when it's finally over, she looks up and shrugs.

"It's not uncommon," she says casually. "I've seen others who'd been wiped behaving that way. They keep you in, mess up your mind a little bit too much, you come out and the world looks really different. You could do the same thing over and over without realising it, or making patterns until your mind calms down a bit. Your perception of time gets screwed up a little, too. I never had it, thank God, because they didn't need to brainwash me for seventy years."

"So you're saying that his behaviour is just a side effect?" Steve looks a little crestfallen. Sam groans inwardly. Noooo. The day had started so well. He was so happy. Nooo.

"Maybe. Like I said, it's not uncommon. I've seen others do stuff like that, too."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Steve almost wails. "How can he be trusted to do his job at all if he's spending half his time on the mission goofing off like that?"

"That's why there were handlers. People to follow you, tell you exactly what you were supposed to know and do. People to tell you exactly who you were supposed to be. When you're so confused after their brainwashing, it's even a welcome convenience to rely on orders without question. So... the longer the mission, the more time apart from your handler, the more likely you'll get a bit... sidetracked."

Steve looks like he's about to cry right there and then. "That's... that's horrible." His voice is small. Sam shoves another tin of organic fries at him, firmly, and he starts to shovel them into his mouth mechanically.

Natasha's gaze softens. "I'm sorry. But from the cases I've seen, it's not permanent. Just takes time, you know?"

Steve shrugs and continues his sad-munching. Ugh. What a picture. Sam feels like his heart could break, and it's time to talk about happier things. "All the more reason for us to go to Belarus," he reasons. "If we can find out more about what they did, we can reverse it." He tries not to wince here, because he's practically talking out of his ass at this point.

There's a pregnant pause, then Steve sniffs awkwardly and gathers himself. "Yeah," he clears his throat, "yeah. That sounds like a good idea."

"Great," Natasha says curtly. "I'll get Tony to arrange for a jet. All goes well, we leave tomorrow. Get packed, boys." She stands up. "I'll be in contact. Thanks for the lunch."

Sam watches her disappear into the bustling Los Angeles lunch-hour crowd. After she's gone, Sam turns to Steve. "Cap. You know whatever that happens, I'm here for you."

Steve nods, appears to steel himself. "Yeah," he breathes. "Thanks, Sam. I really mean it."

He
exhales again, then laughs shakily. "God, I'm a mess."

"Chin up, buttercup. I wanna see an old man kick some HYDRA ass."

They end up puttering about the hotel room making sure they're mission-ready as they can be with what they have. The rest of the day is spent marathoning the entire Terminator movie franchise in one sitting. Not a bad day after all.
The base in Minsk is a silent tomb. A narrow cast-iron door's the only sign of its existence, concealed by a sparse copse of trees and rocks four miles from the nearest road. The door's slightly ajar when he approaches carefully, shield held aloft, as Sam scouts the surrounding area from above and Natasha watches his six.

"Guys, I have a bad feeling about this," Sam intones. "Not a soul in sight from up here."

"Copy." Natasha's voice crackles over the intercom. "They knew we were coming."

Steve doesn't reply. He's too close to the doorway, and he doesn't want anyone to know he's approaching. He feels vulnerable anyway, uncomfortable with the idea of practically walking into a trap through the front door. Why would they leave the door open?

He almost startles when Natasha appears at his flank, but refocuses his attention on the door immediately. Habit has him casting his eyes about the bottom half of it, but he can't see any wires, so it's not rigged to explode. Probably. His legs are rooted to the ground, and he chances a glance at Nat for some kind of sign.

"Go on, Cap. I'm right behind you," she murmurs imperceptibly.

"What the hell are you doing, dumbass?"

He ignores his snide conscience (just his luck that it always, always speaks to him in Bucky's voice) and steps forward. Crouching slightly behind his shield, he edges the heavy door open, and it slides back smoothly and quietly. Funny, he was expecting some creaks and groans.

The inside of the bunker is dark and cold, the only source of light coming from a small green exit sign right above his head. He lets his eyes adjust to the dimness and surveys the scene.

They're on a circular platform, overlooking a small circular room not unlike the one he'd been in when he accepted Erskine's serum. There used to be something large and heavy in the middle of it, but it's recently been moved away; there are drag marks on the floor and paler concrete where whatever it was once stood. The whole place smells faintly of blood. He tells himself it's just the smell of rusty iron. It's hard to tell the difference.

Steve's mouth settles into a grim line and he tries not to grind his teeth. What is this place?

"Clear," Natasha says, coming to a rest behind him. He hadn't even realised that he'd frozen to the spot to take in the place while she checked for hostiles. *Losin' your touch, eh, Stevie?*

Steve draws closer to the railing, looking down. "I thought you said this was a main base. This place is a shoebox."

"You try deciphering code for days on end, Captain Smartass," Natasha retorts gently, without heat. "Come on, there are some shelves over on that end." She leads him down a side staircase down into the main room.

"Sam? Everything okay out there?" Steve asks, pressing his hand into his ear reflexively. No response, but he's not surprised. This hole is pretty much covered in iron. "Nat, the connection's dead. Let's clear out in two minutes. There's nothing here." There's a bitterness in his tone that he can't help, and he's mentally kicking himself for getting his hopes up in the first place. HYDRA
 wouldn't be so careless to leave important documents or equipment lying around for them to find.

"Just a minute." Natasha's managed to open the shelf, which is unsurprisingly empty, but she's rapping at the back of it experimentally. Steve casts his eyes around nervously, checking to see if the door's still clear - their only exit - and putting his back to a wall. With a few hollow *thunks*, Nat makes a small noise of triumph and heaves a wooden plank into the floor. A small stone alcove behind the shelf is revealed, stuffed with a few moldering ledgers and ratty folders.

Steve feels a rush of anticipation and immediately steps forward to leaf through the nearest one, but Natasha pushes him firmly out of the way, pulling out a small drawstring bag - where did *that* come from?! - and loading the papers into it systematically. "Not now, Rogers," she warns. "We gotta bail before something happens."

A minute later, they're back out in the open, blinking away the blinding light of morning.

"Sam? We're loaded up. Ready to go. Come in," Steve calls out, shielding his eyes as he scans the sky. "Wilson? Do you copy?"

A heart-stopping moment of silence where he and Natasha exchange looks of dread, then a long, low groan cuts into his earpiece. "Caaaaap. Oh. My God. You okay, man?"

"We're fine. Where are you? What happened?" Natasha demands urgently.

"I dunno, man. Shittttt. Argh. I'm okay. Someone shot my wing. I took a tumble but at least I could break my fall. On many trees. Oh, that does *not* feel good." More moaning. "I was shouting for y'all, for like, hours."

Steve's on high alert. "Someone shot you? They're here! They've been watching us - " his shield is up again, and he becomes terribly aware of his nakedness here out in the open. *What're you waitin' for, Stevie? A written invitation?*

Natasha's bristling beside him too, and positions herself behind him and the shield as much as possible. "Wilson, what's your location?"

"Hang on. Urrrr. There are kinda a lot of trees here. God, this is hard." Crackling sounds. "I - I think... no, wait, nah, fuck it - "

Seconds later, a flare shoots to the sky about two hundred metres to the north. Steve and Nat break into a run, crashing through the tall grass and stumbling a little on the loose dry rock underneath. If the enemy finds Sam first...

It takes them more than two minutes to find Sam, and Steve's heart is in his throat and blood is thundering in his ears before he spots the guy. He seems to have fallen asleep against a tree trunk. Steve lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding and rushes forward. "Sam? Come on, man, wake up. Now isn't the time to catch up on sleep."

"Whoever it was who shot Sam, they're not anywhere nearby," Natasha spits harshly, still scanning the surroundings warily with her gun out. "I hate snipers."

"Steeeeeve." Sam mumbles and paws at Steve's hands that are fussing over him. "Few mo' hours, don' do this t' me."

Steve lets out a short, relieved laugh. "Just a concussion, then. God, Sam, you gave me a scare."

He has to carry Sam all the way back to their car, parked outside an abandoned farmhouse six miles
away, but he doesn't mind. He follows behind Natasha silently, his eyes trailing the bag dangling from her shoulders, as Sam narrates their journey like a drunken stand-up comedian. Natasha's still antsy and on edge, sticking to the trees as much as possible, and when they make it into the open once again, she starts running and darting side to side as if dodging invisible bullets. Steve keeps pace and tries to match her movements, hitching his shield higher on his back to cover the back of his head and neck. Sam's draped over his shoulder in an undignified reversed fireman's lift, and Steve tries to cushion his head as much as possible from the movement. They're about two miles in and out of range of the forest, with nothing but grass and rocky ground around them, when Natasha finally slows to a hurried walk.

They finally make it back to their car in forty minutes, and Steve melts into the backseat with Sam as Natasha peels out of the lot like they're in the middle of a car chase.

Steve throws his shield onto the floor by his feet and lets his head fall back. The mission went well. It could've been worse.

_Could've gotten yourself killed, punk._

All for your bitch ass, Buck, Steve snaps in response. He ducks his head and hides the slow smile spreading across his face. Maybe he is going a bit insane.

Sam is still bitching to anyone who would listen about whether travel insurance would cover his broken wingsuit, but his gaze is clearer and speech less slurred. He'll be fine.

"Slow down, Romanoff. Mission's over," Steve says as they hit the main highway back to the city. He catches her eye in the rearview mirror, and he knows this is about as anxious as he'll ever see her.

"I hate snipers," she repeats vehemently, and Steve knows that if it were anyone else in her position, their hands would be trembling at the wheel. Her hands are steady, but her knuckles are white.

"I know," Steve says softly. He feels like apologising to her, but he doesn't know why. It wasn't him who shot her through the gut. _Course it wasn't you. You can't shoot to save your life, pal. That's why you got me._

But he doesn't. He doesn't have Bucky.

Sam has finally quietened down and dozes off, breathing softly against the window, head lolling slightly. The journey back to the hotel is silent, and the tension in Nat's shoulders doesn't go away until she turns off the engine.
The Asset

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was only one mission he had tried to bail on, and it was his fourth. It was a simple one, on hindsight: no killing involved. All he had to do was infiltrate the enemy army long enough to gather intelligence about their plans, available equipment, and sabotage whatever maps they owned. He didn't understand why, but after about a day into successfully joining their ranks, his brain began to warp reality.

He had marched with them for barely two hours when he began to truly believe that he was Corporal James Hill. Maybe it started when he found out how easy it was to get along with the other boys. Like it was second nature. His metal arm was easy to hide then, as all of them were bundled up tight against the bitter cold of European winter.

He hadn't meant to fail his mission, truly. He hadn't even meant to run away with them. He simply forgot the mission. As the days melted together, he marched with them, ate with them, talked and laughed and trained with them, and somehow it felt right. He belonged, so he stayed. This was his life. He was not the Asset, he was James Hill. He had a unit and they were his friends and he watched over them while they slept. HYDRA was forgotten, a shadow at the back of his mind.

Two weeks or so into the mission, he was sweating and staggering back to his cot halfway through an ammunitions exercise, to the surprise and worry of his new-found brothers. His back ached like it was being pulled apart with hot pliers, and he was quickly losing control and sensation of his limbs. If the others had any concern for him, he was thankful they didn't choose to show it right in the middle of the day: he'd compromised his cover enough, drawn too much attention to his strange behaviour that suggested that he didn't belong in this company. Someone would drag him to the med tent. Someone would look up his name for a report, and would realise that there was no Corporal Hill in this company.

In that moment, he finally remembered his mission, and gritted his teeth against the sinking feeling of dread in his stomach. He'd need to go back empty-handed. Report his failure. His body was not functional enough to complete the mission, and he knew why. Extended use of the metal arm without medication and cryogenic-aided healing caused him debilitating pain. That was the price of his weapon.

He needed to get back, or he would end up lying immobile until someone found him and maybe put a merciful bullet in his brain.

After a few agonising minutes of panting on his bed, he crawled back into a standing position and limped away discreetly, out of the tent and back into the forest, away from his failed mission. He needed the meds. He hadn't realised how much he relied on the HYDRA scientists on his upkeep, and he wept bitter tears as he crawled blindly back to the hidden base like a runaway dog coming home with its tail between its legs. By then, it had been two days since he'd stolen away from the camp, and every movement sent pain lacing up and down his back. His shoulders were trembling with the effort of holding the weight of his body and the arm up. He was also severely dehydrated, but he didn't realise it through all the pain he was feeling. All he wanted was to die, or to lie in the ice.

They'd been waiting for him. Their ringing laughter made him bite his tongue in shame as he dragged himself across the floor like a dying animal and knelt at his handler's feet. It was a miracle
he'd made it back at all. "Und so," his handler had said softly, gazing at him detachedly. "Die Winter Kakerlake krabbelt zurück zu ihrem Loch."

More laughter. The Asset licked his parched lips and tried to hold back the tremors in his torso. "Bitte," he'd whispered brokenly, reaching out as if to clutch his handler and bring him closer.

"The Prodigal son returns." The handler uncrossed his arms and moved closer, and a faint expression of contempt crossed his features. "Mission report." He already knows, he already knows.

"Failure." The Asset rested his weight on his knees, bowed his head, tried to stretch out his arms with his wrists facing up. It was a position expected of him when facing punishment. By then, he already knew when he'd be punished, and automatically assumed the position as soon as possible. Make it quick. Get it over and done with. This time, his arms refused to cooperate, and the effort had him buckling and almost planting his face into the ground at his handler's feet.

"Did the Asset think that he could escape from us?" His handler was unfazed, and his quiet voice was ringing in the silence now as he addressed the Asset before their rapt audience.

"Nie. Nein. Bitte..." the Asset was twitching on the floor, mumbling listlessly into the concrete.

"You need us," his handler had bent down to hiss at him then, his eyes bulging in anger. "We made you. How dare you think you could just leave us like an ungrateful creature..."

"...bitte," the Asset was still chanting under his breath. "Please. Forgot... didn't know... didn't mean to... THE CHAIR. Do it, please, anything, I'm sorry -"


The Asset's body sagged in relief and he was a slobbering mess. "Thank you, thank you..."

The next thing he knew, he was waking up in a crude thawing chamber. It was six months after his failed mission, and the pain was gone. He never forgot his mission after that, and never left the base for more than two weeks since.

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His memory was a blur from the Disneyland parade until the day after. He must have wandered back to the city alright, because the dawn found him sprawled next to a dumpster in an alley a few blocks from where he was squatting.

Nikolai opened his eyes blearily and took stock of the pain. Not so bad yet. Dull throb. He shuffled backwards into a more dignified sitting position, leaning heavily against the wall. He was flanked by an overflowing trash bin and a stinking pile of discarded clothing, but he paid them no mind. He needed to find a base. But that meant going back to HYDRA.

He really didn't want to go back to HYDRA. He wanted to remember. He didn't want THE CHAIR. He'd have to infiltrate and extract, then. At least he knew what he was looking for, and had a vague idea of where they would keep it. There was a nagging voice at the back of his mind. Yes, steal the serum. Take it. What then, when it's gone?

He cleared his mind. That was not an immediate issue. Getting the serum was his immediate issue. He drew out his notebook from within his jacket pocket, and tugged the pen cap out with his teeth. Flipped to a fresh page.
He frowned at the short list and tapped the pen impatiently on the side of the book. The American bases were too modern. Difficult to infiltrate. High risk of recapture and detainment. His best bet would be one of the older ones, but those might have been cleared out years ago. Either way, he was out of options. He would just have to start in Belgium and work his way East. If he could function for that long. There was no if. He had to, or he would die trying. Stupid cliche.

The pile of old clothes beside him stirred, and his heartbeat quickened. He slipped the notebook back into his pocket and prepared for a fight. He hadn't realised that the pile of clothes was a person.

"Hey man what the fuck. Ha. You scared me." The smell became stronger. Nikolai got to his feet and made to walk away, but a grubby hand shot out to grab at his ankle. He looked down, more confused than wary.

"What do you want," Nikolai asked calmly, prying his foot from the man's weak grasp. He looked hard at the pile of clothes. The man was gaunt and dirty, his forearms mottled with bruises. He was grinning dreamily up at Nikolai. Disconcerting.

"I got some things. Some things that you need. Unnerstand?"

The only thing I need is the serum. And to crawl into a freezer. "No."

The man showed his yellow teeth, but he looked earnest and dazed. He flipped a sheet over and showed Nikolai a small glass bottle of clear liquid conspiratorially, then hid it again quickly. "Present from a friend," he continued. "Fifty bucks and your pain goes right away."

Painkiller? It was worth a shot. He wet his lips, ignoring the bitter taste of his tongue, and threw down a fifty. He reached for the bottle.

The man pulled away in alarm, looking affronted. "Fifty for a fuckin' drop."

Nikolai scowled darkly. This man was in no position to bargain with him. But then Nikolai felt the pull in his back muscles and thought, I am in no position to bargain either. He drew more notes from his pocket reluctantly. "Four."

The man snatched the money up gratefully, then beckoned to Nikolai. "Come on then. One first."

The dropper appeared in his trembling hand, and the liquid glistened off the tip.

"I'll do the four." Nikolai took the dropper gingerly.

"Your funeral, man."
Nikolai tipped his back and dispensed the bitter drug on the back of his tongue, then passed the dropper back to the man. Frowning at the taste, he sat back down against the wall. "If this works, I will. Buy the bottle."

Skeptical scoff. "You don't got money for my price."

"Name it."

The man named it, and Nikolai frowned harder. His hands were already fists, but he did not raise them. Harmless civilian. Violence irrelevant.

"Don't. Play games with me. Five grand."

"Nine."

"Too much. Seven. If it's good."

"Eight."

"The bottle isn't. Even full. Last offer. Seven."

"Ha. Fine. Seven grand."

"If it's good."

"Trust me, shit is good."

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It was good.

After carelessly tossing the man the rest of his pilfered cash, Nikolai stumbled back into his small apartment: an empty room in an abandoned building that was scheduled for demolition. Head was spinning. Body was buzzing, fingers too. He felt like someone had come to remove all the stuffing inside of him, and replaced it with something else. Delirious and constantly on the verge of manic laughter, he sank onto the mouldy floor and sighed contentedly. Everything was floating. Was he floating?

The wallpaper was moving. The pain was still there, but somehow disconnected, like somehow his body had been split into two and the other body had taken the brunt of it. Good. Stay in the other body, pain. He didn't need more of it. His mouth was dry, so dry that his tongue felt swollen. Like rough sponge. Almost hard. It was strange, and he felt like laughing.

The wallpaper turned into a river. He wanted to focus, he did. He tried very hard, but the wall kept distracting him. It was like watching a beautiful abstract dance, of which he knew nothing of, but felt anyway. Why hadn't he seen anything this way before? What colour was this wallpaper? He had never seen these colours in his life. He had to tell someone about it. Look at the damn walls, can't you see? Nikolai, did you notice the wallpaper? Nikolai!

He closed his eyes and colours throbbed behind his lids to some unheard beat. The blood rushing in his ears seemed to whisper secrets to him. His body trembled finely, his skin was numb. Nikolai, I'm sorry.

He opened his eyes, and Nikolai sat in front of him, his arms crossed, a gentle smile on his face.

"God," the Asset started babbling. "Nikolai. Nikolai. I thought you were dead. I killed you. Why are
you here. Nikolai. That's not you."

Not-Nikolai only continued to smile cryptically, and the Asset wanted to tear his hair out and scream.

"It wasn't my fault. I'm sorry. Why are you dead. Nikolai." Not-Nikolai's face began to melt, skin dripping off his jaw like molten wax. Underneath, he saw pale bloodless flesh. Horror. The Asset thrust himself forward, hands outstretched, trying to catch everything with his hands. Put it back into place, reverse what he'd done. It flowed through his fingers, soft and silken, and it was blood.

"No..."

The Asset sagged to the floor, panting. His whole body was prickling, and he rolled over onto his back. The ceiling was moving too, like a million ants of a colony was about to fall onto his head. The ceiling descended on him. He was suffocating. He was being eaten alive. He was melting through the floorboards.

"Nikolai. Help me. I'm sorry. Help me." The Asset's words slurred, blended, repeated, and he chanted this mantra like a prayer for six hours, writhing weakly on the floor as he fought off the room that was threatening to devour him. The six hours felt like six days. He was drowning in plaster and concrete. Six weeks. He was lying on the deck of a concrete ship on a black sea under a black sky. The riptide pulled him under and spat him out again, and he spluttered helplessly. Six years.

At the seventh hour, the Asset managed to sit up. His eyes were raw from crying, but he'd stopped shaking. The pain was still distant, his mind was still floating, but at least the visions were less crazy. Four drops were too many, on hindsight. He was never very good at estimating how much his body could take; that was HYDRA's job. That was what all their experiments were for. Should have listened to the man. He turned his head and Not-Nikolai was leaning in the doorway, quietly, the corner of his mouth quirked in the way it usually did when he was breaking protocol with the Asset.

"I know. I'm trying. To help myself." The Asset mumbled, stood up, paced listlessly for awhile. The glass bottle thunked reassuringly against his metal arm in his left jacket pocket. One drop next time, maybe two at most.

It was already late afternoon. Time to catch a plane to Brussels.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to x_Nichtz_x for correcting the German bits of this chapter.

Die Winter Kakerlake krabbelt zurück zu ihrem Loch. : The Winter Cockroach crawls back to its hole.
Bitte: Please.
Once they're back in their hotel room, Steve practically snatches the bag from Natasha, and the next moment, he's spreading the papers out on the floor and poring over it like a drowning man.

Sam settles quietly onto the armchair by the window after grabbing a chilled soda from the minibar to hold to his head. He knows better than to stop Steve, and watches with one eye open and one eyebrow raised. Natasha doesn't hold it against Steve for ripping the bag from her either; just melts into the bathroom, leaving Steve to his own devices.

Most of it is in German, and it's clear that none of it was filed in any kind of order. Steve empties the tattered folders and feverishly rifles through the sheets, searching for something he can understand. He doesn't realise that his hands are shaking slightly, he's too juiced with adrenaline. Their first lead on anything for so long, there must be something -

A short stack of notes, stapled neatly at the side, emerges. The print is small and faded.

PROCEDURE / CR: DR L.
LOG / 181244

REPORT

*SEVERE HYPO C TEMP 82 DEG
BASILAR SKULL FX CS EXTENSIVE N/V
SIGNS OF R. AMNESIA
*SEVERE TRAUMA AMP SHORT AE
*PARTIAL SCI C6 CS BREATHELESSNESS
2D FRSTB PRXM PHAL

*R/C IMMEDIATE TRM

Steve stares at the words, reads them again. This had to be Bucky's medical report after they'd found him in the snow. Hypothermia. "Sam," he calls. "I need you to help me - can you understand all these medical terms?"

"Bring 'em over," the guy mumbles from across the room. He takes the sheaf from Steve's hands like he really doesn't want to see what's written on it. "Hm."

"Well?" Steve shifts his weight nervously, impatiently. He feels impotent, and his arms hang uselessly at his sides. His empty hands open and close uselessly in desperation.

"Hypothermia, core temp -"

"Yeah, I got that -"

"Steve. Gimme a second, man."

Steve steps back reflexively, and something in his gut twists in shame. "God. I'm sorry. You're not even feeling well -"

"It's no big deal. Just lemme - here, the 'FX' here probably means fracture." Sam fumbles with the paper, wetting it slightly with his condensation-slick fingers. "'R. AMNESIA' - Retrograde amnesia. Means you lost some memory of what happened before the accident, or whatever."
It hits him like a truck. He really doesn't remember. He never did. "How much memory?" he asks anyway.

Sam pauses and seems to choose his words carefully. "It's different for every case."

"Is it... curable? I mean, you - does. Does it come back," Steve chokes out. Sam can't manage to meet his eyes, and he focuses on the paper in his hands and stays silent.

A full minute passes. "I don't know what 'SHORT AE' means," Sam continues carefully.

"Above elbow." Natasha has emerged from her shower, looking calmer. Padding quietly to the mess on the floor, she settles down and curls her legs under herself like a cat.

"His arm," Steve concludes numbly. Shrugging and making a small defeated a noise, Sam tosses the report to Natasha.

She snatches it out of the air and scans it quickly, her face unreadable. "Hypothermia, fractured skull, nausea, amnesia, traumatic amputation, spinal cord injury, frostbite." She looks at Steve after she's done, her gaze searching.

"I'm okay," Steve says automatically, and he crosses over to where Nat is and sinks back down onto the carpet. He feels like he's swallowed a packet of razorblades. He can see it all now, in his mind's eye - Bucky lying broken and breathless in the snow, waiting for a slow and painful death. Bucky lying there feeling lost and afraid. God, did you even remember how you'd got there?

The Bucky in his head stays silent, and Steve wipes at his face absently. He doesn't know what to do with his hands. Doesn't want to show how he feels on his face. The room is quiet, so quiet, and the weight of Sam and Natasha's sympathetic gazes are almost too much to bear. "I'm okay," he repeats to himself, voice cracking a little. "What does the rest of it say?"

Natasha purses her lips, like she thinks it's a bad idea, but she flips the page anyway. A small line appears in between her eyebrows. Thumbing her way through the thin booklet, she lets the minutes stretch out. Steve fidgets and watches her expression, which doesn't change. Finally, she sets the papers down and looks up.

"Steve," she says quietly. Her eyes are soft. "You don't need to know this."

Something curdles in his chest, cold and hard. His hands squirm in his lap. "I really do. I... I need to know, Nat. He was... is. My best friend."

"It's all in the past now. We've seen him. He's... fine." Her face is insistent, still sympathetic, and Steve feels his face burn. He doesn't need her pity.

"Tell me," he bites out, a little sharply.

Natasha considers him coolly, then opens the document again in her lap, delicate, as if she's handling an armed explosive. "The skull fracture healed well." She's obviously trying to

"Romanoff. Lay it on me."

"He lost three toes," she snaps, as if to prove a point.

The frostbite. He says nothing. I will not baulk. Jerks his head, *keep going.*

"They amputated what was left of the arm. Operated on his spine, too." She's obviously trying to
leave out the grisly details, her eyes jumping around the page to piece together generalised information. "Fixed the arm on. Couldn't get it to work. Too heavy."

Sam snorts softly from his corner.

"This part - C5-8, T1-5, L3-5. I think they somehow attached it to parts of his spine." Her voice is bitter now, and distant. "Not such a great idea. Multiple prolapsed discs. Sciatica. Degenerative disc leading to spinal stenosis - "

"I can't. Steve, I can't." Sam stands abruptly and stumbles into the bathroom. Steve barely registers his movement; his vision is white. He's sucking his breaths like his asthma is back. Someone is punching him in the gut, over and over. Bucky, I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry. You should have died.

In his mind, silence.


Natasha's head is tilted slightly to the side as she continues to translate the report mechanically, pointedly not looking at Steve as he sits there letting the information pummel him like physical blows. He imagines Bucky wasting away on a table, covered in straps and tubes and stitches from all the times they opened and closed his body. Maybe his skin was taut around his bones, like how he'd looked after Austria. Maybe he was even skinnier. Maybe his feet dangled off the edge, three toes lighter. Maybe his lips were blue. Maybe he screamed in his long drugged sleep.

He wants to imagine it's him on the table instead.


Steve's insides churn, but he's an expert at keeping his food down after all these years. "I know," he says, surprising himself when he finds that his voice is steady, then adds belatedly, "I should have looked for him."

Natasha raises an eyebrow at him, like she wants to say Don't you start this now, Rogers. She's probably too done with his shit to even say it out loud. Steve gets it.

"Sorry." He rubs at his face again. There's a dull throbbing in his head - sometimes he gets bad headaches from unconsciously clenching his jaw way too hard for too long. There's a click, and Sam emerges from the bathroom cautiously, then settles down next to Steve, cross-legged, and puts a hand on his shoulder wordlessly. The warmth of it is welcome, but there's a sudden tugging in his gut that unsettles Steve. His brain rewinds and replays Natasha's monologue double-time. He snaps his head up to look at Nat.

"Temporary cellular repair?" he demands.

"Not everyone got the real deal serum from Erskine like you did," Natasha rolls her eyes. "I guess Zola couldn't get the healing factor bit to stick when he made his knockoffs."

"So he needs to keep taking whatever they cooked up? The - Serum 32B-SV? All the time?" The sinking feeling is back. A thick band squeezes his chest.
Something clicks in her expression, and Natasha leafs through the papers again hurriedly. "Recommended dosage 25cc fortnightly," she recites. "Subject operational maximum 3 weeks per dose." Her grip slackens and her hands fall to her sides.

"And how long has it been since Washington." Steve's voice is flat now. He already knows the answer. They all do.

"Three weeks tomorrow," Sam breathes woodenly.
Sam Wilson is having a really bad time in Minsk.

First, someone fucks with his wingsuit, which is so not cool. Second, pounding head injury. Yay. Third, they find fuck-all at that stupid old HYDRA base anyway, just some journals that fourth, have caused Steve to have some sort of major mental breakdown.

"Three weeks tomorrow," he'd said helpfully, and his words felt like the final nail in the coffin of Captain America's soul. That was yesterday. Three weeks ago today, Steve took a dive into the Potomac with three bullet wounds and miraculously crawled his way out or something. Steve swears up and down that Bucky had pulled him out, which means they'll have to assume that it's been three weeks since the Winter Soldier's defected. How the hell is he going to survive without HYDRA's Jesus juice?

Steve hasn't breathed a word since their terrible revelation yesterday, just mechanically packed the papers away out of sight and retreated to the bathroom. Natasha had stonily announced that she had work to do, and disappeared into her own room across the hall, leaving Sam to wonder what the hell he was supposed to do next. He'd turned on the news and watched it for the rest of the day, the volume turned low, as Steve somehow decided to turn in at 5pm. On the contrary, Sam felt restless and still a little bit sick from what Natasha had read out on those fucked-up reports, and couldn't calm down to sleep until he popped a few pills for his throbbing head.

Sam had woken slowly, shielding his eyes against the window and rolling over with a groan, only to discover Steve still in his bed. The luminous glow of the bedside clock showed that it was almost 10am. He'd risen, made breakfast for both of them with some groceries they'd stocked up on when they first checked in. Steve didn't respond to anything he did, but Sam talked his ear off anyway. Sam finds himself missing his chirpy morning routine, though he wouldn't admit that.

The guy's lying on his back like a corpse, eyes open and mouth slightly parted. All the fight has gone out of him. Sam's willing to bet he's been like this all night. He wonders if Steve managed to sleep at all, actually.

It's noon. Sam's sitting at his chair by the window again, twiddling his thumbs absently and trying to think of something funny to say. There's a really old rap song he can't get out of his head, one that his partner Riley used to chant under his breath when they were in really tight situations. Funny he should remember it now.

"You know, I'll have you know my sandwiches aren't that bad. But now that it's all cold, you're gonna think my food sucks. It really doesn't suck," Sam intones. He might as well be talking to a wall. He's been talking to the wall all morning.

There's a single knock on the door and he crosses the room to open it.

"How is he?" Natasha barges in, all antsy energy.

"Same as yesterday. Worse. I dunno, it's hard to tell." Sam can't keep the bitterness from his voice.

"I've been trying to work through the rest of the information with Stark overnight. I think we've found another potential base, definitely bigger this time. It's in a forest near Nuremberg."

"Forgive me for not cheering in excitement."

Natasha tilts her head apologetically. "No leads on the shooter."
"Figures." Finding the shooter won't fix his suit, sadly, so this bit of information doesn't exactly contribute to Sam's sour mood. "I guess I'll have to beg a favour from Stark for some repairs. Fat lotta help I'll be if I'm not in the air."

"You should call him ASAP. I'll book the flight for tomorrow morning."

Sam splutters in an almost-laugh because really, that's pretty funny. Even though nothing is funny at all right now. "Oh, you wanna go now? You gonna strap him to your back? Sit him in a stroller?"

Natasha ignores him and strides over to the bed, arms crossed, a frown on her face. She starts speaking to Steve softly in a clipped tone, and Sam turns away. Good luck with that, sister.

He pulls out his phone and calls Stark. It rings way too long before he picks up.

"Make it quick, Wingboy, I have a Clan War to win in about seven minutes."

"Good afternoon to you too."

"Look, I already know what happened - I've just spent hours with Romanoff going over the SHIELD data - at least gimme a break. I had to reschedule my Pilates."

"You don't do Pilates."


"Stark." Sam exhales out through his nose and counts backwards from ten. "Can you be serious for like, ten seconds? Things are kind of going to shit here. Steve's practically catatonic - he just lies in bed and does nothing, man. Hasn't said a word, hasn't eaten, and you know how much food he needs a day. I'd call it FUBAR - "

"I'd call it a Tuesday. Have you tried the shock technique? Try telling him about the Berlin Wall. Oh, no, wait, tell him about Japanese tentacle - "

"Stark. I'm calling to ask a favour," Sam cuts in, trying not to pinch the bridge of his nose and already half-regretting the call in the first place. This guy is a brain aneurysm personified. "Nat told you about the sniper. I'm grounded until someone can repair my suit."

"Here I thought you were asking me for some therapy advice. Box it up and FedEx it to me. I'll mail you the invoice. Don't worry, I accept installment plans."

"Inv - Stark. Quit playin' with me," Sam growls. "We rarely have enough backup here, and you want Captain America running around knocking on HYDRA's doors while I wait in the car?! You have enough money to wipe your ass with it as it is - "

"Wow, take a chill pill, Big Bird. JARVIS, why doesn't anybody get my jokes?" A murmur in the background, and Stark huffs over the line at his AI's response. "All you had to do was say please."

"Here I thought you were asking me for some therapy advice. Box it up and FedEx it to me. I'll mail you the invoice. Don't worry, I accept installment plans."

"Yeah, well, this is me saying please. Come on, Stark, I'm begging you."

"Ah, no, stop that, now I'm getting turned on. Hm. Just a heads-up. I probably won't be able to give it back until I'm done sorting out, like, my life. And solving world hunger."

"Can you do it or not?!" Sam bursts out, wringing his free hand.

"Fine, I'll bump it up the to-do list. After my snail slime facial, before - "
"Thanks, I'll text you." Sam hangs up the phone and takes a deep breath. The world is unfair. Nice
guys are poor, and assholes are rich. And he probably can't join Nat and Steve on their HYDRA
Easter hunt anytime soon.

He turns around and almost pees himself when he sees Steve sitting at the table taking savage bites
out of his sandwich. He picks his jaw off the floor and looks at Natasha with raised eyebrows, and
she shrugs. Her face gives nothing away. Sam draws closer to Steve, whose face is oddly blank as he
chews vigorously. "Steve?"

Steve swallows his food and wipes at his mouth. "I'm no use to him dead." His voice is flat but
resolute. Minutes ago, he was practically on a different planet; now, he seems to be back. Most of
him, anyway. His mouth is grim but his eyes clear. "We have to try to track it down. The serum.
Bucky. Both. If they're familiar with how he works... they'll be waiting for him to show. And that's
what we have to do too."

What the hell did you say to him?! He wants to ask Natasha. Beside him, Natasha's mouth quirks to
the side. Tough love, she mouths at Sam. Oh, so he's spent the whole morning monologuing his
throat raw trying to cheer the guy up, and all he really needed to do was insult Captain America to
fix it. The world is unfair.

"Eat up, Cap," Natasha orders Steve sternly. "I'll see that we're ready to leave." She stalks out of the
room.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Steve stares at Sam, his hands nervously scrunching up the knees of
his pants.

"Good to have you back, Cap," Sam says lightly.

"Sam. I'm sorry if I scared you - " Steve begins hoarsely, but Sam shakes his head.

"I know, I know. Scared the shit outta me, but hey, no need to apologise. I get it." As far as Sam can
tell, Steve Rogers is okay again. Steve Rogers, forever socially awkward and tripping over his
words, bending over backwards to apologise for things that he doesn't need to.

Steve lowers his gaze. "It's just that," he mutters lowly, almost imperceptibly. "I keep imagining him,
what they did to him... and him, lyin' in a ditch somewhere. Alone. Dying. Right now." His eyes say
it all: How the hell are we going to find him?

"Well, don't imagine it then." Sam shrugs. "Let's think about our best case scenario instead. He's
smart enough to know where to go to get his fix, right? Your plan's solid, you can check out the
base, find the cure for him. Maybe even find him, because God knows we've saved up enough
karma for that. And you keep telling me how strong your boy is, he can - "

"He is." Steve swallows. "He's the strongest. If there's anyone who can find a way, it's him."

"Then why worry? Come on. You have, like, three meals to catch up on, and I'm not making
anything else for your lazy ass. I got a package to deliver."
There were many things that the Asset did not remember.

His final mission taught him that. Rogers, Steven G., priority level 6, had told him:

"Your name is James Buchanan Barnes."

The Asset did not want to believe him. He was no stranger to this tactic; his targets sometimes attempted to thwart his mission. Also, that name was a mouthful. Not a name he would have chosen for himself.

"You've known me your entire life."

Then he split his knuckles against his target's face, over and over, filled with a strange blinding rage that was not mission-compliant, when Rogers blurted something that wormed under his skin like a hook.

"Finish it." Blood bubbled from his lips, and his eyes were almost swollen shut. "'Cause I'm with you till the end of the line."

Something jarred inside the Asset's brain then, and his thoughts were a whirl. He stared at the target before him, his arm frozen mid-punch. Someone had said that before, that exact same line. He remembered it from a dream, or maybe it was from a scene in a movie he had watched a few lifetimes ago. How could his target have had the same dream?

In that moment of hesitation, Rogers' eyes had widened slightly, and something inside the Asset broke. They are blue. His eyes are blue. Is this the end?

Before The Asset could make light of what his brain was trying to piece together, there was a loud crack like thunder, and Rogers fell away into the water.

---

The Asset did not remember anything he saw at the Smithsonian Museum, when he'd visited a few days after his failed mission. He walked slowly, reading and memorising every detail in the exhibit. Steve Rogers, Captain America. The Howling Commandos. James Buchanan Barnes, Bucky, best friend. It was surreal, seeing a young man who looked exactly like him, his face blown up on display panels, saluting in group shots, laughing with Captain America in the videos. Was that really him? The Asset could not confirm it.

He'd sat at the back of the small museum theatre, where they played the short film about the Howling Commandos on a loop. The video was about five minutes long. He stayed for an hour.

There was a short letter on display below a small panel about the death of James "Bucky" Barnes. It was rotting and yellow and unfinished, and had been discovered inside an old field pack that once belonged to him. The Asset stared long and hard at the handwriting, reaching out and tracing the letters with a finger. Some of the words were censored with black marker, probably when they'd found it many years later. The hand was unfamiliar: straight as an arrow, but slanting and scrawled like the writer didn't care about appearances. The Asset only ever wrote his reports in straight block
letters. Less room for confusion. He'd never tried to write in any other way, and found himself wondering if his words would turn out the same way if he tried to write normally, too.

Steve -

I don't even know why they're making me write this XXXXXXX thing.
If I'm dead, I'm dead.
Seeya in the next life? Look for me there.
What do people say in these XXXXXXX things, anyway. XXXXXXX XXXX. Jesus. This is total XXXX.

The rest of the page had a few abstract scribbles as if he'd used it to test out a pen.

---

The Asset did not remember, but in the beginning, he saw strange things in his sleep. People would smile at him. They saluted him as he walked by, tilting their cap. "Sergeant Barnes." A small scrawny boy would chuck pillows at his face. It was strange that he could dream of these things, things that never happened to him, like he was quietly taking up residence inside a stranger's body and seeing his life play out from his eyes.

He learnt that Sergeant Barnes's full name was Sergeant James Barnes, and he mostly spent his time smoking, laughing and following a man who sometimes looked like a Roman statue, and other times looked like a starving child. Sergeant Barnes kept making faces at his D-rations and pushing them into this man's pockets, even though the Asset knew that Sergeant Barnes was hungry and liked to feel the sugar melt on his tongue more than any cigarette he craved. The Asset didn't understand why Sergeant Barnes would do that.

In every scene of this mysterious skit for which the Asset was the only witness, the only lines were his name.

"Sergeant Barnes," a thickset man with a huge moustache said, elbowing him and pointing somewhere far away.

"Sergeant Barnes!" A voice above him as he lay in a cold trench, shuddering in the rain.

"Sergeant Barnes..." He turned just in time to see the boy's face explode like a melon, leaving just the lower jaw and its tongue resting inside, red and wet. It was still moving. Sergeant Barnes, it seemed to want to say.

"Sergeant Barnes." Someone at the table nudged him and he put his cards down triumphantly. Everyone at the table started laughing, but the sound coming out of their mouths was "Barnesbarnesbarnesbarnes" -

Dreams were not meant to make sense, the Asset knew this. He assumed it was symbolic, like how the mysterious man could look so different in each dream. He only wished that he could remember all the details when he woke up, but each time, all he could recall upon awakening were colours and blurry faces, laughter, and "Sergeant Barnes". He looked forward to sleeping so that he could see all this again each night, this strange show that would come to life like a film in a cinema. He imagined being a part of this movie. It would be such a different life.

He asked his handler about it one day, careful to make his voice neutral and unthreatening.
"Permission to speak."

"Granted."
"Who is Sergeant Barnes?"

His handler's eyes widened slightly in surprise, but never warmed. They became colder, harder. "Where did you hear that name?"

The Asset did not sense the danger in this situation. It was a simple question, he was curious. He needed to know. "I heard it in my sleep."

His handler looked at him long and hard, as if trying to figure out what to do next. "There is no such person."

If the Asset was confused, he did not show it. He said nothing, trying to understand what the handler knew and what the handler was trying not to tell him. He did not ask his handler again, but they were alerted to his dreams then. Not a smart move on his part. They did nothing about this revelation, but they were waiting.

He didn't know they were waiting for him until he talked in his sleep one night. "Sergeant Barnes," he'd muttered, tearing at the sheets with his metal arm. They woke him immediately and put him in THE CHAIR and made his head hurt so much that he screamed. All that, for dreaming about a person that he'd made up in his head. It wasn't even real.

The dreams faded but never truly went away, no matter how many times they put him in THE CHAIR or how long they made his head hurt. The dreams became snowy. Bad reception.

He was never permitted to sleep for more than two hours at a time. The dreams became black-and-white, silent films. He woke up remembering nothing.

---

The Asset remembered some things.

He didn't know the year, but it was after his mission in 1989. He must have been in the ice for longer than usual, because when he woke up, there were many new faces around him. It was always like this when he was in the ice for a longer period of time.

His new mission was simple: he had been loaned out to the KGB to train their recruits under something called the Red Room. It wasn't anything he'd been asked to do before.

His handler failed to mention that the recruits would be a bunch of scrawny girls, all bones and no muscle. Couldn't have been more than thirteen years old. He had taken one look at them and decided not to use his left arm at all.

At their first sparring session, he introduced himself. His handler had told him to be anyone, so he called himself Ivan. Simple name, easy to pronounce, easy to spell. There was nothing special in the way he said it, - I am Ivan, I am here to teach you - but the girls had lingered in the other corner of the room, whispering fearfully and eyeing him with wary looks. He tried again in Russian, and they tittered anxiously. Their voices floated over to him across the empty room. Зимний Солдат, they'd murmured. Winter Soldier.

Finally, the shortest of them all shouldered past, her face mutinous, spitting at her fellow recruits scornfully. "Это всего лишь металл. Трусихи. He is just a man."

Then she flew at him like a bullet, all red hair and gangly limbs, leaping into the air and twisting just so to hook a knee around his neck -
Ivan turned, snatched the limb in midair, and used the momentum of the girl's jump to send her crashing into the floor, pinning her one-armed by the back of her thigh. Too easy.

The girl thrashed silently like a snake, then a dull blow to his head caused him to loosen his grip a little. The girl had kicked her other leg backwards with all her strength and flexibility, catching him at the base of his skull. It surprised him more than it pained him, and he recovered quickly enough to put her down again easily, his left hand still hanging unused at his side. He found himself smiling slightly. It was mission-compliant.

"Good try. What is your name." He let her up and she sprang to her feet, scowling like he'd ruined her day.

"Natalia."

"Natalia. Use smaller movements. Less likely for opponent to anticipate. Next."

The others started to come forward, one by one, determined to prove themselves. They were all fairly well-trained, for a group of skinny little girls, Ivan decided. Most of them were faster and stronger than Natalia.

He remembered trying to teach them patience. A successful mission was all about patience. He'd given them each a loaded VSS Vintorez and put them in an old building in an abandoned industrial town, not far from the base. He held a piece of paper up to show them. "This is your target. It will be somewhere outside. It will appear at any time. Do not fail."

He folded the paper and placed it in his pocket, then left the building as the girls bickered over the best places to wait. He ducked behind a low half-wall and dozed off. Two hours later, he awoke and taped the paper to a nearby lamp post, then sat back down by the crumbling half-wall, watching, waiting. It was almost ten minutes later when the first shot rang out, and the rest followed soon after. He shook his head. He did not know how to teach them. They are children.

He went back to the building, and found the girls already lined up and waiting. They looked straight ahead, but he could smell their anxiety. They knew their failure. "Show me your rifles," he said. They presented the weapons to him meekly. "Hold them up. Flat. Both hands. Arms straight. Parallel to floor." They complied. His original plan was to make them hold it for the full two hours. They were shaking and crying by the twenty-minute mark, so he took the guns back.

"They are children," he blurted to his handler, later when they'd returned to the base and he'd sent the girls off for their meal. He did not want to fail his mission. "I cannot train them. Mission compromised."

"The mission stands," his handler snapped, jabbing his right arm harder than necessary with the needle. Ivan exhaled slowly as the tightness in his back eased. "Just train them. Write your daily reports. You will choose three when the training is complete."

"Permission to speak."

"Yes." A look of annoyance crossed his handler's face.

"Choose three. What for?"

The handler shrugged. "Advancement."

"And the rest? Where will they go?"
The Asset did not like the slow twist of his handler's mouth. "Where all failures go."

THE CHAIR, a voice inside his head screamed.

---

The Asset remembered choosing Natalia in the end. He couldn't remember who else he'd chosen, but Natalia was special, Natalia was a fighter. Three days before he picked her, he pulled her to the side after he'd dismissed them.

"Natashen'ka," he'd said softly. He'd reached out to touch her hair. It was so soft, so red. It made him feel sad. Not mission-compliant.

In their... months...? Years? Of training? The Asset no longer had a grasp of time, but he knew that by the end, she had changed. She was no longer the angry little girl, at least, not at him. She was not like the rest, blind and eager to please. She was the runt of the litter, always just a little too small and just a little too weak. He liked her more for it. He never treated her differently. He'd been harder on her, if anything, and she'd known it. She was grateful for it.

Her eyes fluttered closed slightly as he brushed her hair like one would a doll. "Natashen'ka," he whispered again. "You must not fail. You have to be strong."

"I am strong," she'd breathed. Her face was smooth, like marble. She spoke the truth. Yes, she was strong. Strong in ways that one could not see.

Ivan did not know why he chose Natalia. Among the rest, she was one of the weaker ones. Maybe that was why. Her the physical illusion of weakness. Enemies would underestimate her. When the Red Room handlers looked through his reports and raised their eyebrows at his final decision, he'd known what to say.

"She has never failed."

There was a long, tangible silence, then the officer nodded once and snapped the folder shut. "I thank you for your service..." his eyes wandered to the gleaming metal arm. "...Солдат."

---

The Asset did not remember anything from before the fall.

He did not remember that Sergeant Barnes had a knack for naming things and getting the names to stick. Before Steve Rogers showed up on European soil, Sergeant Barnes was only known to his comrades as such. He'd befriended a giant of a guy who refused to shave his ridiculous handlebar moustache and insisted on wearing a fucking bowler hat instead of the standard-issue cap. He got away with it because he was one of the most respected soldiers in their regiment, fearless and indomitable in a firefight. At least, that's what he insisted. Barnes is pretty sure he got away with it because unlike Basic, nobody on the front actually gave a fuck what they wore as long as they followed orders.

"You get away with it because you're fuckin' dumb, Dugan," Barnes quipped, rolling an unlit cigarette between his fingers. "Don't know why nobody knows that by now. Give it up for Dum Dum Dugan. Guy so dumb, you gotta say it twice."

Everyone in the tent had roared with laughter and slapped him on the back. Dugan's moustache twitched and he chuckled along. "This Dum Dum saved your ass last week, Barnes."
There's truth in what he said, and they both knew it. They'd almost been surrounded by enemy troops and had to make a hasty retreat, but Sergeant Barnes was all the way up front and half-deaf from the shelling, unaware of the reinforcements closing in on his flank and not even realising that his unit had withdrawn. He was alone in his little foxhole, helmet poking out a little, no less than fifty feet away. Shots pelted through the air like rain.

Desperate to get his attention, Dugan had dived back into the fight, and aimed a spray of bullets near Barnes' head to try to make him turn around. The shots thudded into the damp earth next to his face, but Barnes barely flinched from his position, eye still glued to the scope of his rifle as he picked off the advance carefully. He'd only whirled around, startled and dishevelled, when Dugan gave up yelling and lobbed over a grenade that missed Barne's hole by three feet. Somehow they got out of it alive, but not without Barnes bitching about how he was gonna be deaf for the rest of his life and yelling at Dugan for "tossin' a damn grenade on me, you fuckin' dumbass".

Barnes nodded his head somberly. "Thanks for that, Dum Dum," he said quietly. He lit his precious cigarette, and they traded puffs.

Dum Dum never thought of a decent enough nickname for Barnes in retaliation, and Barnes never told him he already had one, until Steve showed up and almost stole the title of Dum Dum from him when he singlehandedly stormed a POW camp to save them. To save Bucky, actually, they'd all discovered on the march back. Captain America had been looking to save his best friend, and it was just their luck that they happened to be imprisoned together with him.

"Bucky? Really? Sarge, where the hell did that come from?" Dum Dum laughed when they heard Captain America calling him that, and slammed a hand onto Bucky's shoulder. He'd almost buckled under its weight, still feeling exhausted and strangely buzzed from his ordeal in that isolated room, and resorted to just shrugging helplessly.

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The Asset did not remember, but Bucky was the bane of Captain America's existence, and not the least bit charmed by the National Hero. When others would fall over their feet just to fetch his shield, Bucky would roll his eyes and flip him off. "Get it yourself, Rogers. Fuckin' princess." Then he'd steal Steve's cigarette ration when he wasn't looking, because Captain America didn't smoke anyway.

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The Asset did not remember, but Bucky spent hours learning the dirtiest French words from Dernier, "just in case".

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The Asset did not remember, but Bucky shadowed Steve day and night, unless Howard Stark paid a visit to the team, because then it would be like old times again, and Bucky would pull at Steve's arm as if he were still a scrawny little kid who could be dragged around. He'd hang around Stark's equipment for hours, irritating the guy with eager questions and fiddling with everything he wasn't supposed to.

Steve would follow grudgingly because most of the time, Agent Carter would be there too. He'd try his best to make conversation with her as Bucky pestered Stark to custom-make him "the best God damn gun in the world" and constantly plead, "Come on, Howard, make it look all Captain America too, it'd be swell."
"Are you jealous of my shield?" Steve asked Bucky one day as they walked out the tent in the late evening.

Bucky snorted. "That piece of crap? Hell no. You can't shoot to save your life, pal. Someone's gotta." He looked hard at Steve. "Also, it'd be a pretty picture. Matchin' weapons. For the whole team, imagine, Dum Dum's damn hat with a painted star - "

Steve burst out laughing.

" - Morita, too, get him a nice big cape with the flag on it, so everyone'll finally stop askin' him where he's from - and Dernier, 'kay, he ain't American, but how about some fancy grenades or something, and then they'd look like fireworks when they went off. You remember the fireworks, Stevie?"

"God, Buck, you're insane." Tears streamed out of Steve's eyes.

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The Asset did not remember, but for the first few weeks, the Howling Commandos simply called themselves all kinds of names just to annoy Steve. First it was "The Captain's Girls", then it branched out into increasingly lewd ones, no thanks to Bucky's colourful vocabulary. It seemed to improve Colonel Phillips' mood, too: his mouth even twitched to the side once, when Bucky handed him a report where he'd referred to the team as "The Star-Spangled Cunts".

Phillips looked like he wanted to say something, then changed his mind and said instead, "Give me something that won't get me a dishonourable discharge. Now get outta my tent."

Nobody thought of a decent one until Bucky made it up one drunken night. Of course it'd be Bucky who named them, sweet-talking Bucky, foul-mouthed Bucky. Bucky, who always had something to say.

They were holed up in an empty stable that fateful night, after a full day of scouting that turned up nothing. It was filthy and smelt strongly of shit and stale hay, but it was warm and they'd found a bottle of booze in the corner, so they were happy enough to stay. It wasn't long till they realised why the bottle had been left there in the first place: it was vile.

Thock, thock, thock. Three combat knives sank into the stable door, where Bucky had carved up a makeshift dartboard: five rings of increasing size, the smallest about two inches in diameter. Two of them landed in the middle and one a couple inches off. Their entertainment for the night. Bucky grinned and poured out the shots for all of them.

"He's a bloody cheat, that's what," Falsworth slurred, after downing two long gulps of the very questionable liquid. Bucky drank his own shot gingerly, for the one he'd missed. It burned all the way down, and he felt strangely delighted.

Morita coughed and hacked, his eyes watering. "I swear. This has to be lighter fluid. Some kinda fuel. We're all gonna die before dawn."

"Si je bois plus, j'vais mourir," Dernier moaned, and the rest groaned in agreement.

Only Steve was quiet and he smiled serenely, eyes only slightly glazed, even though he'd drunk just as much as the rest of them.

"All right, all right, boys. Last round, eh? Not much left." There was about a little more than a third of the bottle remaining, and Bucky'd only had to drink three mouthfuls of it so far. Bucky glanced at
Steve slyly, whose eyes widened in belated alarm. Too late.

Bucky pulled out his revolver in a flourish. "If Cap misses the bullseye, he's downin' the rest of it," Bucky declared. Steve's nostrils flared in indignation, and Bucky sniggered at his betrayed expression, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

The group of them hooted in delight. "Haaaaa! Best start on it now, Cap, don't waste your time," Dum Dum crowed, shoving the bottle at him.

"Don't waste the bullet, neither," Jones piped up.

"Sarge, if he passes out from that shit, I can't slap a bandage on it," Morita warned weakly, but he leaned forward all the same in anticipation.

The comments only egged Steve on more, Bucky knew that. Bucky also knew Steve wouldn't back down. Bucky also knew - well, suspected - that Steve's tolerance was way more than any of them thought. Who knew what that new body could take. He eyed Steve carefully. He could definitely take it. "What's it gonna be, Rogers?" he taunted playfully, waving the gun a little.

Scowling, Steve snatched the gun sullenly. "And if I get the bullseye?"

"I'll leave that to you to decide."

The noise they were making was definitely enough to bring Hitler's army down on their doorstep. Steve's mouth curled. "Deal." He stood up and walked to the opposite side of the stable slowly, drawing out the moment. Bucky sucked in a breath and eyed Steve's form appraisingly. The rest were shouting words of either encouragement or distraction; it was difficult to tell.

Steve leveled his arm carefully.

"Turn your shoulders, Cap!"

"Aim a little left - no, my left - "

"Don't forget the safety."

"Give up, Captain, just close your eyes and follow your heart!"

The shot slammed through the door, leaving a small smoking hole in the wood. Bullseye. Steve turned around with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face, looking smug as hell. The room erupted into drunken cheers as Steve settled down beside Bucky and handed the gun back to him.

"Ohhh. Whaddaya know, Barnes. You just got hustled." Dugan blew out a low whistle.

Bucky shook his head fondly, putting the gun away carefully. "I ain't even mad, Steve, that was a good one."

"Punish him, Cap!" Jones egged. He was holding his sides like laughing was killing him.

"Teach him a lesson," Falsworth added delightedly. "For takin' the piss on your shooting." Bucky chose not to point out that they'd all been taking the piss.

"Where'd you learn to shoot, huh, Stevie?" Bucky pressed, unafraid. There was a lump in his chest that felt oddly like pride. The bet was nothing. Captain America sure as hell wouldn't make him do anything stupid.
"P - Agent Carter," Steve said shortly, his ears turning slightly pink. Then his grin widened and shit, Bucky was in trouble. Captain America wouldn't make him do anything stupid, but Steve fuckin' Rogers was gonna make him eat his words, he just knew it.

A second later, Steve was slapping the bottle into Bucky's unsuspecting hands, his eyes glittering with mischief. "Chug it."

Bucky spluttered in horror as the team went crazy, slapping their thighs and yelling bloody murder. "That was for if you missed."

"You gave me a free pass."

Bucky gaped at the guy who claimed to be his best friend. "Steven Grant Rogers, you're a fuckin' punk," Bucky growled, unscrewing the bottle. Immediately, the pungent fumes went straight up his nose and made his eyes water. "You're gonna be the fuckin' death of me." He paused, the bottle hovering near his lips. The cheers inside the stable rose into an almighty crescendo.

"Look at us," he suddenly said, shaking his head. Half despair, half amusement. "Bunch of us. They said we're the best soldiers, right, but we're really just the loudest, dumbest Godforsakin' team. Scare 'em all off. Fuck secrecy too, they can hear us all the way in China right now." His shoulders started shaking with laughter. The others hadn't stopped laughing since Steve asked Bucky to drink.

"Imagine it, maybe Hitler's spyin' on us right now - " Bucky had to stop talking, or he'd spill the stuff all over the place.

" - outside, with a fancy telescope and surrounded by his A-team - " Dugan supplied helpfully.

" - and we're just sittin' here pissin' ourselves - " Morita added, gasping.

" - an' he's all, Verdammte Scheiße! All this effort just to off a howlin' bunch of drunks - " Bucky continued, almost wheezing.

Even Steve had started to laugh, his head thrown back and hand clutching at his chest.

" - when all we had to do was wait for them to drink themselves to death all on their own!"

The laughter echoed pleasantly, warming the space around them. Bucky raised the bottle in a toast.

"To the Howling Commandos."

The Asset did not remember that night. Neither did Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to x_Nichtz_x and Kana_Go for the German and Russian bits respectively:

Это всего лишь металл. Трусихи. - It's only metal. Cowards.
Si je bois plus, j'vais mourir. - If I drink any more, I'll die.
Verdammte Scheiße! - Damn shit!
They're on borrowed time now, and they're feeling the pinch. Even Sam's a little subdued in the backseat of the car, but Steve isn't sure if it's because he's still trying to walk off the mean concussion to his head, or because their situation is looking increasingly grim with each passing minute.

Steve is an artist, and he has a great imagination. That's not helping him right now, not at all. Thankfully, the drive from the Airport Nürnberg to their destination is barely twenty minutes, so he only spends twenty minutes fidgeting in his seat and having daymares about what could have been Bucky's past. The drive feels longer than twenty minutes. Steve thinks about how many people in the world die in every passing minute. He'd asked JARVIS before, once, a long time ago when he was bumming around and couldn't sleep at night. 105.

He gazes blankly out of the window. The sun has set completely, and the sky is turning ink-black fast. Over two thousand people die in twenty minutes, he finds himself thinking. He wonders if Bucky is about to be part of that little statistic. Maybe he already is. Time is passing too slowly. As the minutes tick by, Steve mentally adds another hundred to the count. The car is moving too slowly. The daylight disappears completely. He has never been a patient man.

**Bucky's form swims into view. He's crouched behind his rifle, still as stone. Steve can't make out if he's breathing or not. It's almost midnight. It's August, 1943. The moon is a pale sliver in the sky.**

They're waiting for Bucky to clear out a watchtower at a HYDRA base on the borders of France. They huddle together behind him, trying not to make noise, wondering how the hell he's going to see anything at all when they can't even see more than six feet ahead of their own shoes. They're a little nervous. Three missions ago, they'd had to squat in a shallow, stinking ditch for almost an hour, waiting for Bucky to take his shot. Bucky may take pride in his waiting game, and the other Howlies swear by his legendary patience, but they always hate it when they have to experience it first-hand.

Steve can feel his muscles cramping up as the night gets chillier around them. The silence presses in, and the air becomes still. Crack. Some of them jerk in surprise. Then they hear Bucky's chuckle, low and darkly delighted.

"Did you get him?" Morita mutters sullenly. Bucky turns around and they know the answer.

"How in hell..." Steve hisses, and Bucky waves him off.

"Waited 'till the guy lit his next smoke." He wipes at his gun affectionately, and slings it over his back. In the darkness, his eyes are glittering in triumph. "Fortune favours the patient, Stevie."

They leave the car and Sam at Rückersdorf, a small town on the edge of Behringersdorfer Forest. Sam complains a little, but a lot less than Steve expected; after all, he's not exactly keen to be shot out of the air so soon after the last time. And it's not like he can get into the air this time. They'd waited around in Minsk anxiously until Tony's drone finally arrived to pick Sam's wingsuit up, then blazed to Germany without a second glance.

Natasha loads up on her weapons, then closes the trunk of the rental car. "Do I need to keep the AC running? Leave a bowl of water?"

"Screw you, Romanoff," Sam huffs from inside the car. His window's rolled down, and he's powering up his little Falcon toy. He calls it Redwing and talks to it like it's a real pet, which only bothers Steve a little. Tony'd been thoughtful enough to drop it off with them while picking up the
suit, so at least they'll have some kind of remote air support. With the car less than three miles away from the base, the range should hold.

Steve's all geared up and ready. He swings his shield onto his back and it slides into place silently. It's an automatic movement. His mind is on other things. He nods to Sam and sets off after Natasha, who starts at a punishing pace. They're only a minute in and the trees are getting thick around them, so they have no choice but to slow down, to keep from announcing their presence. The remaining distance suddenly seems a whole lot farther. The thick, humid air closes in around them, and Steve gets the familiar phantom pain in his chest, like his body is trying to get an asthma attack but somehow can't seem to remember how to do it.

"Wilson, come in," Natasha calls out, quietly.

"You're still a little far out... but we got a few hostiles on the perimeter, about a half-mile radius around our coordinates."

"Copy. How many?"

"Fifteen heat signatures."

Natasha turns to Steve. He draws up short. He's still thinking of asthma, trying to remember exactly when his last attack was. Where he was, what he'd been doing. If Bucky was there.

"What?" He asks defensively.

She flips her hair impatiently. "What's the plan, Rogers?" Oh. Right.

He considers their options. "Sam, can you get any visuals on the base?"

"Negative. The trees are really dense here. I can't get past the canopy."

On a normal day, he'd have a plan at the tip of his tongue, and would be calculating the success rate of it by now. Today is not a normal day. His mind is a blanket of panic.

"Steve," Natasha says forcefully, taking his shoulder and gripping hard. "Are you here?"

"No, STEVE WAIT - "

Steve's leg catches on something and he looks down. Doesn't see anything actually, but his foot is still moving forward fractionally, and he hears the soft click. His voice catches in his throat, but thank God his body moves faster than his brain, because he doesn't know what happened, but the next moment, he's flattened on the ground trying to make himself as small as possible under his shield and there's brick and plaster raining down on his head.

It's ten minutes later when the rubble is cleared enough for Steve to push his way out. Just as he crawls out, spitting dust and sucking in air, a wiry arm grabs at him and hauls him up, shakes him violently. Bucky's livid, his eyes wild and lips pale. His face loses its colour when he's angry.

For a long moment, his throat works furiously like he has a million things to say, but doesn't know how to start. "Rogers," he finally snarls, "you gotta be here, you understand me? You're here, or you're dead. Get your head on straight."

"Yes. I'm here or I'm dead." Steve inhales and clears his head. "Sorry."
Natasha looks a little concerned, but they know this isn’t the time. "We’re outnumbered," she says. "We’ll slip past them, go in, grab whatever we find."

Steve nods. "Your lead." He's never been great at infiltration, anyway. That's because your ma raised you to knock before entering, Bucky-in-his-head snickers.

Despite Sam's regular reports of "A hell lot of guards, guys, keep an eye out", they manage to slip by and don't come across anybody at all until they reach the base. It's nothing impressive: a low concrete block, two storeys high, piled with enough foliage that Steve can imagine walking straight into it. No windows. The only door is narrow and nondescript, flanked by two heavily-armed guards.

They take one each, and the guards go down silently. "Clear," Steve reports to Sam. "We're going in."

"Copy. If you aren't out in fifteen, I'm calling in the armada."

Steve considers pointing out that they have no armada, then says, "Affirmative." He throws a wary look at Natasha, getting a strange feeling of déjà vu, then eases the door open as quietly as he can, trying not to think of tripwires.

They end up in a short corridor with wooden doors on each side and a stairwell on the other side. They make quick work of clearing the first floor. When they've finally reached the stairwell, Natasha reports in. "First floor is clear. Sam, come in."

"Co - tasha. Looks li - - ing. Got - - " Sam's voice stutters over the comms line, and they can't make out what he's saying, but he doesn't sound alarmed, so that's fine.

Steve is starting to feel like this whole thing was a bad idea. "Why is it crawling with hostiles outside but there's nobody home?" He whispers to Nat. She looks unfazed, but her guard is up, too. She shrugs and they proceed to the next floor. It's the same as the first floor, only the last two doors are cast iron and refuse to budge. They seem to be locked from the inside.

"Search the rooms," Steve orders. "I'll work on opening these up." Natasha slinks down the corridor and he takes up his shield, positioning the edge at the hinge and pushing with all his strength. With a long creak and groan, the shield sinks in between the door and the concrete wall as the door warps a little. Steve pants a little and pushes harder, a little worried about the noise he's making. Suddenly, the shield lurches forward, and the door swings open with a bang. He immediately plants himself behind the shield, expecting a hailstorm of bullets in his face, but there's nothing.

His stomach lurches when he steps into the room and peers over his shield. Unlike the rest of the building, this room is in a complete mess. Three tables have been haphazardly shoved up against the wall, and the drawers look like they've been thoroughly ransacked. There's a chair in the corner that looks like a dentists', but crueler: heavy straps hang from the sides, short rows of steel spikes gleaming meanly on the undersides. There's a small table beside it where a surgical tray used to sit. He can still see the dust mark left behind. He looks at the chair again, his skin crawling. It's worn but well-maintained, hardly a speck of rust on it. Was it used recently?

Forcing himself to move on, he prowls through the room, trying to find anything of note.

"Anything here?"

Natasha's voice makes him jump right out of his skin. Jesus. "I don't know. Looks like someone's been here before us." Steve casts a despairing look around the room as she walks in, surveying the scene around her. Her gaze settles on the chair, and she looks at it long and hard. Steve opens each
drawer half-heartedly, rooting around randomly. Another bust. At least Sam is safe this time.

Steve gives up on the drawers. "I'll try the other door across the hall." Natasha makes a non-committal noise and starts to look through the rubbish Steve has flung aside.

The final door is surprisingly cold to the touch, and not just because it's metal. "Hey, Nat?" He calls out cautiously, eyeing the door a lot more carefully this time. "There's something here."

There's a muffled sound behind him, and Natasha's saying something like "I think I've found something, too", but Steve's not sure. He presses his whole palm against the ice-cold metal, pressing gently.

To his surprise, the door swings forward slowly and quietly with a soft sucking sound, like a fridge door. It is a sort of fridge door. Cold air rushes out as Steve steps in gingerly. The room is dimly lit by two panels of light all the way at the back. Most of the light is blocked by a short row of shelves. He moves closer instinctively, a moth to a flame, his eyes widening in realisation. Here are three shelves' worth of vials labelled 32B-SV. Oh, God. It's here, they've found it. Relief rushes to his head and makes him a little giddy.

A soft sighing sound behind him. "Nat, it's here - " he turns around, a grin splitting his already half-frozen face.

Natasha is not there, and the door is closed.

*You're here or you're dead, Stevie.*

He doesn't panic. The door opened easily enough just now. He strides back to it and realises that it's flush against the wall; there's no way of opening it from the inside. He pushes at it, but it doesn't give. He backs up and flings his shield at it, as hard as he can. It sinks into the door by about two inches, and he pulls it out to inspect the damage. Solid metal. How thick is the door? Steve thinks back to when it was open. At least five inches. He wonders if Natasha can hear him.

He picks up the shield and grips it tightly, bashing it firmly against the gouge in the metal. His breath fogs in front of his face. Again. The dull clang rings in his ears. Is it getting colder?

Again. Slowly, the metal gives, curling away like hard butter. His limbs ache strangely, and his movements turn sluggish. He doesn't remember falling to his knees, or dropping his shield. It's right beside you, pick it up. His arms don't move. His eyelids are stiff, they're stuck and he can't close them. His chest is immobile; he cannot draw breath. His tongue hardens and splits in his mouth when he tries to scream.
Getting onto an airplane to Europe was easier than expected, but then again, Nikolai was familiar with dealing with airport security. His arm was still firmly wrapped in a cast. When the machines began to scream as he walked through, he looked embarrassed as he was escorted to the side for a pat-down.

He made his voice small. "Apologise for the trouble. Sir." Gestured to the arm. "They put a lot of metal in it when it got banged up."

The security man nodded and waved his wand around a bit. More beeping noises. "You military, son?"

Nikolai nodded. Didn't speak.

"Where'd you serve?"

"Afghanistan. Two tours." The lie was easy. His voice caught in his throat as if by accident. As if he didn't want to talk about it. He didn't.

"All good. Take care of yourself." The man looked him up and down, then waved him through.

His bag and jacket was waiting for him with a lady wearing latex gloves. She was unearthing the contents of his jacket pockets: The sunglasses from Disneyland. Notebook. Three Snapple caps rattled out onto the counter. She lifted a small glass bottle. "What's in this?"

"My eyedrops. Medication. Sorry. Did I need to check it in."

"No, it's fine."

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Real Fact #243: If you put all the streets in New York City in a straight line, they would stretch to Japan.

Real Fact #56: 1/4 of the bones in your body are in your feet.

Real Fact #986: In Switzerland, it is illegal to own only one guinea pig because they are prone to loneliness.

---

The plane ride was uncomfortable, but it forced him to stay motionless for many hours, which was probably good for his back. What had started as a dull throb in Los Angeles had already extended to his fingertips.

He took two drops of his painkiller and watched *Gone with the Wind* on the inflight entertainment system. There was a strange moment where the man on the tiny screen said, "You should be kissed, and often, and by someone who knows how", and Nikolai felt a deep throb in his brain. It was a good line. He'd heard it somewhere before. In a dream. I should write it down, he thought.
When the movie ended, he switched the entertainment system to "Top 40s Radio" and closed his eyes.

---

He dreamt he was a soldier.

He was following orders. They had a days' march ahead of them. He could feel his scalp boiling under the steel of his helmet. The men around him were singing a song to the beat of their steps. Their dirt-streaked faces were familiar to him. He wanted very badly to light a cigarette, or maybe to have a sip of water. He wanted to drown in a tub of it.

"Sergeant Barnes," they belted out. Feet stomped the cracked earth, dry gravel. "Sergeant Baaaaarnes, Sergeant Baaaaarnes..."

The pace never let up, and they carried on for hours. Soon, the singing died down and they trudged on in silence. His skin was so hot, and his body was so cold. His head hurt, a terrible pain, and his vision was blurry. He would have to talk to Morita when they stopped to rest, see if there was anything in his kit to help.

"Sergeant Barnes!"

They came to a stop at the order. It was early evening. The sun had begun to set. Far in the distance, a faint curl of smoke and a smattering of houses. The men knew what it meant: reconnaissance mission that night. He turned to his unit, found that they were already waiting orders. "Sergeant Barnes," he rasped out. His throat ripped from the inside. "Sergeant Barnes, Sergeant Barnes." They were nodding and moving off in compliance.

Morita hung back and peered at him, placing a hand on his shoulder. He frowned slightly, said, "Sergeant Barnes, Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes..." The hand moved, the back of it touching his forehead.

"Sergeant Barnes," he snapped back, pushing the hand off.


He found himself nodding to his friend's words. He looked down and Morita's half-full canteen was in his hands. "Sergeant Barnes." He nodded again gratefully, then took a long drink. Swallowing hurt all the way down, and he spluttered out a precious mouthful, his eyes watering. The water got into his lungs. Too much water. He couldn't stop coughing for a long while, and soon his whole unit was manhandling him, pulling off his helmet and pack and boots, pushing him onto the hard ground and covering him with a soft stinking blanket. He followed blindly, hacking and wheezing and gasping for breath.

He didn't go on the reconnaissance mission that night.

---

Machelen was a base close to the Brussels Airport. As far as he could remember, he'd only been there twice, but at least he remembered it. Let fortune favour me, he thought. Let the serum be here.

It wasn't. Something had happened to the base, and it was not how he remembered it. It had been converted into a row of colourful houses. There was a playground nearby. The buildings had large windows with large white curtains billowing out. Not HYDRA.
The ache in his chest seemed to grow with his disappointment, and he sagged into the weight of his arm bitterly. The playground was deserted; it was noon. Children would be at school. Every other step he took sent a white-hot lick of fire across his back, but he walked to the playground and sat on the bench. He unscrewed the bottle and dissolved three drops on the back of his tongue, right at the back, but it was just as bitter as anywhere else.

As his mouth began to fill with cotton, his shoulders finally relaxed a little bit. He tilted his head back. The sun was the good kind of warm. The air was the good kind of crisp. He didn't need to be anywhere at all. Forget the list, forget Nuremberg and Pruszków and Minsk. Someone began to play "Top 40s Radio" in the background. He tilted his head from side to side with the beat. He wondered why it was called 40s music. It did not sound anything like music would have sounded like in the 1940s, though he didn't know why he thought that. In his ear, a little girl sang about her problems. The words of the song were very fast, not very melodic, a little bit high-pitched. He couldn't really figure it out, but he liked the beat anyway. It was catchy.

He didn't realise he'd closed his eyes until he heard screaming. His spine snapped rigid. He would have jumped up if he hadn't been in so much pain, but he relaxed instantly. It was the sound of children. It was late afternoon already, and they were starting to come to the playground. Back to your mission, you have wasted enough time. He felt his body creak to life reluctantly as he forced himself to get up and walk away. If he drove through the night, he could make it to Behringersdorfer Forst before dawn.

He arrived much later than that, after a harrowing drive. The effects of his drug were still strong, and he'd almost run the car off the road thrice trying to follow the wrong streak of tail-lights. Bad idea. At about 3am, he gave up and pulled over at the side of the road, then curled up uncomfortably against the door and drifted off.

---

He dreamt that his unit didn't return from their reconnaissance mission.

He had opened his eyes to the sound of nervous chatter. The sky was just beginning to lighten, and his unit should have been back hours ago. He pushed himself to his feet, irritated that nobody had woken him up, and infuriated that they were late. "Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes?" He demanded, but no sound escaped his lips. The other men stared at him with detached concern. He tried again, softer. "Sergeant Barnes. Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes." Their faces twisted and they shook their heads in response, some sadly and some nervously. "Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes," one of them remarked.

"No, that's not possible. When he found them -

He strode off and started croaking out orders to the waiting men, and they listened grudgingly. By nightfall, they were hustling under the cover of night to the encampment on the horizon.

It was poor judgement on his part, he realised much later, as they were getting trussed up and beaten down. They'd stumbled upon a formidable HYDRA force, some of them equipped with deadly weapons that fired otherworldly bullets that left bright blue streaks of light in their wake. They surrendered quickly after they saw the bullet reduce Private Kelly into a red cloud of pulp.

Still, he didn't really think much of it until he was shoved into a cage into the waiting arms of Dum Dum and Jones. By then, he was sweating and shaking, and vomiting thin streams of brown-tinged saliva. Morita started pushing everyone away from him, shouting, "SERGEANT! BARNES!"
Sergeant Barnes Sergeant Barnes!

He clutched at his chest as the pain increased. When his eyes found Morita's, he knew he was going to die.

---

Time passed in strange flashes sometimes, he knew that. He would look at something and suddenly the sun would be on the other side of the sky.

He finally reached the edge of the forest sometime after nightfall. The base was somewhere inside, but he wasn't sure where. He would have to park the car and walk. The thought of walking did not sit well with him. There was a very high chance that he would make it to the base, yes. There was a very low chance that he would have the strength to leave it.

He fumbled with his jacket, almost dropped the bottle. Two more drops. The pain-cloud in his head dissipated slightly. A happy-cloud formed over it.

Leaving the car outside a random building, he limped slowly towards the forest. Then stopped, and removed his sling. The cast was rock-hard. He braced himself, gritting his teeth, and wrenched his left arm straight.

The smell of asphalt filled his nose. He blinked and realised that he was lying horizontally on the ground, breathing hard and sweating. His shoulder felt like it was about to burst, but when he looked down, everything seemed fine. He picked the splinters of plaster and bandage off the metal arm, and rose to his feet slowly. Final lap, he told himself. Give it all. His head swam and pretty colours spotted his vision. A smile tugged at his lips, even though he didn't know why he was smiling. "Top 40s Radio" drifted through the air, its alien beats throbbing in his ears like blood. He hummed softly to himself as he put each leg in front of the other. It wasn't so difficult. He felt like he could float if he really wanted to.

His brain was floating again, and watercolours ran wild in his peripheral vision. A wall of trees swayed before him, looming closer, and he suddenly thought, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. He repeated those strange words and laughed. How odd and utterly delightful, that his brain would throw up a phrase like that. He wondered where he'd learnt it.

He needed to rest. He was almost at the forest, but he needed to rest. His face touched something cold and hard, a shock and a relief to his burning skin. Burning? He wasn't aware that he was having a fever. It was unimportant. He leaned into the metal more. Rest, just for a bit.

---

The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

- William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming

---

He dreamt he was in a cage, and then he was not.

Nobody came near him in the cage, not after he'd coughed and spat out his insides onto the floor. His
knees were skinned through his pants from spending hours retching and coughing on his knees. He couldn't get up, he didn't want to lie down. His men were watching him. They were concerned, but they were afraid. They didn't come near him. The closest whispered empty words of reassurance, their voices soft and desperate.

"Sergeant Barnes," they murmured, clasping their hands as if in prayer. "Sergeant Barnes."

He tried to listen, tried to take deeper breaths. Couldn't. Heaved again.

The blinding light of a lamp threw long shadows across the floor, and he raised a shaking hand to shield his eyes. The others shrank away from the light as it revealed the unearthly blue weapon, slung low on the guard's hip. He stayed where he was, he couldn't move even if he wanted to. The door clanged open and someone grabbed him by the armpits and hauled him across the threshold. The men behind him roared.

"SERGEANT BARNES! BARNES, SERGEANT BARNES!" They surged forward together, and were thrown back immediately by a rod that sizzled with electricity. They howled and fell away, then shot forward again, grabbing wildly.

The cage crashed shut and they threw themselves at the bars, momentarily forgetting about the puddle of waste he'd spewed on the floor. It squelched under their boots as they shook the cage in fury and vain. "SERGEANT BARNES!"

Their voices died away. They dragged him down several corridors and into a small, cold room. There was a table in the middle of it. He felt relieved as they laid him down and strapped him in. Finally, finally time to rest. Finally time to die. Words began to pour from his lips. "Sergeant Barnes, Sergeant Barnes," he chanted under his breath. There was a number too, he knew it in his heart, but in his dreams he knew only two words. "Sergeant Barnes." He sighed. The room dimmed and spun, so he closed his eyes.

Then his body was on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Side note: Since story's set in 2014, Bucky's listening to the popular songs of that year. Think Pharrell's "Happy" and Ariana Grande's "Problem".
When this is over, he's going for a long vacation. Somewhere with no trees, preferably. For someone who identifies with a damn bird, he sure has a problem with those. Or maybe he's just in a really, really bad mood.

He's usually not this grumpy, but the past few days have had him stretched really thin. Sam's definitely ready for this shitstorm to blow over. Anytime now, maybe.

He watches with trepidation as Steve and Nat's heat signatures disappear into the thick cloak of the building. No comms, no vision. Just faith. And that he has in spades. He focuses on the control screen, directing Redwing to patrol the area as discreetly as possible. He isn't all that worried; if they spot the little dude, it's no huge loss to him.

The perimeter of guards is puzzling. For a bunch of people who're guarding a place against entry, they're sure keeping their distance.

"Rogers, Romanoff, report."

Radio silence. Just another day at the office. He forces himself to relax and kicks back in the driver's seat, trying and failing to rest his knees comfortably against the wheel. The clock on the dashboard glows faintly; they've been inside for about four minutes now. Maybe he should've given them a smaller window. His starts to drum his fingers nervously.

There's a dim flash of light outside the opposite window, and he tears his gaze from the screen, squinting suspiciously, but he doesn't see anything. The nearest streetlight is at least seventy feet away, and there's nothing in the semi-darkness of the parking lot. Must have been the screen's reflection on the glass...?

A faint crackle sparks in his ear and he listens intently.

" - floor - er - in - "

"Nat?" Sam's hand flies to his ear by reflex. "Can't really hear you. It looks pretty quiet out here, it's like they're waiting for something to happen. They've got you surrounded. I hope you guys have an out."

More radio silence, and he shifts around nervously, looking at his screen again. The guards seem to be regrouping, slowly clustering together.

Another movement outside the car again, reflected in the side view mirror, and this time he's pretty damn sure it's not his vivid imagination. Real smart, Sam. Send your only backup to cover your friends, and leave your ass open for the taking. He shoves the tablet under the seat and pulls his handgun from his holster, his pulse a steady thrum that he feels on the tip of his tongue.

He doesn't know what the hell he's supposed to do. Open the opposite window? Get out of the car? Recline the seat? Open fire and pray?

There's a quiet thunk that reverberates from the passenger side's door. Oh, hell. What's the worst that can happen?
You'll die, he answers himself. Duh.

He gets out of the car anyway, as slowly and carefully as possible, but nothing cloaks the sound of his door opening. He cringes at the noise and presses himself against the vehicle, creeping around the back of the car to peer around the trunk.

No way. No fucking way. He doesn't know whether he should laugh or cry, but at least he doesn't drop his gun in shock. Or wet his pants. *Fuck me upside down.* It's Bucky fucking Barnes.

At least, he hopes it is, because he really doesn't want to think about how he could be standing two feet away from the Winter Soldier armed with nothing but a 9mm pistol. He might as well be naked.

Then again, Winter Soldier or not, the guy's leaning against the bumper of the car like his life depends on it. Even from this angle, Sam can see his face pressed flush to the metal, and both his arms hang limp and drape to the ground. His face is turned the other way, with his shaggy hair pulled back in a sort of tiny ponytail.

Sam keeps a reaaaal good distance. He semicircles over to face the guy proper, keeping a wide berth between them and the gun trained directly at his head. He's not taking any chances. After all, the last time he'd seen Barnes, the guy had tried to kill him. Kind of hard not to hold a grudge.

He edges closer and peers at Barnes' face, which looks smooth and almost innocent in his sleep. What the hell is he doing sleeping against my damn car?

He kind of wishes he had a long stick to prod the guy with. Wake up, you scary-ass dinosaur. Before I shit myself. Sam plants his feet and stays at least three arms-lengths away from the guy. "Barnes. Barnes, you with me?" No response. "Barnes!"

Barnes stirs slightly with a soft groan and he raises his head a little, and Sam's grip tightens on his gun.

"Tell me you're not here to kill me." His voice is pretty steady, considering. Impressive. Sam feels more naked than ever.

There's a long, awkward silence and Sam is considering maybe backing up even more before Barnes speaks. "What."

"Do you... know where you are?"

No response. Barnes' head falls against the car. Hell, did the guy just fall asleep again?

"Mach - nein, Nuremberg. Verzeihung. Alles gut. Keine Sorge." He starts pushing weakly at the car with his right arm, shaking uncontrollably.

"What - whoa, easy," Sam says, stepping forward automatically, then stopping himself forcibly. He keeps the gun up. "Sprechen English, man."

Barnes either ignores him or doesn't hear him. He's still pawing slowly at the side of the car, he's breathing funny - is he laughing? He's laughing. Sam is so bewildered right now. This is getting so, so FUBAR. "Dude, what is up with you?"

His raised voice finally catches Barnes' attention and he turns slowly to really look at Sam, then looks away quickly enough. "I'm sorry," he mutters. "I have to be somewhere. Soon." He finally manages to claw his way up. He doesn't seem to notice that Sam's still pointing a gun at him, and doesn't seem to notice when his metal arm gouges holes in the car like it's made out of swiss cheese.
Sam suddenly imagines that happening to his face and steps farther back.

"Barnes," he says slowly and clearly, "do you know who I am?"

He takes a good long look at Sam, his eyes drifting about in confusion. He's frowning a little bit. "I'm supposed to know you." Was that a statement? Was that a question?

"Yeah, man. You yanked me outta the sky, like, about a month ago? Thanks for that."

Barnes actually looks wounded. "I... remember. I'm sorry. It wasn't. I don't do that anymore."

"That's real good to hear, man." Sam lets out a breath he didn't know he's been holding. "We've been looking for you, you know."

"Who."

"Me. Steve. Steve Rogers. Your best friend." His voice turns sharp and accusing, but he doesn't care. "Hell, Barnes, he's been tearing the world apart looking for you. Tearing himself apart looking for you."

"I'm sorry," Barnes says again immediately. He's breathing heavily and grips the car for support. "I have to go - "

"We know all about where you need to go," Sam drawls. "You need to find your serum. We know. That's why we're here - Steve and Nat, they're looking for it too - "

"Need it," Barnes chokes out. "Please, you don't know. Bitte, ich werde alles machen, hilf mir, Nikolai..." He's looking over Sam's shoulder and babbling in German, and something clicks. Realisation hits Sam like an ALS ice bucket challenge. No fucking way. He's high. He's high as a kite, he's baked as a cake -

"What the hell are you on?" Sam demands, and before he knows it he's holstering his gun and all over the guy, who almost slumps over onto the ground again. He manhandles Barnes into the light of the streetlamp and looks at him, really looks now: pupils blown, sweat glistening at his temples, lips cracked. He smiles softly and flops into Sam's grasp, pliant and docile and murmuring, "... makethisworkfor me... 'mnot a puppetidun work agnstyourstrings..."

"You're shitting me." Frenetic, Sam rips at Barnes' jacket and fishes around in his pockets. His fist closes around a small glass bottle, and he unscrews it quickly and gives it a sniff. "Is this... what?" No smell. "Is this acid? Are you on acid?!" His self control slips a little, and he takes Barnes by the shoulders and gives him a violent shake. He definitely wants to laugh and cry now. At the same time. He's stuck out in the cold in Bumfucksville, Germany, with a schizophrenic ex-assassin who is definitely tripping balls. He really, really needs backup, like, yesterday.

"Rogers, Nat, come in. Now is a really good time to come in." He gets no response, of course, and throws open the passenger-side door, shoving Barnes into the seat unceremoniously. He is not panicking, he's not panicking, he just needs to stop and think. What. The fuck. Is going on. He stumbles back into the driver's side and wrenches the door shut, breathing heavily and trying to process the situation. The clock shows that it's been almost twenty minutes since his last contact with his team. Fuck, fuck.

Barnes is mumbling apologies again, thrashing a little. "Stop. Sorry. Okay. I need... give me a moment. Stop. Enough, sorry. Can’t... cannot quit."

Sam ignores him and digs up the tablet from under the seat.
"Come on, baby, show me some good news," he grumbles, then freezes. That can't be right.

The screen is blank. There's not a soul, nobody outside the compound anymore, not that Redwing can detect. Which means, which means - they've all gone back into the building. Oh, shit. He resets Redwing's mission parameters and reroutes the drone back to the car. He's gonna need all the firepower he has, even if it's just a really cute robot bird and a really dysfunctional robot man. Steve needs him. He can do this.

"Barnes, this is really, really important and I need you to give me a straight answer," Sam rounds on the guy, who's swaying in his seat and blinking lazily, eyes fixed on something on the dashboard and mouth slightly parted.

"Sergeant Barnes, you are on a mission," he grits out, and it sort of works. Barnes sort of snaps out of it enough to make eye contact with him.

"Mission. Yes."

Is he feeling guilty for manipulating the poor brainwashed guy? Not in the slightest. If this doesn't work... well. It'd better work.

"Cover me. We need to get to the HYDRA base. ASAP." He throws the glove compartment open and shoves another pistol into Barnes' hands. "I hope you're lucid enough to use that. Because I'm sure as hell crazy enough to trust you. God help me," Sam rambles, then says again, for good measure, "God help me."

He gets out of the car and miraculously, Barnes follows suit like a zombie. He hears a few clicks and thinks, Good. He's able to load his own gun.

And then he thinks, That sound didn't come from Barnes.

Armed with rifles, six men emerge from the shadows. Sam's caught with his pants down, his right arm pointing his gun uselessly to the floor and his mouth gaping stupidly. Think. Think fast. "Hey, fellas. Thank God you're here, I've got the worst car trouble - "

Over his head, he hears a series of tiny pops and two of the guys drop instantly. He dives back into the car as the rest open fire, throwing his arms around his head protectively as the bullets slam through glass and metal. He grabs for the tablet blindly and takes control of Redwing, just in time because it had just identified Barnes as a hostile and was this close to dispatching him.

It's over almost as soon as it began. Within twenty seconds, the attackers are draped around the car: a ring of corpses. Sam doesn't let his mind dwell on it. He sits up in his seat gingerly, surveying the damage. Barnes is crouching behind the passenger door like it's a shield, pointing his gun through the broken window. He's panting a little and still gripping the door tightly for support, his body wound like a spring. In that moment, he looks almost normal again. Lethal killer, in the zone. Then he exhales and shudders, and turns with a grimace to address Sam. "We need to go. I. I'm running out of time."

Yes. Yes. "Okay. But first... I think I got something you'll appreciate." Sam strides to the trunk and springs it open, pulling out a huge heavy box that he likes to call Aidzilla. The behemoth of first-aid kits, stocked by Captain America himself. He finds what he needs quickly enough, and he grabs a couple of them, grinning over the open trunk at Barnes. "Epinephrine," he calls over. "Adrenaline, my man. Way more useful than what you've been using."

He smacks away Barnes' outstretched hand and shoves them into the inner pocket of his jacket.
"Later. When you really need it." Then he locks up the battered car and guides Redwing to scout ahead. "Come on, then. We got a mission to finish."

"What is the mission," Barnes groans softly, falling into step beside Sam with great effort.

"Rescue," Sam replies brusquely. They push into the dark forest.

Chapter End Notes

According to Google translate -
Verzeihung. Alles gut. Keine Sorge. - Pardon. All good. Don't worry.
Bitte, ich werde alles machen, hilf mir - Please, I'll do anything, help me

Side note: The song Bucky's singing to is Sam Smith's "Money on my Mind". And yes, if you must know, Sam recognises it.
The Asset

The Asset remembers being mildly surprised when his handler told him that he was to continue training the three girls he had chosen for six more months. He had been expecting to go back into the ice, and was already dreading it in the final days before submitting his final reports. It was unexpected.

He drew up a training plan for the Red Room handlers and his own to approve, and presented it to them. The Red Room officer surveyed the list appraisingly, running a long finger down the paper. He raised an eyebrow. "Reconnaissance mission?"

"Fieldwork is necessary to reinforce training," the Asset said immediately. He could feel his palms turn slightly sweaty, but he stared straight ahead, his hands clasped behind his back. Did not make eye contact with his handler, who bristled slightly next to him.

"Understood. Thank you, Asset. Lydecker." The officer nodded to his handler, then handed the report back to the Asset. "I will leave you to it." He left the room.

His handler waited until the sound of his footsteps trailed away before snatching the file from the Asset.

"Recon mission?" He flung the file open and glared down its contents. "My, Asset. How very... proactive of you." The handler's voice was soft and dangerous. Be careful.

"It is not a real - "

"Who assigned the mission?"

"The mission - "

"Who assigned the mission?"

"I did."

"Asset," the handler began to grin and shake his head, clicking his tongue softly as if chiding a misbehaving child. He closed the folder and laid it gently on the table. His hands began to reach under his jacket, to his hip. "Asset, Asset. You forget yourself."

The Asset's knees buckled and he sank to the floor wordlessly, bringing his hands to the front. He bowed his head. Make it quick.

"Oh, not so fast, Asset." The handler pulled his head back by his hair, and the Asset did not resist. "To whom do you belong?"

"HYDRA."

"Who assigns the missions?"
"...HYDRA."

"Yes," the handler breathed, "HYDRA. Last I recalled, Asset, it is us who gives the missions. It seems you have forgotten your training. Three months away from us, in charge of others, what a vacation you must be having."

Before he could reply, there was a flash of blue and a crackle-hiss of current. The baton hit him right in the solar plexus, making his back arch involuntarily. He screamed through clenched teeth as his vision darkened, brightened, darkened again. It stopped, sooner than he expected, and the Asset slumped over, tears of exertion streaming down his cheeks. He braced himself for more, but what he heard instead was,

"Little girl. Get out."

The Asset glanced up, vision swimming, peering through his messy hair just in time to see a lithe figure dart away. She left a trail of red in her wake. He tore his eyes away. His handler bore down on him again and he flinched away instinctively, but was careful not to raise his hand in defence.

The baton came again, this time just under his rib. His lungs froze and he trembled and jerked, eyes skittering in his head. More water poured down his face. His nostrils flared at the acrid smell of something burning. He felt, distantly and through the haze of arresting pain, something warm trickle down his left thigh.

It was some moments before he realised that the punishment had stopped. The familiar stench of burning hair and ammonia permeated the air. The Asset breathed heavily, watching with a strange detachment a string of spit drooping to the floor from his mouth.

"Remember who you belong to, Asset. Or you will be sorry you forgot." His handler straightened, and tucked the baton back into the folds of his uniform. His face was a mask of disdain and disgust. "Clean yourself up. You will see me again in a fortnight. Remember your mission."

---

Nikolai has not been very accurate in telling time recently, he knows this. He wouldn't know how long they have threshed through the forest if not for the noisy man in front of him who won't stop reminding him.

"Damn it, Barnes," the man says, grabbing him by the shoulders and hauling him to his feet yet again. "Stop quitting on me. We only have two miles to go and I'd like to be there before daybreak."

He isn't doing it on purpose. His legs are burning and tingling and he can't feel his toes. Nikolai says nothing and bows his head, resuming his painful shuffle. Two miles is a very short distance. He doesn't think he can go that far.

He does.

Nikolai sinks to the ground immediately when the man finally, finally, says, "We're here. And it's 4am. Oh, God," then, "No, come on, man!"

"Can't," Nikolai pants. He's grinding his teeth so hard his cheeks ache. "Don't. Can't." He thinks of the gun that the man had given him that he'd tucked into his waistband. If he could reach it. If he could take it into his hand and raise his arm and turn it on himself. The idea does not scare him. He'd do it if he could manage it. The man would have to do it for him. The man is talking to himself, tapping on the bright screen. The man never stops talking.
Nikolai raises his voice. "Your gun. Please." He can't reach out, so he tries to knock his foot against the man's legs to get his attention. "Please. Gun." Exhale. Inhale. "End it."

He opens his eyes and the man's face is much closer, and his mouth is moving rapidly. There's a hand on his forehead, another stinging his face. Nikolai strains to understand him. He's so tired. He thinks of the gun again. "...rn you, when this happens, you've gotta act fast. There should be five more hostiles in that building..."

What is he saying? Is this a mission briefing? He is not mission-ready. He can feel his gun pressing hard against his aching spine. He closes his eyes again, rests his head on the bumpy surface behind him. Why is it bumpy? You are in a forest.

---

He remembers the forest.

He'd called it a reconnaissance mission, and it was approved, but it wasn't actually a mission at all. He didn't really know what to call it, and it didn't involve anything very relevant to their training. Still, the three girls seemed happy enough to follow.

He remembers the three girls, but he forgot their names. Sometimes, he feels like he could almost remember them, the words right on the tip of his tongue.

The tallest of them was the most careful, the most meticulous. She had spindly limbs, graceless and awkward. She was also afraid of him, and never truly met his eyes even if he spoke to her. She was one of the best, however, so he'd still chosen her. Then there was the second, not so much shorter than the first, but with a thickset build and a hard mouth. She was strong enough that he had almost used his metal arm on her once, when they were sparring. The third was red. She was thin and wiry and a full head shorter at least, sharp and prickly at the edges. Unpredictable, but her eyes held a softness that Ivan knew he should do away with. He didn't. Remember your mission. He didn't want to.

They were in the forest, twenty miles east of the Red Room base. They'd set up a small cosy camp during the day, where he ran through some survival skills with them. They'd already learnt it before, he knew, but none of them said a thing. It was an unspoken understanding that they'd all four come to, when the girls had realised the mission they were so worried about was actually a merciful break from their hard training. It was cold that night, and the second girl had built a good roaring fire. They huddled around it contentedly, murmuring to each other. Ivan watched from a distance. The fire was big enough that he could feel it even in the half-shadows of the trees.

He rested his head against the bumpy surface behind him. He knew he would be in trouble if they ever found out about this. In that moment, covered with the blanket of soft nature-sounds and the low crackle of the flame, he chose to forget. The girls whispered to one another and burst into quiet laughs, hushed and delighted, and the sound washed over him like comfort. If only he could live out the rest of his days like this. This was a good mission. It felt familiar and right. Teaching, protecting. Not killing.

"Ivan." The red girl settled down in front of him. She was so close. He could feel the warmth radiating from her, and the fire behind lit her hair aflame. He stared at her for a long moment, at the fiery halo, drinking in the sight, then he thought to himself, This girl will be beautiful.

Her small hand came up to rest, very softly and carefully, against his chest, where the rod had touched that day. She had seen. He shuddered and pushed the hand away gently. "What is it, Natashen'ka."
Her hair was on fire. She leaned in. "Ivan," she whispered again, and her eyes were liquid bright. "We could run away. Both of us." Her hand rested now on his cheek, very lightly. Her blood was warm. He felt himself leaning into it, a moth to a flame. Nobody had ever done that to him before.

*She is a girl. An icy pit in his stomach. Remember your mission.*

"Remember your mission, Natalia," Ivan stood up abruptly, and walked back to his tent. It was late, and it was time to sleep. He lay awake on the bedroll the whole night, thinking of fire and red things, his skin burning where she had touched him.

---

He is burning everywhere. He is struggling to breathe. He thinks, end it end it end it. He thinks of cold metal and wishes for its hard kiss, pressed against his temple. He doesn't feel the needle.

He feels the rush of blood in his ears first, then it goes down his legs, behind his eyes. He sits up straight and blinks. "What." His hands start to tremble finely. The man's face comes back into focus, very quickly. Focus focus focus. Too much focus. Everything is sharp-edged and bright.

"You okay? You back? How many fingers am I holding up?" The man rambles, steadies him while hauling him up. Nikolai squints.

"You aren't holding up any fingers."

"Awesome. We're good to go. Do you remember your mission?" The man steers him to face a door. Nikolai's brain stutters. He doesn't remember his mission. White noise between his ears. "Okay, I'll repeat myself in case you spaced out on me just now. There are about five hostiles behind that door. Clear 'em out. Find Steve Rogers. Find Natasha Romanoff. Bring them out safely. Understood?"

His thoughts are *ping*ing in his head. Everywhere hurts, and he's bursting with the need to run run run -

"*Soldier.*"

"Yes. Understood."

"All right. I'm right behind you."

Nikolai starts forward immediately, then stops. Turns back. "HYDRA is inside."

"Yeah no shit." The man rolls his eyes exasperatedly.

"No. You don't understand. They... they'll take me. It's not safe."

"It's only five of them, man. Piece of cake for a guy like you."

"It's not safe for *you.*" Nikolai tries to control his breathing, and fails. "When they take me - "

"Stop being so pessimistic, man. They won't," the man scolds impatiently. "We are *out of time.* We don't have a choice."


The man's face twists. He's angry and maybe insulted. "I can take care of myself." He holds up his gun. "See? I'm armed. Same gun as you."
Nikolai can't help but smile a little at that. He looks at the man, up and down. His hands itch for action. He can disarm and kill this man in five different ways right here. "I can disarm and kill you in five different ways. Right here."

The man throws his hands up. "I'll stay outside, got it. I'll just sit here with my thumbs up my ass - "

"Good." Nikolai starts for the door, his blood zinging. His feet feel strange, and sounds are echoing in his head.

"Barnes," the man calls out. Nikolai turns around for the last time. The man looks anxious, uncertain. The bird-drone hovers at his shoulder silently. "Five minutes. Five minutes and I'm going in, so help me God."

Nikolai pulls his gun out and pushes the door open.

---

They were waiting for him. He doesn't see them until the door clicks shut behind him, then they spring out from behind it, from the end of the corridor, everywhere. But there are only five of them. None of them are shooting at him. They rush together, and in their hands are long black sticks. The hum of energy startles Nikolai into motion.

He barely needs to aim. Bang, bang. Two of them drop in quick succession, but before he can train his focus on the others, a rough voice cuts through the air. "Спутник."

His knees hit the ground and he drops the gun. His eyes are sliding shut. What is happening? Where is he? He is to be punished, he's about to be punished, but why?

Remember your mission, a voice in his head says. What is the mission.

"Ahhh, Asset. So good to see you again, old friend." A familiar face leers at him from across the room.


"Yeah, yeah. In the flesh." He comes closer, and towers over the Asset. The Asset studies his face carefully. He looks different. Something happened to his face. He can't think clearly. His blood is too loud, the lights are too bright.

"Your face," the Asset says automatically. He's so confused. How did he get here? What is the mission?

"Look like shit, don't I?" Rumlow barks out a laugh. "I admit, that was some nasty stuff right there. You can thank your pals for doing this to me."

"My pals." The Asset doesn't know what he's saying. "I don't understand."

"And I don't blame you!" Rumlow sings, grabbing the Asset's face between both palms and shaking it hard. The Asset can feel his brain rattle about a bit. Rumlow looks angrier than he's ever looked, but the Asset can't confirm that. He can't remember much. Maybe he has been angrier. Rumlow lets go of the Asset, and stares at him for a long moment. "You don't even remember your mission, do you?"

His whole body is shaking, something is wrong with him. He remembers what he needs, and why. He bows his head once more.
"Asset is compromised," the Asset admits hollowly. He doesn't remember his mission. Protect kill save clean rescue eliminate target target target. "Request emergency recovery."

Rumlow says nothing, and the Asset gazes mutely at the floor, trying not to think about the thrum of his blood in his mouth. "You know." Rumlow finally says. "We were waiting for you to come back. Gave us a hell of a wait."

The Asset has nothing to say.

"But we waited anyway," Rumlow continues. "Dog will always crawl back to its master, and all that. Had a nice little trap set up for you over here, too. But you know how it goes - sometimes, you set up a trap. A bear trap in the middle of the woods. Sometimes it doesn't trap what you want."

The Asset is feeling light-headed. He doesn't understand what Rumlow is saying. It has nothing to do with his mission. Does he have a mission?

"Sometimes, instead of the bear, you get other creatures. Little foxes, hares. Waste of a trap." He pauses, then laughs and shakes his head. "Or sometimes you get something better than the bear you were waiting for." He draws closer to the Asset, and a wave of relief washes over him then, because Rumlow is twirling a syringe in his hand and he knows, he knows, he needs it. Right now. The serum, then the ice. Please.

He jerks and strains forward minutely, his gaze following the movement of Rumlow's hands. The guy stops and laughs again. "Oh, this thing? Yeah. It's a present for you, old pal. It's yours. If you're on our side. Tell me, Asset, who do you serve?"

The Asset's mouth moves automatically, and the words spill out. "HYDRA, the Asset serves HYDRA. The Asset is ready to comply."

Rumlow grins. "I know you are, buddy. I know." The needle slides into his arm easily, and the Asset shudders in relief. He can almost feel the liquid flow through his system, like a surge of icy water. The bubbling burning searing numbing pain recedes gently as Rumlow whispers comforting words into his ear, low and incomprehensible, his hand on the Asset's shoulder. The room is still as everyone waits for it to take effect. Blood is still spreading slowly from the head wounds of the two HYDRA guards. Nobody moves. The Asset blinks. His vision is clear. He tests his arm, both his arms. Operational. He rises to his feet, and Rumlow rises with him. "It's real good to have you back with us, Asset," Rumlow says warmly. "We have a mission for you."

The Asset nods, and Rumlow tells him the mission. The Asset complies. He remembers his mission now.

---

The Asset doesn't really remember his mission in 2005. It comes back in flashes sometimes, but not fully, and never in the correct sequence.

There was shooting, and there was blood. Success, and he knew it because he went to the scene to confirm the kill.

He didn't usually need to confirm it, but this time, the shot he'd taken was tricky. Target was hiding behind a human shield, but he was certain that his bullet would pierce through if he timed it just right. It turned out he did. Two bodies were huddled beside an old building, their only cover. Useless cover. They were on the wrong side of it. The wall behind them was slick with blood and maybe brains. Unimportant. His target was right below the stain, and half his face was shattered. Mission
success.

The human shield was still alive, twitching at his feet. He looked down. It was a young lady, pressing her hands against her belly. She looked back at him. Her eyes were soft.

"Иван?" she sputtered. "Иван, это ты?" She bled steadily through her fingers. Who is Ivan? Unimportant. Her blood was bright red. She reached out to him with red hands. The wall behind her was red. Her hair, redredred.

No witnesses, his handler had said. The Asset took out a mobile phone and punched in the emergency number, then set the phone onto the ground. He did not know why he was doing this. Defiance meant punishment, meant THE CHAIR. It did not matter. They would not find out.

She called out again, harshly and questioningly. The Asset ignored her and walked away. Remember your mission. Mission success. No witnesses.

---

Rumlow waits until he's outside the door, then shouts an order down the stairs for the guards to open it. The door hisses open and he steps inside. The room is empty. Tables on one side. In the far corner, THE CHAIR. The Asset is confused. Rumlow said his target was in the room. He turns to leave.

Something falls onto his shoulders, a heavy weight, and he raises his right hand automatically to protect his neck. Pain as something bites into his palm, into the unprotected left side of his neck. Rows of steel piercing his skin. He grunts, struggling slightly as the spikes tear into his throat. The strap tightens, its cold bite unrelenting. He reaches his left arm upwards and throws the body off his shoulders easily. Rips the strap from his throat and tosses it to the side. Blood seeps out, warm and thick, from the holes in his neck. His breath is catching around mouthfuls of blood, and he can almost feel it dripping into his lungs. He advances on his target.

She springs up lightly from the ground where he'd thrown her, dodging his blows sinuously. "Barnes, you in there somewhere?" She pants. Her leg hooks upwards unexpectedly and he catches it with a bleeding hand, uses the force of her kick to propel her into the wall. She pushes off instead of crashing into it, landing a hit into his gut and slipping out of his grasp. Target is well-trained. He advances again, blocks her punches and backhands her face with his left arm. Her head snaps back and she gasps.

"Barnes stop," she chokes out as she stumbles further backwards, barely fending off his attacks. He doesn't bother blocking her blows. He moves into them and forces her into a corner. There's a small snap and he looks down: a small circle sizzles blue against his chest. A familiar feeling, but a weak charge. He snarls angrily and rips it away, shoving it back towards her.

She ducks under his arm and his knee rises to meet her face. She grunts and falls away backwards, but swings her leg low against his ankles. He lets himself fall and lashes out at her on the way down. She manages to knock the electric device out of his weakened hand and scrambles to the side, but he's rolling over and finds her neck with his left hand. The joints whir quietly. Squeezes.

"Ivan," she says finally, her eyelids fluttering madly. Her leg kicks up impossibly high, and it catches his head. His head whips forward, and black spots appear in his vision. His grip tightens. He lifts and slams her back into the floor. Her head cracks on the tile. Her nails scrape uselessly against the metal, trying to pull the fingers away. Her eyes are wild and vulnerable. There is a softness in them that looks familiar. The Asset stares hard, and doesn't let go.
"Ivan," she chokes out, and a trembling hand reaches out and presses onto the Asset's face. It feels warm. It burns him like a brand, and he thinks of a dark forest and a warm campfire and the quiet sound of laughter.

The Asset lets go quickly and shoves her hand away. Stares at this woman lying under him, this woman who is gasping for breath and clutching at her purpling neck. His own neck is still bleeding in sluggish spurts, and half her face is stained with it. This woman who looks like a girl he used to know. A name falls from his lips.

"Natashen'ka." The Asset is confused. Remember your mission.

He reaches out his right hand, the bleeding one, and tugs weakly at her hair. Brown. Wrong colour. The strands clump together, sticky with blood. The woman is grabbing his hand, shaking her head, trying to find words around her tortured breathing. "Changed..." she sighs, then tries to push him away. He stays there, staring dumbly at her face.

"I know you," he murmurs.

She's still nodding and trying to push him off. She doesn't understand. Rumlow is right outside the room, remember your mission. The Asset raises his hand, the bleeding one. "I remember my mission," he says, and sinks his fist into her face. The girl's hands fall limply to her sides. She's covered in red. He has to protect her. He has to kill her. What is the mission?

He doesn't know if she can still hear him, but he leans close anyway. "Stay down, Natashen'ka."

---

It is as he expected: Rumlow's waiting for him outside.


"Good. I knew you'd do me proud," Rumlow pats his shoulder, looks at the mess inside the room. At Natalia's crumpled body, at the blood on the floor. "We'll get - "

"Hey, man. Fancy seeing you here. Here I thought I'd dropped a building on your face." Someone emerges from the staircase, holding a gun. The Asset remembers him. He was supposed to stay outside. Why are you here. I can kill you in five different ways. Then he thinks, what is the mission.

Rumlow looks surprised, then amused. "Here I thought I'd shot you clean out of the sky!" He starts laughing and claps the Asset on the shoulder. "Oh, kid, you're a hard one to kill, I'll give you that." The Asset shudders, feels his shirt drink up the blood flowing from his neck. The man moves closer to them cautiously. I can kill you in five different ways.

"Barnes? You with me?" The man calls out carefully, ignoring Rumlow. The Asset doesn't respond. Rumlow's heavy hand stays on his shoulder.

"Have you been trying to call him that all along?" Rumlow crows. His grip tightens, and the Asset thinks, your mission. "Barnes is long gone, my friend. He was never there to begin with."

The man fires his gun twice, but the Asset is ready. His left arm shoots out automatically, and the bullets glance off the metal. He darts forward and twists the gun out of the man's grip, feeling bones grind and snap. The man makes a quiet sound. The Asset points the gun at him now, backing up so that he's standing beside Rumlow again. His arm is shaking, and the damaged nerves in his palm don't allow him to grip the gun well. He switches to his other arm.

The man is looking at him like he's disappointed. The Asset doesn't want to kill this man. He thinks of THE CHAIR. He thinks of the silent simplicity of the ice. His robot arm is steady, but he doesn't pull the trigger. "Asset. Do it." Rumlow says casually.

The Asset can't do it. His mouth is full of blood. His head is swimming. He wants the ice. He finds himself shaking his head. He can't do it. He looks at the man, and the man looks back at him. He still looks disappointed in him. Not afraid, like most targets are. He's disappointed, and he's looking at the Asset like he expected better. Nikolai had looked at him like that, too. Don't think of that now. Remember your mission.


"Christ, Asset, you're a goddamn mess." Rumlow snatches the gun from his hand, points it at the man and fires.

Chapter End Notes

According to Google translate:

Спутник - Sputnik
Иван, это ты? - Ivan, is that you?
Sam

He knows it's a bad idea to let Barnes go into the base by himself, all jacked up with dope and chemicals. How the guy's still standing is baffling to him.

Sam waits outside grudgingly, always waiting and always useless, as Barnes steps through the doorway and disappears. He thinks he can hear a scuffle and muffled gunfire, but the sound's so soft it may be his own imagination. He has to wait, because Barnes is right. The guy's brain is so scrambled, Sam won't even be surprised if he went back to killer machine mode if he'd said "Hail HYDRA" during their fun little trek through the night.

He didn't say it. He wasn't suicidal. And he sure isn't now, which is why he's waiting. The minutes tick by, and Redwing hums impatiently beside his ear. "I know, I know," Sam mutters. "Soon. We gotta wait it out a bit."

The bird doesn't reply.

Sam doesn't hear any more suggestions of noise, real or imagined, after five minutes. Neither does the door open with Barnes and Steve and Natasha in tow. Figures. "All right, baby, it's go time. You ready?" He crouches beside the door and directs Redwing to it. God bless Stark for his obsession with outfitting anything he owns with blasters, but Sam thinks maybe now isn't the time for such theatrics. "Showtime."

He nudges at the door slowly with his foot. It's heavier than normal, but it finally gives and slides open silently, just big enough for him to push Redwing through the gap vertically. The screen shows him three hostiles: one patrolling the long corridor, two huddled in the front room. The patrolling one spots Redwing first and looks alarmed, then he's down before he can say anything. Sam hears two more soft pops as Redwing sneaks into the front room, hugging the ceiling, dropping bullets onto the remaining two guards' heads. With nobody else on the first floor, Sam goes in himself, and directs Redwing to patrol the first floor so he doesn't get any funny surprises later.

There are two other bodies lying by the door that Barnes must've killed. Before he got subdued, maybe?

He can hear a low murmur of voices drifting down from up the flight of steps at the far end, and he creeps up the stairs quickly and silently. His blood freezes because he recognises that voice, and maybe a little of that face. What's left of it, anyway. "Hey, man. Fancy seeing you here. Here I thought I'd shot you clean out of the sky!" His laugh creeps the hell out of Sam. It's not exactly a perfect villain one, but it really gets under Sam's skin. Especially when he's draping his arm on Barnes like they're best friends. It's a
good sign that Barnes doesn't respond to it, and looks slightly uncomfortable. At least, that's what Sam hopes.

"Oh, kid, you're a hard one to kill, I'll give you that."

Damn right I am, asshole, Sam thinks, but he's more worried about whether he has Barnes on his side or not. His chances are not looking good. "Barnes? You with me?" He feels stupid for saying it, but he has to try somehow. There's a lump in his throat that rises suddenly when he glimpses, beyond the open doorway behind them, a very still body on the floor that looks very like Natasha, and he already knows the answer. Oh, God. It's the Winter Soldier. He's killed her. Has he already killed Steve?

Rumlow's laughing again and saying something, but Sam can't hear him. A surge of rage builds in him and he can't think beyond smashing the guy's face in right away. He's probably going to die in the next few minutes anyway, with the way Barnes is looking at him.

He fires the gun quickly, getting two shots out before Barnes - no, the Winter Soldier - spins into its path, catching the bullets or something, then his hands are suddenly on Sam's and he feels his bones give way as the Winter Soldier disarms him before he can even blink. A numb sort of pain shoots up his forearm as his right hand crumples oddly. The Winter Soldier is already pointing the gun back at him, retreating to stand at Rumlow's side.

Sam raises his palms in front of him, grimacing at the throbbing pain radiating from his hand. It's angled really funny. He studies Barnes' face carefully and thinks, this is the last thing I'm going to see. He's too stunned to feel anything other than exhaustion and maybe a bit of sadness. Barnes' jaw is set, his mouth pressed in a hard line, but his eyes twitch and nostrils flare. His right hand is shaking visibly and he seems to notice that too, because he switches the gun to his left arm quickly. His eyes are burning holes into Sam's brain.

The moment stretches out and Barnes doesn't pull the trigger. Sam starts to feel slightly angry. He thinks about all the trouble they'd gone through to try to bring him back. Only to find him here, back at square one, and dying at his hands. It's unfair. He deserves better. Steve and Natasha deserves - deserved? - better. He decides he kind of hates this guy. He levels his gaze at Barnes. You poor old bastard, he thinks. Go ahead, shoot. Live with this memory for the rest of your sad life. Killing the only people who ever cared for your sorry ass.

"Asset. Do it." Rumlow's order, an ultimatum.

Barnes' shoulders start to shake, and his face crumples a little. He can't do it. Sam wants to laugh and punch him in the face at the same time. He chooses to stay still.


Rumlow rolls his eyes, and says, "Christ, Asset, you're a goddamn mess." Then he's suddenly the one holding the gun, and something above Sam explodes.

Instinctively, he drops to the ground and shields his head with his arms. A shower of dust rains down on him. There's a muffled groan and the fleshy sounds of a fist fight in front of him, and he opens his eyes and looks up. Barnes has Rumlow pressed against the wall with the metal arm, but the other arm is scrabbling at Rumlow's hand that's digging viciously into the wounds on his neck. There's so much blood, and Barnes is hacking out more mouthfuls of it in Rumlow's face, and Sam thinks how does someone have so much blood, then Barnes lets his left arm up and Rumlow surges forward, overbalancing with the sudden loss of resistance.
Barnes rolls onto his back and kicks Rumlow backwards with the motion, throwing him into the opposite wall. The gun skitters across the floor, forgotten, a few feet from Sam. He dives and grabs it with his uninjured hand, spinning around, just in time to see Barnes slam his left hand at - into - Rumlow’s unprotected face.

The metal fingers sink through the eye sockets and crack through the cheekbones. Swiss cheese, Sam thinks mildly. Rumlow lets out a low, gurgling groan as Barnes digs his hand deeper into the flesh like his face is made of dough. There's a pop-squelch-sucking sound, followed by a slick crunch, as Barnes yanks his hand free, and the front part of Rumlow’s skull just comes along with it in splinters. Barnes sags onto the floor, flinging the mess to the side with a careless wring of his hand, then he's breathing heavily and clutching at his head like he's trying to shake something off - spreading Rumlow’s brains all over his face and Sam wants to puke right there and then - and then he's crawling closer to Rumlow’s body and cradling what's left of his head and sobbing.

Sam stands as far away as he can, and his hand is really not shaking. It's not. It is. He can't help it. He doesn't know what to do. This guy just saved his life. After trying to kill him. Before killing the guy who tried to kill him. And now he's crying over the guy who'd tried to kill him. Does he shoot? Does he not? What has he done with Natasha? What has he done with Steve?

Barnes raises his face, a splattered mess of stuff. God. Sam is revolted. "I'm sorry," his voice cracks, because he's crying and because he has mini-stab wounds all around his neck. "I tried. I don't know. I don't know. My mission. Failed. Rumlow."

Sam thinks it would be merciful to shoot Barnes. Right now. It would be sweet mercy. Like putting down a rabid dog. What the hell is he thinking? "What did you do with Natasha?" Sam's voice is just as wrecked. He can't keep it together.

Barnes gasps and shudders, shakes his head. "Failed that. Too. Natasha. Natasha." He closes his eyes and tears mingle with the muck on his face.

Sam sees red, then walks over to Barnes and pistol-whips him in the back of the head, so hard he can feel the impact all the way to his shoulder. He drops to the floor like a ragdoll. Sam can't bring himself to care when he steps over the two bodies and into the room where she's lying on the floor. He crouches down, his head spinning. At least Barnes didn't rip her face open. Sam doesn't think that's a consolation at all, but he thinks it anyway. Her face is half-purple from a mean blow to the side, and the rest of it is painted red with blood splatter. So much blood. So much red.

He doesn't see any open wounds. He touches her face almost reverently, the part that isn't broken and bruised, then touches her neck tentatively where there's a clear hand-mark, ugly and raised.

*He feels a pulse.* His heart leaps to his throat, oh my God, oh my God, Nat, thank God, you're alive, you're still here -

She's still out cold though, and Sam flounders a bit, helpless. Then he remembers the other adrenaline shot, still snug inside his jacket, and almost cries with relief. He fumbles at it one-handed and pokes it gingerly into her arm.

Nothing happens, and he exhales and sits back. Okay, I've done it all. Gave my best. I give up.

He doesn't know how long he sits there, waiting for lightning to strike him or something, but he suddenly notices that Natasha's eyelids have started to flicker. He throws himself forward, babbling like an idiot, prodding at her arm, wake up wake up -

She does, and immediately starts coughing and rasping. Ouch. "Hey, Romanoff, calm down.
Breathe. Slowly. That's it, slow down. You got this," he murmurs, pushing her shoulder down firmly when she tries to struggle to a sitting position. She gives up fighting against him, finally coming to her senses and breathing like she's been running ten miles.

"What... did you give me..." she whispers painfully, staring at him through slightly glazed eyes. Her pupils are super dilated. He winces apologetically.

"Erm. Just some adrenaline," he hedges. "He really did a number on you."

Natasha groans and nods, and slowly pushes herself up onto her elbows. She's shaking her head and still hyperventilating. "Sucks. Feels like - I'm on a - rollercoaster - "

"Sorry. I had to. It'll go away in a bit. But I had to. Listen, Nat," Sam says urgently. "Barnes is here. Just outside the room. I knocked him out, I don't know how long he'll be under, but we gotta go. If you saw what he did to Ruml..." his voice catches in his throat and he shakes his head. "Anyway. Do you know where Steve is? What did Barnes do to him? Where is he?"

Natasha looks confused. "Don't know," she gasps hoarsely. "Was looking at some files and he... went to the other room, then the door closed and I... I waited above it for - so long. How long. How long has it been?" She peers at Sam, looking winded and exhausted.

"Too long. I'm sorry, Nat. Blame Barnes, he showed up at the worst time. Total dead weight." Sam gets to his feet. "Stay here, ride the thing out. Where's the other room?"

She points. It's right across the hallway. Sam hadn't realised that there was another door there. He hauls himself to his feet. "Sit tight."

The door is fucking cold to the touch. It hurts Sam's hand when he tries to push it open. Surely there must be a way to open this thing. If these doors can open and close to trap Nat and Steve, there must be a control somewhere.

After some hopeless searching, he finds it where he should've first looked: in the front room on the first floor, where the guards were. He's too tired to chide himself for being stupid. The mechanism is old-fashioned and heavy; he cranks a lever, then flips a switch labelled "POWER" for good measure, then races back upstairs to check if it worked.

It did. The back half of the level is cloaked in a fog of frost. Sam gasps in shock, and realisation dawns on him as he nears the door that's now ajar.

It's not just a room, it's a cryo chamber.

The thick mist clears slowly, and Sam starts to shiver just from stepping into the place. The door doesn't open all the way. It thumps into a hard block on the floor, then refuses to budge. He cranes his neck around the edge of the door. It's Steve. Steve, frozen solid all the way to the bones, curled up against the door. His shield lies beside him, coated in white frost. Heart in his mouth, Sam puts all his weight into shoving the door open, and feels sick again as he hears Steve's frozen form drag across the floor like a block of granite.

Let him be okay. He's Captain America. He's been frozen before. He'll be fine.

Sam takes the shield out first. He's bent over Steve now, wondering how the hell he's going to lift the guy up with one hand smashed into a pulp. He must have a good amount of adrenaline running through his system himself, because he barely feels anything in the hand unless he accidentally brushes it against something. Natasha appears in the doorway, breathing loudly in great rasps, her shattered throat giving her presence away.
"Oh, God, Steve," she grinds out, then she helps Sam half-drag, half-carry Steve out into the hallway. Barnes is still out cold, leaning against the wall as though he's asleep, his hands still tenderly wrapped around Rumlow's pulverised face. Sam forces himself to look away.

They sit there in the hallway for a long time, saying nothing. Natasha's laboured breathing is the only sound, a steady rattling that echoes a bit in the silence. She won't take her eyes off Barnes, and Sam can't read her expression. He watches Steve and wonders if it's warm enough out here for him to thaw, and whether it's safe to leave him like this. He wants to close his eyes, but he watches Steve instead. Steve's eyes are open, covered in a thick film of ice, and he looks back at Sam blankly. Sam wonders if he's just holding a vigil for a man long dead.

The sun rises outside, but the building has no windows and they don't know it. They wait.

Rumlow's plan was solid. The troops were not. "They are not ready," the Asset had insisted, when Rumlow had announced their timeline. It was tight, too tight. "The lines will not hold."

"Well, they'd better hold," Rumlow chewed on a cigar with a grinning mouth. He was young then. Just as cunning, more reckless. "My mission's got a deadline on it, Asset. We start next week or we both fail. And you know what happens if we fail."

The Asset knew, so he said nothing. He thought again, they are not ready. He had spent four months training his own unit of Vietcong snipers. It was slow work. They were afraid, and inefficient. They did not understand him. Good chance of capturing the city, with Rumlow's brutal offensive. Little chance of holding it. HYDRA gave him and Rumlow no choice, it seemed. He agreed with Rumlow. They'd better hold.

They'd entered the city of Huế in the very early hours of the morning, from all directions. After a full day of heavy artillery fire, they managed to occupy the poorly-defended city. Scant hours later, civilians had swarmed into the Citadel for shelter, an unstoppable mob. Unarmed, taking refuge from the city that was falling around their ears. The Asset had not known what to do. Civilians were not mentioned in his mission parameters.

"Give them the rooms," he finally told his officers. "Keep them out of the way. They are liabilities."

They held the main Citadel for little over a month. The Asset had expected to only last a week at most, but the element of surprise worked better than even Rumlow imagined. Still, the counterattack was swift. When the tanks advanced by the dozens, and waves and waves of American battalions were thrown at their gates day and night, he knew it was only a matter of time. There were only so many tanks he could take out single-handedly, from their makeshift bunkers and spider-holes. His men were eager but inexperienced, and worse, impatient. He could not do anything with impatient soldiers.

Sometimes he'd set up explosive traps near the bridges if he could. It amounted to nothing. A few more deaths in the sea of thousands. He didn't have many chances to use their anti-tank rifles either. Maybe fired about two of them. For a long time, it seemed they were stuck in a terrible stalemate. Their defensive position was strong, but their ammunition supply was limited. Their numbers dwindled as the enemy struck back, bit by bit, retaking the city building by building. Soon, most of his troops were held within the Citadel, surrounded on all sides. The enemy dropped the main bridge, and their food supply was cut.

Each night, he wondered where Rumlow was, reviewing the plan in his mind. He must be at the river now. He must have destroyed that bridge today. He should have secured Provincial Headquarters by now. Each night, he imagined the enemy troops finally crawling over the walls and through the windows, a swarm of locusts to devour them all. They are not ready. The Citadel will not hold, much less the city. Mission failure.

Rumlow had told him not to worry about air raids. The enemy would not risk destruction of religious monuments. He had laughed his usual laugh when he said this, sucking hard at his cigar. "They won't even touch us with their little finger. I'll come for you if they do, you poor bastard, so stop lookin' at me like that. Just hold the damn Citadel."
They bombed the city, eventually, even though Rumlow swore they wouldn't. When the first bombs struck the city and came closer, the civilians within the building began to yowl, animals before an earthquake. The Asset hated the sound. It distracted the troops from their mission. He opened the rooms and told the civilians to leave.

"We are under attack. Run, or die," the Asset had said, and his officer translated it into urgent shouts. Chaos. It was late in the night, and dark. They'd turned off the lights. More difficult to target. The children were screaming but they were not going anywhere, because there was nowhere to go.

The Asset ordered the snipers to shoot. There was nothing else they could do. He took down two planes with the recoilless rifle on the parapet. The grounds and walls shook from the shelling that came closer and closer. The fleet closed in, a tight V, and he knew what they carried on board. They could not hold the Citadel. Mission failure.

In two minutes, half the Citadel was on fire, the napalm pouring down the steps and through the walls like disease. His men were raving. Most were on fire. The Asset remembers choking on the smoke of their meat, thick and sweet. It brought a sickening slaver to his lips. They shot at their own comrades, the flailing rag-dolls of flame. They flung themselves out of the narrow windows, they ran screaming together with the children. Darkness and screaming children. He did not know where they were running to. There was nowhere to go.

He stood as far away from the chaos as he could, in a corner, taking down the advance from high ground. They poured over the hastily-dug trenches and pits. They recoiled at the traps he had set at the perimeters, then surged forward in increasing numbers, undaunted. He was shooting so fast that his gun barrel glowed red hot. He knew he would have to switch to his smaller automatic later, then the pistols, then the knives. Hold the Citadel. Mission failure.

Something caught on his leg, a heavy weight that pulled and pulled, interfering with his aim. He looked down and saw a naked child clinging to it, screaming. The Asset dropped his gun. The child's body was aflame, his skin sliding off his bones onto the Asset's clothing. The flames dripped off his arms like molten wax. Sweet smell of charred meat in his nostrils. He pushed the child away with his metal arm and drew his pistol. Bang. The boy stopped screaming. The Asset started screaming.

His leg was on fire. He stumbled and ripped the cloth away with his metal arm, saw his skin melting away. He screamed. It burned and it didn't stop burning. He pressed the metal arm against it to smother it, but the metal grew too hot too quickly. He pulled away. He screamed.

Someone was yelling and pulling at his arm, slapping and grabbing at his face. He tore his eyes away from his leg and looked up. Rumlow. Mission failure.

The Asset does not remember how they managed to escape the siege. He remembers ending up on a HYDRA-operated American plane, heading to the safehouse. Rumlow was holding him down and slicing the burning skin away viciously, looking furious. The blade parted the bubbling flesh. "Things go south, you get your ass out of there," he spat at the Asset. He wasn't laughing anymore. The Asset's throat was raw from screaming.

The Asset whimpered miserably, half-listening. It burned, it burned. He wanted the ice. He tried to push Rumlow's hands away. "The mission - "

"Compromised. When it's compromised, you get the hell out. Christ. Do you know how much you're worth?" Rumlow used more force than he needed to, hacking quickly, turning the skin aside, splitting muscle from bone. The Asset didn't reply. He didn't know.

"Hell lot more than this goddamn suicide mission. When we get back to base, I swear, I'll give
Kosygin a piece of my mind, I'll give him decisive victory -“

Ice, the Asset thought. Don't care what you give him. Give me the ice.

---

He comes to on a cold concrete floor and there's blood on his hands. He knows where he is, and he knows what he's done. He stirs and pushes the body away from him, feels rather than hears the cock of the gun to his right. He raises his head.

"You can shoot me. If you want. It's okay." His throat hurts when he speaks. It feels very sore and tight, crusted over with half-dried blood that had clotted messily, before getting torn open, then clotting again. Mission failure. He stares at Rumlow's face, unrecognisable in his hands.

"Are you gonna kill us?" the man behind the gun asks calmly. He looks tired. The lady beside him says nothing, and her stare is silently accusing. Someone else is curled up on the floor in between them, back to him. The Asset feels tired too. Mission failure, he thinks again, looking at Rumlow's body, and at the blood on his hands.

"Barnes?"

"No," the Asset replies, and lets his head fall back. "Not that. I'm not him."

"Sure look like him." The man lowers the pistol. "Who am I talking to, then?"

The Asset doesn't care, closes his eyes. Shrugs minutely, and belatedly realises that his pain is mostly gone. No more pulling on his spine, no heavy weight in his shoulders. Yes, remember. Rumlow saved you. Rumlow...

He really looks at Rumlow this time, the pink mass of his face, and shudders. He did that. The man who had saved him. He did that. He looks back at the man with the gun. "I'm Rumlow."

The man snorts, the lady lounging beside him frowns harder. "I used to know a Rumlow," he waved his gun a little, "until his face kinda fell out."

The Asset winces and says nothing. He fixes his eyes on the lady this time. Her eyes are hard. The look doesn't belong on her face, somehow. He remembers her. "Ivan, I'm Ivan," he decides.

"You're not him," she spits suddenly, all venom and hate. He recoils a bit and thinks, I am not him. That's true. He's running out of names to use.

"They took him away," the Asset agrees. "They didn't like him, so they took him away. But I remember now."


2005. Mission success. No witnesses. A red girl, lying in red sand. Иван, это ты?, she had said. The Asset bows his head so he cannot see her disappointment. "I remember."

"You almost killed me."

"I didn't... I didn't know. At the time. They made me forget. I wasn't Ivan. Then. Or now." He isn't anybody now. He's an empty machine full of memories that don't belong to him. Missing memories that should belong to him. He thinks of the small book inside his jacket pocket, resting warm against his chest, and hopes he remembers to update the list. Later. "I'm sorry."
All the fight goes out of her. "I know," she says bitterly. "I hated you for that, you know? For so long. Not Ivan, I kept telling myself. He wouldn't leave me to die in the dirt."

"No," the Asset agrees again. He knows Ivan wouldn't have done that. But some part of Ivan left her alive that day, too. Maybe he's still a little bit Ivan. Maybe he's still a little bit of everyone they made him to be. He feels so sad, and so tired. They're silent for awhile more. He looks at the curled-up body on the floor, at the white crusts on the edges of his clothes and the slow spread of ice-melt on the floor.

"He shouldn't lie here," the Asset supplies. "The slowest way. Hurts the most." He inhales as the memories of ice comes back to him, too. "He'll feel his skin first. Burning. But can't move. It's... not optimal."

"Great," the man's voice cuts out bitterly. "Let me just pop him into my microwave and hit defrost."

"We need to get to a safehouse," the Asset ignores the man. The man is saying impossible and irrelevant things. He's not helping.

The man snorts, but the lady looks serious. Her name is Natalia. Remember your mission. "The car's three miles out," her mouth says. Her eyes say, can you get there?

"Rumlow. He gave me the serum. Emergency recovery. I can do it." The Asset doesn't move a muscle. He feels sad again, and he looks at the corpse at his feet. The man who saved him. Where's the rest of it, Rumlow? I shouldn't have killed you. You'd be able to tell me. The Asset imagines Rumlow laughing at him, like how he used to laugh at everything. He'd even laughed when the Asset failed his mission. He had no fear. The Asset has fears. The Asset needs the serum, and now it's gone, together with Rumlow.

"I did find some documents about it," Natalia murmurs. The Asset wonders if he had been speaking aloud. "In that room. It could help. When we get out of here, we can bring it to someone. Maybe ask them to recreate it for you."

The Asset nods slowly, but doesn't believe her. Sounds highly unlikely. Only HYDRA knows how.

"Do you think Tony will get us an airlift if we ask nicely?" the man groans. He's getting ready to stand up, tucking the gun clumsily into his jacket with his left hand. Natalia gets to her feet slowly, shaking her head.

"He's mixed up in a lot of shit, actually. He told me a little about it when he was trying to find this base for us. There's some guy blowing his people up and calling himself The Orange or something." She shrugs. "Best leave him alone right now."

"He told me he was playing Clash of Clans," the man grumbles, taking Natalia's hand and staggering to his feet. The Asset watches impassively.

"That's Tony for you." She looks down at the Asset, not unkindly. "Pick him up. Let's go."

The Asset complies.

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"So what I really can't understand," the man prods the Asset, on their humid trek back to the car, "is why you're so hung up about Rumlow. Guy treats you like an animal and you're all sad about him dying. What's up with that? Ever heard of Stockholm Syndrome?"
"He saved me," the Asset says simply. It's true. The cold weight of Rogers, Steven G. in his arms keeps him from sweating. Keeps his right hand from bleeding. The morning sun gets hotter as the forest thins.

"Well, yeah, he gave you a shot of somethin' to bring you back from the edge. Doesn't make him special. Definitely doesn't make him worth saving."

"He was a good man."

The man snorts. He won't understand. The Asset can't begin to explain. He tries. "Vietnam. 1968."

The man looks startled, and Natalia looks backwards over her shoulder, mildly interested. "The Tet Offensive. The one campaign that made the US start pulling troops out of Vietnam. You were there?"

Is that what it was called, the Asset thinks. Then he says, "Yes. It was Rumlow's plan."

Long silence. Boots crunching softly in pine-piles. The Asset remembers it all.

"Mission failure," the Asset says, eventually. "We could not hold the Citadel. The napalm. It burns, you know. Not like normal. Doesn't stop. I was going to die."

"And he saved you," The man concludes, shaking his head slightly and clicking his tongue.

"Yes." The Asset felt like he had to explain more. "Wasn't his mission. But he came back for me. He promised. He told me. He told me - the Asset is worth more than the mission."

Silence. And now you have killed him, the Asset thinks. Mission failure.

---

They steal another car because the old one has bullet holes in it. The Asset lets Natalia and the man fix their injuries as he douses a good amount of antiseptic on his hand and neck, then wraps both generously in the gauze he finds in the kit. It's good gauze, thick and clean. A good kit, but not good enough for coming out of the ice.

A car the Asset chooses is relatively new, with strong air-conditioning. The Asset sits in the front seat, ignoring the man's complaining, and cranks it up to the strongest, coldest setting. "It hurts when it's too hot outside," he says quietly. They don't argue with him. They're arguing about what to call him, as if he's not there. He closes his eyes and imagines he's not there.

"Obviously, he doesn't remember anything about being Bucky, or Barnes - " the man says heatedly.

" - well, I don't want to call him Ivan," Natalia points out. Stubborn little Natashen'ka, still angry at him. He doesn't blame her. "He calls himself Asset."

He thinks about the bottle of liquid painkiller in his jacket, which he doesn't need anymore. There's still plenty left. He could take some now. Maybe save some for later.

"We're not calling him Asset, God, Romanoff!" The man throws his hands up in the air. "That makes us no better than them!"

Then the man suddenly starts swearing fluently when he realises that Rogers has formed a small puddle on the leather. "Is this supposed to happen? Barnes?"

The Asset cracks an eye open. "Take the kit out."
"Rude." The man rolls his eyes and huffs, twisting to drag the big box out from under the seat. "First, if you're talking to me, you should know my name is Wilson. Sam Wilson. Second, you should call this - " he heaves the box into the Asset's hands, " - Aidzilla."

Aidzilla doesn't have what he needs anyway, but he empties it of all the cold packs he can find and activates all of them, sticking them all over Rogers with some sports tape. It's a funny sight, but the Asset knows not to laugh, because it's going to start hurting soon and that's not so funny.

They find a clinic and wait in the car while the Asset walks in to steal the medical supplies Aidzilla doesn't have, which Wilson takes offense at. It's midday and the place is crowded, but he manages to lift three bags of saline solution, a thick blanket and a bottle of fentanyl, because morphine probably won't do much. He doesn't know how he knows that. When he gets back into the car, Natalia looks extremely annoyed and Wilson's voice is raised. He looks like he's been shouting for some time now.

"What the hell, Barnes. What the hell were you doing in there for so long?" Wilson demands.

The Asset frowns. "I had to wait."

"One whole hour?" Wilson half-shouts. The Asset looks at Natalia uncomprehendingly, and she shakes her head slightly. The Asset wants to tell Wilson, very brusquely, that mission success requires patience, when he hears a low groan that doesn't come from Wilson or Natalia. Oh. That's why he's angry.

Rogers is awake, but still mostly immobile. He's blinking rapidly, which means his nervous and circulatory system should be running by now. The Asset supposes he isn't very familiar with the sensation. He pulls Wilson out of the backseat and climbs in quickly, setting up the saline drip and jabbing it into the vein on the back of Rogers' hand. Doses him with a good amount of fentanyl too. Rips the cold packs away, unfolds the blanket and throws it over him. Then he turns the air conditioning off and cranks the windows open. All set. "Give him another hour," the Asset says.

"Just like that, huh?" Wilson grumbles, taking his old position in the front seat.

"Yes." The Asset studies Rogers' eyes, which have calmed a bit. He hopes the painkiller lasts. The blinking has slowed. His eyes are blue. The Asset puts his bandaged hand gently against his neck, and finds a strong pulse. He rubs at the cold skin slightly with his thumb, feeling it soften under its warmth. "Just like that."

He catches Wilson's eye in the rearview mirror, and feels the corners of his mouth pull upwards.
Steve

He's aware of sounds first. It comes at him in huge torrents of noise, and he wonders if this is all a really bad dream, because most of it sounds like Sam whinging endlessly. He can't see anything, and he can't move, which is really weird, and he knows this can't be a dream. He's definitely awake, but he's trapped. What's Sam saying? Can he see me?

White spots spark his vision painfully and he wants to close his eyes against them. He can't. God, what's happening to me? Where am I?

He remembers the room, the really well-built door, and the row of shelves behind him. The serum. He'd found it. He needs to let Natasha know, but he can't move. What's going on, what's going on.

The sounds get louder. Stop shouting, Sam, he wants to say. It hurts his ears, he thinks. He notices the pain now, pricking and burning at the tips of his ears, the ends of his toes. His fingers are two masses of burning needles, like he'd dipped them into anthills on purpose and held them there. Why can't I MOVE?

He tries to force a breath out of his lungs, and something inside his chest honest-to-God creaks. He feels like his insides are shattering like glass. Wow, that hurts. The light grows brighter and he feels like maybe he's tearing. Something wet is definitely flowing down his face. He tries his best to close his eyes, and when it finally happens, relief washes over him. God, everywhere hurts. He has to be on fire. Why hasn't Sam noticed?

Sam's still talking, and he catches a few snatches of it.

" - trust him, I'm telling you, he's - "

" - even a name - "

" - ing me to be patient - "

More yelling, then Sam's voice trails away as the light gets even more blinding. A new figure looms over him, bigger and darker than Sam. He wants to shrink back and defend himself. He needs his shield, where is my shield? Sam, tell me you have my shield.

He's sure his skin is burning. He tries to yell again, but his ribs refuse to expand. He can't stand this. It's too much, all the needles and the stings and how is it possible that all his muscles are cramped right now? It's too much -

And then it's not. The pain fades like a sudden change in wind direction, blowing the other way. It recedes to a steady buzz at the tips of his nerves. If he could sigh in relief, he'd do it now.

He thinks he can feel a soft weight resting on his neck. It's strangely comforting, and his eyes slide shut.

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It's midsummer in 1936, and the air is muggy with dust and the filth of the city, which Bucky tries to shut out with their grubby curtains, closing the one window of their miserable apartment. The rusty hinges whine then the window clangs shut. Buck's grumbling about the dirty air and how it's terrible for Steve's asthma, and Steve wants to roll his eyes and say, I'm not made of glass, Buck, Christ, but he doesn't this time.
This time, lying flat on his back and feeling ten kinds of fucked, he finds himself agreeing mutely. This one's a bad one - he's already been sick for the past week with a mean bout of the flu, and it's not getting better as it should have by now. His body's decided maybe it's time for a good ol' asthma attack now, just to test his limits a bit.

He knows Bucky's worried because he won't sit still, even though there's nothing he can do. He's talking calmly, non-stop, sometimes complaining about the weather or the neighbours downstairs who never seemed to quit yellin', or walking Steve through that night with Sally Madison that he really doesn't wanna know about, all the while rearranging their sparse furniture, re-stacking their small collection of books, adjusting Steve's sheets.

Usually, he's the one who complains about Steve's never-ending need for movement, says Steve's distracting him with his foot-tapping or finger-drumming. Quit shakin' about, Stevie, he'd snap, looking up from whatever he was reading. Most of the time, it's an old paper he's nicked from the station near the docks, sometimes a new book he's borrowed from Old Mrs. Hamm's store.

"Because she adores me, Steve," Bucky would drawl, like it's an obvious and valid reason why anyone would let him take a new book without paying for it first.

He's been sick all his life, and Bucky's been there for almost all of it. Steve knows it's always been a possibility that the next one could be the one. He has honestly never imagined making it past his twenty-first birthday. Or eighteenth, even, but they'd just celebrated it together a coupla' months back (they'd gone to Coney Island where Steve got sick from Bucky plying him with too much cotton candy and soda-pop, then daring him to ride the Cyclone right after). People wait for the one to come 'round and marry them. Steve waits for the one to come 'round and finally kill him good.

The last time it was this bad was a few years ago, when his skin was mottled with scarlet fever and Bucky was the only one who'd been adamant about staying in his room even though it meant he could catch it, too. He didn't, the lucky bastard.

Steve had only seen Bucky laid up twice. A terrifying case of appendicitis when he was thirteen, and the other time, a thankfully mild strep throat that disappeared within four days.

"Bucky," he'd whispered, through the fever-haze, when Bucky'd been in the middle of reciting Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to him and looking increasingly guilty about the choice in reading material for the occasion, even though Steve was genuinely enjoying the story.

"Yeah, kid," Bucky stopped at once, setting the book aside gratefully.

"You ever think... maybe this time..." Steve began, and Bucky's face shifted from concern to anger.

"Don't even, Steve. Don't you dare say it, you dumb little shit. You can't fuckin' die from this."

His reaction shocked Steve out of his torpor a little bit. He remembers his words getting stuck in his throat, and feeling like a terrible coward for scaring his friend like that.

Bucky had risen to his feet, his face dark and unreadable. "You didn't survive all those other shit times only to die from it now. So help me God. All that time wasted watchin' you fight. You give up now, Steve, I've wasted half my life for nothing."

"All right," Steve had finally choked out. "All right, I didn't mean nothin' -"

"If anything," Bucky continued lowly, "if either of us is gonna die from a fuckin' cough, it'd better be me, so help me God." He paused, then exhaled and sat back down hard and smiled tightly. "You're gonna die old, or at least from picking a fight with the biggest jock in Brooklyn. Jesus. Have some
That was 1933, and Bucky had been right. Steve didn't die from the scarlet fever, but he came close enough.

Now Steve is getting that same feeling again, that this is the one. Bucky can't even sit still to read him another inappropriately morbid story. He knows better than to mention the possibility to Bucky again, but he knows from Bucky's incessant commentary and constant movement that he's thinking of it too. Steve can't really breathe properly, and the throat infection has maybe spread to his lungs because the itch has deepened. Bucky won't look at Steve properly, either.

I could stop breathing any moment now, Steve thinks desperately, and panics a little bit more. He tastes bile in his throat. He's afraid. Bucky's voice drifts closer, and there's a warm hand on the side of his neck, touching but not pressing. The shadow looming above him is telling him to breathe, please breathe, Stevie, you can do it, slowly now, and he does. The panic eases a little. The weight on his neck feels reassuring. He closes his eyes and his breaths even out slowly, and he falls asleep.

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He wakes up shivering, even though he knows he's under at least two layers of thick blanket. Sam isn't shouting any more, which is a relief. He thinks he hears strange music coming from somewhere, like from a children's game. A mechanical voice chimes out. Tasty.

He tries to quell his shaking, but it only makes him twitch even more. Still, he feels extremely thankful when he realises it means he can move. He's not stuck anymore. He uncurls for what seems like the first time in years, and his joints protest strangely, unsticking themselves from their frozen positions.

He knows the room is very warm, he can feel the heat on the tips of his fingers. The rest of him is clammy. The room's a little hazy from some kind of steam hovering near the ceiling, and he realises it's coming from the bathroom. The door's ajar and the shower is running noisily. He's in a warm, soft bed in a hotel room. He pulls himself up with a groan, jerking at his limbs because they don't seem to want to behave, wrapping his trembling his arms around his knees.

"Nice to have you back, Cap."

Steve looks up and Sam's on the other bed, sitting cross-legged. His phone is on the bed, on the Candy Crush game. So that's where the sound was coming from. He's sweating profusely, but otherwise looks calm. Maybe a little tired.

"Oh, God," Steve says automatically, getting a heavy feeling of déjà vu. "What... time is it?"

Sam's face falls and he looks very uncertain. Oh, God. Not again. "Steve... it's been awhile."

"Oh, God," Steve repeats, running his shaking hands through his hair. It's cold and damp. "What year is it?!"

Sam is silent for a moment, then bursts out laughing. "Oh, man. Your face. I'm so sorry. I couldn't help it. Steve. Steve, my man. It's okay. You were only frozen, like, overnight."

Steve's heart seems to stop beating as he lets this information sink in, then he's scowling and shoving a pillow at Sam's face. "Wilson - God, that wasn't even funny - "

"Hey, whoa, watch the hand," Sam bats the pillow away, still chuckling, and Steve notices the thick cast around his fingers and wrist. He realises that they're not at the base anymore, and they're safe,
"Did you get the serum?" Steve asks. "There was a bunch of it in the room I was trapped in, a whole batch, Sam, it was really there - where's Natasha?"

"She's in her room. Sleeping. It's been a long night." Sam says hesitantly. "About the serum. I don't remember seeing any of it, Steve. If you're talking about all the bottles in the chamber, they were all shattered by the time I'd found you."

The cryostasis chamber. The rapid temperature change had probably destroyed all of it. Steve feels disappointment sink into his gut like a stone. "So we have nothing. All that trouble and we have nothing again."

"Haaaaa. Not exactly. I wouldn't really say that, no." Sam's voice has changed, and his eyes are fixed on the other side of the room. Steve twists in his bed and -

It's Bucky. Alive. Frozen in place where he'd stepped out of the bathroom, wet washcloth dripping in one hand, shirtless like Sam because they'd turned the room into a sauna for him. He's sporting an odd bandage around his neck and right hand. He's alive and he's here. Steve's mouth opens and closes and he blinks idiotically. He's still shaking like a newborn foal.

"Rogers," Bucky finally says, then looks down at the cloth in his hand. "You don't need this anymore." He folds it over his arm before turning back into the bathroom and closing the door. Steve gapes for about twenty more seconds, then turns to Sam, who's looking a little sheepish.

"Shit. That would've made a good reaction video," Sam intones sadly. "Stark would've paid good money. Should've thought of that earlier."

Steve's speechless. He waves his hands at Sam desperately, eyebrows raised. The universal sign for PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT JUST HAPPENED.

Sam sighs. "Okay, you want the Cliffnotes version or the long narrative with footnotes and appendix?"

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So there's good news. Steve can work with that. Steve is not ready to think about the bad news. The good news is enough for now. The good news is, Bucky's back.

"The bad news," Sam continues, and Steve wants to cover his ears and sing loudly so he can't hear the guy for awhile. "is that he's not Bucky. He's not really anybody, actually. We can't figure him out. And we don't have the serum, so... we have to figure that out, too. And uh, I'm gonna throw up the possibility that he's been abusing drugs."

Steve is not listening, he's really not. Bucky is back. That's the most important thing. The rest will fall into place.

He finds that he can't ignore all of the bad news. "How do you know he's not Bucky?"

"Well, we know about the amnesia thing. And the fact that he keeps saying he's not Bucky, you know, that might've been a clue too."

"I don't believe that," Steve shakes his head. "He's in there somewhere, Sam. He knew me, on the bridge. On the helicarrier, and when he pulled me from the Potomac. He knew me."
"Yeah, you might wanna be careful there, because he also knew Rumlow, his best friend since the Vietnam War, and that didn't stop him from squashing his face like putty anyway."

What a mess. What did they do to you, huh, Buck? Put your brain in a blender any time you came close to figuring out who you are? The Bucky in his head shrugs nonchalantly, pressing his palm against his short hair, the way he did when he was nervous or trying to impress a lady. You gonna give up, Stevie?

No. I'm not going to give up. "What does he call himself, then?" Steve asks curiously. Sam throws his arms up in exasperation.

"That's the worst part. He can't seem to decide. I'm pretty sure he's just naming himself after people he's killed, because when he woke up he tried to introduce himself as Rumlow, can you imagine, then he called himself Ivan and Natasha's having none of that, because apparently they have some kinda history and she doesn't know if she likes or hates him, and he gets all sad about it when he looks at her - "

"Nikolai." A low voice from across the room. They hadn't realised that he'd come out again. "You can call me Nikolai."

Your name is Bucky, you jerk, Steve wants to shout. He says nothing.

"Nikolai? That somebody you killed too?" Sam asks casually.

Bucky looks startled and a little hurt. "Yes."

Sam throws a see-what'd-I-tell-you look over to Steve, who refuses to acknowledge it. Steve glares at Bucky stubbornly. "You're Bucky."

Bucky sits down and rubs at his face tiredly. "I know. I saw, at the museum. I should be Bucky. I have his face. But I'm not. Not him. He's... I don't remember anything."

"You remember me," Steve counters mulishly. He feels a little childish, but he doesn't care.

"Rogers, Steven G.," Bucky agrees softly, but he's also shaking his head. "I know you. Doesn't mean I remember. I can't be the person. You expect. Not Bucky."

"James, then," Steve insists. Old Bucky had hated being called that, because it reminded him of his father. But Steve hates it more that Bucky would name himself after each of his victims, as if he were a deranged psycho-killer. "Can you be James?"

Bucky considers, then nods slowly. "James. Simple name, easy to spell. Not conspicuous. It will serve."

Sam coughs a little and it sounds like coughfuckedupcough. Then he stretches for his phone and the Candy Crush music starts playing.

Steve pointedly ignores him. "Good. You're James, from now on. And stop calling me Steven. My name is Steve."

Bucky nods and says nothing.

Soft popping sounds in the background, and a man's voice saying, Sweet. Then, Delicious.

Steve wracks his brains for something to say to him. "D'you remember that one time in 1933?"
he blurts suddenly, scooting closer to the end of the bed.

Bucky throws him a confused and frustrated look. "I told you, I - "

"We were in our Brooklyn apartment. We were both fifteen. I was so sick, from the scarlet fever, remember? You used to read me all kinds of stuff when I was sick. Sometimes it was about other people being sick and dying, and you'd look so awful about it, like I'd get even sicker or somethin' because of it."

Bucky's face looks uneasy. "You were sick a lot," he said slowly, hesitantly, like he wasn't sure if he wanted to phrase it as a statement or a question.

Steve grins, and continues cheerfully. "Yeah, I was. I thought I was gonna die, that day in 1933, remember? You said - "

"You can't die from being sick," Bucky blurts suddenly, in a completely different voice, forceful and full of derision. Then he exhales hard and puts a hand to his temple. "Stop."

Steve's heart is in his mouth. He remembers, he remembers.

"You did say something like that," he says quietly. The Candy Crush music plays on in the background, but he knows Sam isn't paying attention to the game now. "I thought you'd kill me yourself, you were so angry with me, when you found out I was thinkin' of dying that way."

"I'm not him," Bucky says automatically. "Stop. Stop doing that, Rogers."

"It's Steve," Steve corrects gently. "Okay, I'll stop."

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The soldiers are high on freedom and adrenaline as they march back to base camp following his lead. Steve hasn't met anyone who doesn't call him "Captain" out of mockery or lust until now. These men call him Captain and mean it, and it makes his chest ache in an odd happy way that makes him feel like he's waited his whole life for this. It makes him feel like he's finally doing something that matters.

Morita has him at "I'm from Fresno, Ace". He's seen enough bullies to know that Jim Morita isn't one, and has probably been the victim of them more often than not. Morita strikes up an easy conversation with him, telling him about their unit, about Sergeant Barnes and Dum Dum Dugan and Gabe Jones, and how they'd been captured, and what they'd been doing before that.

On the contrary, Bucky's shaky and quiet, sticking to Steve and not saying much. He looks and sounds fine, if not a little tired and a lot skinny. He's smaller than Steve remembers him, pale and bony, and Steve keeps glancing at him sideways, wondering if there's something he's missing. Bucky just catches his eye and smiles reassuringly, then walks on. Steve doesn't want to think about what may have happened to him in the room where he'd found him, strapped to a table and reciting his name and designation incoherently. He wonders if Bucky's been changed by that, or by the war. He knows it happens, but he never imagined it would happen to him.

Maybe Bucky just hates that Steve is different now, and can't seem to look him in the eye and tell him so.

After the first few miles, Steve lets it go and stops hovering as much, giving Bucky some space in case he needs it. Bucky doesn't, and keeps pace close to him until nightfall when they break for a rest.
It doesn't take long before Bucky's out like a light, curled up on his side and breathing softly into the crook of his elbow, like how he always used to do even when they were kids in Brooklyn. Steve doesn't realise he's been watching Bucky intently until Morita clears his throat quietly beside him.

"Captain."

"It's Steve," he says automatically. Morita nods and doesn't correct himself, following Steve's gaze to Bucky's figure on the ground.

They stand side by side for awhile, not speaking. The silence swells up around them, warm and comfortable. The other men are murmuring quietly in the mild night.

"We thought he was gonna die, you know," Morita says finally. "Barnes."

Steve nods wearily. "They did a number on him." He thinks of the table, and the straps, and the tray scattered with syringes on the side. He thinks of Bucky's tired face and sharp, jutting bones.

"No, I mean before. Dunno how he survived it."

Alarm bells ring in Steve's head, and he tears his eyes away from Bucky. "What d'you mean?"

Morita shrugs. "He was sick. For more'n a week before they took us, all along the road. I didn't have much to help him. Bad case of pneumonia, maybe. I've seen it before. By the time they took him, he was already pukin' his insides all over the place. I thought we'd never see him again." He frowns at Steve like he doesn't believe what he's saying himself. "That state, he couldn't have lasted for more than six, seven hours? And here he is. Sleepin' like a baby. Not even a cough."

Steve feels his heartbeat stutter as he looks back at Bucky. He thinks about the syringes strewn around the table, but he pushes the thought away quickly. Bucky's alive, and he's here. That's all that matters. He laughs suddenly, startling Morita a bit. "You know what he told me last time, back in Brooklyn? I was always spittin' my lungs out all the time, I was that sick. Once I told him I was gonna die. And he got real angry and all, and said something like, 'You're not gonna die from a stupid sickness, Steve'. He said if either of us was gonna die from a cough, it'd be him."

Morita blinks incredulously, then exhales a small laugh too. "Bastard really meant it, huh?"

"Yeah," Steve breathes, watching the steady rise and fall of Bucky's ribs in the dim light. "Yeah, he did."
Imagine a tennis match where the two opponents are really old best friends, but only one of them thinks they're friends, and the other doesn't even want to play, but doesn't want to give the friendly one the wrong idea, so they end up playing the most bizarre match ever because they're both trying their best to lose. Or something.

That's Sam's life now. He's upgraded from babysitter to... Referee. Facilitator? Well. Job titles are relative. You could have a job making coffee and call yourself an Elite Beverage Ambassador or something. Not that Sam has anything against people who make coffee. He loves anyone who makes coffee. It's one of the main reasons why he's still friends with Steve, because lately he can't find better ones.

They stay in the hotel room for hours because they can't agree on what to do next. Of all the things Sam had imagined would happen after the big Steve'n'Bucky reunion, he never imagined that it would be this bad.

Barnes wants to blaze off to Pruszków to smoke out more HYDRA bases, Steve wants to fly them all back to New York and squat in Stark Tower because "Tony can do genius things and fix all our problems". Personally, Sam just wants to go home and help himself to a huge serving of his great-aunt's lasagna. He'd actually sincerely brought this opinion to the table, but Barnes had looked at him blandly and told him that his "objective" was "illogical and irrelevant".

Which Steve had responded to very badly, and he rounded on the poor guy shouting about how this guy saved your life and have some respect and courtesy, damn it and Sam was silently all hell yeah, Cap, you tell 'im, but then the next thing they knew, Barnes had turned white and was sinking to his knees on the carpet, and holding his hands out like he expected Steve to start reading him his rights there and then.

"What - Buck -" Steve looked aghast and alarmed, backing up hurriedly. He exchanged a desperate look with Sam. "Bucky - James, what're you doing?"

Then Barnes sort of snapped out of it and jumped to his feet, looking really shocked and embarrassed at the same time, and before they could say anything else, he was apologising profusely and locking himself in the bathroom.

"He's just really confused." Sam had said helpfully after a long beat of silence, resuming his Candy Crushing determinedly as Steve flopped onto his bed and groaned. "Natasha said he'd be. Give him time."

Barnes had emerged from the bathroom soon enough, and they all suddenly decided to pretend that nothing had happened.

The only difference now is that Steve speaks so nicely to Barnes that Sam feels a little nauseated. Especially when they resume arguing about their next destination. Now they're both being equally stubborn but a hell lot more passive-aggressive, because Steve doesn't want to trigger Barnes again, and Barnes obviously still thinks he's in danger of being punished or something.

Sam is determined to remain a non-participating party (because apparently he's illogical and
irrelevant), so he keeps his head down and tries to clear Level 491, being as invisible as he can while still listening to the whole thing. He's never hated those little chocolate squares more.

"You're recuperating," Steve points out reasonably, with all the patience of a grown-up. "Another HYDRA base is out of the question, at least for another week."

"The injuries are not serious. I'm fully functional," Barnes replies, just as calm. His face is blank and emotionless, and he's holding himself completely still where he's sitting. "On a normal mission. I would be cleared for duty."

Oh, Barnes, tell me you're not going there.

"By people who think it's okay for you to be in pain."

"By people who assess the situation. Logically. Prioritise accordingly."

You are so going there.

"So you're saying I have poor judgement?"

Here we go. Sam sucks in a breath and buys another batch of extra lives, because Tony hasn't sent him any for days. Asshole probably saw him catching up.

Barnes snarls, his jaw twitching dangerously. He's wound like a spring. Sam wonders belatedly if he's armed. "I'm saying, HYDRA is time-efficient. I don't have time. For this."

"Are you even listening to yourself?" Steve's getting riled up again, probably because he's angry about Barnes comparing him to HYDRA and is not-so-subtly suggesting that they've managed him better. "I'm asking you to take care of yourself, not sit around and rot. I'm telling you we can't go to another base just as blind and stupid as we did the last one, because we all know how that turned out, or do I have to remind you? Here, why don't you ask Sam if there's a chance he can hold a gun properly anytime soon - or I'll call Nat over and you can take a picture of what you did to her so you'll never forget -"

"I don't have time for this," Barnes repeats, slamming his bandaged palm onto the table, as if to prove that the injury is really not that bad.

"Well, tough," Steve snaps back, glowering hard and breathing through his nose. "Where's that legendary patience of yours, huh? Or did you lose that too when you fell off that damn train in '44?"

Sam knows Steve regrets it the moment the words escape his mouth, and he almost hisses through his teeth in sympathy. He's been making really dumb swaps on his game the entire time. Another life wasted. The moment stretches out.

"Buck -" Steve starts, his voice breaking a little. "I didn't -"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. The urgency of the situation," Barnes finally says, his voice hollow. His eyes are cold and flinty as he stares down Steve from where he's sitting. His words come out slow and measured, each of them punching out deliberately. "You know who would. Rumlow."

Pop-pop-pop-pling!

Delicious.

A perfectly-timed combo. Sam even gets a special candy from that. It's a riveting game.
Steve mumbles something about getting some air and walks out of the room. The door clicks shut behind him, and Barnes barely blinks. Doesn't move an inch.

Sam purses his lips and closes his game, finally looking up with a sigh. "God, watching the both of you bicker. It's like an episode of Rules of Engagement."

"I said something wrong," Barnes says, in his weird toneless way where Sam can't tell if it's a question or a statement.

"You done fucked up now," Sam agrees lightly, waving his hand dismissively. "Don't worry too much about it. To be fair, Steve said some shit too."

"I'm sorry." For a cold-blooded ex-assassin, this guy sure apologises a hell lot. "When I talk to him. My head gets all. Sometimes I don't know where the words come from."

Sam secretly takes that as a good sign. "Are you kidding me? You arguing with him is the most human you've sounded yet."

Barnes continues to stare at the door for a good five minutes, so Sam decides to spare him. "He'll be back, just let him cool off a bit."

Then, because he's out of lives again and has already spent about twenty bucks on the damn game, Sam turns on the television, casually flipping through the channels. There must be at least a hundred random European channels on this thing. Where are the damn English channels? He hopes he can find some HBO on this thing. Or maybe the Disney channel. Cheer Barnes up a bit.

Barnes crosses the room to sit beside him, and he stares mutely for a long time as Sam keeps flipping. "Stop."

"Hmm?" Sam hums, non-committal, thumb still excessively jabbing the Channel Up button.

"Saw something. Go back."

Sighing grudgingly, he backtracks. He finds what Barnes spotted, and they watch the screen in silence.

"Footage suggests that the attack was carried out by three helicopters operating under command of the Mandarin, who most recently claimed responsibility for the bombing at the Grauman's Chinese Theatre."

The news report isn't breaking. It's been playing on repeat for maybe the past two days now.

He doesn't know how much time has passed, but Steve finally comes back with a bag of apology-kebabs that smell downright sinful. Sam's gaze is still fixed on the television.

"Hey, Cap?" he says slowly, as the heavenly smell of greasy meat wafts closer. Somehow, it doesn't lift his spirits as much as he'd expect them to. "Looks like New York's out of the question."

Sam's watched it enough times that he's sure he can recite the announcer's lines by heart already. The news anchor yammers on needlessly, but the picture beside her face says it all: a still image of what used to be a cliffside mansion, now a shapeless mass of concrete and steel, the rest of it razed right to the sea. Sam knows the exact moment that Steve reads its caption, because his eyes widen and his jaw slackens.

TERROR ATTACK IN PARADISE: TONY STARK PRESUMED DEAD
They eat their kebabs in silence. Steve did his over-ordering thing again, and Sam's looking at the mountain of food apprehensively, but the guy easily inhales his two giant stinking rolls like a dying man. The sauce barely has any time to leak anywhere. Barnes manages to finish half, then seems to give up and pushes the remainder to Steve, who takes it like he expected it, aaaand it's gone.

Sam finishes his because kebabs are love, no matter what the occasion. After he's done, though, he doesn't even have the heart to resume his Candy Crush game, even though he knows his lives have fully regenerated by now. He thinks about how he hasn't received any lives from Stark in the past few days. Well. Now he knows why.

He can definitely cut tension in the room with a spoon right now. And eat it like jello. Barnes has retreated to the far corner of the room, dragging a chair and setting it against the wall, and writing feverishly in a notebook Sam hasn't seen before. Steve's bouncing a knee so hard his leg's almost a blur, rapping his fingers on the edge of the table to boot. The television's still on the same channel - Sam decided to leave it on in case there's any breaking news or updates - but they've muted it.

Sam's usually a pro at breaking awkward silences. He knows it. It's his talent. He can't think of anything to say now. Tony Stark, MIA. It leaves them all feeling more bereft than ever. If they had minimal support before, now it feels they have none. The sounds of Steve's anxiety isn't helping.

"Stop that," Barnes finally says, looking up from his writing and scowling over at Steve. "Can't hear anything with that noise."

There's nothing to hear, Sam almost points out, but says nothing instead. Steve inhales sharply, his eyes getting sort of sad, then stills with great effort. He's chewing on the inside of his cheek now, Sam can see it. Can almost hear it too, in the ringing silence, the ripe roll of flesh under his teeth. "All right," Steve finally bites out. "All right. We'll go to Poland."

Chapter End Notes

Side note: I find that Candy Crush music is 1) extremely soothing and 2) the ultimate tension-breaker. Great for serious situations. Sam thinks so too.
Steve

It's November, 1940, and the Selective Training and Service Act has been running for two months now. The war in Europe's escalating, and men are getting drafted into the military. There's talk that America'll join in soon enough.

Nearly everyone Steve knows who's been drafted so far has gone kicking and screaming. It leaves him bitter with disgust. It makes him think about his long-lost father, drafted and killed in action in the first World War before he was even born. Steve has no pictures of the man. His mother had always described him like a god, and Steve grew to behold his father in that divine light: honest, good, kind, honourable. That was his father. Drafted, sure, but he fought and died for his country like a hero.

Not like the punks in the streets of today, openly discussing possible ways of bailing out on the system, looking for loopholes, and joking about winning the death lottery.

Steve stumbles through their front door with blood tracking down his chin and all over the front of his shirt. Immediately, Bucky tosses his paper aside, making angry snarling noises and setting his hands heavily on his shoulders. Steve closes his eyes and sways a little, shaking his head until Bucky stops for a breath.

"Someone has to stick it to the big guy," he explains thickly through a crooked nose, spraying blood on every hard consonant.

Bucky looks furious, his lips pressed into a thin white line. He looks like he wants to lay a few on Steve himself. Then he sighs and produces a soggy ice-filled cloth like it's a situation he's well-prepared for, and presses it down a little too hard. "Maybe someone has to get over the fact that he ain't one of the big guys."

Steve glares at him as fiercely as he can through his swollen eyelids. "Don't start with that," he snaps, and makes to shove the ice pack away.

Bucky smacks his hand away and presses harder, ignoring Steve's indignant yelp. "What am I gonna do with you, huh? I turn my back one second and you're hitting just about anyone you can find with your face -"

"He was moanin' about the government," Steve insists sourly, licking at the blood on his lips. Some of it has begun to crust already.

"So what? So fuckin' what? You work for the mayor now, is that it? It's none of your business, Steve, and sure as hell not something worth breakin' your mug for!" He shoves hard at Steve's shoulders and forces him to the bed. Steve relents and sinks onto the hard-sprung platform, letting Bucky ease his blood-stained shirt off his pale shoulders while taking the ice pack into his own hand. A familiar routine.

"Talking smack about the draft," Steve continues, a little more subdued this time, voice softly muffled by the wet rag on his face.

Bucky scowls harder, but looks a little less spitting mad. "Look, cut those guys a break, all right? Nobody wants to fight in a goddamn war. They got families. They don't wanna go. Leave them be."

"'S not right," Steve mutters stubbornly, waving the cold lump of cloth around a bit. It drips all over the side of the bed, and Bucky snatches it back and presses mercilessly again. "Ow - I mean, sure, it's
not - nobody wants to die, but if they'd just stop bitchin' about it and makin' it seem all bad..."

"Isn't it?"

"No higher honour than fighting for what's right."

"Asshole. If you could hear yourself now -" 

"Shut it. They don't know how much it means."

Steve seethes sullenly, bitterly. He's bitterly jealous of them when he shouldn't be, he knows, but he can't help it. "Why can't I be there, huh? Gimme the chance. I'd trade bodies with them in a heartbeat."

"Steve."

"Think they'd prefer that? Become a little shorter. Skinnier, sicker. Get to stay home with ma and pa like the useless cowards they are."

"Steve. Stop it."

Bucky huffs. "That's enough. Shut your damn trap if you know what's good for you. Ain't nothing you'd understand, so just shut it. God, you're giving me a headache."

"They can do something, Buck. They can honest-to-God do something with their lives, and they don't see it," Steve rambles on, lying back obediently as Bucky rubs at the blood on his chin and neck with another wet rag.

"Tell me about it," Bucky mutters sarcastically, rolling his eyes. He's probably heard this speech a thousand times now, but Steve's on a roll now, so he doesn't say anything else.

Steve carries on blithely, wistfully. "And here I am, beggin' to get enlisted and gettin' 4F cards thrown in my face. 'S not right."

Bucky says nothing and potters about efficiently: putting the shirt in a basin to soak, rinsing the rags and draping them over the window grille, fetching their small first-aid kit. He rummages through the sad little thing, looking upset. Steve knows what he's thinking now.

"When we make it big, Stevie, first thing I'm gonna do is buy the biggest God damn first-aid box," he'd said once, when Steve had yet again crashed through their door looking like fresh roadkill. "Stock a crate full of the shit. Enough space for a whole hospital in there. God. You trainin' me to be a nurse, that it? Look at you."

Bucky doesn't say it this time, just sets the sorry little thing carefully on the floor beside their equally sorry mattress, and rolls out a few precious strips of bandage. Counts out the plasters and measures out the tape. He finally meets Steve's eyes, and it's an expression Steve doesn't remember seeing before. "Careful what you wish for, Stevie," he murmurs finally, and Steve gets a horrible feeling in his gut.

Then Bucky grins and wrenches Steve's nose into place.

---

It's not really a surprise when Steve gets a text from a random local number after they're done eating their kebabs.

*Stay safe. I'll be in touch.*

Just like that, Natasha's gone. What was that stupid saying, how did it go? Something like find
something, lose something else in the process.

Well, she can take care of herself. And it's not the first time she's done this. It's kind of her thing, and Steve can almost say he's used to it. At least she texted first. Steve feels a little relieved that she chose to go, judging from the way she and Bucky skirted around each other. It's probably for the best that she keep her distance for now. Until everything settles down. It will, it has to.

Steve's been trying to book flight tickets to Warsaw for the past hour, it seems. It's not that he can't do it. He's just a little distracted, that's all. Bucky - James - hasn't said a word to him since their small argument and he feels like he should say something, but the guy won't even look at him.

He's distracted because Bucky's sitting in a corner with his back pressed up against the wall, scribbling into a notebook in a really intense way, like he's trying to see if he can destroy it by writing hard enough. The picture is all wrong.

Steve tries to break it down, taking in his expression, the way he holds his shoulders, the way he sits. The way he's writing. It's all wrong. Bucky was a first-rate sloucher, always lounging against anything in his immediate vicinity as though he belonged there, as though he owned the place. He even got away with it in the military, more than anyone else. This Bucky places himself lightly in the chair, straight-backed and rigid. His shoulders tilt a little to the right, as if overcompensating for the weight of his metal arm. Steve wonders exactly how heavy it is. It would be, if it's solid metal.

Steve tears his eyes away and looks at his laptop screen again. He's never been great at using computers and is terrible at the Internet thing, but Sam had refused to help him.

"It's not difficult, man," he'd said flippantly. "If you don't figure it out on your own, you'll never learn."

That was an hour ago, and it's late, and Sam is snoring softly into his pillow. Bucky's still scratching vindictively at his notebook. Steve's eyes hurt from the glare of the laptop. There are too many things on the page and he doesn't know what to click. Stark had told him, a long time ago, to be really careful about clicking, because if he clicked on an advertisement by accident, the computer would get infected by a virus and the big corporations would be able to track his activity and they'd need to buy a new laptop.

Stark would have been able to help him get the tickets. Steve feels sad all over again.

Everything on the webpage looks like an advertisement. The only one he knows he shouldn't click is a dodgy videoclip of cartoon girls in skimpy clothing that makes Steve really uncomfortable. Maybe that's why Sam didn't want to help. He didn't want to see these stupid pictures himself.

He frowns and scrolls on. There's a picture on the side that says "Do not click on this red button!" and it takes all his willpower not to click it. When he looks back up, he realises that Bucky has finally stopped writing and is watching him intently. Steve shifts in his seat uneasily.

"What?" he demands, feeling a little stupid. He looks back at the screen quickly and clicks on a calendar. Another window pops up and the calendar appears again, bigger this time. Is it the same calendar? How does he know if the date is correct? Why are there two calendars? Who the hell programs these things?

"How long does it take. To book tickets."

Oh, that's how it is. The guy doesn't remember who he's supposed to be, but he sure as hell remembers how to pick a fight with Steve. And turn on the sass.
"I'm not a computer expert," Steve hisses, fighting the urge to slam the little device shut. He can feel his face start to burn a little. Sam snores on, sleeping like the dead.

Bucky stalks over and snatches the thing from Steve's lap, taking it to his corner. Steve can't help but feel a little relieved. He lets Bucky frown over the confusing Internet and goes to brush his teeth and get ready for bed.

"Flight 1620HRS. Costs €340 for three tickets. Confirm," Bucky announces stonily about fifteen minutes later. Steve's sure he can detect a hint of triumph in his tone, but chooses to ignore it. Bucky's always been better at picking up new tricks. He's not going to get all jealous about it.

"Okay. Aren't you going to sleep? I got the sofa bed set up for you." Steve points to the deconstructed sofa in front of the television.

"Confirm purchase," Bucky repeats, twirling a card back and forth between his metal fingers. Click, click, click. It's Steve's credit card, which he rarely uses - his stomach twists a little as he remembers with a jolt that Stark had gotten it for him. It's also supposed to be in his wallet.

"How did - never mind. Yeah, book it," Steve shrugs and pulls at his bed covers. "Then try to catch some sleep, okay?"

"I don't sleep."

"Everyone needs sleep," Steve points out patiently, fussing at the layers of blankets. Hotel beds are confusing and Steve will never get used to the multitudes of sheets and blankets on them.

Bucky ignores him and stands up, putting on his jacket and making for the door, making Steve freeze in his actions and panic a little. Is he going to run away again?

"Go to sleep," Bucky turns around to say mechanically. "Not going anywhere. We have a flight to catch."

Okay. He has a point. Steve can't trust himself to speak, so he nods tersely and forces himself under the covers. He's pretty sure he won't be able to fall asleep until Bucky comes back.

---

If Bucky's used to him stumbling through the front door half-dead from a sound beating, Steve's used to Bucky coming in in the dead of night, making a racket because he's a little tipsy and reeking of the cigarettes he refuses to smoke near Steve. Sometimes there are telltale smudges of red lipstick along his jaw and on the corners of his mouth. Most of the time, he'd be humming to himself, still moving a little to whatever the last song was at the dance, his eyes glittering in enjoyment as he flicked on the light.

"You shoulda' been there, Stevie," he'd half-shout, slamming the front door a little too hard and throwing his jacket onto the floor.

Steve would stir in bed, still half-asleep, faintly annoyed at the disturbance. "Keep it down, Buck," he'd complain, burying his face into the thin pillow.

Bucky wouldn't keep it down. Alcohol had the tendency to make him half-deaf, it seemed, and more talkative than ever before. He'd move about the apartment, pouring himself some water, narrating the night's events in explicit detail and singing out bits of the music he'd liked the most, all the while slowly undressing and leaving his clothes in random stink-piles on the floor.
Most of the time, he'd be too out of it to even shower first, and would heave his half-dressed self onto the bed and fall asleep almost immediately in his usual position: his back to Steve, breathing gently and drooling onto the arm he'd tucked under his head. By then, Steve would be fully awake, fuming silently into his side of the pillow and wondering what he'd done to deserve such a disgusting roommate, let alone share a bed with the damn jerk.

It's January 1941 and Steve can't really fall asleep because the apartment is freezing and they haven't had enough money to repair the heating since it conked out before Christmas. He waits, shivering, for Bucky to get home, wondering what time it is. It feels like Bucky's later than usual.

When he finally comes in through the door, Steve knows something's off. He lies in the dark while the terrible smell of cigarette smoke permeates the room, waiting for Bucky to jostle him awake with a tale or two of his sordid deeds of the night. The door slams, but the apartment remains dark. Bucky's breathing heavily, ragged, while he drags himself across the threshold before sliding down the far wall onto the floor. He sits there silently for a long while, and Steve doesn't know what to do. He can't guess what must have happened, but it probably wasn't anything good.

He closes his eyes, evens out his breathing and keeps still, his mind racing. He waits. The silence stretches out between them, tight and brittle in the cold apartment.

"Steve. You awake?" Bucky whispers finally from where he is. He doesn't move to get up or come closer.

Steve licks his lips cautiously, and even though it's dark and the most he can see is Bucky's shapeless form against the wall, he keeps his eyes shut. "Yeah," he croaks softly.

Bucky lets out a long groan and doesn't say anything else for a long time. They listen to each other's breathing, each of them still and shivering, as the darkness seems gape between them.

"Remember that time you got into a fight?" Bucky breathes.

Which time, Steve wants to answer, but he knows it's a rhetorical question. Of course he remembers.

"Y'were so mad at those poor boys whinin' 'bout gettin' drafted," Bucky continues quietly, but his words are almost deafening in the still room. His voice is brittle, like he's about to cry. Steve says nothing.

Bucky breaks the silence once more. "Stevie. You gonna get mad at me?"

---

Turns out he did manage to fall asleep after all, because he wakes up with a jolt and blinks in the darkness in confusion, wondering what startled him.

There are low sounds coming from across the room near the door, and Sam's voice drifts over, urgent and insistent. Steve throws off his covers and pads towards the sound.

As he gets closer, the smell of cigarettes fills his nose. Bucky's leaning on the wall, humming under his breath and laughing a little every time Sam tries to pull him away one-handed.

He bats at Sam drunkenly. "Stop. Don't interrupt." Then he carries on humming, his cheek pressed into the wallpaper. He's stroking its textured surface reverently with his fingers. "You're a sky full of stars. Hmmm." 

"James?" Steve calls out tentatively, and Sam whirls around. Even in the dark, his face is clearly
"Steve. You gotta take it away from him," Sam mutters urgently.

"What's going on?" This is so bizarre. Steve thinks of Bucky coming home late at night, dazed and delighted from a night of drinking. This is a whole new level. "What happened to him? Bucky, did you drink something?"

"He was a little like this when I found him at the base. Called it painkiller but I'd bet my left nut it's acid," Sam says darkly. "Should've taken it away from him when he was out."

"No. Don't take it away. Please." Bucky's eyes have found Steve's and he claws his way closer, as if the wallpaper were the floor. Steve gapes at him, horrified.

"Sam, get the light." Steve reaches out to put a hand on his Bucky's shoulder. "Hey. Let's get you to bed."

Bucky leans his whole weight into the touch, and Steve has to brace himself quickly to prevent from falling over. "Whoa." He wonders how heavy that arm is, again.

"Sorry," Bucky mumbles, then the light comes on and he blinks slowly in surprise. He locks eyes with Steve and looks at him like it's the first time they're seeing each other. "Your eyes are blue."

"It's too early for this shit," Sam declares from somewhere behind him. Steve silently agrees and drags Bucky over to his bed. The guy is slow-limbed and sloppy, a little like how Bucky used to be when he was drunk.

"Sorry," he says to the bed as he sinks onto it immediately and rolls onto his back. He looks blearily in Steve's direction. "Sorry. I had to."

"What did you have to do, Buck?" Steve asks softly, getting down to pull off his shoes and socks. He looks away when he sees the missing toes: two on the right, one on the left.

"You told me to sleep. And." Bucky sighs and fixes his gaze onto the ceiling suddenly, frowning and mouthing silently for awhile, then suddenly remembers he hasn't finished his sentence yet. "The painkiller. Helps me sleep."

Steve helps Bucky out of his jacket and shirt and tosses the jacket to Sam, who immediately starts checking the pockets thoroughly. "You need a painkiller to sleep?"

"This one is good. This. When I take it... Steve. When I take it, I can remember." He suddenly sounds so young. This is Bucky. It is. Steve's vision blurs a little as he drags Bucky into a decent position, putting his head on the pillow. "I know you want me to remember."

Behind them, there are soft rustling sounds as Sam rifles through the pockets and swears under his breath.

"What do you remember?" He draws the covers up and tucks Bucky in tenderly, tears welling in his eyes.

Bucky doesn't reply. He's staring at the ceiling again, nodding his head slowly like he's listening to a tune, and smiling a little. He's crying too, Steve notices with a jolt: fat tears rolling down his temples and into his hair. Steve watches helplessly, aching painfully at the sight, until Bucky's eyes finally close and his breathing evens out.
He wipes at his face hurriedly before turning around. There's a small mountain of trinkets that Sam has unearthed from the jacket: a pair of Mickey Mouse sunglasses, a lighter and cigarettes, two knives, a tinted glass bottle, a few Snapple caps. Sam has the small black book in his hands, his eyes scanning through the writing as his eyebrows go higher. As Steve approaches, he closes the book and shakes his head. Wordlessly, Steve takes the little book off his hands and thumbs it open carefully.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

CUT HAIR
OLIVER THREAT NEGATIVE
DISNEYLAND MOTHERFUCKER
CALL YOURSELF NIKOLAI
WHAT DID CIGARETTES TASTE LIKE?? DID YOU SMOKE?
WEDNESDAY GOOD SUNSET
MUSEUM LIGHTS, YES
SPACE MOUNTAIN NOOO
FIREWORKS?? BIRTHDAY?? LINK
FIND THE THE THING HYDRA

DON'T TAKE 4 DROPS
2 GOOD
GO TO BELGIUM

YOU KILLED RUMLOW
YOU KILLED NIKOLAI YOUR FAULT
2002 MISSION?
1989 MISSION?

RED GIRL IS NATALIA
2005 ODESSA
MISSION?
YOU CHOSE NATALIA
YOU KILLED THE OTHERS??

YOU KNOW ROGERS. TARGET NEGATIVE
NOISY MAN WILSON LOW THREAT

SNOW.

HIS FACE HIS EYES BLUE
RUMLOW IS DEAD
YOU KILLED HIM
HE PULLED YOU FROM THE FIRE
VIETNAM
HE GAVE YOU THE ICE
HE HAS THE SERUM??
YOUR LEG.
HE SAVED YOUR LEG

SERGEANT BARNES
DYING IN A CAGE
WHERE? VIETNAM?
YOU WERE ON FIRE
TABLE
SOMEONE SAVED YOU
WHO SAVED YOU
RUMLOW?? FIRE??

731. FIRE

ROGERS SAYS YOU FELL OFF A TRAIN
MUSEUM CONFIRM
1944. SNOW?

Steve turned the page.

NEW JERSEY
SEATTLE
BEHRINGER FORST - 2
MINSK - 4
MACHELEN - 1
PRUSZKÓW - 3

1958 MIG-17

NIKOLAI 2002
INTERNET
BOOKS
MISSION?
NOT HIM. SPY
PROFESSOR

RUMLOW
VIETNAM
HE KNOWS THE WORDS
PROTECT
HE KNOWS CAMBODIA?
MISSION?

He can't read it anymore. Steve closes the book and slips it back into the jacket, feeling an odd combination of confused and hopeful. "He's starting to remember."

"Oh, is that what it was?" Sam asks tightly. He's examining the glass bottle now with a twisted look on his face. "I'm gonna flush this shit before he ends up killing someone. Or himself."

"No - wait." Steve grabs Sam's wrist suddenly. "He - it. He said it helps him."

Sam shoots him a sharp look. He's always been able to see right through Steve. "That look like a healthy man to you, Rogers?" Sam jabs his chin over to Bucky's prone figure. "This stuff's dangerous. There's a reason why it's illegal, for fuck's sake."

"I know - look. I'll keep it, okay? Just in case. I promise I won't let him do anything." He feels the words stick in his throat and wonders if he's lying to himself.

"I don't care what he does," Sam scoffs disdainfully. "I'm worried about you." He eyes Steve
suspiciously, then pushes the bottle into his hand. "Don't make me regret this, Cap."

Steve nods fractionally and keeps the bottle in his bag. They'll deal with that later. He settles down onto the sofa bed, but he doesn't sleep anymore. He watches Bucky lying flat on his back on the bed, so still and silent that he could be dead.

The picture's all wrong.
The Asset

He dreams of lying on a cold table, and of being on fire.

He knows his death is coming soon. He can feel his breath catching, his insides bubbling over. His lungs are fit to burst with an itch so deep it hurts everywhere. It hurts so much that it blinds him. He knows he's chanting a name and a number, but in the dream he only hears two words.

He's too delirious to realise it when a new pain spreads through him, foreign and unwelcome. Dying hurts so much more than he thought it would.

He closes his eyes and tries to think about the people in his unit. He hopes they'll get out safe, somehow. He thinks about home, a place that he can't remember the name of. He can't remember what's inside the home, but he knows its smells and colours. He thinks of those. He thinks of a small face, glowing bright-eyed and stubborn in the slanting light of day. It's a familiar face, and it keeps him calm. He grits his teeth and gives in to the fire.

Time stands still. He doesn't know if it's because he's dying, or because it's a dream. Maybe he has already died. The fire rages, and his words falter. The table gets colder, the straps tighter. He's always wanted a quick death, but life isn't so kind, he knows that now.

Daysweeksmonthseyears? The fire ebbs away, so slowly and imperceptibly that he thinks he's simply getting used to it. But it really does go away slowly. Bit by bit, his vision clears. There are people moving around him, speaking excitedly in hushed tones. He starts spitting out his mantra again, and they ignore him.

It isn't long before the pain starts again, always different, always varied. First they make small cuts all along his arms and nod to each other. It gets worse from there: the cuts get longer, deeper. They peel the skin off the back of his hand with a knife and scribble furiously onto clipboards. They pull his fingernails out, one by one, and put them into little containers and carry them away like precious jewellery. It doesn't end.

He mumbles his words, over and over, through it all. He doesn't know how long they hurt him. His hunger comes, goes, comes, then passes altogether. They let him drink two bowls of water a day. His muscles ache from being immobile for so long, but he's too tired and hungry to move.

He waits for his death, but it doesn't come.

Someone comes instead. In the dream, he's singing his name like a song, then a face swims into view. The face is familiar yet unfamiliar, its features ever-changing and malleable.

"Sergeant Barnes," the face chokes out, and fumbles at his straps. The face sharpens and it's Rumlow, his mouth wide and laughing. He's come to save him. He closes his eyes and wishes he'd died instead.

When he opens his eyes, it's not Rumlow anymore. It's a stranger. He's tall and built like a tank, all gold hair and blue eyes, and his face is smudged with dirt. He's speaking, but the words warp like they're both underwater.

"Sergeant Barnes?" he finally finds his voice and squints at his saviour. The face ripples. It's Rumlow, it's not. It's Steve, but not Steve. "Sergeant Barnes?" he asks again, disbelievingly.

"Sergeant Barnes," the man helps him up from the table. He winces and looks down at himself. He's
covered in dirt and grime and his own stinking filth. It's revolting. He doesn't remember how it happened.

His arms are smooth and whole, albeit stringy and bony. It confuses him to no end, and he opens his mouth to ask a question, but the man is leading him out of the room in a hurry.

He changes into the uniform of a dead comrade, and they escape the place together. His unit is waiting for them outside. They look at him in confusion and wonder. He wonders if any of this is real. Not-Steve leads them on a long march, and he follows because it's all he can do. It may be a dream. He's half-convincing he's still on the table. He's half-convincing he's already dead.

---

He wakes up and knows he's not dead. His entire body is heavy with sleep. It gets like this when he takes the painkiller.

He sits up slowly and realises he'd fallen asleep in Rogers' bed. Rogers is slouched on the sofa bed across the floor, watching him with half-lidded eyes. He looks like he needs to sleep.

"You look like you need to sleep," James says.

"What do you remember?" Rogers asks immediately, uncurling from his position and moving closer. "Tell me."

James blinks in surprise. "I went out. Bought cigarettes, smoked them downstairs -"

"No. I mean from before." Rogers is relentless. The clock on the nightstand shows 0823HRS. Wilson is not in the room.

"Where is Wilson," James asks instead.

"Popped out for some breakfast." Rogers is biting his lip. "Don't change the subject."

"I don't know what you expect from me." The line comes out rushed and James looks down at his hands. He remembers so much, but he remembers so little. It's always wrong, or not enough. He doesn't want to disappoint Rogers. He wants to tell Rogers that he remembers him, but he can't.

"What did you dream about?" Rogers presses. Unrelenting. Stubborn bastard. His brain throbs strangely and he clenches his jaw against the discomfort.

"Nothing." He thinks of THE CHAIR. He isn't supposed to have dreams. But that was HYDRA, wasn't it? If HYDRA didn't want him to have dreams, maybe they were good things.

"Is it wrong," he blurts. He needs to know.

"What's wrong?" Rogers is on his feet, padding closer to his bed. He settles down on the end of the bed. He looks disappointed. His eyes are blue.

"If I dream," James clarifies, then cringes at how stupid the question sounds. Of course it's not wrong.

Rogers cringes too. "No," he says quietly, evenly. He lays a hand on the sheets. "No, it's not."

James lets out a slow breath. "They didn't like when I slept," he confesses. "They didn't like when I dreamed." THE CHAIR. He shudders and looks at the bandage on his hand.
Rogers' question comes again. "What did you dream about?"

He closes his eyes and remembers the cold table and the hot fire. He wets his lips nervously. "In my dreams. All the words are the same. When people talk. Laugh. Scream."

"What do they say?"

"Sergeant Barnes."

Rogers' eyes are blue and wet. His cheeks glisten. "That's you, Buck. You've been in there, the whole time."

"No. I didn't know," James insists. Rogers doesn't understand. "You don't understand. I know now because of the museum. Didn't know. Not then. Why it was the only thing I could hear. Asked them who Sergeant Barnes was. Then they knew. They put me in THE CHAIR."

Rogers nods and says nothing. Tears drip off his jaw onto the sheets.

"I learnt to stop sleeping so much. Dreams stopped. But when I take the painkiller, they come back." James levels a look at Rogers. "I want to remember."

Rogers nods again. "I know you do." His voice wobbles. He looks so sad. It makes James feel a little sad, too. He doesn't want Rogers to be sad.

"I dreamt. Last night. About a table." He looks at Rogers to see if he should carry on.

"The table was cold. I was on the table and I thought. I was going to die. Maybe I was, at one point. Then I wasn't. There were people around me and the table. It had straps. I could only hear the two words. Sergeant Barnes, over and over. They hurt me a lot. Took my fingernails. Don't know why."

"Don't know how long it was. In a dream time is. Not accurate. Someone came to take me out. His face changes all the time. Sometimes it's - I don't know. The dream ends with us walking. Don't know where we're going. We're walking and I'm thinking. That maybe I'm not supposed to be alive."

Rogers' shoulders begin to shake, and James stops talking. "I'm sorry," he says immediately. "Thought you would - be happy. To know what I dream. It doesn't mean anything." He feels a little sick from talking so much, like maybe he should be punished for it. Especially when Rogers is looking upset because of it. He sits and watches Rogers cry silently and unreservedly. Neither of them moves from where they're sitting.

Eventually Rogers stops and swipes at his face, inhaling wetly. His knuckles are covered in a film of tears, and James' head throbs more.

"Bucky," he says finally, and James doesn't bother to correct him. "That was me. It was real, it really happened. I saved you. I'd heard that the 107th was captured. I got Howard and Peggy to drop me right into that camp just to look for you."

James frowns. No, it had to be a dream. "Unlikely. Real mission would require backup."

Rogers lets out a shaky laugh. "Didn't have that option. I thought you'd died. I - I needed to know."

"High risk," James scowls accusingly. Rogers doesn't know how to take care of himself. The dull pain behind his brow throbs insistently. "You went into a prisoner of war camp without backup. For one man."
"Ended up saving pretty much the whole company," Rogers supplies helpfully, shrugging. Modest person.

"Stupid plan. Could have gotten yourself killed," James snipes, but his vision darkens from the hurt in his head, so he stops and breathes deeply, thinking slowly. "It was you."

"Yeah, Buck. It was."

"You looked different." James isn't convinced. The warping face in the dream swims into view. Rumlow's face, framed by gold-spun hair. Not Rumlow? Not Steve?

His head. It hurts.

"You said that too. It was the first time you'd seen me after I took the serum."

James hums noncommittally. "I thought. That maybe it was Rumlow."

Rogers looks shocked, then deeply offended. "No," he hisses. "Don't you dare. God. How could you - of course it wasn't Rumlow, how could you even think that?"

"He saved me too," James says quickly. "You wouldn't understand. Nobody understands. Rumlow may have been HYDRA, but Rumlow had cared, too.

He remembers pushing his hand into Rumlow's face again, and closes his eyes. He slides his hand under the sheets, tracing along his right thigh absent-mindedly, feeling the terrible scarring even through the track pants he's wearing. Sometimes it still hurts, a thumping acid-burn in his bones, but he doesn't know why. "From the fire. I'm sorry. It. I get it mixed up."

"Tell me," Rogers demands. So he does.

Rogers doesn't ask him about Rumlow after that, but his eyes drift to James' right leg occasionally. James ignores it.

---

The flight to Poland is short and uneventful. It would have been better, but Rogers has taken the painkiller and isn't giving it back. "You're not in pain," he'd pointed out, with a raised eyebrow. James lets it go. For now.

Wilson had given James a tiny iPod before they left the hotel room, so James had that at least to listen to during the journey.

"What is it for," James had said, pressing the buttons experimentally and watching the screen light up. He has to hold it carefully. The thing is small and he can crush it if he's not paying attention.

All Wilson said was, "You deserve to get high to better tunes than Nicki Minaj."

James looked at Rogers quizzically, but he shrugged in response. Don't look at me, I don't understand him either. "Thank you."

He tries it out on the plane. He listens to a band called The Beatles and stares at the back of the seat in front of him. The songs are nice, but then again, he's always liked music. He's sure of it, even though he knows he hasn't listened to music for a long time. He's sure he would have liked to listen to The Nicki Minaj too, whoever those people are. He learns the lyrics as best he can. He thinks about the last flight he was on, when he watched Gone with the Wind. Something stirs in his
memory, faint and fleeting.

He pulls an earbud out and elbows Rogers. "Gone with the Wind."

"What?"

"It's a movie. Do you know it."

"Ye - yeah," Rogers sits up excitedly, his voice raising a little. "We watched it together. D'you remember? You snuck us into the theater because you were boning that girl - I don't remember her name. She worked at the ticket office."

"You need kissing. Badly. By someone who knows how." His head only hurts very slightly. He doesn't recall watching the movie with Rogers, but he knows he's definitely seen it before.

Rogers laughs tremulously, looking delighted. "That dumb line. God. You used it on every single dame for the next three months. You wanted to be Clark Gable."

"The actor," James asks incredulously. Did he really?

"Spent hours in front of the mirror getting your hair just right," Rogers snorts quietly. His eyes are shining and blue. "Damn near drove me crazy."

James hums in acknowledgement and absently lifts his hand to his hair. The bandage is gone now, and the swelling is down, but the scabs and bruises remain. He touches his hair softly with the flat of his palm and imagines it cut like the man in the movie.

Rogers smiles stupidly wide, and James looks away pointedly. He closes his eyes as The Beatles sing about the sun.

---

They make their way to the car rental shop near the airport after touching down and clearing customs, because Rogers looked upset when James had told him there were plenty of free cars in the parking lot to choose from. James had relented because it's not his problem if Rogers insists on wasting money on irrelevant things. It's not his money. He tries not to think about the cost of car rental and how many drops of painkiller it could buy.

Rogers insists on driving. Wilson doesn't complain because his hand is in recovery. James feels like he should say something about it, because he knows it was his fault. There's nothing to say, though, that will make it heal faster. So he doesn't say anything. Instead, he leans forward in between the two front seats and watches his phone game. It looks complicated. Lots of colours and shapes. The music is melodic but repetitive.

"What is that game," he finally asks, and Wilson jumps in his seat.

"It's called Candy Crush," Rogers says helpfully. "Stark told me you can upload it -"

" - download -" Wilson corrects.

" - load it on your phone, it's called an -"

"Application." James clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Wasn't born yesterday."

"Barnes, I like you more and more. Really. With each passing day," Wilson gushes. Then he swears as the words Out Of Moves appears on the screen. "Here, you try. I've been stuck at this level
since California."

"What is the objective."

Wilson twists in his seat uncomfortably and starts explaining. It doesn't seem difficult. " - and you have to think carefully, because if you run outta moves, you have to start over."

It takes him almost the rest of the car ride, because he considers each move very carefully. Eventually, he clears the level in three tries. "Success," he says, dropping the phone back into Wilson's lap.

"How the hell?" Wilson checks his phone disbelievingly. "That's not even fair. You're one lucky motherfucker, you know that?"

"It's not luck. Like any other mission. Mostly strategy. Patience." He watches Wilson's face intently in the rearview mirror, feeling his mouth curl to one side. He likes it when he's successful.

"You creep me the fuck out, Barnes," Wilson snaps in response, tossing his phone aside like it's personally offending him. Rogers is laughing softly at the exchange, tapping the wheel rhythmically with his fingers even though the radio isn't on.

Wilson is funnier when he's nervous, he concludes. He takes out his notebook and writes about Candy Crush and getting a phone for himself.

---

It's almost midnight when they check into a hotel near a park. James wants to head to the base immediately. They don't have much to prepare anyway, as they'd left their guns behind in Nuremberg. They were running low on ammunition, so it wasn't worth the hassle smuggling those over. At least he has his knives. He'd checked those in. Not the most efficient, but it's all he needs. He has his knives, Rogers has his shield. Wilson has his shooting bird toy.

They're ready as they can be, and he says as much. Rogers doesn't look happy about it and talks about sleep and rest like it's something important. Wilson looks upset and starts playing his game again.

"We have done nothing but sleep and rest since the forest." James checks his knives carefully, testing the edges against his fingertips. "You forget. Time is running out." He still has a fair amount of time. About two weeks. He doesn't intend on testing his limits again.

Rogers looks like he's about to start another argument, but reconsiders and deflates. "Fine."

He tells them about the base, what he remembers of it. It's an old underground bunker under the city, accessible by the sewers. Wilson looks unhappy but surprisingly remains silent. "Expect them to trap me again," James says thoughtfully. "Not sure if they know about the forest."

"So what's the plan?" Wilson's nervous. He knows he can't do much this time.

"Part of the bunker runs under the old town square," Rogers says, pointing at the map on the computer screen. "You could control Redwing from there. Park at a café, enjoy the sights."

"It's one in the morning," Wilson rolls his eyes.

"A bar, then. Have a drink or two. It's on me," Rogers smiles innocently.
"And you? You and Mr. Roboto here gonna waltz in there and ring their doorbell?" Wilson rounds on James. "They can reprogram you. Like how Rumlow did."

"Yes," James admits. "There's a word. I don't know. It messes my brain up."

"Couldn't you wear earplugs or something?"

James has nothing to say to that. He looks at Wilson and wonders why he's not dead yet. A man who thinks like this, running dangerous missions. Easy kill.

Wilson raises his hands quickly. "Just a suggestion, man. Don't need to kill me with your eyes."

Rogers presses on. "I'll go in first, then. Take out whoever's waiting."

James nods. Makes sense. "Objective. Find the serum."

Wilson clears his throat awkwardly. "You do realise... that it's only a temporary solution, right? I mean, not to burst your bubble or anything. But are we gonna spend the rest of our lives hunting down HYDRA and hoping to score more of this shit? Because I'm pretty sure once they know what we're up to -"

"- they'll destroy whatever they have left," Rogers finishes softly. "I know. One step at a time, Sam. We get this serum. Maybe we can bring it to someone. We still have time. There's gotta be someone in the world who knows how to fix this."

"There is," James points out. "HYDRA."

"We'll figure it out," Rogers says assuringly.

"That's what we're going on, huh?" Wilson shakes his head.

Yes, James thinks. That's what we're going on. "Logical."

They stuff whatever they need into a bag and leave the room quickly.
"You don't know what worry is. I don't know what it is. I don't know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I don't know whether I can cry or not. I don't know whether I have tried to or not. I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth... I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not."

- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

---

It's 1943 and they're walking out of Austria.

They're up before dawn and getting ready to move out again. They're still many miles away from base camp, and Steve is anxious. He doesn't know if HYDRA will be sending reinforcements after them. He thinks about the tanks shooting blue death in all directions and knows he never wants to see that again.

The only person who hasn't moved is Bucky. He's sitting up on his bedroll, looking forlorn and staring into space. There are dark rings under his eyes even though he'd slept just like the rest of them, and he flinches slightly when Steve crosses over to him and sits beside him.

"Hey, Buck," he says softly. He stares ahead, trying to see what Bucky's looking at, but he knows Bucky's far away right now. "Are you here?"

He watches as Bucky's jaw works slowly. He looks vulnerable and unsure, and his gaze drops to his hands. Then he finally speaks, his voice harsh from disuse. "Is any of this real?"


Bucky's shaking his head vehemently, disbelievingly. "I should be dead," he says slowly, and panic rises in his eyes. He looks at Steve now, really looks at him. His gaze shifts into something hard and accusing. "You're not him."

"Sure I am," Steve insists thickly. "I'm right here. You're right here, too. Don't get stupid on me, Barnes."

A long pause. "I'm here," Bucky repeats hollowly. His eyes scan Steve's face, flitting over every feature calculatingly. "How are you here?" He looks at Steve's shoulders, grabs his hands and turns them over, running thin fingers over his upturned palms.

Steve takes a slow breath and waits.

"You're here. I'm not dead. A sort of realisation dawns on Bucky's face, and a million different expressions flicker past. Disbelief, shock. It settles on anger quickly enough. "You're supposed to be in Brooklyn. You're supposed to be safe. What the hell did you do, damn it, what happened to you - Rogers, I swear, look at you, I turn my back one God damn second -"

He's grabbing Steve's jaw roughly now, turning his head this way and that, grasping his arms, then studying his hands again, all the while swearing hotly. Steve lets it happen, lets the truth of it sink in.
on its own. His body's bigger, it's true, but Bucky would know it still, more than anyone in the world. Hell, he's fixed it up enough times to recognise it by touch, if he ever goes blind.

Finally, Bucky stops and holds him at arm's length, looking positively livid, but his eyes have lost their glassiness. He's here. "I need a smoke. I need a fuckin' - Dum Dum! Get me a fuckin' smoke!"

He shoves to his feet and stalks away.

Steve starts to laugh weakly. It's okay. They're okay.

---

Call him paranoid, but Steve doesn't have a good feeling about this operation. He feels terribly underprepared. Also, the last two bases that they'd tried to visit had both ended in some form of disaster. He's not stupid to think that this third one will be a walk in the park.

His only comfort is that Bucky seems to be in a better mood than ever. He's been relatively good-humoured ever since they left Germany, making the effort to socialise and doing his best not to behave like the cold-hearted assassin he's been for the past seventy-odd years. It feels good to have Bucky watching his six once more like he used to, even if maybe it's not really a hundred percent Bucky. Not yet.

The sewer is thankfully pretty dry and not as disgusting as Steve expects it to be. They splash in the two-inch water noisily as they near a niche in the wall labelled PRZEJŚCIA NIE MA. Bucky backs up against the grimy wall and gives Steve a small nod. He steps forward, and Redwing whirrs silently beside his ear, its torch lighting their way.

Here goes nothing. He inhales sharply and kicks the door in, then jumps in immediately, body drawn tight beneath his shield. Redwing zooms in to cover him.

Nothing happens.

He's crouching low on a floor that's actually a metal grille, below which is a pond of more sewer muck. A sweep of the place reveals that he's in a sort of circular antechamber. Redwing is silent and doesn't detect anything. Its light shines down a dark, narrow hallway. Holding his shield firm, Steve advances cautiously, keeping his ears peeled for sounds of movement. There's a bright, rhythmic plink of water hitting metal echoing in the place, but other than that, the air is stagnant and cold.

Redwing flies ahead, its beam throwing harsh relief on the stained walls. The hallway opens up to another chamber, it seems, and there's a few soft pops and a sudden hard clang and the robot clatters to the floor. The light flickers and dims, revealing shadows of legs rushing forward around the corner.

There's no time to think. Steve starts running forward just as the voices start screaming in Russian. He ignores it and flings his shield, not stopping to hear it catch against the man's throat because he's on another one, who's running at him with a sizzling cattle prod and yelling incomprehensibly. He dodges the rod easily, catches his shield in midair and swings around, hearing rather than feeling the metal connect with the man's ribs. The remaining assailant shines a blinding torch in his face that leaves him momentarily dazzled, but he anticipates the incoming blow and rolls to the side in the nick of time. The rod comes down an inch to the right of his ear. He twists and kicks out, feeling the guy's knees buckle, and immediately moves in to ram his shield into his head.

Something pings off his shield and he ducks and rolls out of Redwing's light, disarming the agent from the side by dislocating his shoulder and punching him hard in the kidney. He slides down with
There's a ringing silence as Steve kneels in the darkness, blood thundering in his ears, his eyes barely making out the unconscious bodies around him. Redwing twitches on the floor but doesn't rise. He's in another sort of chamber that forks off into the darkness. How big is this base? "James? I think we're cl -"

Something slams into his neck from the front and back and he chokes mid-sentence, his hands flying up to grope at the foreign objects desperately. His fingers find two thin darts and he wrenches them out instinctively, but it's too late. His vision blurs a little and wow, now is not the time to feel sleepy. He shakes his head groggily and realises his shield's on the floor. He's suddenly on the floor, too. Shit.

"Jaaaaamess," he drags out through clenched teeth. Stay awake. Stay lucid. You can do this. Some of the bodies around him are beginning to stir, curling and uncurling in pain.

A shadow passes over him, but he barely registers it.

"Спуть - aaaaaarghhhh," a voice moans, and Steve hears the slippery sound of knives whistling through the air. More bodies hit the floor around him. Get up, he tells himself. Get up. He blinks slowly and fumbles for his shield.

There's a few more thudding sounds, then a rustling and a soft click. Light floods his vision and he winces away from it. Turn it off, he wants to say, but his tongue is fat and heavy in his mouth. He blinks again. Bucky's leaning over him, looking nonplussed and maybe slightly amused.

"Tranquiliser." He smirks and kicks at the darts at Steve's feet. "Amateur." He shines the light on Steve's face again, merciless, grabbing his head roughly to assess the punctures. Steve groans and lifts his shield blearily like he's fending off an attack.

"Schtoooopp," he complains. Get a grip, Steve. His vision sharpens a bit more, then splits into double images. The tranq wasn't strong enough to take him down, it seems. Come on. Walk it off. "Ugggggg."

Seemingly satisfied with his condition, Bucky ignores him and sets the light on the floor. The closest HYDRA agent is stirring slightly, and Bucky hauls him up, pushing him against the wall effortlessly. The other hand shoots into his slack mouth and snaps away the cyanide pill. "Where is it."

The agent's head lolls stupidly. Bucky shakes him violently, and presses his knife to his neck. "Where is it," he asks again.

"Сны - "

Bucky whips his right elbow forward and cracks him right across the mouth. "Where is it."

Steve squirms on the hard floor. There's silence and a low gurgling noise, then the agent opens his bloodied mouth to speak again. "Сныт - AAAAAAAA!"

The knife hilt's protruding from the man's left cheek. His jaw hangs open and Steve can see the glint of the wicked steel resting on his tongue, and he's suddenly on his feet, stumbling forward clumsily, hand raised. "Bucky, stop ."

Bucky backhands him easily to the side, a friendly tap at most, and he collapses bonelessly to the floor, muscles loose and uncooperative.
"Where is it."

Steve hears an odd squelching noise and liquid whimpering. "Say the word. I will put this in the other side."

"PHPLEASEIdonchhh. Hrgggggh." The body crumples to the floor beside Steve. He finds himself staring at the blood pouring out from his face and neck in slick pulses. It's a grotesque image in the harsh slanting light of the torch. Steve flinches in disgust and forces himself to his feet once more. He's still light-headed, but at least he can feel his limbs now.

"Bucky, WAIT!" His voice rings out louder than he intends to in the closed space. He clomps over like a drunkard and tries to tear him away from another agent, who's panting desperately and half-crawling to the exit.

Bucky whirls around. His shadowed face is unrecognisable and expressionless, and he holds his bloodied knife close to Steve's nose in warning. "Don't. Compromise. Mission."

He turns back and yanks the whimpering agent up by the scruff of his neck like a kitten. His hand forces itself into the mouth again to dislodge the cyanide pill he knows is hidden inside. Steve falls back and watches helplessly, leaning heavily on his shield, his stomach roiling.

"Where is it."

The agent shakes his head mutely, his eyes squeezed tight.

"Won't ask again," Bucky murmurs gently, skating the flat of the blade over his neck, spreading the other guy's blood over his quivering skin.

The agent's mouth drops open, but no sound escapes. Tell him, just tell him, Steve pleads silently, trying to tear his eyes away. He can't.

The knife scrapes at his jaw like a caress, and the skin flops away easily, revealing wet flesh. The man gasps and starts to scream. "IDONNOWIDONNOWSTOPSTOP -"

Before he can finish, he falls to the ground with his neck gaping open, blood pouring out in a torrent like his friend before him. Bucky wipes his knife on his sleeve absently and advances on the next one.

"Don't," Steve breathes, but he knows it's no use. His arms hang uselessly at his sides and he watches, rooted to the spot.

The agent scuttles to the far wall, cowering behind his arms. "Waitwaitwait please. Wait."

Bucky stops and waits. Blood drips off the cuff of his sleeve. The agent reaches a trembling hand into his jacket and pulls out a single vial, hugging it close to himself anxiously. The tiny thing glints in the half-light. Steve sees Bucky's form tense at the sight of it, and for a moment, he does nothing. Then the tension in his shoulders breaks and he reaches forward with an outstretched hand.

The next moment happens in slow motion. The vial flies into the air, spinning, as the agent chuckes it away and throws himself as far as he can from Bucky's reach. A voice tears from his throat, and he's screaming the word that the first agent had tried to say but failed.

"Спутник!"

Steve surges forward, diving low over the fallen bodies. He feels his fingers close over the cool glass
of the vial, and he uses the momentum of the dive to roll over and spring back to his feet, whirling around as he does so. The adrenaline rush shakes away the last traces of the tranquiliser.

He has a split second to take in the scene: the fallen bodies on the ground, with their blood dripping through the metal grille into the rank puddles below. The last agent lies spread-eagled on his back. The knife is firmly planted into his eye socket. His limbs are twitching. The echoes of his dying breath fade away abruptly.

Bucky stands over the agent, his body very, very still. He has another knife in his hand already, and he's facing Steve now. The last time he looked at Steve like that, they were on a helicarrier above the Potomac River.

The Winter Soldier's gaze falls onto the vial in his fist.

---

It's early in 1944 and he's on HYDRA's most wanted list. They literally have a list, neatly printed with the names of other strangers, and tacked to the wall along with pictures, sketches and newspaper clippings. The Howlies stumble upon this strange shrine-like setup on a simple mission to intercept a weapons shipment.

Dum Dum whistles low, taking the list down for a good look. "Will ya look at that. You're famous."

"I wouldn't celebrate just yet," Monty cautions. "There's a bounty on your head, Cap."

So there is. Dernier digs up a thick sheaf of papers detailing how he looks like and his last known locations, complete with sketches of his face and costume. Steve looks over his shoulder and finds himself mildly impressed. "These are good."

"What's this, art appreciation class?" Bucky snarls, snatching the documents out of the Frenchman's hands. He has that look on his face, the one that says he's itching to kill someone. Steve knows that look well now. He's not very fond of it.

Bucky glares at the papers hatefully. "They know about Grenoble. How the hell do they know about Grenoble?" He targets the question at Dernier as if it's his responsibility to know, and the guy glares back and starts speaking in rapid-fire French.

A month ago, they'd done a covert operation on the small HYDRA base in France. It wasn't a huge setup and there was nothing of import in that location, so they bugged its communications systems and copied as many documents as they could before hightailing it out of there. The mission had been successful, as far as they knew.

Or so they thought. "They can't have known about Grenoble," Steve says reasonably, but Bucky shoves a few papers at him distractedly. A sketch of Jones' profile, a note about the sabotaged radio, a transcript of their hushed conversation. His blood runs cold. They've been chasing HYDRA all this time without ever stopping to think that maybe they were being chased too.

"They've been tracking us," Steve concludes numbly, flicking through the information.

Jones unearths a small map filled with scribbles and markings, and they throw themselves on it. He jabs a grubby finger at a blackened point. "That. That's our camp."

"Not anymore," Steve says quickly, feeling a sudden rush of gratefulness that they'd decided to clear out of that place two days early. "This... changes everything. We gotta disappear. Regroup. Gather everything, let's clear out. It's not safe here." They hustle and sweep the place quickly.
Bucky hasn't moved. He's still standing a few metres away from the group, bent over the stack in his hands. Steve starts in surprise because he realises Bucky's hands are shaking badly. The sense of something terribly wrong seats itself deep in his gut. Bucky's hands never shake, not ever. Especially not on a mission.

Before he can ask Bucky what's happening, Dum Dum lets out a harsh exclamation, and everyone stops what they're doing and turn to him in surprise. He's staring at the list with a confused look on his face. "Cap."

Steve tears the paper from his hands and sweeps the page quickly, finding his name with ease.

_Steve Rogers, alias Capt America, DOA_

No surprises there. His eyes travel down, then up. His mouth goes dry.

_Sgt James Barnes, subj 37, ALIVE_

His eyes settle on Bucky's figure. He's still standing off to the side, flipping through the files and photographs feverishly. Even his shoulders are trembling badly, and he doesn't seem to notice that the team is staring at him in silent horror.

"Bucky?" Steve calls out softly, but there's no response. He edges closer and glimpses the photographs. Some part of him is not surprised at what he sees. It's all of Bucky, lying strapped to a table. He's thin and pale as death, his body peppered with knife wounds. There's a close-up showing the back of a hand, with its skin peeled back to the wrist. There are bloody scabs where the fingernails should be.

Stepping forward, he closes his hands on the shaking photographs. "Bucky," he says again, and Bucky finally wrenches his gaze from the photos. His eyes are wild, pupils blown wide in fear.

Steve keeps his eyes on Bucky's face, trying his best to look calm and reassuring, and gently wrests the photographs from his friend's grip. Morita takes the pile and shoves it into his pack wordlessly without a second glance.

"Bucky." Steve reaches out a tentative hand and grips Bucky's shoulder tightly. He squeezes hard. Bucky's breathing finally slows, and he blinks rapidly. "I'm here," he blurts weakly, then clears his throat. "Yeah, I'm here."

Silently, the team files out of the room on high alert.

They make it out safely. The Howling Commandos set up another camp in a place so remote Steve almost gets lost taking a leak.

The photographs disappear from Morita's bag the following day. They never ask Bucky about them, or find out why he's on the list too.

---

"Bucky. Don't," Steve manages to get out, before Bucky lunges at him. They stumble off into a side corridor, and grapple in near darkness.

Blinking blindly, he throws up his shield and ducks out of the way, hearing the knife scrape against the metal of his shield. He gasps and dodges again as the blade swipes dangerously close to his jugular - he can feel the slice of air on his skin. "James!" He shouts desperately, blocking a blow and
catching another in the stomach. It's the metal arm. He feels his insides crumple into a pulp, but he grips the vial tighter in his sweaty palm and doesn't let go.

"James, remember -" He raises his shield in time and Bucky's arm comes down on it hard. It connects at the wrist, and the knife drops to the floor and slips between the gaps. He grabs the hand and tries to throw Bucky down, but the skin is slippery with blood and it twists out of his grip instantly. Steve feels something connect with his left knee. He drops before it can give way, swinging his shield in an arc. It hits Bucky hard and he hears a sharp exhale.

"James, your mission," he gasps. "Remember your mission!"

He winces and braces himself again, but the blow he's waiting for doesn't come. Bucky's silhouette stills, and the sound of hard breathing fills the air.

"My mission," Bucky repeats mechanically.

"Our mission," Steve corrects quickly. "Get the serum. We've got it. See?" He holds the vial up in his shaking hand, the other bent awkwardly around his middle where the metal arm had found him. It's a little bit difficult to breathe.


"That's me," Steve admits sheepishly. "It's okay. Are you with me? Are you here?"

Bucky groans and holds his head in his hands, shaking everywhere. "I'm here," he intones, his voice small. "Steve."

"Hey. Heya, Buck. It's okay, it's okay -"

"I'm not dead," he says, his words coming out in a rush, like he didn't mean for them to. He's apologising under his breath, over and over, sobbing long and loud. His arms reach out to grope for Steve in the dark, and wet fingers find his ears, his collarbones, his elbows. Steve stands stock-still and waits. Twitching hands find his wrists, ghost over his upturned palms.

It's 2014. They're breathing deeply in the dark sewer, covered in blood and grime. The knife and shield lie forgotten at their feet.

It's 1943. They're squatting in the dirt, somewhere on the borders of Austria. Steve imagines that Bucky would recognise him blind.


---

"She moved toward him lithely, soundlessly in her bare feet, and her face was full of wonder. Her small hand felt his arm, felt the soundness of his muscles. And then her fingers went up to his cheek as a blind man's fingers might. And her joy was nearly like sorrow."

- John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Big thanks to AletheiaFeliea for the Polish translation :3 And for letting me know that Pruszków used to have some kind of mafia in the 90s, which totally fits the HYDRA agenda. *happy nerd dance*

PRZEJŚCIA NIE MA - No Entry
Спутник - Sputnik

Find me on tumblr: yourmorningwar
“There is no future. There is no past. Time is simultaneous, an intricately structured jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time, when the whole design is visible in every facet.”

- Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

---

It's 1936 and they're burying Sarah Rogers and Steve's grieving so hard he can't walk straight, and he doesn't say anything for a long time. Bucky sticks to him the whole day.

Then the ceremony is over and Steve is staggering numbly out of the cemetery when he finally tells Bucky what he's thinking about. "I don't have anything anymore, Buck," he whispers, his voice hoarse from crying.

"You have me," Bucky says, without a beat. "Remember that. Even if you think you got nothing, Stevie. You'll always have me."

---

It's 1941 and he's sitting up in bed because Steve has just kicked him awake again. Steve's always fighting, it seems, even in sleep. He's used to it. He thinks about the draft letter he's hidden in his jacket and wonders what Steve would say. Would he be angry? Would he be proud? Would he be envious?

Would he be sad?

He pulls the threadbare blanket back onto the bed because Steve has somehow managed to pull it off the both of them and kick it onto the floor in his sleep. He thinks about having a bed of his own somewhere across the Atlantic. A bed to sleep through the night, still and cold.

The following night, he tells Steve. They don't talk for a few days after that.

When Steve finally breaks the silence, it's also in the middle of the night, when they're lying side by side in the dark. They've given up pretending to be asleep hours ago. "You said I'd always have you," Steve whispers suddenly, and his words are a knife to Bucky's chest.

Bucky has no reply to that. It's not something either of them can control, and they both know it, but Steve doesn't take his accusation back. He leaves it hanging between them and it hurts them both and Bucky thinks, at least he's not carrying all the hurt on his own.

It's 1941 and they're having their last night together before he ships out to England. Steve lets Bucky drag him all around town: dinner at a proper place with proper tables, Stark's Expo, a night of music and dancing. He loses Steve halfway through the Expo and finds him skulking at the enlistment booth, but this may be the last time he'll ever see Steve and he can't bring himself to get mad.

As he walks away, arm-in-arm with the girls, he throws up a silent prayer. *Dear God, let him get rejected fifty times for all the fifty states he applies under.*

The next morning, he walks out of their apartment before sunrise. Steve is sleeping soundly in their bed, and Bucky doesn't try to wake him. There's nothing more they need to say to each other, and he knows that Steve would only get angry all over again if he watched Bucky go.
He leaves a package for Steve to find, for when he finally gets around to doing his own laundry. He's gonna have to do everything alone now. He won't have Bucky anymore.

---

*I'll be back before you know it. Meantime, take care of yourself. Got you a little something in case you get sick again. It's the new Steinbeck. Mrs. Hamm swears it's good. Don't be a lazy bastard, read it on your own. Far as I know, it's about a poor family being angry at life. Well, we're poor and you're angry, so I figured you'd enjoy it. You'd better take care of it too, damn thing didn't come free. I'll wanna read it when I come home.*

---

It's 1942 and he's playing cards the whole night through with Dum Dum and Morita and Jones. They're somewhere in Italy, making their way upwards into Austria.

They're barely focused on the game because they've run out of good things to gamble - the cigarettes all gone and smoked - so their conversation steers towards more sobering things.

"Hell, I miss the city," Jones complains, shaking his head. "Even the stink of it. Never thought I'd say that."

Bucky silently agrees and rearranges his cards casually. "City only stank when you were there, Gabe."

"I'll fold," Morita chimes in, pushing his hand back to Dugan face-down. "Wouldn't say it's the city I miss. The people. *That* I miss."

Bucky nods along automatically. "People in the street, the sounds. Children. Laughing." He sighs and throws his cards down, too. "The good sounds."

"The dames," Dum Dum supplies forcefully, looking at Bucky as though he'd grown a second head.

"The *dames,*" Bucky agrees reverently, shaking his head in wonder, thinking of the perfumed dance halls and red mouths and soft damp thighs in smoky alleys. He'd forgotten about that. He misses that, too. The dancing and the music that made his teeth rattle in his head.

"Got one of your own, Sarge?" Jones asks, drawing a card and hissing his displeasure at it. He shoves his hand to Dugan. "You gimme rotten luck, Dum Dum."

"My own? Nah," he chuckles, snatching the deck from Dum Dum and collecting all the cards. Jones is right. He's pretty sure Dugan's cheating.


Bucky grins.

"'Course, they're lining up for me," Bucky responds lightly, grinning. "But why pick just one when you can have 'em all?"

The others laugh easily and call him a sly dog. He laughs along and wonders what Steve is doing now, half a world away.

---

It's 1943 and they're marching thirty miles back to Italy but he's in a daze and thinks he's walking to
the gates of Hades instead.

When he finally snaps out of it and realises that Steve isn't half a world away, he's so angry he can't see straight for hours, violently chain-smoking and spitting curses at his terrified unit. He puts as much distance between him and Steve as he can, because he thinks he may actually kill the guy himself.

Maybe it's because they know he's been through hell lately, but his men surrender their cigarettes to him wordlessly until he calms down.

---

It's 2014 and it's dark and quiet. The ringing sound of Спутник dies away inside his brain, and something else dies with it, all at once.

It's dark and he doesn't know who he is or where he is or how he got here.

It's dark and he thinks, *what is my mission?* And he sees a man standing in front of him and he's holding *the thing* and he thinks, that is my mission.

The man fights well in the dark and uses his shield to his advantage, but he's able to avoid it when it flashes through the air and reflects the pale light behind him.

The man is strong and doesn't go down when he uses the metal arm, but lets out a hard grunt and twists away quickly. He doesn't pause, but moves in for the kill, knife high, but the angle is wrong and he doesn't see the shield in the way and he feels a small *pop* in his wrist and the knife slides loose.

The Asset never drops his knife, he thinks. Is that him? Is that who he is?

The man falls and shouts, and the shield smashes into his body from the side. The man is calling him James, and he's saying something about a mission.

He stops. Blood pounds in his ears and through his neck, where pain is blooming like a bruise. His mission.

"My mission," he says, his mouth tasting of salt and blood.

"Our mission," the man replies, and he shifts closer and *the thing* is in his hands. The man is holding his other hand across his middle and hunching over, and he thinks suddenly, *he's built like a goddamn tank.*

It's dark and his head hurts, phantom currents of electricity running through the lobes of his brain. It's real, it's not. He doesn't know. He wants it to stop. He has done nothing wrong.

The man is still talking and he moves closer. He knows that voice. He knows his mission. Retrieve the serum.

"Mission success," he asks cautiously. A name falls from his lips, unbidden, and before it comes out he knows he's right. "Steve. Rogers."

Steve Rogers continues talking, and he's saying, "Are you here?"

It's 1943 and it's dark and his limbs are heavy and his men move around him and he thinks he should be dead and maybe this is what comes after but someone sits beside him and asks *are you here are*
But it's dark and it's not 1943, it's 2014, and his hands are drenched in blood and he grips his head in his hands because he can feel THE CHAIR and it hurts, it hurts, but then it doesn't because he knows that he is here and that there is no chair here and therefore there is no pain here and he's saying, "I'm here," like a prayer and a confirmation rolled in one, and then, "Steve."

It's dark but he moves towards Steve like he can see. His hands are slippery with blood and then his hands are in Steve's hands and they are warm, and Steve calls him Buck, and he's saying I'm not dead and I'm sorry over and over.

It's dark and he can't see anything but he doesn't need to see anything. His hands map out the person before him in blood, the bumps and the ridges and points, and he thinks, this is real and I am here and my name is Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes 32557038 and his hands settle on Steve's hands again.

It's dark and he thinks, I haven't been here since 1944. "I'm here," he says finally. "Stevie. I remember."

---

It's 1933 and he's sitting by the bed and reading to Steve and they both think he's going to die, but Bucky reads clearly and evenly and pretends the words have no meaning, making his voice just loud enough to mask Steve's laboured wheezing.

"It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality," he recites slowly. "It is as though time, no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line, now runs parallel between us like a looping string."

He pauses, catches Steve's eye, and shrugs. "Whatever that means."

---

It's 1944 and they find the list with his name on it, and he feels like he's back in Austria. He feels like he's never left, because there are pictures and they're calling out to him. Look here, the images say. That happened. That's you. We had you. We have you.

He burns the photographs while the rest are sleeping.

He takes one last look at them first, spreading them out carefully in a circle, memorising each detail. That was him. That is him. The only evidence he has that everything on the table was real. He picks at his fingernails absent-mindedly.

It'll be dawn soon. He lights up the corners of each picture with a match, then lights his cigarette and sits back on his haunches, sucking deeply. All gone now, never happened. Just a nightmare. You're here, you're alive.

He remembers feeling so much pain. He remembers being beyond sick, sicker than Steve had ever been. They must have done something to him, because he's not sick anymore. He stares at his fingernails hard and tugs at them carefully. He examines the back of his hand. The skin is whole and unbroken.

Gripping his cigarette between his teeth, he draws his knife out, making a shallow cut across the back of his hand. The skin parts cleanly and the blood flows, and he sits there and smokes and watches, waiting and waiting. Is this real, is this a dream?
The sky brightens and the cut's still there, angry and red and still weeping slightly. This is real. The photographs were, too, but not anymore. They're gone now, and his hand bleeds like it should, and that's enough.

It's 1944 and they find out the hard way that HYDRA has special forces, too. They're ambushed while trying to radio their progress back to Colonel Phillips from an abandoned communications outpost near Switzerland.

Morita's escape plan is crazy as fuck, even by their standards, and not even that much of an actual plan, but somehow they're going with it because the building's exploding around their ears and they're running out of time.

"Split up and run like hell," Jones repeats numbly. Dugan simply laughs.

"We'll have the suits, alright? It's distraction enough," Morita snaps, already shoving the revolting things into their hands. There are only three extra ones in Steve's pack, and Bucky, Falsworth and Jones get one each. "Look. We can't let them take us. Alive."

The significance of that silences them and everyone's thinking about the list again, and suddenly nobody is looking at Bucky, then they're swapping out their uniforms for the tacky costume quickly. The walls tremble around them as the shells crash through concrete and stone.

"Pretty sure they know Captain America ain't black," Jones complains, but he pulls his suit on anyway.

"It's a little on the loose side," Falsworth gripes primly, even though he's actually almost as tall as Steve. He's probably just pissed that he's dressing his posh ass in an American flag.

"Yeah, in the chest maybe," Bucky agrees. "Crotch's pretty tight, though."

"Isn't the shield a dead giveaway?" Steve cuts in, ignoring the jibe. His face is lined with worry. By some unspoken agreement, the shield ends up in Bucky's hands. He scowls and knows exactly what they're all thinking, but he hefts it up and doesn't argue. "Nobody gets caught alive," he stresses.

They charge out, one after the other in different directions, and they get lucky because they're fast and the tanks are not, and the forest provides excellent cover. They laugh about their ridiculous escape for weeks after that.

It's 1944 and they jump onto a moving train because Jones intercepted the HYDRA comms channel and Steve's plans are always crazier than Morita's. They think the operation's going to be a quick assassination, but it's a trap and they only realise it when they think they're safe inside the train, and the compartment doors slam shut to separate them.

Bucky gets caught in a standoff against three HYDRA soldiers. His ammunition runs out, but suddenly Steve is back and tossing him another gun and they're safe again.

Then their luck runs out and the next thing he knows, Bucky's blown clean out of a hole in the train. Instinctively, he grabs at the air and his hands close on a thin rail. The wind screams in his ears, and thick snowfall whips into his eyes. Steve's so far away, and he's leaning out of the train and shouting at him, and he wants to shout something back, but his face is frozen by the cold and he can't do anything but hang on.

Then the rail snaps off and he's falling and screaming and the last thing Bucky thinks is at least they
won't take me alive, and then he stops being Bucky for a long, long time.

---

It's 2014 and it's still dark and they breathe in each other's air in the small space between them.


There's a beat and then Steve loses it. "Oh, God," Steve blubbers crazily. "The book, the damn Steinbeck - God, you remember -"

"That's what I said," Bucky says thickly, pushing Steve's hands away but actually sort of grabbing back and holding on, like they're about to slip away from each other even though they're not. "Tell me you have it - tell me, Steve, I paid actual money for that -"

"I don't," Steve blurts, but he sounds so insanely happy about it, laughing loud and unapologetic. "Christ, Buck, I'm sorry. It's been so long. I don't have anything anymore."

The laughter dies away and what remains is warm silence.

"You have me," Bucky points out quietly.

It's dark so they turn back to the light. The bodies lie on the floor all around the lamp, a silent audience to their strange reunion.

Steve picks up the light on the floor and the broken bird. Bucky plucks the knives from his victims.

They walk back the way they came.

---

"How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?"

- John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath
It's two in the morning and Sam Wilson is standing in a crooked alley of a random Polish town, staring at a drain cover with a phone in one hand and a tablet cradled on his other elbow. He takes a moment to muse about how he has become Superhuman Chaperone of the Year, all simply because said Superhuman happened to lap him about a million times just a couple months back in DC. Some would call it fate. He calls it The Shitstorm That Is My Life™.

At least he has Nick Fury on speed dial now. It's the only emergency protocol they could agree on, even though Sam isn't sure exactly what Steve expects Fury to do if he really did call the guy up. But it's Captain America and the most dangerous assassin in history. There's no way they'd mess up this time. He's tempted to call Fury up anyway, just to have a nice chat. Chaperoning gets lonely.

Redwing lasts less than two minutes inside the base before it gets taken down. Sam isn't even surprised. It's no less than he expected, and he forces himself not to panic just yet because he did sort of mentally promise himself to give them the benefit of doubt. Ten minutes. A lot can happen in ten minutes, but he tries not to think about it. He stares at the tablet, trying to make out what's going on through Redwing's camera, but the angle's bad and he's mostly just looking at the floor. Breathe, he tells himself. Calm down. It could be worse.

As much as he makes himself believe that nothing could go wrong, he's still taken by surprise when the drain cover shifts before the ten minutes is up. He's so relieved he almost drops his phone as he stuffs it back into his pocket. Finally, a successful mission. This calls for a celebration.

Barnes heaves himself out of the hole, looking dazed and a little bit beat-up. He's using his right elbow to climb up the last few rungs instead of his hand, and his arms look like they've been dipped into vats of blood up to the elbows. Most of it's all over his face too. Something tells Sam it's not his blood, and he's not sure if that's supposed to comfort him or not.

"Holy shit," he rasps automatically, and rushes forward to haul him up, a gesture more than anything because the guy's heavier than an armoured car. Also, Sam doesn't really want to touch the guy because blood. Everywhere. "What happened? Should I be worried?"

"I'm sorry," Barnes mutters immediately straightening up and stumbling forward to grip Sam's shoulders tightly. His eyes fix onto Sam's, grey and wide and desperate. Sam freezes. Oh my God. Why is he holding me. Where is Steve - he can crush me like an insect -

"What," Sam manages, trying to hold himself really still. His mouth has gone bone dry. Where the hell is Steve? "What have you done?!"

"I couldn't save him," Barnes continues, looking anguished, shaking Sam a little. "I tried everything. Wilson. I didn't - didn't mean to -"

Oh, fuck. Fuck. Sam tries not to hyperventilate. He should probably start begging for his life right now. "Steve. No. You didn't. Tell me you didn't -" Oh God. This is not happening. This can't be happening. Steve. Oh my God.

Barnes' expression flickers. The quirk of his mouth is completely unreadable. Sam belatedly wonders if he can reach into his back pocket fast enough to hit that speed dial button.

"If it makes you feel any better..." Barnes hangs his head. "He's in a better place."

Slowly, he releases his grip on Sam and the next thing he knows, he's pushing Redwing into Sam's
convulsing hand. Sam looks blankly down at the twisted hunk of red-and-gold, his heart hammering hard against his ribs.

Sam stares at the thing in his hand for a good ten seconds, then it clicks. "What the fuck," he says stonily, gripping the bird hard in his fist. "What. The. Fuck."

Steve emerges out of the manhole at that moment, laughing so hard he can't even stand up, just crawls over the edge and rolls over to the side, slapping the asphalt with one palm and clutching at his chest with the other. Tears stream out of his eyes and he's gasping in between his howls, and Sam thinks, holy *fucking shit*, I will kill you, I will kill you both, you *motherfucking jerkoffs*, then he realises he's actually shouting it all out loud, shoving Redwing's remains into Barnes' blood-crusted face because Sam is going to -

"- make you *choke* on this shit, you *motherfucker* -"

Barnes twists away easily, batting Redwing gently away with his left arm. Is he smiling? Is he *fucking* smiling?!

Sam sort of just stops and stares as something else sinks in. He looks uncomprehendingly from Barnes to Steve and back to Barnes, and they're looking at each other like they're a couple of eleven-year-olds who've just pulled the best prank ever. This is not right. This is - how the hell is this happening?

"What the fuck," Sam blurs again, because he has nothing else to say. What the fuck happened down in that damn sewer, he'd planned to say, but only the first bit made it out of his mouth. He's probably having a heart attack now. Or maybe an aneurysm. Both.

"One for the books," Barnes says quietly to Steve, mouth still quirked to the side like he's trying his best not to laugh aloud. He helps Steve to his feet because the guy's still gasping and wheezing. Sam gapes at them stupidly.

"Ah. Haaahh. Heh. Sam. God. You should've seen your face," Steve huffs out, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. "I should've taken a - a reacting video -"

"Reaction," Barnes corrects nonchalantly. Steve waves his hand in acknowledgement - you know what I mean - and starts laughing all over again. He looks so *fucking* happy right now, but Sam isn't feeling it. His face hurts from how hard he's scowling. Captain *fucking* America. What a complete *dickhead*.

Sam fumes silently and fantasises about strangling the both of them in their sleep as they walk back to the hotel together. As they set off, Steve finally calms down enough to fill him in.

---

It's sort of nice, actually, when they end up in the room together just sorting out their own shit. Feels like the storm is over, if Sam chooses not to think about the fact that they only have the *one* serum that Barnes will probably have to use in two weeks' time. It means they have two weeks to figure it out, and Sam will take it. It's a good time frame to work with. Better than what they're used to having.

Steve's got Natasha on the phone. He'd called her first thing when they got back and immediately started talking excitedly and pacing about the room at a maddening rate. Barnes cleans himself up quickly and sits cross-legged on Steve's bed, cleaning and sharpening a bunch of knives that have appeared out of nowhere. Once in awhile, he pauses to glare in Steve's general direction, eyes
following his movements like a cat.

Sam's settled down at the small table near the window, trying to figure out how to fix Redwing and failing miserably and thinking about how he's never going to use it again. Or fly in his wingsuit. He wonders where it is now.

" - you're serious? Thank God," Steve exclaims, stopping in his tracks and whirling around to address the room at large. "Stark's alive!"

"Really?" Sam says incredulously. "How'd he manage that?"

"He's - hang on, Nat - turns out he managed to escape, but he couldn't get back for awhile because his suit ran out of battery - wait," Steve holds his hand up and listens intently, even though Sam wasn't about to say anything. He frowns, then his face lights up. "You really think so? ...I guess. ...Okay. Wow. ...Yeah, I'll see you then. Thanks, Nat."

He hangs up and finally stops pacing, grinning widely. "So Tony's alive," he says happily, tossing his phone between his hands absently, like his joy can't be contained and he has to keep moving to express it.

"That's really good to hear," Sam replies evenly. It is. It really is. Things are finally starting to go their way, it seems. And he can't help but smile too, seeing the good Captain bubbling with excitement like that. Especially when it means that he'll get his wingsuit back eventually. "So what's the plan now?"

"We'll go to New York," Steve says immediately. Barnes makes a strangled noise from where he is, but says nothing. "Everyone's there, Nat says Tony's converted his whole Stark Tower to an Avengers Tower, unbelievable."

"And our little problem over there?" Sam juts his chin at Barnes. Steve just grins harder and rounds on his friend.

"Bucky. There are people there who can help you - there's this guy, a really nice guy, he's a doctor. We can let him take a look at the notes Natasha found, take the serum we have here and replicate it -"

Barnes is shaking his head and touching his knives in a way that Sam doesn't like. "No use. Only HYDRA can replicate it."

Steve deflates a little. "You don't know that," he insists.

"Life isn't so simple."

"I never said it was!" Steve raises his voice hotly. "But it's what we have now, alright? We can't stop trying, we're so close -"

"And what. They save me, and we ride off into the sunset. Is that it. Listen to yourself, Jesus, life is just like the pictures to you, isn't it."

"Look, you just need to give it a chance -"

"I can't let them take me. Not again," Barnes growls low. "Best scenario, they don't. They let me go. Where do I go. What do I do. Why bother, Steve, it's not fuckin' worth it." He presses the heel of his hand to his temple and closes his eyes briefly, breathing deeply and mouthing something to himself, then opens his eyes again.
"Nobody's going to take you," Steve blurts incredulously.

Barnes raises an eyebrow. "I'm wanted. In at least ten different states."

"I wouldn't let them. They didn't take Natasha, I won't let them take you!"

"Best not give them a chance to in the first place." Barnes jabs a knife in Steve's direction like he's making a really good point.

"So you're just going to give up?" Steve blinks, then suddenly starts laughing, harsh and bitter, a laugh Sam hasn't heard Steve make before. "I - we, Sam and Nat, and I - we've followed you halfway across the world trying to bring you home, and after all this, after risking our lives, you want to give up? Just like that?"

"Never asked for you to follow," Barnes hits back, his tone clipped and angry. Sam really wishes he'd put those knives away.

"You're my best friend, Buck," Steve says exasperatedly. "I'm not gonna let you die, not now, not when you're just startin' to come back -"

Barnes sucks in a breath through his teeth like he's trying to keep himself under control. "I don't deserve - I've. Done things," he says slowly, and Sam thinks about Rumlow and silently agrees. "Things that they can't ignore. Things that need punishing. But I'm done, done with punishment, Steve. I won't go back. I can't go back. Christ. Just leave me be."

Steve collapses onto the foot of Sam's bed, looking thoroughly exhausted. "They're my friends. They won't - hurt you. Bucky. Please. I know you. You've never given up. We can save you. I can save you."

Barnes slips his knives away, sighing and pinching his hand to his nose bridge, as if he were weighing his words carefully.

"Don't say that. You think you know me. The Bucky you knew. That's not who I am now. I've been Bucky for twenty years and I've been the Asset for seventy. Do you know what I have done. Remember, don't remember, you think it makes a difference. Who do you think I am now. Tell me."

A million emotions flicker across Steve's face at his words, and for a long time he says nothing. He looks at Barnes and Barnes looks back at him, and Sam looks at both of them and has nothing to say, either.

"You said I'd always have -" Steve starts, his voice small.

"I know what I said," Barnes interrupts. "But you don't need me anymore. Haven't needed me for seventy years."

Steve chokes up and shakes his head. "Just come to New York," he whispers desperately, staring at his palms. "Just, please."

"End of the line, Steve," Barnes drawls impassively. "When you gotta go, you gotta go."

Steve's too overwhelmed to reply. He gasps and shudders and covers his face with his hands, shaking all over.

Bullshit.
"Bullshit," Sam utters, his voice low and furious. "You're so full of bullshit, Barnes. So what, you had a bad time. They fucked you bad. So fucking what. Now it's over and you have a chance to live and what, you don't want it? You think it's about what you deserve? Far as I know, you deserve squat - "

"Sam," Steve interjects, looking horrified. "Don't -"

" - and I don't give a flying fuck if you live or you die, but you know who does? Steve fucking Rogers. He's done nothing but try to save you. He didn't fight back when you almost killed him, because even when he was dying he thought there was still a chance, and even if there weren't, he'd rather die by your hand than live to put you out of your goddamn misery. So you listen here, motherfucker. It's not about what you deserve, it's about what he deserves, and if you're gonna pussy out now, so help me God, I will kill you myself if you wanna die so badly."

Barnes stares back at him, wide-eyed and looking distinctly wounded, and Sam doesn't care. Guy needs to fucking hear it.

"Sam, that's -" Steve starts again weakly, looking nervously between them, but Sam isn't done. Not even close.

"And you think he doesn't need you around? You're all he's ever had since you were kids, for God's sake, and I know it because it's all he ever talks about - did you ask him about what he did when he thought you were dead? Go ahead - Steve, tell him, tell him what you did to the Valkyrie -"

"Sam, no!"

"HE FUCKING CRASHED A PLANE FULL OF EXPLOSIVES INTO THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, AND -"

Barnes' face is white as a sheet, lips pressed together in a thin line and nostrils flaring with heavy breaths.

" - HE COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO GET OUT AND SAVE HIMSELF, BET MY ASS THERE WERE PARACHUTES ON THE THING, BUT NO, HE JUST STAYED ON BOARD AND CLOSED HIS EYES AND SAID HIS PRAYERS BECAUSE -"

"Stop -"

" - YOU WERE GONE AND HE CHOSE TO DIE -"

"Enough." Barnes cuts across his shouting, and Sam snaps out of it.

He realises that he's on his feet and shaking everywhere, body thrumming with adrenaline and fury. Barnes is also on his feet, standing right in front of him and looking extremely pissed off, but at least his knives are nowhere to be seen. Steve slumps on the covers, his face drawn and tight. Barnes glares him down and Sam does his best to glare right back, too angry to feel afraid right now. Finally, Barnes looks away and mutters, "Need a fuckin' smoke," then he's out of the room and banging the door behind him.

Steve cradles his head in his hands. "What do I do, Sam? I don't know what to do anymore. God, God knows I've tried. I don't know..."

"Don't worry about it," Sam replies tersely, stalking to their bags and rummaging through them to get the laptop out. He's booking those damn tickets to New York. They're going, and that's that. He'll drag Barnes there himself if he has to.
He begins to really regret losing his shit at Barnes because Steve resumes wearing a hole in the carpet again, which riles him up more than he ever expected.

"Look, I know you're anxious and all, but I feel exhausted just from watching you, man," Sam finally huffs.

Steve ignores him and carries on walking in circles, twisting his hands about and worrying at his hair. "I shouldn't have forced it on him," he mumbles for maybe the hundredth time. "If I'd explained a little more, he wouldn't have flipped out so badly."

Sam hums in agreement, but all he really wants to do is sleep, actually. It's close to five in the morning and he's only human. He rolls over and tries to close his eyes and ignore Steve's self-condemning monologue.

The room door clicks open at about six, and Sam hasn't slept a wink. The sky outside the window's already beginning to lighten.

"Bucky," Steve says immediately, and rushes forward awkwardly. "I'm sorry, you're right, we can always just -"


Sam sits up in his bed, slowly and grudgingly giving in to the fact that he's not meant to ever sleep well if he's in their company.

"Who?" Steve asks worriedly, exchanging a glance with Sam. "What, you mean Sam?"

"I'm sorry, Barnes," Sam begins, as sincerely as he can manage. "I said some things, didn't mean it -"

"No. Him." Barnes raises a shaking hand and points at the space right behind Steve, and of course there's nobody there. Realisation hits Sam like a fucking wrecking ball.

"The LSD," he mutters, shooting out of bed in a hurry. "Steve, I thought you'd taken it from him!"

"I did!" Steve counters, but he pats Barnes down quickly and finds the incriminating bottle almost immediately. "Bucky, what have you done?"

"Don't hurt them. Nikolai. Good people. I'm not. Don't look at me like that don't." Barnes shoves Steve's hands away and tries to kick out, but he's so disoriented he barely manages to push him away.

Sam's fully awake now. "Give him some water," he suggests to Steve. "Barnes, how much did you take?"

"Hmm. Yes."

Sam slaps him across the cheek, not gently. Barnes blinks in surprise and lets it happen. "How much did you take?"

Barnes's eyes drift shut. "Don't know. Number... three. Fourfive. Don't know. Feels strange. Can you feel that." His eyes jerk open suddenly and he gasps. "Can't move. Stop, don't come closer. Nikolai. Said I was sorry." He thrashes gently, murmuring under his breath even more and shaking...
his head. "Please stop."

"Alright, Jesus, I'll bite," Sam spits exasperatedly, as Steve lifts his head and pushes water into his pliant mouth. "Who the hell is Nikolai, huh? What'd he ever do to you?"

Barnes gulps all the water down then pulls back, pushing Steve away forcefully. He stills and his wild eyes find Sam with huge difficulty.

"He said he'd save me," he whispers, looking terrified, as if the guy he's hallucinating were eavesdropping close by. His gaze wanders again, then falls onto Steve. His body shudders deeply under Sam's hand. "So I killed him."
Hi guys, your comments have been wonderful so far, all of you! I'm sorry I made you love/hate Sam the previous chapter, but we are all imperfect humans and like Bucky said, life isn't like the pictures, so I tried to make the situation a huge mess like how real life would be. :)

Just a warning: This chapter gets a little gory, more than my usual, but I tried not to dwell on it too much. I needed it to be horrible, but not gratuitous. I'm not sure I managed that, but I hope I did. I was inspired by a similar scene in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Which is infinitely more horrifying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He knows it's a mistake to take too many drops, but he does it anyway. His hands don't shake as he unscrews the bottle and thinks of falling from a train and lying on a table and sitting in THE CHAIR and a man pointing an airplane into the ice. Fuck it all, he says to himself, and tilts his head back.

It's too much, he realises stupidly as he slinks back to the room with his tail between his legs and the floor rushing up to meet him. His body is pins and needles and static everywhere, his brain a steady *thuddthuddthud* of pulsing electricity. Nikolai follows him all the way back, the silent ghost lingering in his peripheral vision everywhere he turns.

"Go away," Bucky says weakly, again and again. He doesn't move. He looks like he's melting, then he's not, then he is again. He's standing before Bucky, naked, peeling apart like a banana. Go away, Nikolai. You're dead. I killed you. Stop coming back.

Of all the people he's killed, he has to see Nikolai. Of all the people.

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His final lesson with Nikolai was two nights before his mission. They'd sat there in the little room together like always, drinking the tea Nikolai always insisted on making and speaking calmly about world politics. The Asset nodded where appropriate and asked questions when he didn't understand. Nikolai always let him ask questions.

"Asset," Nikolai said suddenly, leaning forward slightly. "I need to show you something. Can you keep a secret?"

The Asset was taken by surprise by the question, and by Nikolai's sudden change in demeanour. The old man was always calm, almost bored, when he spoke, and his voice wavered a little like it did with old people. This time, his eyes were alight with something the Asset couldn't pinpoint. Can the Asset keep a secret? He's not sure.

"I follow orders," the Asset said finally, the only truth that mattered. It meant, tell me what to do and I will do it. It meant, if someone else tells me what to do, I will have to do it too.

Nikolai nodded jerkily and pushed a book into the Asset's hands from across the table, watching his
face carefully. The Asset looked down. "American history," the Asset said, touching the glossy cover. This was irregular.

"Read Chapter 14."

The Asset complied, but when his eyes found the photograph, he froze and stared. That man. That face. He looked at Nikolai, and Nikolai looked back at him. His expression was shuttered. He looked sad.

"I don't understand," the Asset said, and his brain pounded. The words swam up at him, the face laughed at him from its photograph. Sergeant James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes of the 107th, the caption read. His brain pounded even more. "Why are you showing this to me." THE CHAIR. He could feel it coming. He was thinking of things he wasn't supposed to be thinking about. Who is Sergeant Barnes, a voice said inside his head. Nobody, please, he responded.

"Where were you born, Asset?" Nikolai asked gently. "Do you remember?"

"Stalingrad," the Asset said immediately. This he knew. They'd told him many times, so it had to be true. Nothing to gain from lying about something as unimportant as that.

Nikolai pursed his lips. He looked disappointed. "Think carefully. Think of before Stalingrad. When were you a child? Where did you spend your childhood?"

Was there anything before Stalingrad? Was he ever a child? The Asset looked down at the pages. The Howling Commandos. The surface of his skin grew hot with unease. The man on the page smiled back at him, wearing the Asset's face. He didn't understand. He thought of THE CHAIR, and he thought of his handler. Rumlow. Remember your mission. He stood up automatically, shoving the book back at Nikolai like it was a live grenade.

Nikolai sighed and leaned back in his seat, looking up at him calmly but seriously. "You don't belong here."

The Asset shook his head. Don't say this, Nikolai. Why are you saying this. Stop. "Request permission to leave."

"I can get you out, I can help you. I can save you."

Why? The Asset was not in danger. Even if he was, Rumlow would save him. That was how it worked.

"That man in the book? That's you. Sergeant Barnes. And the other people in the pictures... look at them." He pushed the open book forward again, but the Asset refused to look.

Nikolai, stop talking. They will hear. If they hear, I cannot stop them from taking you. "Stop. Please," he whispered, staring at the wall in front of him. "Request permission to -"

"Go," Nikolai relented, and the Asset bolted out of the room. He had to act fast. He needed to forget. If he forgot, he would not need to report it. He would have nothing to report if the others questioned him.

He found Rumlow soon enough, and pulled him out of his meeting room without a second thought. The other agents gaped but watched it happen wordlessly.

"Asset? What the fuck are you doing?" Rumlow complained, pulling out of his grasp and rubbing at his shoulder. "What's going on? That was Alexander Pierce in the room, are you suicidal? You want
him to put you in THE CHAIR?"


Frowning hard, Rumlow gripped his chin roughly and peered into his eyes. "Okay, okay, calm down, cowboy. All right. Geez. Look at ya. The dreams came back, huh?"


Rumlow nodded, clapped his hand on the Asset's shoulder and chuckled softly. "You poor sonofabitch. Okay. I'll need to explain the situation to Pierce. God, do you know how bad you've made me look in front of him?"

"No," the Asset admitted. "I didn't mean to. Rumlow. I'm sorry."

"Ah, I'll live. Let's get you prepped."

---

"I thought maybe if I forgot what he'd told me," Bucky says quietly, and doesn't finish his sentence. It's almost midday and he's finally come down enough to speak in proper sentences. He's still swimming in guilt from their argument, so he talks because they like to know when he remembers things.

Steve and Wilson continue listening, neither of them saying a word. Steve has this sympathetic look on his face, so Bucky mostly remains on his back and stares at the ceiling. His body's tired after being so high-strung the whole night, so it's more comfortable like this anyway.

"They put me in THE CHAIR. Because I asked. It didn't last long, didn't need to. Fresh memories were always easier to wipe. Wasn't even long enough for me to shit myself. Heh."

Steve makes a small noise, but Bucky continues.

"Didn't work. I messed up the mission. Was supposed to take out this guy. English diplomat. Rumlow said he'd done stuff to us. HYDRA, I mean. But he couldn't get arrested for it because of his diplomatic immunity, so they asked me to take him out. Easy mission, but I failed. They knew I was coming. They were ready for me, had stun guns and all. Almost trapped me, too, but I was faster than they expected. Only HYDRA knew about the mission, and only HYDRA knew that I'd been assigned. Meant that HYDRA was compromised. I didn't know what to think of it.

"Went back and reported to Rumlow. The others, they wanted to punish me for failing, but Rumlow said it wasn't my fault if there was an informant. He was angry. Ordered a lockdown on the base and asked me to interrogate everyone."

Wilson stirs. "By interrogate you mean -"

"Nothing much. Just threats. Knives. Most were already afraid of me, so I didn't need to do anything." Bucky waves his hand casually. He's done worse. "Didn't find anyone, but then. Nikolai came into the room and I knew. I didn't really remember what he'd said to me, but I knew anyway. It was him, had to be him."

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"It was you," the Asset said, putting his knife down on the table abruptly. His fingers lost feeling for
awhile. No, not him. It couldn't be Nikolai.

"Asset," Nikolai said evenly, looking around the room as he walked in slowly. It was empty but for a table in the middle, which hadn't been used at all during the interrogations. The Asset hadn't needed to use it.

"You compromised my mission," the Asset said, even though he didn't know how he knew it. Why would Nikolai do that?

"You're not who you think you are. And I'm not who you think I am." Nikolai kept walking forward, his hands spread non-threateningly. They were pale and wrinkled. The Asset stared. "It's not too late, Sergeant Barnes. We can help you out of here."

"Don't say that name!" The Asset picked up the knife again, his heart thundering through his ears. His head began to hurt. "Don't say it, not so loud -"

"It's your name. Sergeant Barnes. You don't belong here. It's time to go home."

Nikolai, stop. They will hurt you if they hear you. He said it again, moving closer to grip the Asset's shoulder with thin fingers.

He grabbed Nikolai's outstretched hands and slammed him bodily onto the table, strapping him in with jerky movements. Nikolai gave a strangled shout and started to struggle weakly against the straps.

"Barnes," he said, his voice changing completely. "Stop. You know me." Different tone. The soft German lilt melted away. Different accent. Not Nikolai. Who are you?

"Who are you." He pressed the knife to his neck. His hands did not shake.

"You really don't remember," Nikolai mumbled. His eyes were watering under the harsh ceiling lights. The Asset realised that he'd accidentally broken both of his wrists putting him onto the table. How old is this man, he thought to himself.

The door opened and Rumlow strode in, pulling a long drag from a fat cigar. "Thought I heard something. Everything alright, Asset?"

The Asset's throat constricted slightly. He hoped Nikolai wouldn't think about saying the name again, not in Rumlow's presence. "Yes. Informant found. Await further instruction."

Nikolai struck out desperately, straining against the binds, but it was useless. He was a harmless old professor, tied unnecessarily tightly to a table. The Asset looked away.

Rumlow surveyed him with disinterest. "Huh. Well. Can't say I'm surprised. Never liked you, slimy old fart." He pressed the tip of his cigar to Nikolai's veiny wrist.

Nikolai howled in pain and anger and the Asset didn't look at him.

"So who do you work for? Gotta say, I'm impressed. Old guy like you. They run out of young blood where you come from, huh?" Rumlow sucked on his cigar again, then exhaled the cloud into Nikolai's face. Nikolai said nothing. The Asset refused to look, but he knew that Nikolai was looking at him.

"Not a talker, okay," Rumlow said easily, clapping and rubbing his palms together. "We don't really need to know, actually. Hell, we probably have more guys crawling around your organisation than
you do in ours. It's true, isn't it? Or are we gonna get busted by a nice team of agents on an extraction mission now?"

He stopped talking and paused, as if he were truly waiting for someone to crash in through the door. Nothing happened. Rumlow grinned and patted Nikolai's cheek. "Thought so. What should we do with him, Asset?"

The Asset couldn't look. He didn't want to do anything to him. "Ready to comply," he said tightly.

Rumlow nodded. "I know you are, buddy," he said fondly. "Funny, seems this guy here ain't as scared as he should be."

Nikolai huffed. "Not afraid of you, Rumlow," he uttered in disgust. "I'm an old man. Kill me and be done with it."

His voice. Distinctly not Nikolai. Who is this man. The Asset waited for his orders. He hoped they would be easy to execute.

"It's not me you should be worried about," Rumlow pointed out gleefully. "It's him. You know what the Asset used to do to spies? Hehhh. Tell him, Asset. Come on, you remember Cambodia? Or did we wipe that? God, I'm losing track myself. Those were some fun times. Remember that old school?"

"Cambodia." The Asset remembered. He remembered the building that was once a school, and its torture rooms, and the racks on which his victims lay. He was only assigned the most difficult. They had to suffer, Rumlow had insisted, his eyes bright and hungry. For working against the cause. He remembered peeling their skin back like layers of clothing. Don't ask me to do that again, Rumlow. He swallowed hard. "I remember."

"He's being modest," Rumlow assured Nikolai, patting his cheek again affectionately and leaning in close. "When he skinned them, God. He was an expert. Learnt it so quickly like he was made to do it. Put a knife in his hand, and it's like magic, you know? Whole damn thing comin' off in one beautiful sheet. You wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it."

Nikolai shook his head urgently, gasping slightly. His eyes were round and wide. The Asset tried not to look. "Well, Asset. He doesn't believe it. Guess you gotta show him."

The Asset complied. His hands were steady but his vision was blurred. He didn't want to look. He cut the clothes off first. The body underneath was shrunken and trembling. "You don't have to do this," Nikolai started to say in a thin voice, but Rumlow slammed a fist into his mouth and he stopped talking.

The Asset paused, knife hovering. He didn't want to do this. He looked at Rumlow for confirmation. Please, he thought.

Rumlow only nodded and stuck his cigar back into his smirking mouth. "Order through pain," he intoned. "Carry on, Asset."

He started at the shoulder, his hands moving almost automatically, as if the procedure was simple muscle memory to him. Rumlow's eyes burned into the back of his head. The Asset's sweat rolled into his eyes and blurred his vision even more. The skin fell away like thin crepe, soft and wet. Nikolai began to pant, then scream, long and loud. The air was filled with the smell of copper. The Asset's fingers began to shake. Not mission-compliant.

"You know me," Nikolai gasped between shrieks. "Don't do this. Stop." But the Asset only took
orders from his handler, and he bent his head further and carried on. He reached the fingertips. They were twitching harder than his own. He didn't want to continue. He lifted the knife.

"Rumlow." The Asset straightened up. He was faintly aware that his face was wet. On the table, Nikolai panted and moaned and whimpered.


The Asset complied and kept going, working quickly down to the toes. Under his blade and fingertips, Nikolai's skin opened like a delicate white flower, blooming red underneath it all. The floor became slippery. Soon Nikolai passed out, then came to and continued screaming. He had started on the other arm when Nikolai groped for the front of his clothes blindly, his eyes glazed with pain. "Your name," he hissed, "is Ja -"

The Asset sank the knife into his throat before he could think twice. He stared in mild shock as Nikolai choked around the blade and finally stilled, barely noticing it when Rumlow started shouting and knocked him to his knees. He'd almost said the name. It wasn't the Asset's fault. Nobody was allowed to say the name.

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"Rumlow was so mad. I'd disobeyed the direct order. I don't really remember what he did after that. Lots of THE CHAIR, probably. I was even thankful for it, you know, didn't regret disobeying for once. I really didn't want to do it. Secretly glad that I'd chosen to end it when I did.

"But THE CHAIR this time was just pure punishment. He never tried to wipe that memory away. Maybe he knew how much it bothered me. That I had killed Nikolai like that. He knew I liked him. That's why he made me do the skinning, I think." Bucky shrugs, then takes a long breath. "Well. That's it. Of all the people I'd killed, this one keeps comin' back for me. Don't know why. Maybe because he kept giving me books. He was nice."

Wilson snorts tremulously. "He was nice," he mutters under his breath.

"When did this happen?" Steve asks suddenly. His eyes are bloodshot and wide. Bucky frowns.

"2003. I think. Same year as the mission. Yes."

"June."

Bucky frowns more and thinks a bit. It really did happen in June, actually. "Yes. How did you -"

"His name wasn't Nikolai," Steve gasps, his fists flying to his mouth in horror. His face is milk-white. "Oh, God, Bucky, his name wasn't Nikolai." He looks devastated, and he pushes himself off the bed, shaking like he doesn't know what to do with himself, biting at his knuckles like he's trying to keep from screaming. He's gulping in lungfuls of air like he's drowning.

"Wait, you know who this guy was?" Wilson asks incredulously. "How could you know? You were under the ice at the time."

He has a point. Bucky stares at Steve in confusion as he shudders, running his hands through his hair and looking like he's about to tear them out in clumps.

"When I came back from the ice," he manages, his voice cracking. "I. I looked through all the files.
All the people I knew. I wanted to know what happened to them, what they did after the war. Where they went, what they did with their lives. Only Peggy was still alive. The others were all dead.

Bucky's head starts to hurt again, like it does when he's on the edge of remembering something he shouldn't know. "What are you saying."

"The others. He - he went into the secret service after the war, and stayed all the way till his death. He died in 2003. He was 80. They found his body in a river, and - and half his skin had been sliced clean off. MI6 refused to confirm if he was active - he was supposed to be retired. God. Oh, Jesus. It was him. It was you."

"What are you saying," Bucky says again numbly, a faint buzz in his ears. He feels like he should know the answer, but he doesn't.

"His name wasn't Nikolai. It was James. James Montgomery Falsworth." The look Steve gives Bucky is beyond pained, his words ringing terrible and true.

Monty. His lips go numb as he repeats the name slowly, disbelievingly. As his mouth forms the words, he knows it's true. Bucky closes his eyes and feels the tears come in waves.

Falsworth. Monty. He shakes his head, then his shoulders are shaking and his hands are shaking and he can't stop.

He sees it now, the resemblance. The shape of his nose, the tilt of his mouth. The same line between his eyes, carved deeper by time. The accent that came out at the very end. God, Nikolai. God, Monty. God. God. God. He can't stop shaking.

Steve crawls close and holds him and doesn't let go. He can't understand how Steve could look at him, let alone touch him, knowing what he'd done to their friend, their brother, but he keeps shaking and doesn't react or push him away. He'll take what he can get.

He doesn't react when Wilson takes the bottle to the bathroom and pours it down the sink, either. He's remembered enough, or maybe too much. He never wants to see Nikolai's face again, but now even without the help of the drug, it's all he can see. Monty.

His eyes remember the knife hilt in his neck, the raw twitching limbs on the table. His hand remembers the feel of the velvety skin between his fingers. His ears remember the reedy screams echoing in the room. He's done remembering. All he wants to do now is to forget. THE CHAIR. He needs THE CHAIR.

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The little room was quiet and softly lit by the reading lamp between them. Steam rose gently up from the small cups of tea that Nikolai had made, because he said that the cold was getting to his bones and a hot drink made him feel better. It made the Asset feel a little better, too.

He found a clipping of a poem taped to the inside of the old newspaper he was reading. "A poem."

"Yes. Thought you'd enjoy something different. You can read it aloud," Nikolai encouraged, pressing his fingertips together and smiling gently. He always smiled at the Asset these days.

The Asset complied. "The Second Coming."

"Go on."

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart.
The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand..." The Asset trailed away, scanning the rest of the poem in silence.

"I don't understand." The Asset twisted his mouth slightly. "But I like it."


Chapter End Notes

Side note: Cambodia really happened, I just added fictional characters to it. There's a building that used to be a high school that was converted into a prison centre for people who were accused of going against the regime.
"Maybe telling him about Nikolai wasn't such a great idea," Sam mutters to him as they pass through airport security.

Steve hangs his head miserably. If only he'd thought of that sooner. Too late for that now.

He'd come to terms with all his friends dying a long time ago, but this new revelation digs deep and dredges up the grief he thought he'd buried away. He'd seen the file, the pictures of the body. Autopsy reports. It was horrible to comprehend then, but now, knowing the whole story and what really happened...

Of all the scenarios Steve has fantasised about, this doesn't even come close. Bringing Bucky home isn't supposed to feel this dreadful. They're supposed to remember old Brooklyn and compare it to new Brooklyn, he's supposed to show Buck what's become of their old apartment block. He's supposed to bring him to the supermarket and show him how they charge double for fruit that probably has more worms in, because it means it's not covered in poison like the cheaper fruits are. He's supposed to say, remember that time you drank too much booze because you were so happy about the job at the theatre I'd just landed? Remember after, when you hurled all over Judy Baron just as she was finally thinking of giving you a kiss?

Remember when you used to tell me that you'd made the fireworks for my birthday and I actually believed you, until Marvin Johnson laughed at me, and I almost broke my hand on his teeth before you pulled me off and admitted you were lying all along?

Remember when Dugan hid your clothes while you were in the river and you raged all the way back to camp, stark naked and shivering, to burn all his skivvies in the fire?

"Let's just try to make it back without any more drama," Steve replies simply. His gaze lingers on Bucky, who looks pale and drained. He hasn't spoken much since they packed and left the hotel, just follows them silently without argument. Steve wonders if he should be worried, but takes it as a good sign. At least he's following them to New York.

They board the plane quietly.

The flight is long and uncomfortable. Sam takes the window seat and orders a whisky after they take off. He throws it back immediately, then promptly falls asleep, his head rhythmically knocking against the window because he didn't even bother to recline his seat first. Steve takes pity on him and shoves the tiny pillow under his ear, watching in mild disgust as it grows wet with spit.

He doesn't really know how to work the inflight entertainment system because the touchscreen is more like a poke-really-hard-till-it-works screen. Maybe he should've brought a book. Out of the corner of his eye, he tries to watch Bucky.

Remember when we were supposed to parachute behind enemy lines in Salzburg, and you were too afraid to jump out the plane but too ashamed to admit it? Remember when Monty grabbed you from behind and pulled you out with him anyway, and you wouldn't speak to us for days after that?

Steve can't think of anything to say. They've never been good with words between one another. They'd fight and yell and things would be alright. That's how they are, that's how they always were. This time is different, and no amount of fighting and yelling is going to bridge the divide of seventy years so easily. Seventy years of ice and blood and pain and death.
Remember after Austria, when you refused the honourable discharge because I asked you to follow me into the jaws of death?

Remember telling me you didn't like the idea of ziplining onto a speeding train in the Alps, and said that it was all too simple to be true? Remember when I told you it was just your fear of falling that was making you nervous, and to stop thinking about the list that had our names in bold?

Bucky sits stock-still beside him, barely breathing, his hands limp in his lap like he's forgotten how to use them. He stares at the one flesh hand Bucky has, bearing all the signs that show he doesn't have the same healing factor as Steve does. The angry wounds on his palm are still half-healed, and his wrist is tightly bound in leukoplast tape, because he'd sprained it on the edge of Steve's shield.

Steve wonders what he's thinking, whether he's thinking of Monty, whether he's worrying about how the authorities would take him and punish him in New York.

Reaching out a tentative hand, he touches Bucky's elbow. Bucky's head turns slowly to face him. His eyes are all sadness and fear, but the stillness of his form contains it completely.

"Hey," Steve whispers. "It's okay. I'm not gonna let them take you."

Remember when we were on the mountain and we were staring down the zipline that disappeared into the blizzard when I pulled you to the side, out of earshot, and I told you that it was okay, and that I would never let them take you?

Bucky blinks and turns back to continue staring into the space in front of him. He gives no indication of feeling Steve's hand on his arm.

If the plane weren't so quiet, Steve would have missed his reply altogether. It comes almost a minute later, rough and low. "Maybe you should."

Steve swallows the lump in his throat and doesn't respond. Remember wondering what our lives would be like after the war was finally over?

He still does. He reclines his seat and closes his eyes.

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Walking into Stark - no, the Avengers Tower - almost feels like coming home, even though he's only been inside the building five times at most, and it was when an alien army was attacking the city. Still, it's good to see friendly faces who greet him as he walks in, as if everything's fine and dandy. Some of them he even recognises from SHIELD.

Despite the cheery and bustling atmosphere in the lobby, they trudge sullenly after the receptionist who escorts them to the lift. Even Sam is uncharacteristically quiet, his eyes still ringed from the uneasy sleep he managed to catch in the air, but his gaze takes in his surroundings appreciatively.

"Good afternoon, Captain Rogers," the lift chimes suddenly, voice smooth and melodic. "Welcome back to the Avengers Tower."

"Hi, JARVIS," Steve sighs, and feels the tension seep from his shoulders. If there's any building in the world he feels safe in, it's the one with JARVIS in it. "I've missed you."

"Likewise," JARVIS chirps. "Mr. Wilson, Mr. Barnes, pleased to make your acquaintance. Mr. Stark has informed me of your arrival and wishes to extend his greetings."
Bucky's rigid and wound like a spring next to him, but he doesn't respond to JARVIS.

"Does he really?" Sam asks incredulously, gazing around him for the source of the voice.

"Actually, I took the liberty to paraphrase the message. Mr. Stark's original words were 'Welcome them to my crib', but I felt a formal tone would be more suitable."

"I'm having a conversation with a lift. This is insane," Sam chuckles softly.

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson, I will take that as a compliment."

"If this is the superhero lifestyle, sign me up," Sam shakes his head as the lift doors slide open smoothly. They step into a wide circular room outfitted completely in glass, with a spectacular view of downtown Manhattan. Steve isn't all that impressed anymore because he's seen it before, and he's more interested in the person who's standing at a far table, drink in hand, deep in discussion with a bunch of other people Steve doesn't recognise.

"Tony," he wheezes, and suddenly he's striding forward and tugging the guy into a tight hug without thinking about it.

Tony makes an aborted spasm like he's been shocked with electricity, and squirms uncomfortably. "Whoa, okay, I hope that's your phone in your pocket -"

"Sorry," Steve lets go immediately, stepping back hurriedly. His mouth feels like it's trembling a little and he blinks rapidly. What's wrong with him? "I'm sorry. It's just... it's good to see you're okay."

"Funny, that makes the both of us." Tony turns and waves a dismissive hand at the others at the table, his drink sloshing dangerously. "Right, folks, you're on a tight deadline. Be nice to Dr. Banner, don't make fun of his tea. Or his music. Or his - just don't make fun of him. I can't Hulk-proof everything, I'm not made of money. Okay, I am, but you know what I mean."

He whirls around to look at Steve, grinning widely, then sees Sam and Bucky standing awkwardly on the lift landing. "Wilson - Barnes - no warm welcome? God, the three of you look like you just watched Marley & Me for the first time. Why the long faces? Who died?"

Steve flinches and exchanges a meaningful look with Sam, who steps forward slowly.

Tony's face scrunches up a little. "Well, okay. Don't tell me. I'm a big boy, I don't mind being left out."

"Stark," Sam says finally, coming closer. "Never thought I'd actually say this, but thank God you're alive."

"You're just saying that because I still have your wingsuit," Tony quips, rolling his eyes and setting his drink down. They clasp hands briefly.

"Nah, I'm saying it because I need you to fix Redwing, too." Sam smirks sheepishly.

"What is it with you people?" Tony throws his hands up. "It's like everyone thinks I'm a universal service centre for broken things."

"Tony, I don't think you've met Bucky," Steve interrupts, before Tony can launch into his usual tirade. "Bucky, this is -"

"Stark," he says sharply, planting his feet where he stands and looking wary. He's looking at Tony
like he's seen a ghost.

"Nice to meet you too," Tony calls out across the room, waving awkwardly to emphasise the distance between them. "Why don't you come on over here, I swear I don't smell that bad. I've heard a lot about you. First my dad wouldn't shut up about you, then Rogers wouldn't. It feels like I've known you all my life. We should probably make out now."

Bucky makes a pained sound and starts weeping openly, and the three of them stare at him in silent horror as he drops to the floor and holds his hands out.

Tony looks nonplussed. "What's happening? Is it because I asked for a kiss? I don't usually get this reaction, this isn't helping my self confidence."

Steve stares hopelessly at Bucky, then it clicks. Oh. Oh, no. "No - Bucky, come on, get up," Steve moans desperately, dashing quickly over and tugging him up roughly. "Snap out of it, pal, don't do this again."

"I can't," Bucky bites out, shuddering and shaking his head vehemently. "It's all. Everything I've done. It's all coming back, I can't - I don't want it. To remember. Any of it. Please. Take it away, give me the chair, Stevie, I need the fucking chair, I need -"

"Wilson? What's going on?" Tony hovers on the spot uncertainly. He's probably wondering why Sam is just standing there with his arms crossed, watching it happen like it's nothing out of the ordinary.

"Don't look at me, he's been a hot mess all over Europe. Hasn't exactly been a cakewalk. Steve handles his shit, I just hang around and look busy."

Steve gets Bucky to his feet after several tries, but he just clings on to Steve's arm like he wants to be dragged away and thrown into a cell. He whimpers and tries to pull himself back down to the ground, mumbling about wanting to sit in a chair. "Tony... I'm sorry. He's not usually like this, not until. Um. This is terrible timing. You don't deserve to find out like this."

"Ahhh. That. This makes so much more sense," Tony exclaims, and a sudden reassuring smile flashes across his face that has Steve really confused for a moment. "You know, I did have my suspicions. But yeah, I figured that it was him soon enough. They don't call me a genius for nothing. It's cool. I'm cool."

"Can anyone translate the superhero codespeak right now?" Sam asks tiredly.

"Winter Soldier killed my parents," Tony replies flippantly, and Bucky jerks like he's been stabbed in the back. Sam makes a choked noise and starts coughing.


That seems to work a little and Bucky straightens, his movements stilling. He raises his head slowly to look at Tony. "Do it. I deserve it."

Tony looks surprised, then shrugs. "You know what? I think I will." He snaps at something on his wrist and lunges at Bucky before Steve can open his mouth in protest. The blow throws Bucky sprawling on the floor, and Tony stands over him, panting slightly and grimacing, clenching and unclenching his right hand. Steve realises that it's armoured. When did that happen?

"Okay, now I'm cool." Tony uses the same hand to pull Bucky to his feet.
Bucky touches his hand to his cheek slowly, where the skin has already torn slightly from the abrasion. "I don't understand."

"Well, what d'you expect me to do?" Tony says, in a surprisingly gentle tone. "I know you wouldn't have done it if you had the choice, okay? So unless you plan on brainwashing me into murdering you as some poetic kind of punishment, let's just forget about it. Before I realise how unnaturally nice I'm being about this whole thing and change my mind."

"Forget about it," Bucky echoes uncertainly.

"I hear that's what you do best," Tony flashes his teeth.

"Tony," Steve says, feeling immeasurably relieved. "I know we're asking a lot. Thank you. For this. For everything."

"Oh, don't thank me for everything," Tony grumbles. "Pepper insisted I embrace the power of forgiveness." He points an accusing finger at Bucky. "You're lucky I have someone like her as my moral compass, because a few days ago I would've been happy to paint the floor with your guts."

Bucky nods empathetically, as if it's perfectly fine if Tony decides to change his mind and do that instead.

"Although she won't be very happy about that punch. It wasn't exactly what we rehearsed," Tony adds as an afterthought, while getting a few more glasses out from under a table and pouring a generous shot of expensive scotch into each of them. "Nobody mention it to her. Barnes, you fell onto a doorknob. JARVIS, not a word."

"Very good, sir," JARVIS replies coolly, as they settle awkwardly into the recently-vacated chairs as Tony forces the drinks on them, even though it's about four in the afternoon.

Steve politely takes the proffered glass in his hand. Bucky takes his as well, looking thoroughly lost. Steve feels a pang of sympathy for him. It's probably really confusing to be having a drink with someone who's just punched you because you're the one who murdered his parents. He probably suspects Tony of slipping some kind of poison into it. Steve makes a show of finishing it first, all at once, since he doesn't feel it anyway.

Bucky's eyes follow his movement, then he sips the drink cautiously and pushes the rest of it away.

"How's Pepper doing?" Steve asks suddenly. "I thought she'd be here."

"Yeah, about that. She's in quarantine."

"What?"

"You put your girlfriend in quarantine?!" Sam exclaims loudly at the same time.

"Don't look at me, it was her idea," Tony says defensively, looking sour about it. He takes another swig from his glass and swishes it around his mouth. "What a shitstorm."

"What happened?" Steve presses.

"Long story short? Nutjob kidnaps the hero's girl and injects her with an unstable superdrug, hoping the hero will be encouraged to help stabilise superdrug to save her. Nutjob's plan fails, the superdrug remains unstable, and now the hero's left with his girl who's terrified because she can now breathe fire."
"The nutjob... the orange man? Natasha mentioned him."

Tony presses his palm to his face. "The Mandarin. You're killing me, Cap."

"Sorry," Steve says. "So what's going to happen to her?"

"Don't know, but Banner's here so I'm trusting him to get rid of Extremis pronto so Pepper'll be back to normal again and less likely to actually kill me or spontaneously combust when I forget to put the toilet seat down."

"Extremis?"

"The superdrug, Rogers, keep up," Tony snaps irritably. "Anyway, it means fortunately for you, Banner's in town and he can get a look at whatever's wrong with your buddy here too. Unfortunately for you, I sort of totally value Pepper's life a lot more than Winter Asswipe over here, so I believe the term is 'get in line'. Don't steal my Hulk."

Sam hums to himself, smiling a little. Steve shoots a questioning look at him, but he just mouths the word asswipe again and smiles more.

"Yeah, Tony, of course. You're already doing plenty, I won't take up Banner's time until Pepper's okay," Steve says quickly, immediately feeling really guilty about coming to Stark for help again. He's had so much to deal with lately, and still has so many things to sort out too. He almost died, lost his house, and his girlfriend is in quarantine, for crying out loud. He feels all wrong about coming back to New York now, and shifts uneasily in his seat. "I really didn't mean to impose -"

"Oh, don't beat yourself up about it. I've also just self-destructed my entire iron legion as a romantic gesture, because Pepper's convinced I need actual human friends. Hope you haven't found a hotel yet, because you're gonna regret missing out on the rooms I've prepped."

"Rooms?" Steve's jaw drops for a moment, and Sam sits up a little straighter. "I - Tony, you really didn't have to -"

"It's not called the Avengers Tower for nothing," Tony points out disdainfully. "I wouldn't put a Starbucks sign onto an empty building unless I actually intended for the place to start churning out sad excuses for coffee. Banner's already shamelessly laid claim to his room. I had him at 'shatterproof glass'. Wait till you see yours, Steve, I labelled anything invented after 1950 with detailed instructions and diagrams."

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted or thankful," Steve says flatly. "But thank you anyway."

"Wait, so I get a room too?" Sam perks up excitedly.

"No, you get a birdcage," Tony deadpans. "Actually, I wasn't sure if you were staying. Or if you're even qualified to be an Avenger. I never got the audition tape. But I have guest rooms, so don't look at me like that. It doesn't work. I have a lightbulb where my heart should be."

Sam grunts grudgingly and nods his thanks, and Steve's eyes shift to Bucky, whose face betrays no expression. His eyes are almost glazed, and he stares straight ahead. "And him?" Steve asks tentatively.

"You can bunk together, just like the good old days." Tony's tone gets a little dismissive and cold.

Steve knows what he means. He lets it slide because Stark has a good reason to hate Bucky, and he's used to sharing a room anyway. "Thanks, Tony. I don't know how I can ever repay you."
"Oh, I can think of a few ways," Tony says easily. "But we can start with letting me open up that sweet Soviet masterpiece."

He wishes Tony wouldn't be so forward. Bucky immediately looks slightly betrayed, and Steve catches the look of alarm on his face.

"He didn't mean it like that, Buck," he says lightly. "We're not actually opening you up. We're just gonna take a few x-rays and have a look at your arm, maybe make some modifications so you'll at least stop ripping your spine in two every time you use it. Trust me, if the notes we've found are anything to go by, it'll make a huge difference, especially when you're low on your serum."

Which will be soon. None of them need reminding.

Bucky presses his lips together and shrugs indifferently.
Bucky

The room would be nice if not for the yellow sticky notes they find on almost every surface, but it
doesn't bother Bucky.

Steve heaves a long-suffering sigh and peels one off the nearest wall switch. "I swear," he mutters,
shaking his head. "His ego is bigger than this damn building."

The note reads _And God said, Let there be Light: and there was light._ Steve flicks it into a bin near
the door, which has _Captain America's sense of humour_ pasted on its rim. Bucky chuckles a little.
He can't help it.

"He punched you in the face," Steve reminds him, rolling his eyes.

"I earned it." He sets his bag down on the nearest table and checks out the room carefully.

Like the previous room, it's practically made from glass. It makes Bucky feel a little uncomfortable,
but he doesn't say anything about it. Stark did mention it was shatter-proof, so he's not going to start
worrying. He gazes out warily. It's a long way down.

He knocks on the glass experimentally, then flattens his palm against it, but it doesn't budge. Steve's
saying something, he realises.

"Sorry. I wasn't listening." He tears his eyes from the window and shoves his hands into his pockets.

Steve's standing by the kitchenette with a bunch of yellow notes in his hands, somehow looking
offended and concerned at the same time. "You doing okay?"

"Yes." He moves to a corner where the window meets the wall, leaning his back against the solid
wall behind him. The floor is soft and carpeted. He can feel the cold of the outside through the glass.
He looks at the way the late afternoon sunlight slants across the city, throwing long shadows across
the buildings. It's nice.

"Told you they wouldn't take you away." Steve's voice floats over. Bucky makes a small noise of
assent, but he thinks, not yet.

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Tuesday.

Steve gives up on un-labelling the furniture, because he can't figure out what's helpful and what's
not, and Bucky doesn't care enough to figure it out.

"You know what, I'm gonna check out the rest of the building. Stark says the whole of the 18th floor
is a swimming pool."

How did he get the water up so high? Bucky nods absently. He's sitting by the window again,
admiring the rain blanketing the city. The droplets chase each other down the giant windows, and he
follows the race raptly, choosing random ones to root for on the way down. "I'll be here."

Steve sighs dramatically. "You haven't left this room for three days."

"Did. I go to the smoking room. Down the hall." His droplet gets eaten by a bigger one. Damn.
"Bucky. You know what I mean."

"Stark said wait. I'm waiting. I'm good at waiting," Bucky points out, still gazing at the window. "No mission, nowhere to be. People may recognise me in the street."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Steve huff and throw his hands up.

The door clicks closed. Bucky finally takes out his notebook, because he doesn't like to write in it when Steve's around. He hasn't written anything in it since he started to remember everything. He doesn't know where to start. He feels like a man displaced, out of space and time, not really belonging here but not really belonging there either.

He remembers growing up with Steve and starving in a small apartment and smoking himself to death at the docks because he didn't see a future in anything. He remembers the pranks and the fights and all the times Steve'd kicked him in his sleep.

He remembers so much, but it's like a different person lurking at the back of his head. He knows his name is Bucky but he doesn't know who he is, not really. He doesn't feel much like singing like how he used to or going dancing or sweet-talking girls till they were blushing and bright under his fingers. He just feels like sitting here by the big window and not moving for maybe the rest of his life.

Which probably won't be long. At least he'll have Steve around when it happens.

The door opens again and Steve steps across the threshold noisily, humming a soft tune and stopping abruptly. Bucky tucks away his book quickly.

"You forget something or what," he says, raising his eyebrows.

"Forget?" Steve nudges the door closed. "Jesus, have you been there the whole time?"

"What do you mean, whole time. You just left."

"Bucky, I left about three hours ago," Steve says uncertainly.

He looks out the window. It's dark out. Oh. "Sorry," Bucky grunts, looking away quickly. "Brain damage and all. It happens."

Steve exhales sharply and doesn't say anything for a moment, then chooses to drop it. "You feeling hungry? I bought dinner."

The person he is, whoever he is, needs food about as much as he needs sleep, but he knows that Steve would expect his Bucky to be hungry. "Smells good," he says.

It ends up tasting pretty good, if not a little oily. Whatever appetite he's mustered goes out the window when he sees Steve gorging himself on egg rolls like a starving man, and Bucky ends up pushing most of his food onto his plate in half-sympathy and half-disgust.

"Remember when you used to give me your D-rations?" Steve blurts around a mouthful of fried rice.

"Those sad excuses for chocolate," Bucky says automatically, then grimaces when the memory comes back after the words leave his mouth. There were days where he'd have shot himself in the foot to get more of those stupid things.

"Don't lie to me, you liked them."

"You needed them more," Bucky replies brusquely, then ducks his head and forces himself to finish
his meal.

They both have a difficult time figuring out the sink. Funnily enough, the only notes Stark has given them about it are *You wanna play a game?* next to the tap and its many knobs and buttons, and *WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT PUT YOUR HAND IN HERE* right beside one of the holes at the bottom of the sink. It's always been his job to wash, but Bucky's stuck because he's pretty sure normal taps don't have so many features. What the hell else is it meant to do other than expel water?

He doesn't understand why there's more than one hole at the bottom, either.

"Why is there an extra hole if nothing's supposed to go in anyway," Bucky gripes. He really needs to put his hand in now. The metal one, of course, because he's not stupid. What's the worst that could happen?

"Leave it, it's probably booby-trapped," Steve calls over his shoulder distractedly.

He puts his hand in.

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Wednesday.

Stark makes him get a full-body x-ray, because "An MRI on you would only benefit me". He doesn't bother asking for an explanation. Knowing Stark, it probably means an MRI would kill him.

Once the results are ready, Stark pastes them up onto the huge glass windows against the morning sun and stares at them for a long time. Bucky stares too. He's not a doctor, but he knows he's definitely not looking at something normal. Most of the bone structure is blocked from view by huge white shapes, which he assumes is metal plates. Interesting. He prods at his ribs and tries to feel them through the skin, but he's not sure if what he feels is normal or not.

"How are you even standing upright?" Stark finally snaps at him irritably, but his eyes are wide and a little shocked. Steve glowers at the windows like it's a staring competition.

"They put a stick. Up my ass. Here, you can see it -" Bucky moves forward and points to the thin white rod running the length of his spinal cord.

Stark opens his mouth in surprise, then catches himself and looks incredibly unimpressed, like he wants to punch Bucky again. "I liked you better when you were crying on my floor."

"Tony," Steve says sharply, bristling a little.

"*Steve,* Stark throws back in a high voice, turning back to the images and sighing. "I don't see what I can do here. I'm going to need a whole team of surgeons if I want to take all the nasty stuff out and leave an actual functioning human being behind."

Bucky shrugs. "Do what you want."

"Don't tempt me," Stark replies lightly, looking pensive. He gazes at Bucky's arm like he's a butcher sizing up a hefty slab of meat to slice up. "Well," he says to the room at large but mostly himself, "there's always 3D printing."

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Thursday.
After assuring Steve that he's going to be fine and that he doesn't need to follow them - "I'm 97, Steve, I've been through worse, I can handle it" - Stark leads him to another room on another floor that looks just like the rest of the building, but has considerably less glass. There are sofas scattered around the centre, a few side tables, and a huge black screen where the windows should be. What is this place? Doesn't look like a lab.

"What are we doing here," he asks.

"Have a seat, I'll get my toolbox. JARVIS? The works."

"Right away, sir."

That machine is everywhere? That's not right. "Where is THE CHAIR."

"You're surrounded by them, just pick one," Stark waves at him distractedly, tapping away at a touchscreen panel that has appeared out of nowhere. Bucky realises it came from inside one of the tables, and settles into a nearby armchair feeling very disconcerted despite its extremely soft suede covering. There's nothing to restrain him. What is Stark trying to do?

"You have no straps," Bucky points out politely, trying hard not to make it sound like an insult. "You can't do the procedure without any straps."

"Straps?" Stark says absently, his eyes are still on the touchscreen. He finishes keying whatever it was he was busy with, then shoots a puzzled look at Bucky. "Contrary to popular belief, I'm not that kinky."

"Safety precaution," Bucky drawls. Isn't it obvious? Smart guy like him. Well, he can't know everything.

Stark's gaze is fixed and serious this time. "Barnes, as much as I appear to despise you, I don't actually plan on torturing you. I'm just going dismantle your arm. It's metal. Probably adamantium. It's strong enough to completely wreck a garbage disposal without you feeling a thing - trust me, this is way less intense. Thanks for ruining my garbage disposal, by the way. It's not like it was a really overpriced German brand or anything."

Oh. "I'm sorry. I'll pay for the damage." Somehow. The New Yorkers in the street look pretty rich.

"Hm. Stark nods, then his gaze flicks to the doorway. "Dum-E? I relegated you to building cleanliness."

The mini-crane whirs in response and rolls up to him with a large case, dropping it to the floor with a resounding thunk. Stark scowls and snatches it off the floor. "Look at you, you're not even trying. Go away and find something else to fuck up. Shoo."

Bucky stares and says nothing. If Howard was crazy, Tony is insane. He verbally abuses robots.

"Okay, so this may take awhile," Stark mumbles, his head buried deep in the open toolbox. He starts picking up various tools and wedging them in between his fingers. "Maybe longer than you think. Eight hours, give or take. And I'm going to need you to stay awake in case anything funny happens."

He can do that. "I don't sleep." He does, actually, recently more than he has for the past few decades, but he can do without it.

Bucky pulls it off and tosses it onto the next armchair. He can't shake off the feeling of wrongness that he's not in THE CHAIR. Suck it up, Barnes. Don't be stupid. You don't need that damn thing.

Still, he jerks away instinctively when Stark's hands reach out to prod at the joint where the metal arm starts. "Sorry." He forces himself to relax, but his jaw is so tight it makes his skull ache.

Stark ignores him and starts tapping and poking around the edges and between the grooves, making small impressed noises occasionally. He examines the arm all the way down to the fingertips, muttering to himself and typing up notes on his screen.

"Okay," he says finally, sitting up straight and stretching casually. "JARVIS, start monitoring vitals."

"Heart rate stable. Blood pressure normal. Temperature normal. Some tension in the shoulders."

Bucky exhales slowly and tries to prove the building machine wrong as Stark begins work, starting from the fingertips. He watches as the tools slip between the grooves like lockpicks.

"So tell me about my dad," Stark says suddenly. "What was he like?"

This is a bad idea. "He," Bucky croaks uncertainly. "He was smart. Funny. Everyone loved him."

"I said tell me about my dad, not myself," Tony mumbles around a screwdriver he's stuck between his teeth.

"His inventions. Back then they were something else. You know. I always asked him how the hell he did all of it."

"And? Did he tell you?" Tony lifts the outer plates of the metal palm away. The circuitry underneath is dense and hums faintly.

"Ignored me most of the time," Bucky admits. "Thought it was funny, seeing me all amazed like that. But we smoked together a lot. When we could. He liked me enough to let me see all the new stuff."

"So basically he treated you like a son," Tony intones bitterly, laying the metal pieces neatly to the side and tapping at the touchscreen again.

Bucky doesn't understand. "I don't understand."

"Did he say anything to you?" Tony presses, and suddenly he's not looking at the arm anymore. His eyes burn into Bucky's intensely.

"Told you, mostly he just ignored -"

"Before you killed him," Tony clarifies, his eyes still shining oddly.

"He recognised me. He said the name. Sergeant Barnes. Then he said. Not my wife."

A lump forms in Bucky's throat. The memory swims to the surface: an icy road, a mangled car. Pulling Howard out the door by his hair. The smell of oil and gasoline. In the passenger seat, the sound of someone in pain.

"Heart rate elevated," the building intones impassively. "Abnormal breathing pattern."

"He recognised me. He said the name. Sergeant Barnes. Then he said. Not my wife."

Stark's face is inscrutable, and Bucky forces himself to hold his gaze. "I prepped you a bunch of movies to help you relax," he finally says, his tone clipped. "Sit back and enjoy."
Friday.

He returns to the room at the crack of dawn, feeling like he's been run over by a train or two. Exhaustion rolls over him in waves, and he feels like he's been crying for hours. He probably was. He must have been in that chair for more than... well. It was daytime, then it was night, and now it's daytime again. He was in that chair awhile. Maybe he should try to sleep now.

Steve's already awake and reading a paper while sipping coffee. He looks up relief, when the door opens, then he must see the look on Bucky's face, because his smile drops instantly.

"What did he do to you?" Steve demands, tossing the paper and coming closer to help him into a chair. Bucky's left arm is mostly gone, ending just above where the red star used to be. He can't walk without swerving unsteadily at the sudden imbalance in weight. He hadn't realised how much he had been compensating to bear the arm, but it's not the reason why he's upset.

The procedure barely hurt; at most, he'd felt a pulling sensation in his chest and right shoulder, or his bones vibrating down his back. What hurt was the **movies**.

"The movies," he tries to explain, then realises how stupid it sounds and swallows big gulps. Don't start crying again.

"Movies," Steve mimics skeptically, his expression darkening.

"They were bad." Bucky hides his face in his one hand. Steve wouldn't understand. "There was a little girl. In red."

"JARVIS? What's he talking about?" Steve demands hotly.

That fucking machine is in their room too? Jesus Christ. It's been watching him the entire time. "Why the fuck is the building voice everywhere."

Steve ignores him.

"I'm afraid it was the 'War Epics' playlist, Captain Rogers."

"Nothing epic about them," Bucky interjects weakly, his voice still unsteady. He thinks about the cartoon one, with the flies buzzing around the boy at the train station. A children's movie. It makes him feel sick inside.

"What's on that playlist?" Steve presses irritably, already turning to the door and wrenching it open as the machine lists the titles out. Bucky stumbles after him unsteadily, trying hard not to list to the right. He makes it into the lift as Steve listens to the building voice, looking increasingly livid. "I'll kill him," he seethes, shoulders taut and shaking. Bucky's not sure Steve even realises that he's still with him in the lift. "I'll kill him."

The doors hiss open and he strides out without a word. Maybe he's overreacting a little. Sure, Bucky's shaken up, but it's because they were sad movies. It's normal.

"Stevie, come on, it's not his fault -"

But Steve breaks into a run. He trails after Steve slowly as he bangs into the room Tony's in. Bucky decides he doesn't want to join the argument and stops a few doors down, leaning on the wall and listening to Steve fume. He can only hear snatches of Steve's raised voice, but it's enough to guess
what's happening.

" - Graveyard of the Fireflies? Life is Beautiful?!

" - yes, I've watched the damn films - 

" - he's one step away from a mental breakdown and I'm trying my damndest - 

"THERE ARE BETTER WAYS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST, TONY!"

Some muffled reply, then, "THAT'S NOT THE POINT, HE'S A VICTIM TOO -

"YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH HE'S BEATING HIMSELF UP -

" - YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE, YOU KNOW THAT?"

More muted sounds of Stark explaining himself.

"I DON'T CARE IF SCHINDLER'S LIST WON THE FUCKING NOBEL PEACE PRIZE!"

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Saturday.

It's raining outside again and Steve decides to stay in the room with Bucky the whole afternoon. The building plays them music from the 40's. The trumpet sounds make Bucky feel warm and almost happy, but he's not, because Steve is mad and is being very distracting.

"Stop being so mad. Distracting."

"I'm not mad."

He is. Bucky can see it. And hear it, and feel it, because Steve won't sit still, and Bucky can't focus on his reading like this.

"I killed his parents. He's allowed to make me feel bad."

"No, he isn't. That's not how it works. That's not how any of this works!" Steve puts down his sketchpad, looking flustered. "You gotta stop feeling responsible for it, all of it."

"It was me, though. Always me." Bucky's tired of this argument. He tries to find his page again. It's difficult to read with only one hand.

"You didn't know any better, Buck, they were controlling you!"

"Same as the Nazis. Soldiers following bad orders. Too scared to do otherwise. Don't mean they're good people." He keeps his voice calm and continues searching the page for where he left off.

Steve finally grimaces and says nothing, looking like a petulant child. "Sometimes I wanna beat the hell outta him."

He looks up and sighs. "He gave us a room," Bucky says reasonably. "He let me stay. You already yelled at him yesterday. Don't go picking a fight. Why you always gotta pick a fight, huh."

Steve lets out a frustrated sound and looks extremely unhappy.

A moment later, his face lights up.
"Whatever you're thinking. No." Bucky twists away pointedly and goes back to his book. The story's about a magic spider who saves the life of a pig.

"The gym has a full pantry, you know," Steve starts, his eyes taking on a wicked gleam. "A whole shelf of Snapples."

Interesting. Bucky puts his book down. "Are they the ones with the facts." Those were fun. He learnt a lot from those Real Facts. Especially the one about the bones in a human foot. He should look it up to confirm. May make a good method of interrogation.

"I hear there are more than a thousand different facts," Steve adds conspiratorially. "How many new ones you think we can find there?"

Two hours later, they burst back into their room, wheezing and clutching their stomachs. They'd almost been caught by someone walking past, and in their moment of panic, they managed to spill almost all of it before escaping. Steve's fault. The gym carpet is going to smell like Pink Lemonade, Kiwi Raspberry and Mango Madness for a long time. Bucky's face hurts from laughing and when he catches the expression on Steve's face, he doesn't regret what they did for one second.

When they finally calm down enough to function normally, they discover a box of pastries sitting on the counter with another yellow sticky note on top.

_Barnes_
*Sorry I tried to trigger your PTSD with sad war movies*
_Cronuts are emotional currency_
_T.S._

The cronuts, whatever they are, are actually delicious. If Bucky had to be stuck eating one thing for the rest of his life, this would be his choice. He ignores Steve's raised eyebrows when he reaches for another. Seconds later, Steve's phone on the countertop starts buzzing madly, lighting up with notifications. Bucky snatches it up and almost chokes on his food.

_Tony Stark: ROGERS YOU SON OF A BITCH_
_Tony Stark: I JUST RECARPETED THAT AREA_
_Tony Stark: I BOUGHT YOUR BOYFRIEND FUCKING CRONUTS_

Steve grabs his phone back to see and snorts some cronut out through his nose. The phone starts ringing and he immediately declines it, wiping away tears of laughter giddily. Bucky swipes the phone to finish reading the messages.

_Tony Stark: PICK UP YOU JACKASS_
_Tony Stark: I KNOW IT WAS YOU JARVIS HAS VIDEO EVIDENCE_

The phone starts buzzing again and Bucky accepts the call, schooling his features. "It was an accident," he says immediately.

"_Barnes? That you? Did you fucking think this through? I have your arm, or do you not want that back?_"

Hm. He has a point. "It was Steve's idea. Please continue printing my arm."

_"You're lucky I already started. I'm gonna find a way to make you regret this."_

He's no stranger to threats, so this doesn't bother him much. He takes another bite of the cronut and lets it melt in his mouth. "Did you know that the fear of vegetables is called lachanophobia."
The line goes dead.

The plastic arm that Stark fixes onto him that night is revolting. It's pink and has a white cat cartoon pattern all over.

Worth it.
Steve

On the first night that they lie on the bed together in the beautiful room Tony has given to Steve, they both don't sleep. Steve knows Bucky only lies down because he won't stop asking Bucky to try to catch some shut-eye, even if it's just for a few minutes.

For Steve, he can't sleep because the bed's too damn soft. He feels wrong somehow, like it's too warm and comfortable for it to be real, so he kicks all the sheets to Bucky's side of the bed. Bucky lets the covers bunch up against his body, staring at the ceiling with that faraway look he gets so often these days.

The bedside clock is glowing 3:24am when Steve finally turns to look at him. It's not like last time in their old apartment. The bed's a whole lot bigger now, and there's a comfortable distance between them that they could never afford in the past. "You never used to lie on your back, you know," he says, over the ridge of bunched-up covers separating them. "Maybe that's why you can't sleep now."

Bucky doesn't move, but he shakes his head at the ceiling. "Back feels funny when I lie on my side. Like something's. Pulling."

That gets to Steve so much that he finds nothing to say. His tongue feels thick in his mouth and he rolls away.

---

It's Sunday and Steve is going out of his mind trying to get Bucky to leave the room.

There's nothing wrong with staying in, because it really is a comfortable room with an amazing view, but he just doesn't like the idea of Bucky skulking in the room for days on end. It scares him, knowing that if it were 1935 it would be him sitting about indoors and Bucky trying his best to drag Steve out. Now, Bucky only ever moves to smoke, eat, wash up, and sleep. Other times, he's sitting at the window, staring across the rooftops blankly, as if he's not really seeing any of it at all.

"You do realise that he has no purpose in life anymore, right?"

Sam's still panting slightly from their run. Steve had only overtaken him about six times before he'd called it quits. They sit side-by-side on the bench as the sun gets slightly warmer on the backs of their necks, breaths misting up the crisp morning air.

"What kind of talk is that?" Steve says, nonplussed. "He can do anything with his life. He just chooses not to. It's drivin' me mad."

Sam looks at Steve like he's the one who's a little bit crazy. "Maybe you're looking at this the wrong way," he tries, speaking carefully and thoughtfully. It just irritates Steve further.

"He remembers. He told me that himself. And... I don't know, I thought that would have made a difference." His voice is bitter now, and he feels like his lip trembles when he says it.

"I'm sure it does," Sam assures him. "But for a long time, his life was his missions. And now he has none."

"It's different," Steve insists. "If I lose my job, I don't just stop existing, do I?"

"He's been doing the same job for seventy years."
"You don't need to remind me," Steve mumbles sullenly, stubbornly. "You'd think I walk around all
day forgetting that I'm in the future -"

"That's the thing, Steve," Sam says gently. His warm hand rests tentatively on his shoulder and his
eyes are earnest. "You still think it's the future."

---

It's Monday and Steve buys more cigarettes and a bunch of books for Bucky after the usual run with
Sam. He finishes them quickly enough and disappears to the smoking room for a long time. When he
comes back, he looks relaxed and almost content, and he sits on the sofa next to Steve.

"Thank you for the books."

"Thank Tony, I used his money," Steve waves off the stilted pleasantry. "Were they any good?"

Bucky shrugs. "There was one. Kind of dumb. Whole book was just about some broad stuck on a
rich guy. Just gettin' it off until the end."

Steve grimaces, but he's secretly pleased at Bucky's choice in words. It's almost like something his
Bucky would've said, if you ignored the flatness in tone. "Sorry, I thought the bestseller list was
pretty foolproof."

Bucky doesn't reply, and sits quietly for awhile. "What are you watching."

"Um. I'm not sure," Steve says, caught off-guard. He hasn't actually been paying attention to the
show, even though it's been on for awhile and he's been staring at it for some time. "Something about
the forest. And fire ants."

Bucky nods and stays where he is. He watches the documentary intently, and Steve watches him.
His brain runs at a mile a minute.

"Do you think I'm still stuck in the past?"

The question falls from his lips, clumsy and unplanned, and he feels slightly embarrassed and stupid.
Bucky turns to him in surprise, and he looks at his palms quickly, feeling heat in his cheeks. "I mean,
I dunno. Just thinking about something Sam told me yesterday."


"Yeah, Buck. I told you. We go to Central every morning."

Bucky makes a small noise like "huh" and turns back to the screen. Steve twiddles his thumbs
nervously and feels like crying.

"I don't know where either of us are," Bucky says finally, in a quiet voice. They watch raptly as the
ants huddle into a malleable raft-like shape and float downstream into the distance.

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It's Tuesday and Steve makes his usual half-hearted effort to make Bucky leave the room. He's not
surprised when it doesn't work. He doesn't have much to do either, but unlike Bucky, he can't sit in
the same room the whole day without doing anything at all.

He's about to go to the gym when he gets a text from Natasha, and he meets her at Bedford in
Brooklyn. It looks nothing like

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look like rainbow pinwheels of poison stuffed with sugary frosting in the middle, and walk down the street, munching slowly. The bruise over Natasha's neck has faded almost completely; only a couple of pale splotches remain, finger-shaped.

"You should see him," Steve complains, because it feels good to tell someone else his problems and Sam's heard it a billion times already. "He just sits around all day and does nothing."

Natasha raises a perfect eyebrow. "Well, he doesn't have any missions."

"That's what Sam said," Steve gripes, feeling disappointed that she's saying the same.

"It's who he is. He's not going to just forget that."

"But you went through it, didn't you?" Steve asks, then flushes a little because he's never asked Nat about her past, and he never intended to, but he is now. For his own selfish reasons. "I mean - sorry, you don't need to answer -"

"We're different," Natasha says abruptly, but her face remains neutral. "I'm not like him."

"I'm sorry," Steve says again, and he really means it. He really doesn't need Nat to tell him anything. He's sorry for even thinking it.

"You need to stop assuming everything," she ignores his apology, and continues. "He remembers being your friend. It doesn't mean he's the same friend now. Tell me you know the difference."

He wishes he does. "How's Fury?"

Natasha's icy demeanour melts away as quickly as it came. "Alive. Grumpy. He misses SHIELD. I think he misses you, too."

Steve scoffs. "Well, he knows where to find me if he does."

"Actually, it's sort of the reason why I asked to meet you," Natasha says casually.

"Actually, it's sort of the reason why I asked to meet you," Natasha says casually.

Steve feels like kicking himself for not figuring it out sooner. "And here I thought this was a social call. So you didn't call me just to colour my insides with a toxic bagel?" he accuses lightly.

"It is a social call," Natasha assures him calmly, rolling her eyes. "It's both, anyway. I'm just the unfortunate messenger. He knows you found Barnes. He's pretty keen on meeting the fella in person."

"That's not such a great idea," Steve says immediately, then narrows his eyes. "Why does he wanna meet Buck, anyway?"

"Fury said you'd say that," Nat nods. She's still munching on her bagel. "He also told me to tell you that it's 'his goddamn right', seeing as Barnes almost managed to kill him."

"That's exactly the reason why Bucky shouldn't see him," Steve says firmly. He realises he's stopped walking. "I mean, Jesus, you should have seen what he did when he saw Tony. He's barely keeping it together, Nat."

"Doesn't have to be now," she says around a mouthful of rainbow bagel, shrugging. "Just letting you know that Fury's definitely making this happen sooner or later."

Steve wonders if Fury plans to have Bucky arrested or something, but concludes that if he'd really wanted it, Bucky would already be locked in solitary somewhere far away by now.
"Appreciate the heads-up," Steve mutters stonily. Add that to his list of Things Bucky May Not Like Doing.

His tongue is still slightly numb from the sweetness of the bagel when he and Natasha part ways. He spends the rest of the afternoon wandering around the familiar-yet-unfamiliar streets of his hometown, finding another bookstore and buying a few more books, this time taking care to avoid the bestseller section.

By the time he gets back to the tower, it's almost eight and he panics a little thinking about having left Bucky on his own for so long. Turns out it didn't make a difference, because when he steps through the door, Bucky doesn't even know he'd been gone.

---

It's Wednesday and Steve can't sleep again. When he closes his eyes, all he can see is the image of Bucky's x-ray, burnt into his eyelids like he'd stared at a light for too long. What did they do to you, huh? How did you survive it?

That's the burning question. How did you survive everything, Bucky? How many times have you cheated death and not known it?

He thinks about what Morita told him, all quiet and puzzled by the campfire, the night after they'd broken out of the prison camp in Austria. Bad lung infection, wouldn't last the night. He thinks about how healthy Bucky looked sleeping on his bedroll, skinny but surely alive and well, not a scratch on him.

He thinks about the freezing wind battering at the back of his head as he watched Bucky fall away from the train, the rusted railing still clutched in his hand. He thinks about how that wind tore the words from his lips as Bucky shrank into the ravine below, a tiny speck, then about how the train zipped by a copse of winter-trees and then he was on the other side of the mountain and his head was in his hands. He thinks about how he'd suddenly wanted the wind to pick up so strong that he'd get swept out, too.

He thinks about how high up they were when it happened.

"Quit worrying," Bucky rasps suddenly into the darkness. "Can't sleep with you thinking so loud."

"Sorry," Steve says into his pillow, and tries to keep still. His eyes ache from trying to remain shut. "I just keep imagining what Stark would need to do to get all of it out."

"Whatever he does, I'm not gonna die," Bucky vows flatly to the ceiling.

Steve believes him. Bucky's not going to die. Maybe it's because he can't.

---

It's Thursday and Steve wakes up to an empty apartment and two missed calls from Sam. He must have fallen asleep eventually, at a really late hour, because it's close to noon already when he glances at the bedside clock. The sticky note on the snooze button depicts a complicated diagram on how to set the alarm, but Steve just uses his phone if he needs an alarm because he'd learnt that much and it's all he needs.

There's a heavy weight in his stomach that won't go away, and he forces himself not to go searching the building for Bucky. He'll be fine. He's not a kid.
He figures out how to work the coffee machine eventually, because the sticky notes are helpful after all, even though there's the odd lewd phrase thrown in like Tony really couldn't help himself. He pulls one particularly cryptic one away from the stack.

*I know you like it long and black ;)*

He doesn't, thank you very much.

He makes a latte, and watches the news. He looks at the clock. Then he makes another latte and goes out to buy the paper. He buys a hotdog from a nearby stand on the way to the shop, then buys another on the way back to the tower.

He returns to the room and looks at the clock and makes another latte and reads the paper. Even the obituaries.

He makes another latte but forgets the milk, and finishes it anyway. He looks at the clock and paces the room. "JARVIS," he says finally, "how's Bucky doing?"

"Mr. Stark is tending to his prosthetic arm most efficiently."

"Is he coping okay?"

"His vitals are normal. Minimal signs of distress."

Steve relaxes a little and makes another coffee. It's not so bad without the milk, actually. "Do you think I could drop in to say hi to Pepper?"

"Ms. Potts would be most pleased with some company," JARVIS replies immediately.

"But am I allowed to see her?"

"A visit from a friend would not distress her," the AI hedges smoothly.

Steve takes that as a yes, and JARVIS meekly gives him the directions and access codes to the basement.

When the door slides open, he's stunned and doesn't know where to look. He'd expected a cold, sterile room. Possibly with a lot of metal. Or a lot of white. The walls of the room are some kind of thick clear plastic, not a huge space, but big enough for it to fit a gorgeous couch and a huge bed. It only looks a little odd because they're both covered with some tacky plastic material. What takes his breath away is the flowers. They hang from the ceiling from huge trellises and spill from huge plastic-covered vases, a lush wild riot of irises, purple and blue and white. He almost doesn't spot Pepper amongst them all, curled up on the far end of the bed and frowning over a crossword puzzle.

She suddenly notices Steve and jumps up in shock, her hand flying to her mouth. "Steve!"

"Ms. Potts," Steve says lamely, suddenly feeling like he's intruding on something private.

"How did you get in here? You're not supposed to be here," Pepper breathes, looking fearful but excited.

"JARVIS let me in," he explains sheepishly, his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry, I'll go -"

"No - stay," Pepper says suddenly, and looks surprised at herself for saying it. She smiles sadly. "I didn't know how hard self-imposed exile would be," she admits.
"You haven't seen anyone all this time?" Steve blurts incredulously. He does the math and realises she must have been stuck in there for at least a week now.

"Just Tony. He won't take no for an answer," Pepper rolls her eyes. "The flowers were his idea. They'll die anyway, he said, so it doesn't matter if I end up burning them."

Steve looks at her sympathetically. "I heard about what happened," he says quietly. "I hope you're feeling well."

"It's not so bad," Pepper replies easily, moving closer to the wall, but Steve can see a tightness in her eyes and the tension in her shoulders. "How is he? Is he taking care of himself?"

"Same old Tony," Steve assures her. "He's a little stressed, but he'll be okay."

Pepper purses her lips. "Don't let what he says get to you. Tell me he's been civil, at least. He promised me he would be."

"More than I hoped." It's true. "He's helping Bucky with his arm as we speak."

She nods and looks a little relieved, then crosses back to the couch and sits down gently.

"I'm glad you finally found him, Steve."

Tony must have told her everything about Bucky. He's grateful she's not raring to crucify him for what he's done. "Me too," Steve replies.

They're silent for a bit, Steve awkwardly not-quite-meeting Pepper's eyes, and Pepper surveying him with her unfazed gaze, thoughtful and completely in control. "We're going to get out of this mess, won't we? All of us."

Her tone brooks no argument. Steve feels ashamed. She has a fire burning her life away from the inside, a fuse waiting to blow at any moment, but she's the one comforting him, through a six-inch wall of fireproof plastic. He looks at her and is inadvertently reminded of a Botticelli painting. She's softness and brightness and strength all at once, and he understands why Tony loves her. He'd have filled her room with flowers, too. She deserves no less.

"Yeah," he chokes out finally, and smiles for her because he should.

He promises to be patient with Tony and to look out for him, then goes back to the room and looks at the clock and makes more coffee. Turns out he really does like his coffee long and black.

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It's Friday and he forgets his promise to Pepper because Tony is OFFICIALLY THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE ON THE PLANET.

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It's Saturday and he's helping Bucky open up bottle after bottle of Snapple juice and handing the cap to him to read, because he can't do it with the one arm. Some of them he glosses over and sets aside carelessly, while some make his face light up in a way that makes Steve's chest ache. He doesn't bother looking at the facts himself, because Sam told him the other time that half of them are lies anyway. Bucky doesn't need to know that.

He finds himself wondering if it's the old Bucky who's enjoying this moment, or the stranger who's
wearing Bucky's face and hijacked his memories. The stranger who could torture and kill a man without so much as flinching if given the command.

Bucky licks some juice clinging to the top of a cap, then looks at him and smiles, actually smiles, and he realises that it doesn't matter, because it's neither. They'd been split apart and it may have been seventy years ago for Bucky and three years ago for Steve, but it's here they've ended up, here and now, sitting with their knees knocking against each other on the carpet and exchanging secret smiles. It feels like muscle memory, but in the same way, it feels like something new altogether.

Pepper was right. They'll get out of this mess. All of them.
"Tony gave him a pink arm," Steve grumbles, and Sam manages to huff out a laugh between his panting, because going for runs with a superhuman Care Bear really kills his lungs.

He tries to imagine the Winter Soldier with a pink carbon fibre prosthetic, but his mind stalls because it doesn't seem physically possible. Surely he wouldn't let that happen. He kind of has a reputation to uphold.

"With Hello Kitty printed all over," Steve adds crossly, his eyebrows knitted as if he expects Sam to take all this seriously.

This time he really starts laughing, smacking his knee weakly. "I'll believe it when I see it," he manages finally, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

Captain America waits patiently for him to compose himself, pouting a little in disapproval. "Are you done?"

Not by a long shot, but Sam swallows the rest of his giggles because he has self-control. He does. "It can't be that bad," he says in the end, mouth still twitching to the side uncontrollably. "How'd he take it?"

Steve shrugs. "He hasn't said anything about it, actually. I'm not sure if he's even noticed it."

Sam rolls his eyes. "Stop being melodramatic, man. He'd notice it even if he were comatose." Grins again. "Who knows, maybe he secretly likes it."

Steve smiles slightly and punches him lightly on the arm. They watch a few more runners zip by.

Sam wonders if he should tell Steve about what Nick Fury's been up to, or if Steve already knows. He probably doesn't know. If he did, he'd have complained to Sam about it by now. It's pretty difficult to bring it up, though. He can only imagine how Steve would react. And, yeah, he doesn't want to make that happen anytime soon. Ever.

"After this is over, I'm heading back to DC," Sam supplies suddenly. Nice going, Sam. Very smooth change in topic.

Steve straightens a little, looking concerned. "Is everything okay there?"

"Yeah, of course. But you know... I kind of have a job there. At least, I hope so. Being MIA for weeks kind of affects my job performance." It's not as serious as it sounds, but he'd suddenly remembered to check his email a couple days ago and was surprised to see a barrage of messages and questions from his colleagues and cell group. He cringes a little, thinking about all the people whom he'd been in the midst of counselling before he dropped off the radar suddenly. Pretty irresponsible of him, even though "I had to help Captain America" was a valid enough reason.

Steve looks stricken. "I'd forgotten. Sam, God, I'm sorry."

"It's nothing serious," Sam says quickly. "I'm not the only one there, you know. People have been covering for me and stuff. But I figure it's about time I show my face a little bit around there, or they'll think I've died or something."

"I'm sorry," Steve says again, sincerely and earnestly. "I can't believe I forgot. It's just so surreal to
think that... well. I thought maybe you'd, I dunno."

"I'd what?"

"Nothing." Steve smiles brilliantly. "When are you leaving? Tony still has your wingsuit, doesn't he?"

"He can keep it," Sam says firmly. "I don't need it unless some kind of shit's going down. And where I'm going, shit doesn't exactly go down that often. Keep it till you need me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Don't know if you noticed, Cap, but it's you that attracts trouble, not me." He hesitates, then adds, "The wingsuit was rotting away in Fort Meade before you came along."

Steve sighs wistfully. "Yeah, that's true," he relents.

"I was thinking of going back tomorrow, but I could push it till next Friday," Sam admits, watching Steve's face carefully. It's shitty timing, really, but he can't do much anyway. They've done nothing but sit around with their thumbs up their asses for the past week, waiting for Tony's scientist people to figure out how to save Barnes. Actually, waiting for Tony's scientist people to figure out how to save his girlfriend, so that they can start figuring out how to save Barnes after that. It's like waiting for an organ donation. The chances don't look great. "Think you can tie your shoelaces without me?"

"I'm about a hundred years older than you," Steve scolds.

If Steve's upset about the news, he doesn't show it. The implication of Sam's departure date goes unmentioned, but definitely not unnoticed. By next Friday, Barnes would either be saved or... dead? Dying? Either way, he's staying with Steve until then, just in case. Because if he's gonna be a superhero babysitter, he'd damn well be the best.

They walk back to the tower together, like always. Steve buys food from every cart he passes, like always. He gulps it down eagerly, talking through mouthfuls about everything Barnes has said and done over the past 24 hours. Sam pretends to listen, and ponders the ticking time bomb that is Nick Fury's Ruthless Determination.

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He's visiting the happy couple for over dinner the following day when that time bomb goes off.

The night starts out well enough. They order in pizza and Barnes eats all the olives off the damn thing before he lets either of them have a slice. Other than that, he does seem a lot more friendly than he was a week ago, and a lot more put together. The arm, though. It takes all of Sam's self control not to piss his pants. Tony Stark's one hell of a resourceful guy, that's for sure.

"Brings out the colour of your eyes," he says tightly, his face aching from holding it in as Barnes lets him have a look.

"It's a good arm," Barnes agrees levelly, flexing it a little and wriggling his fingers to prove it. "Stark managed to swap it out part-for-part. Almost all of it. Only no hydraulics. And not strong. But it's light, I barely feel it."

Huh, Sam thinks. He really doesn't care about the design.

They have a *Fresh Prince* marathon, like regular people. They eat microwaved popcorn, like regular
people. Actually, it's him and Steve eating popcorn on the sofa. Barnes is sitting in the armchair off to the left, picking at his bowl distractedly. Sam watches him out of the corner of his eye as he lobs the sticky bits into Steve's hair with the composure of a well-trained assassin. Because he is. Steve doesn't seem to notice, so Sam doesn't say anything.

Halfway through the second episode, Barnes gets up. "Quick smoke. Won't be a minute, don't wait," he announces, before closing the door shut behind him.

They finish two more episodes and his chair remains empty.

"I'd better go check on him." Steve sets his bowl aside with practiced calmness, obviously trying to contain his worry.

Sam sniffs and shakes his head. "Mother hen," he teases, but folds his legs to let Steve pass.

"He spaces out sometimes, it's not funny," Steve retorts. "Goes on for hours if I don't snap him out of it."

Sam sighs and trails after Steve because it's second nature to have his back by now. The smoking room is at the end of the corridor near the lift. As they near it, Sam can make out faint snatches of a conversation.

" - good, like what Rumlow used to give me." Barnes is talking to somebody. Or is he talking to himself?

Steve turns around and exchanges a look of alarm with him, then wrenches the door open.

An acrid smell billows out, laced with the heavy sweetness of cigars. Barnes looks up in mild surprise from where he's sitting: a small table by the window, opposite one Nick Fury. Of course. Sam's jaw would drop, but he's not surprised. An uneasy feeling settles in his stomach instead. His gaze falls on the folder on the table between them. Damn you, Fury.

"Steve," Barnes says, his face lighting up. Out of everyone in the room, Sam's pretty sure he's the most relaxed, like he either hasn't picked up on the spike in tension, or simply doesn't care. "You didn't tell me about your other friend I'd almost killed."

"Ex boss." Steve's tone is acid as he glares daggers at the guy. "Nice of you to drop by."

"At ease, soldier, we're just having a friendly smoke." Fury tips his head in greeting, smiling enigmatically. Yeah, he's sharing a cigar with the Winter Soldier - the guy who had almost managed to kill him two months ago - and chatting like they're old friends. The guy probably has balls of steel, or something.

"Natasha mentioned you wanted to see me," Steve says icily.

"Yes, and I seem to recall you saying I could visit anytime," Fury replies evenly. Steve bristles in indignation.

"I said you could visit me anytime."

Barnes shifts in his seat. "Steve. Relax, we're just talking." He lets out another thick stream of smoke and passes the cigar back to Fury, while Steve levels a glare at him.

"About your old pal Rumlow?" Steve demands, then stops himself and shakes his head. Barnes looks away pointedly, chewing his inner cheek.
Sam snickers, "Never bring up the ex, Barnes." Barnes blinks at him blankly.

Sadly, Steve doesn't hear it. "Bucky, this is Nick Fury. You almost killed him," Steve says slowly, like Barnes is being really slow on the uptake. "You literally -"

"Double tap. Through the wall. Sloppy work," Barnes agrees, taking the cigar from Fury again and sucking at it gently. "No choice. They gave me a tight deadline."

Sam's heard the story. If hitting someone in the chest through solid wall from another building is sloppy work, he doesn't know what decent work is. Holy fucking shit.

"Don't sell yourself short," Fury replies warmly, and Barnes shrugs and hums to himself.

"Glad I failed. In the end." He sighs out more smoke and lounges back, eyeing Steve nonchalantly. "Stevie. Don't look at me like that. Was a shitty apartment anyway."

"I did try to tell him," Fury supplies. "He was all about having a low profile."

"Christ. Don't mean low security."

"That's exactly what I said." The two men chuckle quietly and trade puffs again like old comrades. Sam just gapes and wonders when that happened.

"What the hell is going on?" Steve snaps irritably. "Nick, you know how much I hate it when you go behind my back."

"You know I wouldn't do it if it weren't important." Fury taps his finger on the file that's still on the table, and Sam can tell it's only then that Steve notices it. Damn you, Fury, he thinks again.

"What, a mission?" Steve laughs and turns to Sam incredulously, like he finally gets the punchline of the joke, then sees the look on his face before Sam can pretend to look clueless too. Whoops. "Wait, you knew about this?"

He doesn't need to reply. Instead, he chooses to glare accusingly at Fury, who's just slouching easily, completely unperturbed. Fury fucks everything up and Steve blames him instead? That's not even fair. "Dick move, Fury," Sam mutters darkly. Fury pretends not to hear him and exhales a stream of smoke out his nostrils contentedly.

"It's no big deal," Barnes says flippantly. "Nothing dangerous."

"Sam, how long have you known?" Steve shoots at him accusingly.

Sam winces. Okay, maybe he deserves that a little. He hasn't exactly been straight about this. "Just a few days. I swear, I didn't know he was gonna track Barnes down himself," Sam promises, this time looking pointedly at Fury. "I assumed he would have the decency to speak to you first."

And by assumed, I mean I fucking told it to your face, you selfish bastard. Now Steve is giving him the "Son I am disappoint" look and it's breaking his heart, okay? Damn you, Fury.

"Wilson, I didn't survive the Cold War by treating people with decency," Fury retorts disdainfully, scowling. Sam glowers right back. How is that even relevant? "Now if we're all done with exchanging pleasantries, I believe Barnes and I were having a private conversation."

Sam's all ready to go, because banging out the door to show his displeasure would be pretty satisfying, especially if it's Nick Fury he's storming out on. And really, what Barnes gets up to and
which morgue he ends up in is none of his damn business. Sadly, Steve's feelings are, so he plants his feet and waits for Steve to respond.

"Bucky." Steve's voice is low and pleading, like it's meant for Barnes' ears only. "You really think you wanna do this, taking orders again? Is that what you want?"

"You're not my handler," Barnes mumbles sullenly, but he looks slightly cowed. He bows his head and doesn't meet Steve's gaze.

"Neither is he," Steve points out gently.

"You told me I should find something to do," Barnes argues. "This, it's. What I do best."

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fury," he he bites out. "You can't make him do this. He practically has two weeks to live."

"Well, if you'd given me a chance to explain myself earlier, you'd understand why I chose to show up here in spite of that," Fury snaps back irritably, flipping the file open and turning it to Steve. Despite himself, Sam takes a step forward to gaze at its contents, and Steve does the same. "We managed to apprehend an old scientist from HYDRA last week. Romanoff has been trying to crack him, but he insists on seeing the Winter Soldier or he won't talk."

A faint look of comprehension dawns on Steve's face as he skims through the documents. "You think he has information that can help us," he says carefully.

"Still not a good idea to send him," Sam mutters under his breath, but nobody listens to him anyway. If he'd thought it was a good idea, he'd have told Steve about Fury's plans himself. If Natasha couldn't get him to give up their intel, who could?

"I can get him to talk," Barnes says, his voice steely. "It's what I do best, he's said, and Sam suddenly remembers the whole fucked up story about Nikolai and suppresses a shudder. There's no way he's gonna be able to handle this.

"You really think so?" Sam pipes up, unconvinced. "All these years they've been controlling you, and you think you can just waltz in there and take the wheel? Does nobody see the flaw in this? Remember Germany? Because my hand does." He holds up his right hand, still locked firmly within a stiff cast. He's actually supposed to have gone for a proper x-ray for that, because there's no way the bones could've aligned properly without some surgery. He should really get around to doing that. Barnes' face pales as his gaze falls on the injury, but he says nothing. Steve shifts uneasily and looks unsure.

"You take me for a fool," Fury scoffs. The next moment happens so fast that none of them see it coming. Fury shoves the cigar between his teeth and pulls a Glock from his hip, resting it onto the table with his finger on the trigger. "Спутник."

Barnes gasps and doubles over, slamming both hands onto the table as if someone's clubbed him in the back of his head. His fingers clutch the edges of the table hard as his body is suddenly wracked with fine tremors.

Sam takes a reflexive step back, his breath catching in his throat as Steve automatically backs up and shoves Sam behind him, cursing under his breath.

"Jesus Christ, Fury, get back -"

"Soldier. You with me?" Fury asks casually, ignoring Steve and looking at Barnes intently.
There's a beat of silence as Barnes slowly stops trembling and sits still as a statue, head drooping loosely. Then he inhales and snaps upright, eyes flying open and darting about the room wildly. His hands flutter in his lap indecisively, clenching and unclenching, like they're separate machines recalibrating after a reboot. Steve stops shouting and stares warily.

It's like a switch is flipped and suddenly he's still again. "What. What happened." Barnes blinks slowly and takes in the three of them: Sam hiding behind Steve, Fury across the table with his gun flat on the surface and pointing at him. His wide eyes flick to the gun then to Fury's face. "Mission failure," he says quietly, like he's unsure.

"Abort mission," Fury assures him calmly. "Tell me your name."

"My name," Barnes repeats, staring down at his hands and at his pink arm, breathing shallowly. He puts his fingers to his temple and rocks forward a little, grimacing. "James. Buchanan Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038." He looks up at Steve, his eyes flooding with relief. "I'm here. It's me."

Fury looks almost disappointed. "Well, that was underwhelming." He slides his gun back into the folds of his coat as Steve rounds on him.

"You - that was reckless," he fumes, shaking with anger. Sam realises he'd been shaking too, but more out of panic than anything else. Damn right it was reckless. Dear God.

"Just testing a theory." Fury offers the cigar back to Barnes, who accepts it gingerly. "Killswitch programming only works the first few times. The mind's a fast learner. First few times it shuts down because it expects the conditioning to kick in, but it's like crying wolf. The next time it happens, it'll be even less interesting." He definitely sounds disappointed this time.

"I wanna ask how you know this, but I get a feeling I won't like the answer." Sam frowns at Fury in disapproval. God knows what he's been involved in.

Fury smirks slightly, his one eye gleaming. "Relax. We just recently managed to decrypt a couple old HYDRA files about it."

Sam only half believes him, and Steve's snort of derision shows he doesn't buy it, either.

"This is good," Barnes cuts in suddenly, looking at the cigar in his fingers with almost childlike surprise. "Like what Rumlow used to -" He catches the look on Steve's face and drops his arm, looking forlorn. Then he waves a careless pink hand at Fury. "You didn't tell me about your other friend I almost killed."

It's like a fucking glitch in the Matrix. Steve looks like someone's just punched him in the stomach. Fury, at least, seems completely unsurprised, and pushes the file at Barnes in case he's forgotten that, too. He takes it automatically as Fury peers at Steve and raises an eyebrow. "Said it yourself, Cap. He's got two weeks to live. You wanna waste that time talking about his feelings?"

Steve snatches the folder out of Barnes' hand aggressively. "He's not going without me," he snarls, then he's storming out the room without a second glance, slamming the door so hard it bounces off the frame and swings open again.

"I'm right here, you know," Barnes mutters, but doesn't make to stand up. His now empty hand starts to rub absently at his temple, while the other taps the ash off the cigar.

"You have popcorn in your hair," Fury calls out after Steve's retreating back. Captain America flips him off over his retreating shoulder and disappears round the corner.
"Fury. If I do it." Barnes asks seriously. "Can I get more cigars."

Fury smiles like a knife. "As many as you want."

"Dick move," Sam bites out again, for the record, then follows Steve meekly because Fury has a gun and has just bought over the Winter Soldier with the promise of cigars. Two more weeks. He really misses DC now.
It's an uncommonly cold March evening, and they're huddled in a tight circle outside the tent. The wind howls faintly through the trees, but does nothing to mask the pained sounds their captive is making from inside it.

It's the first time in almost a month that they've gotten lucky. Though the motorcade they'd ambushed the day before wasn't Schmidt's like they thought, they'd managed to capture the target alive. He has to be someone important, at least, because Steve's sure HYDRA doesn't send their men around with a two-tank escort on a daily basis. Also because Bucky insists he recognises the guy from the prison camp in Austria, which is why he's under strict orders not to enter that tent. Orders that are about to be overruled, because Steve and Monty have been trying to crack him the whole night and he's not even close to talking.

"Come on, Stevie, you know I can do this," Bucky insists. He looks far from willing, but Steve knows he's right. He's always been their best interrogator. Steve knows he's far too impatient to get anything out of anyone with experience. Gabe's banned from speaking to captives because of that one time he spilled their plans instead while trying to squeeze it out of another agent. Falsworth is good, but not as good as Bucky. Dugan kills them by accident most of the time, and Morita flat-out refuses. Dernier obviously doesn't want to do it either, because every time Steve asks him to have a go, he starts doing his thing where he pretends he doesn't understand anyone.

They're running out of options, and Steve can feel his resolve crumbling. "I don't like it," he admits. "Did you see the way he looked at you when we took him? Gave me the creeps."

"He's tied to a chair with a bullet in his leg." Bucky rolls his eyes. Steve looks around at the others, trying to think of a better way, but they look back at him blankly because they seem to love his ideas the most.

Monty looks like he's about to say something. "I say we just finish him," Dum Dum beats him to it. "He knows fuck all. What a waste o' time."

"Ne comprends pas," Dernier chimes in helpfully as Steve makes eye contact with him.

"Trust me, I got this," Bucky says, his gaze hard and determined. Steve hates it when he looks like that, when he can see the war reflected in the backs of Bucky's eyes. He never used to have that look. "Ten minutes, alone. I won't even need to use my knife."

"He knows you," Morita insists uncertainly. "If he gets to you..."

Bucky smiles brightly and pats him on the arm. "Oh, I'm countin' on it," he breathes, then winks at Steve and strides into the tent confidently.

He's back out in less than ten minutes, looking a little pale but grimly satisfied. "There's another prison camp in Luxembourg," he declares. "He's heading the research department there. Zola just promoted him."

"How the bloody hell did you do that?" Falsworth snaps, annoyed but slightly impressed. Steve feels disgruntled himself - he hasn't slept the whole night, and it just doesn't seem fair.

"He said he'd send me there," Bucky replies simply. He smirks and it's too sharp and too bright. He does that when he knows he's landed a kill, too. "They talk when they think you're beaten."
According to the file, the guy's being held in a random basement of a random house in the middle of a random suburb. Somehow, that surprises him, and he says as much.

Fury glowers at him like it's a huge insult. "This is on you, Rogers," he growls. "You blew my headquarters to dust."

"Well, if you didn't want me to, maybe you shouldn't have let HYDRA grow in there in the first place," Steve retorts, grinning in spite of himself. Natasha was right. Nick really does get grumpy about SHIELD not being around anymore.

They step into the unassuming house, Bucky trailing behind them distractedly. Steve has no idea what happened, but somewhere along the line, he must have struck a deal with Fury. Or the devil. Either way, he suddenly has an unlimited stash of cigars and a brand new phone, which he uses purely for Candy Crush. Thankfully, he doesn't spend money on it, but he keeps track of the time religiously. Steve tries not to let it get to him. At least he doesn't turn the sound on.

"Come on, Bucky, we're here," Steve scolds. He doesn't even look up. "Will you stop for one second?"

"Running out of moves. Don't interrupt." He frowns at the screen in concentration.

"This is on you, Fury." He huffs in frustration and tries to swipe the phone away. "There's a reason why I didn't get him one myself. Bucky, we're on a mission, come on. Give it."

"Don't - fuck, made a bad swap. Fuckin' punk, stop -" He spins out of Steve's reach, then stops and groans fervently. "I lost a life."

"Not sure you had one in the first place," Steve snaps, but Bucky scowls, sets an alarm, and stuffs the phone into his pocket.

"Hey, fellas." Natasha slides out of the kitchen holding a knife in a not-so-domestic way. "I thought I heard a disturbance."

"Get these fools off my hands, Romanoff," Fury mutters, and sweeps up the staircase without a backward glance. She narrows her eyes at Steve like he's done something wrong, but doesn't ask. They follow her obediently into the kitchen.

"To be honest, I wasn't expecting you to be here," Natasha calls over her shoulder.

"Feels good to have something to do," Bucky explains tonelessly.

"I wasn't talking to you," she says, then stops abruptly in front of the cellar door and turns back to face them.

Steve glares at her. "I'm no spy, Nat, but I think I can hold my own just fine in there."

Her mouth curls to the side and she shrugs a little. "We'll see."

What's that supposed to mean? "Is there... anything I should know before I see him?" Steve asks tentatively. "Is he in one piece, at least? A little warning would be nice."

"Oh, it's all very uninteresting," Natasha assures him. "Fury didn't let me do any of the fun stuff. Yet."
"You gonna be okay out here?" He looks over at Bucky, who at least looks a lot more focused now. He nods tersely and takes a seat at the island counter. Nat smiles tightly and nods to the door, and Steve opens it cautiously.

"Watch out for his spit, he has pretty good aim," Natasha warns him, as he descends the stairs into the dimly-lit cellar, shutting the door carefully behind him.

The old man bound to the chair looks completely at ease, much to his chagrin. The bonds aren't even tight, because they don't have to be. Steve takes a breath and reminds himself that this guy had a hand in torturing Bucky, which makes it a lot easier to stomach the whole situation. That, and the fact that this bald, bespectacled man is smiling at him in a way that makes him feel like punching something.

"Captain America," he murmers with low delight, his eyes twinkling behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "What a pleasure, what a pleasure. A nice surprise."

"Can't say the same to you," Steve retorts, glaring down his nose at the tittering man. "Have I said something funny?"

"No, not at all. Pardon me." The man catches his breath and blinks innocently. "It's just that... for you to be here. You people must really be desperate."

"Cut the bullshit, Lewis," Steve says shortly. "The only thing that's stopping me from snapping your neck right now is what you know."

"Knowledge is power," the old man responds lightly. "And you may call me Do -"

"I'll call you whatever I wanna call you," he cuts in curtly. "And you're testing my patience, Lewis. You know something we don't. I'd appreciate it if you could share with the class."

"I have stated my terms," Lewis replies firmly. "I will only reveal what I know if you bring the Asset to me."

"Now why would I do that?" Steve narrows his eyes at this guy. He may be old, but he's vicious and sly, he can feel it. This guy's nothing but trouble. Fortunately, Steve's pretty experienced with guys like him. No doubt he's going to try the killswitch on Bucky.

"It's a simple request," the old man says blithely. "What does it matter? When you take what you can from me, I will end up dead, right? Nothing in it for me. Try your luck, I am ready for pain. Or honour an old man's dying wish and save us all the trouble. Show me the Asset."

His name is Bucky, Steve wants to scream, but holds it back. He's not going to give the guy the satisfaction, so he keeps his face as blank as possible. "You could ask for anything else. Food. Water. A fortune for your whole family, if you have one. Why do you wanna see him so badly, huh?"

The old man shows his teeth. "Why, I thought you knew. He and I... we're old friends."

Steve rolls his eyes. "Can't beat me on that one, pal."

"Oh, but we had such good times together," the old man insists. "I'm sure he must have told you about it. I rather think he grew quite fond of seeing my face."

Get over yourself. "Whatever you're trying to do, it's not gonna work on me, okay?" Steve bites out irritably. "I don't have all day. I know you know how to make the serum. It's in the files, you were in
charge of administering it all through the 70s. If you tell us how to replicate it, I'll see to it that you get out of here. Alive."

A look of faint surprise ghosts over the man's face. "A solemn vow from Captain America himself?" He purses his lips, then smiles again sickeningly. "Very tempting, but I'll pass. Surely you can do better than this. Your dear Director Fury and Miss Romanoff have already offered me that and more. My counter-proposal stands."

God, this guy is getting on his nerves. Steve can see why Fury's in such a bad mood these days. "I really can't figure out why you'd wanna see him so bad," he says slowly. "I mean, he is a ruthless assassin known for his extreme interrogation techniques. No thanks to what people like you have taught him. So now that he's back on our side, you really wanna take that chance? You really want the Winter Soldier to come in and question you himself?"

"That's what I've been saying, yes," Lewis drawls. "You know, I've heard a lot of things about Captain America. I was not told that you are mentally challenged as well."

Steve turns abruptly and goes back to the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.

"I need to punch something," he announces immediately. Natasha and Bucky look up at him from where they're sitting. Apparently he's interrupted some deep meaningful conversation. He supposes he should be glad they're being civil to each other.

Natasha snorts and hands a twenty to Bucky, who pockets it with quiet dignity. "I had faith in you," she sighs. "I thought you'd last at least ten minutes."

"Guy can't even get the ladies to talk to him." Bucky stands up and rolls his shoulders in anticipation. "My turn."

Steve stops him with his hand on his shoulder. "He's gonna do it, Buck," he warns softly. "He's gonna try to take you back, I can see it."

Bucky nods once, then tilts his lips slightly to the side. "I know. I'm counting on it."

"Are you?"

"Do you trust me."

"Yes, but?"

"Whatever you hear, don't come in."

"But?"

"Don't. Come in."

"Okay, fine, but - wait!"

Bucky disappears behind the door, which clicks shut quietly. Steve heaves a sigh and joins Natasha at the table. For some reason, she looks like she's trying not to laugh.

"What?" he snaps at her, annoyed and flustered and feeling utterly useless.

"Untwist your panties, Cap. You think I'd send Barnes in with no ears at all?" She holds up an earpiece, her face breaking into a triumphant smirk.
Technology is amazing, Steve decides, as he takes the little device from her and shoves it into his ear. The voices are faint and crackling, but clear enough to distinguish. Natasha bumps her shoulder against his as he settles into the chair beside her.

"Relax," she says softly. "Who do you think trained me in interrogation?"

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"Asset. You're looking young and healthy."

"My name is Bucky."

"If you say so. Come here, come closer. No warm welcome for an old friend? What happened to your arm? My, what an abomination."

"You said you wanted to see me. I'm here. Tell me how to fix it."

"You forget your place, Asset."

"My place is wherever I wanna be. And my name is Bucky."

"Arrogance is very unbecoming of you. Rumlow would be so disappointed."

"Rumlow is dead. I killed him. Tell me how to fix it."

Something rustles and there are more crackling sounds in the background. "Something tells me it's not something you really want to know. You have no idea how much you're worth, you know that? Maybe I should tell you. It would please me immensely to know how much more pain I will be causing -"

"Tell me. Or I will show you. How much pain I can cause."

"I have no doubt about that. But why give you the chance? Спутник."

Steve is on his feet and breathing hard, but Natasha lays a hand on his shoulder in warning. She's shaking her head. "Trust him," she mouths. He looks to her, then to the door, and back to her. All he hears over the earpiece is a long crackle of staticky silence.

"Asset, report."

"Where... where..."

"Asset, report status. Now."

"I'm sorry. Sorry. Forgot mission. What is the mission."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I - yes. Yes. Please. Not the chair."

"Untie me."

"Yes."

More rustling sounds. Steve's heart is hammering in his throat, but he stays rooted to the spot. There's nothing down there that can really harm Bucky. It's an old unarmed man. He and Nat can subdue
them both if they come out through the door. He grits his teeth and strains his ears.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Asset."

"Wrong answer."

There's a thump sound and a muffled groan. "The Winter cockroach."

"I knew you'd remember. Didn't I tell you not to forget your place? You're more trouble than you're worth, aren't you?"

"I don't understand. Please. The serum - it hurts. Everywhere. They said, they said they would help to stop it."

"Is that why you left us? Traitor. You think they care about you? You're a killer, you're vermin. You exist on suffering. I wonder what they'd do if they knew the price of your life."

"Please. Stop. My head hurts stop."

"I bet they'd turn on you. You know it's true. Steve Rogers, Captain America, the pillar of goodness and truth holding up the world. How quickly do you think he'd abandon you when I tell him that your precious serum costs thousands of lives?"

Natasha manhandles Steve back to his seat as his hand flies to the doorknob. "Wait," she grits out, her voice harsh in his ear as she digs her heels into the floor. "Just wait."

"What are you saying."

"It's a virus, you fool, we don't replicate it. It replicates itself. In host bodies. Do you understand me, cockroach? We infect them and take it from their corpses and pump it into your veins. Now you know. Look at your face! Didn't I tell you that it's not something you want to know?"

Bucky remains silent. Steve can barely hear the mocking murmur over the rush of blood that's going to his head. Natasha's fingernails dig into his forearms in warning, and she keeps saying, not yet, not yet. He doesn't know what they're waiting for.

"There you have it, Asset. I have waited a long time for you to return. There is no cure. Stop fighting. Those people above us, they say they are your friends? They will never let you live. Not at that price. They will put you down like a dog. But not me. Come back to us, and we will take you in. We, and only we, know exactly how much you're worth. It's a price we're willing to pay, aren't we? I knew it. Rumlow knew it. And HYDRA pays it gladly; hail HYDRA, indeed. Stop that crying. Stand up. That's it. Remember your mission. Let's get out of here. Let's go home, Asset."

There's a shuffling sound and heavy breathing. "My name is Bucky."

Steve flinches at the soft crack that sounds through the line, closely followed by a sigh and a muffled thud. Natasha's muttering darkly in Russian, shaking her head and tightening her grip on his arms even though Steve isn't moving anymore. He barely feels like he's in his body at all.

A moment later, the door swings slowly open and Bucky glides through, his face ashen and his lips pressed tightly together. He doesn't meet their eyes. He knew all along, Steve realises. Whatever you hear, don't come in, he'd said. He knew they were listening. His mind is a blank whirl of denial, and he looks at Bucky without seeing anything at all.
Bucky smiles suddenly, sharp and brittle. It looks all wrong. "Told you I could make him talk."

"They talk when they think you're beaten," Natasha recites, as if from memory, and sinks into her chair in defeat.

Steve shudders and presses his palms to his eyes.
Bucky

His head is still ringing strangely from his experience in the cellar, but he has it under control. He doesn't really want to think about what happened in there, so he focuses on the good part. Successful interrogation. Almost too easy. He must be quite good at acting. Pity he won't live long enough to make a career out of it. Pity he can't listen to Steve and find something to do with his life.

He brushes Steve off because the guy won't stop talking. He doesn't want to hear it. He feels tired all over, and he wants to go home.

Steve is shouting behind his back, maybe at Natalia or maybe at him. It's not important. He gets into the car they came in, and waits for Steve to finally get into the passenger seat. His face is splotchy, his eyes are blue. His mouth is still moving. He catches a few lines of what Steve's saying because the guy's right in his ear and he can't filter out everything. The words pass over him like white noise.

- figure a way - or say something - not going anywhere - Jesus, I'm your friend I wouldn't - deserve this, don't - fucking look at me when I'm - don't shut me out don't - get it together, God - you let him fucking get to you - pull over are you even watching the - say something - Buck come on don't - jerk, you're a fucking jerk -

Bucky ignores the sounds and keeps driving, thinking about how much time he has left and what he can do in that time. At least he has a good collection of cigars. He can go out in flames, smoking like a gun. He smiles to himself and ignores his phone alarm when it goes off. He can't really remember why he turned it on in the first place.

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1944.

They're all of them crammed into one tent for warmth, sleeping like babes. Steve's mouth is slightly open and his limbs are everywhere; with his thrashing about, he's managed to push Monty and Morita together into an uncomfortable cuddle near the edge of the tent. At least Dugan's outside keeping watch, or they'd be piled one on top of the other.

The tent smells a bit rusty, the air inside it humid and sour with the lingering presence of their captive, who's already been dead a couple of hours and buried in a shallow hole where they'd all had a piss before. They hadn't done it deliberately, but the ground was less frozen from it and it was just easier to dig in the same spot.

He's writing his letter to Steve, the real one. The one that didn't end up in the museum.

He bends over the paper and the words pour out automatically.

\textit{I never used to know what to write in these things, but I think it's because I never knew what death was at the time. Hate to say it, but I know it now. Know it like the back of my hand, my hands that have caused so much death themselves. I wish to hell I could say that I'm not proud of it, but I am. You know I am. I can't help being good at what I do.}

\textit{You know when we have our moments and we wonder what the fuck we're doing here at all? Why the hell are we fighting this war, this endless death-game on foreign soil? I've been on the lines for a year now, maybe more, and I still can't answer that question. Not in a good, honourable way. Why do I fight? Because they fucking made me do it. Because all I wanna do is go home. Because they say if we win we can go home. And I would've done it in a heartbeat when Agent Carter gave me the}
option after Austria, but everything had changed then. You were here, and there was nothing left in Brooklyn to go back to. You goddamn stupid punk. I could've gone home.

But I don't miss our apartment. It wasn't so different from what we have now, was it? I feel just as cold all the time anyway. You know what I really miss? Music. The live music in the dance halls, the kind that shakes your teeth in your ears. You know the kind I love. People moving and laughing to it like there ain't anything in the world outside the sound of it. War can't touch music. It always stays golden and pure. When this is over, Stevie, let's you and me go find the biggest fucking dance hall and get stinking drunk. We'll stand right up next to the drums and the trumpets and forget everything. It'll be swell. Imagine it. Maybe you could bring Agent Carter too.

I shouldn't be talking about this, should I? That's not the point of this letter. You're supposed to read this after I die and here I am making promises I can't keep. Sorry, kid, you know I'm not good at this shit. Well, don't be sad when I die, Steve. At this point it's almost inevitable, the only kind of redemption left after all I've seen and done, the only way the war can end for me. There's no going back from this kinda fucked. After everything we've seen and done, death isn't so bad, huh? I mean, finally getting to rest, maybe it ain't that bad. I know you of all people would understand. Your ma always said, when you gotta go, you gotta go.

Of course I'm afraid of dying, I'm not stupid. My biggest fear is dying slow. I hope to hell you never find out what I mean. I felt it in Austria, the slowly wasting away bit by bit. I've been there, Steve. I don't wanna do it again. If it ever gets that way again, I can only pray that you're there with me, and that you care enough to shoot me through the head, because I'm not sure I'd have the strength to myself. That'd be a good clean death, the best kind. Please God, let me die with a bullet in my skull, smiling and telling you that it's my time and it's all gonna be okay.

He stills his hand abruptly and tears the page out of the sketchbook quickly and quietly, then folds and puts it away. He never sees it again, because when he looks for it a few weeks later, it's gone. Must have gotten lost along the way.

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He leaves the room the moment they return because Steve won't stop talking to him, demanding for him to speak, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him desperately. He has nothing to say, and he doesn't want to look at Steve's face because it's not what he needs to see right now. Steve yells and cries and throws books at the back of his head, trying to pick a fight, so he walks out of the room and sighs in relief when he doesn't follow.

"Building voice," he says tentatively to the blissfully quiet lift.

"At your service, Mr Barnes. You may call me JARVIS."

"Where can I find Stark."

"Mr Stark is currently in a meeting with Dr Banner on the second floor. An interruption is not recommended."

Yeah, like he's going to listen to something the building recommends to him. He presses the button to level two and hums softly to himself as the lift descends.

He finds Stark quickly enough, because like Steve, he's shouting too, and he only has to follow the sound of it down the corridor. He sees Banner first - he's never met the guy before, but there's only two of them in the room so it has to be the guy who isn't Stark. He's not sure what he'd expected. Maybe a small man with shiny glasses and a mean sliver of a smile. This doctor is the opposite. He's
not even wearing a lab coat. He sits facing the door, looking tired and bothered by Stark's raging tirade.

"- and I don't know why I'm even wasting my breath debating this with you -"

"I'm not going to try it on rabbits," Banner cuts in patiently. "Not just because it's unethical -"

"Oh, fuck you, Banner. You think this is about ethics? Bring the - " His mouth suddenly falls open a little when he sees Bucky standing there looking back at him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he snaps immediately. There are bruises under his eyes, like what Bucky sometimes gets when he can't sleep for a few days in a row. He looks a little bit like he's been crying, too, but his face and eyes are dry. "Get out, Barnes, I can't deal with you now."

"I just came to say. That you don't have to." Bucky tries to smile reassuringly. "Bad timing, sorry. Building warned me, should have listened."

"You're Bucky Barnes," Banner says unnecessarily, then looks a little flustered. "Hi - sorry, I'm Bruce. Banner. I know I'm supposed to be taking a look at your blood samples -"

"No, you're not," Stark snarls. "You're supposed to be fixing Pepper, and bang-up job on that so far, Doc."

"Met an old HYDRA agent," Bucky raises his voice a little to get their attention as Banner opens his mouth to reply. "There's no cure for me. Thought you should know. Nice to meet you, Banner. Stark. Thank you for... everything. I hope you find your cure."

He turns sharply and leaves quickly, because he has nothing else to say. He's not sure if Stark's resumed shouting at Banner, or is calling after him, but it's not important. He needs a smoke, so he goes back to Steve's floor and settles down in his chair in the smoking room. The cigar cutter is lying where Fury left it. He suddenly remembers the phone he received too, and takes it out of his pocket. He realises the alarm had been ringing for so long that it no longer makes a sound. He vaguely remembers setting it to keep track of his game. It's funny if he thinks about it. In reality, he waits and his life goes away. He pushes that thought out of his mind and concentrates on the game, forgetting about the cigar burning itself away in the tray in front of him.

"Thought I'd find you here."

Bucky blinks and gives a start, looking up quickly. He'd been staring at the screen for too long, and his vision swims a little. He wonders how much time has passed.

"Sorry," he croaks. He looks out the window. It's night, but he doesn't remember if it was already night when he'd returned to the tower or not.

Wilson slides into the seat in front of him, looking subdued. "Steve told me what happened."

He doesn't like the look in his eyes, that gentle pitying gleam. Bucky makes a non-committal noise and starts a new game, because he doesn't want to talk about that. Save your pity for the dead, Wilson. Save your pity for those who died to keep me alive.

"Hey," Wilson says gently, and puts his hand over the phone screen. He pulls the device away, and Bucky lets it happen. "You don't look so good."

"No big deal. Just dying. Slowly." Bucky picks up his forgotten cigar instead. He cuts it carefully, relights it, and inhales slowly, savouring its heavy sweetness and feeling his head go light. "It
"You don't need to pretend to be okay, you know," Wilson sighs. "I get that it's a lot to take in."

Is it? Is it really? The truth is cruel, yes, but it's simple. Not a lot to take in. Many people are dead. It's his fault. He has to die. Not much to take in at all. Not really very big news, either. He's always felt the blood on his hands. Now he knows it's there for sure.

"You know what I really missed. All these years." He blows a cloud of smoke in Wilson's face unapologetically. "Music. Dancing. Never thanked you properly for the iPod. It was good, you know. To have music back, even for awhile."

Wilson frowns and shakes his head at him. "It's a little early for last words, man. I don't wanna hear it. Fuck. Do me a favour and don't try this on Steve." He takes a breath, scrubbing at his face, then carries on. "You need to talk to him. Properly, like a normal person. I know you feel like shit now, I do. But you don't have to be alone. You don't need to be alone. He doesn't want you to be alone."

Bucky ignores him. "What I really want," he admits, "is to go dancing. One more time. Somewhere with good music. People still go dancing these days, right. At the dance halls."

"Dance halls," Wilson repeats flatly. "Barnes, I'm begging you here. Can you try to keep it together? If you can't do it for yourself, at least do it for Steve."

For Steve. He can do that. He's not the one screaming and shouting and throwing books. He's the most together out of everyone in this tower. "I'm keeping it together." He blinks slowly and breathes in the sweet smoke again.

Wilson makes a sound like he's not convinced, looking at him long and hard. He finally lets out a sigh, and slides Bucky's phone back to him. "For what it's worth, I gotta say. It's not your fault. And I don't think you deserve to die."

Bucky jerks his head in response, halfway between a shake and a nod. His throat closes up briefly, so he forces himself to take another deep drag, feeling breathless from the thick smoke. They watch each other quietly for awhile.

"I don't know about dance halls," Wilson says eventually, "but we do have nightclubs. God, let's get drunk. Let's get fucking wasted. Can you even get wasted?"

Bucky sets the cigar aside. "Let's find out."

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1943.

It's the first night the Howlies are officially meeting each other, after having accepted Captain America's offer to form a special forces unit. Morita and Jones are telling Steve about their hometowns, while Dugan's already red-faced and laughing in loud booming shouts at something Bucky's said. He doesn't even know exactly what he's saying, because the booze is good and Steve's paying, so he keeps drinking like it's water.

The other two are quiet. To say they're out of place would be an understatement. Falsworth may have helped Dum Dum steal a HYDRA tank and blasted the both of them out of there, but it's obvious that he doesn't take to Dugan's obnoxious behaviour. He sniffs in disapproval and sips his beer in silence.
Dernier's there by Morita's insistence. Bucky hasn't tried to speak to him yet, but apparently he'd been in that prison camp way longer than any of them, and in that time, he'd managed to build and set up a chain of explosives that took out half the artillery engines in the adjacent factory, without ever getting found out. Bucky doubts that ever happened, but Morita swears it's true, so Steve believes him because everyone believes fuckin' Morita.

"...and how about you, Captain?" Jones is asking politely. "I mean, we've heard about you from Barnes, sometimes -"

"Don't believe anything he's said," Steve says immediately, looking mortified. "Buck, what did you tell 'em?"

"Only th' good stuff, Stevie." Bucky grins broadly and slaps him on the back, a little too hard, but he doesn't care. Steve's all big now, he can take it.

"He told us about, I dunno, what was it? A market?" Morita thinks a bit. "I don't remember it so well. There was those girls. And a whole lotta milk."

Steve's face flushes and he puts his hand to his face with a groan. "You didn't." Even his ears are red. "Bucky, hell, you swore. Not a soul."

Bucky's laughing so hard he can feel the bourbon bubbling back up his throat a little, and Dugan thumping him on the back isn't helping. He shoves the guy's meaty arm away weakly, misses, chucks his glass onto the floor instead. "Ahhh. Sorry. Well. 'S not like you're s'posed to be here, Rogers."

"Well, thanks to you, these guys will never respect me as their CO now," Steve complains.

"It's not all Barnes' fault," Falsworth points out blandly. "You don't make it easy wearing that costume and prancing about."

Dum Dum slaps the table hard, grinning in approval, and Falsworth smiles tightly.

Bucky takes a few breaths. Costume. There's a story there. "Now that you mention it... remember that time in '33 -"

"You're swacked," Steve smothers his mouth with a giant hand, and he grunts and tries to shake it off unsuccessfully. "Don't listen to him, he's - ow, Jesus!" He pulls back his hand, nursing it where Bucky'd pressed his teeth in, looking scandalised. "You're disgusting."

Bucky smirks, but he's already forgotten what he'd been trying to say. He drapes a heavy arm across Morita's shoulders, which are shaking from silent amusement, and croons along to the song playing in the background, right in his ear. "Heaven, I'm in heaven... n' my heart beats so that I can hardly speeeeeak..." he chuckles as Morita pushes him away, making a face.

"Ugh, don't you drool on me. Goddamn noisy drunk," Morita complains good-naturedly.

" Doesn't shut up when he is," Steve agrees fondly. "Buy him a few rounds and he's a regular Crosby. Hey, Barnes, ever think of being a singer?"

"Singer? I'm a fuckin' musician. Gimme my gun, I'mma make her bullets whistle a sweet song. Hell, gimme a coupla' Krauts, make their -"

Jones puts a hand on his shoulder and says soft words in Bucky's ear - easy, Sarge, that's it, nice and quiet, let's put that drink down, brother.
"I meant after the war, Buck," Steve says quickly, his eyes wide and a little shocked. "When we get home."

"An' you can go back to art school," Bucky agrees leaning into Jones' warm weight. "An' I can - I can -" he scrunches his face, straining to think. "I can. Uhhh."


"Yeah," Bucky breathes, his eyes sliding shut as the room spins around him. He feels warm and soft from the liquor and hears the faint music still warbling from the record player. "Yeah, we could do that. After."

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The nightclub is dark, but the air is charged with sweat and machine-made fog, and the glare of strobe lights pulse behind his eyelids. He can't see the dance floor, not really, because it's a sea of people mashed together, moving in a mass of flesh and raised hands, throbbing to the beat of the bass that he feels to his bones. It's nothing like the dance halls he remembers, but he thinks he likes it. He watches the huge abstract projections of light patterns morph on the walls, in sync with the music. The colourful lights flash everywhere, and the shadows are painted in technicolour.

He turns to Wilson and Steve, who are watching him anxiously, like he may suddenly have a seizure and start dying in front of them. He smiles. "This is nice," he says. The deafening music strips his voice to nothing, but they can see his lips move. He moves close enough for Steve to hear him. "Come on. Stop thinking so much. We always said we'd do this after. Remember."

That earns him a rueful smile, and Steve licks his lips and seems to make up his mind about something. "Okay," he half-shouts back at Bucky, leading them to the bar. Bucky doesn't know where to look. The colours dazzle him like a drug, and the music itself seems to shake his fingertips. Wilson takes charge of ordering the drinks, and soon they're doing shot after shot of stuff he's never tried before in his life. Most of them taste amazing at first, sweet or fruity or sour, and it all goes down light and easy.

He loses count quickly, but Steve finally starts to relax a little, smiling impishly as Bucky knocks back the shots with him as Wilson watches and only matches them for less than half the amount. Each round gets increasingly stronger. One of them tastes of soap. A small green one goes straight to his head and burns through his nose. His tongue goes numb.

Wilson presses another drink into his fingers. It's on fire, and he hesitates and looks at Steve, who looks a little stunned himself. Then he thinks, fuck it, and drinks that too. He can barely taste anymore at this point, but he can tell it's not meant to be nice. He's not sure if the room is spinning, or maybe the lights have just started to move quicker. The beat gets louder in his ears, and the crowd on the dance floor jumps madly. Steve and Wilson are shouting something into each other's ears, so he turns and disappears into the crowd.

It swallows him whole. He lets the mass of people jostle him to the middle, enthralled by their energy. He's not even dancing, he doesn't know if he remembers how. He sways slightly, nodding his head, watching the faces of the people around him - flashing red green purple under the bright stuttering lights, hair plastered to skin and eyelids fluttering closed in delirium. Time seems to skip between flashes of light.

He closes his eyes and feels the music pulse through his brain and imagines it getting loud enough to wipe away everything he knows. Forget how he got here. Forget who he is. Forget who he was. Forget Steve.
Something is pouring down his face but it's not sweat. The light reflects off the wetness hanging off his lashes, a kaleidoscope changing with each slow blink. Warm bodies push and pull against him, all of them thrumming with life. They don't know what it feels like to be alive, he realises. They don't know what it feels like to die. God, Steve, I don't wanna die.

He turns and Steve is there, looking dazed and concerned. His eyes are glassy and flicker in the changing neon lights. A sudden realisation hits him inexplicably: he thinks about the handwritten letter at the bottom of his pack, hastily scrawled out in the dead of night in a tent they shared one night in 1944. He looks at the man standing across the packed room, a head taller than most, his features flashing yellow green orange, his lashes throwing spidery shadows across his cheeks. He thinks there's no way he could have misplaced that letter, and he knows where it must have ended up instead.

The only sound that exists is the music blaring into his ears, but he can read the words off Steve's lips as he pushes his way through the throng to Bucky.

He ignores it and grabs Steve by the shoulders and pulls him close. The music is deafening, but he knows that when he speaks into Steve's ear, he hears it loud and clear. "It has to be you. When it's time. You have to - no, listen, Steve, it's okay -"

Steve's knees buckle, and his face presses awkwardly into Bucky's shoulder. He rages weakly with his fists, shaking his head, beating his answer out against Bucky's ribs - no, no, no. A desperate rhythm. Bucky catches his hands and holds them at bay, still babbling quietly and calmly over the roaring noise. " - it's okay. It's gonna be okay."
It's 1938 and they're celebrating Bucky's birthday. It's nothing big because they can't afford anything too exciting, but they do end up at the new bar that's just opened a few weeks ago. They gaze in awe at the new paint and the huge sign up front, through the windows at the warm crowd behind the doors. The smell of fresh food wafts out, and low sweet music hums through the cracks. Steve takes an eager step forward.

Bucky holds him back and gives him the look.

"What?" Steve says, too excited to be peeved. "Come on, Buck, you're not gettin' any younger."

"Remember, you promised," Bucky warns, waggling his eyebrows. "Don't be a punk and go ruining a fella's birthday."

Steve rolls his eyes and pushes Bucky's hand off his shoulder. "No fighting, I know. Jesus, you'd think I do it all the time."

"That's because you do."

Steve continues making grumpy noises of protest all the way in.

They get kicked out about an hour in, with Steve stumbling out with a busted lip and a very angry best friend. It's not his fault, not really. He didn't start it this time. He'd just happened to speak up at the wrong moment. He catches Bucky's glare and huffs in defeat, shoving his hands into his pockets and feeling terrible about himself. "I'm sorry, alright? It wasn't my fault," he mumbles, splattering blood down the front of his shirt as he speaks.

Bucky's gaze softens and he throws a careless arm around his shoulders. "I know, kid," he says gently, mussing his hair up in a way that he knows Steve hates. "My God, you're shit at keeping promises."

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It's 1941 and Steve's on his way home from the store after work. He usually takes his time to stroll through the aisles to find a small treat or something, but Bucky stayed in bed in the morning and didn't go in for work because he hadn't been feeling well, so he quickens his steps and tries to get home sooner. At least he'd managed to find a few small apples going cheap.

He's going up the steps of their building when a lady rushes by him in a hurry, flushed and breathless, almost bowling him over because he's at least two heads shorter than her.

"Beg pardon, miss," he says politely, sidestepping her quickly and nearly dropping his bag.

"Oh - I'm sorry! I didn't see you there - sorry -" she blushes harder, sweeping golden hair out of her face, and hurries down the steps without a second glance. Steve frowns after her. She looks familiar. She looks really familiar.

He busts through the door of their apartment, scowling. "What's Patty from Molly's diner doing in our apartment building?"
Bucky's sitting on the edge of the bed, making a show of reading the paper. He flicks a glance up at Steve, then goes back to reading. "Hey. You're back early."

"Asked you a question, Buck." Steve chucks the paper bag on the counter in annoyance. "By the way, nice to see you're all better now."

"What can I say, I'm a fighter," Bucky smiles and folds the paper up, setting it aside. "You remember the milk this time?"

Steve strides up to Bucky with his hands on his hips, glowering threateningly. "Quit stallin', you don't fool me. Patty. The waitress from last week."

"Ohh, that Patty? Dunno, maybe she's visitin' a friend."

"Cut it out. Tell me you didn't. We talked about this. Tell me you didn't - not on the damn -" He trails away as a bright red smear on the bed catches his eye. "Is that lipstick on my pillow?!" Steve seethes. It fucking is. He grabs it and starts whacking Bucky across the head with it repeatedly. "You promised, you jerk! No dames on our bed! No dames on my goddamn pillow!"

Bucky laughs loud and easy, catching it and holding it at bay as Steve makes to smother him. "Alright, alright, I'm sorry. Christ. Promise like that, you expect me to keep it?"

"You're an asshole." Steve chucks the pillow at his face one last time, then turns back to the counter and starts unloading the groceries in an unnecessarily violent manner. "Couldn't even have done it on your side."

"Swear to God we at least started on my side," Bucky insists innocently, fussing at his messed-up hair with his palm. "Though it was a little difficult to control where we ended up."

"You're disgusting. I hope she gave you syphilis."

Bucky snorts, still giddy and proud of himself. "You're no fun, Stevie."

"I ain't sleepin' till you change those sheets out," Steve huffs over his shoulder, and he hears his friend sigh reluctantly and start plodding about, pulling the covers off obediently. Jesus. The things he puts up with. He takes the apples out of the bag and decides not to offer him any.

"The fuck is this?" Bucky's voice, sharp and sudden, rings out from behind him. Steve's startled and puzzled for a moment, then his blood runs cold. Oh, shit. The card. He'd forgotten. The card he'd hidden on his side of the bed, wedged between the mattress and the frame. He shouldn't even have kept it in the first place. Wasn't like he'd been accepted, anyway. "Rogers, what the fuck is this?"

He turns around slowly. "I can explain," he starts weakly, but it's pretty clear already what it is, so he stops there and doesn't say anything else. Bucky has the card in one hand and the bundle of sheets in the other.

"Steven Holley from Jersey? Really, Steve? Fuckin' Jersey?!" He throws the paper back down onto the bed like it's burned him. The 4F across the enlistment card stands out bright, red like the lipstick on the sheets. "You promised you'd stop trying."

Steve shakes his head and shrugs, chewing his bottom lip sullenly. "Well, whaddaya want me to say? Promise like that, you expect me to keep it?"
It's 1944 and Steve tosses restlessly in his cot, knowing Bucky can't fall asleep either. He can't shake the feeling that something bad is going to happen tomorrow when they're on the mission. He doesn't know why he has a bad feeling. Yeah? Bucky-in-his-head says sarcastically. You ever think it's because we're swinging onto a high-speed train on a mountainside?

"Bucky," Steve whispers into the night, shifting onto his back again.

"Stop it," Bucky mumbles tiredly, an automatic response. "Woke me up."

"Did not," Steve murmurs back, turning to face him now. Bucky's facing the other way, his shoulders hunched over against the cold. His frame looks small and vulnerable in the darkness - it's been nigh on a year since Austria and he hasn't really put on the weight he'd lost. Steve remembers before, when Bucky used to tower over him, all strong and sure of himself. When did that change? He doesn't know. Maybe he only looks different because Steve's bigger now. "You alright?"

Bucky remains still and silent. Steve wants to reach out and lay a hand on his back, but he doesn't move. He listens to Bucky's quiet breathing, his own heartbeat thudding loud in his throat. For a moment, he thinks that maybe Bucky really has fallen asleep.

"Sometimes I dream," he croaks suddenly to the darkness. "I'm still in Austria. On that table. I never left."

What he wouldn't give to take those memories away, Steve thinks. He can't find the words to express how he feels. He can't find the words to comfort Bucky. His breath sticks in his chest like he's about to have an asthma attack again.

"Dunno what they did to me, Stevie. I was sick, then I wasn't. Thought I was gonna burn up and die." Bucky's voice is low and insistent, bordering on pleading. "They took the skin off my hands. Why? Why'd they do that, Steve?"

I don't know, Buck, Steve wants to say, but his words get lost on their way out. He realises he's not staring at Bucky's back anymore. He's turned to face Steve, his eyes glistening wide and wet in the darkness. Steve can't look away.

"My fingernails. They took those, too. Like a - a damn trophy, or something. Or like I was a gun, and they were tryin' to disassemble me before puttin' me back together. I thought maybe I dreamed it, but the pictures. Those damn. Steve. Steve, I can't go back there. I can't. I'd rather die. You don't know, God, thank God you don't - I never told you, did I? Something's wrong with me, Stevie. I'm hungry all the time, it's like I've been fuckin' starvin' to death for months - I don't know what they did...

His voice trembles and breaks and he just sobs silently, shoulders shaking with the effort of holding it in. It feels wrong, seeing Bucky like this, like he's seeing something awful and raw that nobody should ever see. Steve has never seen him so afraid in his life, and it shocks him to the core.

"It's okay, Buck, you're not goin' back. I promise. They're not ever gonna take you again. I promise. I promise." His words tumble from his mouth, spurred by Bucky's terror. They're empty and meaningless and he knows that Bucky's not dumb enough to believe him, because he always makes promises he can't keep, but he says it anyway because it's all he can. He chants it over and over again through the night like a prayer, until Bucky finally calms and falls asleep from sheer exhaustion. He says it under his breath until his throat is sore and lips are cracked, then he falls asleep too.
It's 2014 and he leaves Sam draped unceremoniously across the edge of his bed, fully clothed and mumbling incomprehensibly. Still, he's nice enough to leave the trash can right beside him and a full glass of water on the bedside table, before going back to his own room. Thankfully, Bucky's still lucid enough to follow him meekly when Steve tugs at his elbow, though he's either ignoring Steve again or completely lost in his head.

When they reach their room, Bucky collapses onto the bed all on his own with a loud, grateful sigh, and Steve pulls his shoes off quickly. He squirms and kicks them off helpfully, then rolls over onto his side and promptly falls asleep. Steve isn't surprised. The drinks had been truly awful, and Sam's a terrible friend, but then again, Bucky's sleeping. Really sleeping. Steve sags against the side of the bed, watching him in wonder for a few minutes. That fire drink was something else. Even he still feels it, molten and heavy in his gut.

Somehow it doesn't make him sleepy in the slightest, and he feels no inclination to sleep. Maybe it's because Bucky's taking up more than half the bed and hasn't undressed. It's kind of disgusting. He decides to take a walk to work off the rest of the liquor in his system, trying hard not to think about what Bucky'd told him in the nightclub. He can't think about it. If he does, he'd -

He finds himself in the basement again, staring mutely at a dark room full of charred roses. The figure on the bed's small and frail, a pale ghost-form in the artificial light. It's a deathbed, he realises, feeling sick to his stomach.

"Induced coma," a voice rasps from behind him, and Steve jumps and turns around guiltily. "Yup. We went there."

"Tony?" Steve inches closer to the man sitting against the wall near the door. He's holding an open bottle of whisky loosely in his hands, his eyes glassy and heavy-lidded.

Tony flashes his teeth, sudden and sharp. "Come to save the day, Cap?"

"Jesus, Tony, are you trying to kill yourself?" Steve squats down to pry the bottle from his fingers.

Tony pulls it closer to himself instinctively, cradling it to his chest. "Better way to go than that, isn't it?"

Steve slumps onto the floor beside him, forcing himself to look at the quarantine room again. It's a lady lying there on the bed. Her name is Pepper. She doesn't look much like Pepper anymore. He chews on his tongue nervously, feeling a tightness in his chest.

"I'm really sorry." Steve can't think of anything else to say. His words are weak and terribly inadequate, and he winces the moment they leave his mouth.

"Not your fault," Tony says bitterly. "You know the worst part? It's not even that we don't know how to fix it. It's simple fucking science. Gene therapy. Even you could understand it."

Steve says nothing. He doesn't know what gene therapy is. He stares down at his hands.

Tony laughs, crazed and helpless. "Imagine a lock. All you need is a key, but that key doesn't fucking exist. Basically if I want to save her, I'd have to create life. I'd have to be a God. Maybe that was the plan all along. To show me that I'm not."

Pepper shifts slightly and a hot pulse of fire ripples out of her chest. The glow of it reflects in Tony's eyes and he stares blankly ahead, then takes another gulp from the bottle. Steve doesn't stop him. They watch the air around her shimmer with heat.
"Whatever happens, Tony," Steve says finally, hoping to sound reassuring and calm. "You're not alone."

Tony lets out a small choked noise and twitches away like the words have stung him, turning his face to the side. "You can go now," he whispers weakly.

Steve hesitates for a few minutes, then rises to leave. Before he can take a step, though, Tony's hand shoots out and closes around his ankle. He stops, surprised and slightly bemused.

"There's something you need to know," Tony blurs, not meeting his eyes. His fingers tighten imperceptibly. "I should've told you. I found - HYDRA had some files about his bloodwork. I should've given them to Banner, but... I couldn't do it. I thought if I'm going to help save anyone, it should be her." He looks up at Steve, his eyes wide and beseeching. "Does that make me a bad person?"

No, Steve thinks. It makes you human. Steve gazes back down at him, his stomach roiling. "It makes you a fucking asshole," he spits instead, because he's human too. Betrayal rises up the back of his throat, bitter and thick. Blinded by a sudden wave of hot tears, he wrenches his leg free and storms out of the room.

He's so angry that he accidentally wakes Bucky up when he gets back to his room. The door shudders ominously as he slams it behind him with shaking hands.

"What. Steve. What's going on." Bucky rolls over blearily. "What time is it."

Steve staggers to the bed and collapses on it heavily, breathing hard. "I'm not gonna give up, Bucky," he declares vehemently.

"God. Not again." Bucky rolls away with a small groan.

"We still have the one serum," Steve continues forcefully. "We can stretch it. We'll have, what, until the end of the month? We'll figure something out, swear to God we will."

Bucky makes a small reluctant noise. "And if we don't."

"We will," Steve hisses angrily. "Please, Buck, you owe me that much. You have to try. Promise me you'll try."

Silence, then a short exhale of breath. "Fine. But If it starts. If -" Bucky chokes up a little. "You have to promise too. When it gets bad. When it's time. I need you to do it." He rolls back to face Steve, so close Steve can smell the alcohol in his breath. "Promise me that."

He wants to refuse. He wants to punch Bucky in the face and tell him he's being unfair and selfish. But he thinks of the quarantine room hidden below the building they're in, and of a still white figure dying slowly amongst a forest of wilting flowers. And he thinks, maybe Bucky's not being unfair or selfish at all. "Okay. Okay. I promise."

---

It's 1944 and they're huddled in a half-crumbled house after a heated hand-to-hand scuffle with a group of Nazi campers. They're mostly unscathed, except for Jones, who's leaning heavily on the far wall, sweating buckets and swearing softly under his breath. "Jesus Mary and Joseph," he moans, clutching at his shoulder and grimacing painfully. "I'm gonna die."

Bucky's unimpressed. "It's only dislocated, Gabe, don't be a baby."
"Fuck you, Barnes," Gabe bites out, groaning. "It's fallin' off, I can't feel my fingers. Lord save my soul. Auuuhhhh. Send me home, Cap, I'm done with this war."

Steve grins and squats beside him, trying and failing to look sympathetic. "Sorry, you're not gettin' out of it so easy," he says brightly. "C'mere, let's put it back. Quit bawlin'."

Morita laughs somewhere behind them, and doesn't even bother to offer his help. He's going over the bodies with Dum Dum, trying to find good weapons to loot. Jones whimpers and shakes his head desperately, shrinking away from Steve's outstretched hands and raising his good arm in defense. "No, no, don't touch it! You'll make it worse!"

Monty rolls his eyes. "Get it together, Jones, my little sister's got bigger bollocks than you."

Steve slaps Jones' hand away and schools his features. "It ain't gonna fix itself. Trust me, Gabe, I've done this a thousand times," he says seriously. Well, maybe twice. On Bucky, because his right shoulder's always been a little weak. He doesn't really know how painful it is, but it can't be that bad. It's not even bleeding, for Christ's sake. "It'll slide right into place, you won't feel a thing, promise."

Bucky snorts so hard, it's a wonder nothing comes out of his nose. "Yeah, listen to him, he knows what he's talkin' about."

When Gabe finally lets him do it, he screams so loud Steve nearly dislocates it again in shock. He cringes as the cry echoes back at them from all corners of the desolate town. If there are any more Nazis lying around, they're fucked for sure, but thankfully, there's no answering battle cry.

They tease him and leave him sobbing and cursing on the floor as Steve hurries to the doorway where Dernier's keeping watch, half expecting an army to appear in the street. Bucky helps Gabe to his feet, patting him comfortingly. "I know, I know, it blows," he's muttering emphatically, and Steve can't figure out if he's saying it loudly on purpose. "Steve Rogers can't keep a promise if you coated it in Elmer's and shoved it up his ass."

"Careful, Barnes, that's insubordination," Monty snickers.

"I was drunk," Steve says aloud, in a horrified voice. "I was drunk when I offered all of you a spot on the team."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Morita assures him, still rifling through the pockets of a dead man on the floor. "We were drunk when we accepted, too."

Chapter End Notes

The secret alternate chapter title is "5 times Steve Rogers made promises he knew he couldn't keep."
Bucky

He wakes up blinking in the harsh light of noon with his head aching slightly and feeling tired all over. Initially, he's disoriented, but the reason why he's woken up becomes obvious soon enough. Steve's pacing near the television, talking heatedly at Wilson, who sits there quietly with his head in his hands. He must be feeling like shit too, but Bucky can't find it in him to pity him. It's his fault. Bucky thinks he can still taste the small green drink on the back of his tongue.

"I mean, can you believe him?" Steve rants, wringing his hands urgently. Wilson shakes his head minutely and makes pained sounds, and Steve takes it as an answer and carries on loudly. "I'm surprised he told me at all. Probably wouldn't have, if he weren't piss drunk at the time. Anyway, I got JARVIS to give them to Bruce - I don't know, am I doing the right thing? You should've seen Pepper. It's horrible, it's like she's glowing from the inside. God, I feel terrible. This sucks. Should I have done that? Am I wasting his time? Oh, God, he should be thinking about Pepper now, shouldn't he, what if she doesn't make it, Sam, would it be -"

"Who's Pepper," Bucky groans, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His head starts to hurt a little bit more.

Steve looks up and Wilson sags in obvious relief, still hiding his face behind his palms.

"Hey," he gushes, grabbing a glass of water from in front of Wilson and striding over. "You had me worried for a second."

Bucky takes the glass automatically. Did Steve just give him Wilson's water? "Is Pepper a person."

"She's Tony's girl," Steve explains, sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed. He motions for Bucky to drink, so he does. Wilson can get his own water. "Remember? She's... she's dying, Buck, I saw her last night. It's not looking good."

"Why is she dying. Is it - was it me."

Wilson snorts from his position on the couch. He ignores it and tries to remember what happened last night. There was a lot of loud music and flashing lights, but he doesn't remember trying to kill anyone. If he did, he blames Wilson.

Steve looks at him, his face unreadable. "No, it wasn't."

Good. "Then why are you angry." Bucky shifts and tries to find a more comfortable sitting position. If he lies back down, he'll definitely fall back asleep. He's been sleeping too much. "Is it because I forgot. I'm sorry. I don't remember. Meeting a Pepper."

"You've never met her," Steve assures him. "And I'm not angry."

Bucky raises his eyebrows, Yeah, right. He's seen it enough times to know when Steve's angry, not even counting the years he's only just begun to remember. It's not difficult to spot. The set of his jaw, the way his hands won't stop moving. This time, Steve picks at the covers, worrying at the corners with his fingers. He's definitely at least furious.

"Stark told me he's had your medical files from HYDRA for awhile now," Steve confesses bitterly. "But he chose not to mention it. Because he was too busy thinking of himself, as usual."

Bucky sighs in exasperation. "Did you start a fight."
He at least has the decency to look a little ashamed. "No, but I kind of told him he was an asshole."

"Unbelievable." Bucky shoves at him gently. "His lady love's dying, and all you can do is. Call him an asshole. Steve," he implores. "Listen."

Steve looks away guiltily, twisting his hands in the sheets.

"I killed his parents. He helped me anyway. He didn't take me away. He's a good man."

Steve starts shaking his head, running his fingers through his hair. It's like he doesn't want to hear it. Bucky keeps going.

"He's a good man," he insists. "And now he's suffering. He doesn't deserve this. Not from you."

"I never said he did." Steve's ears flush red and he stares down at his feet, but his voice remains petulant. "You don't know him like I do. Sometimes he's just so - so selfish -"

Bucky swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands up abruptly. His brain expands and throbs behind his eyes, but he grits his teeth against it.

"Know him well enough. You're more like him than you think," he utters. "Going for a smoke."

As he walks out, he hears Wilson finally speak up, his voice carrying across the room just as the door shuts.

"Y'know, Cap, as much as I hate to say it, I gotta say I'm with Barnes on this one."

---

He doesn't actually want a smoke right now, but he doesn't want to be stuck in the room listening to Steve talk about his problems. That's what Wilson is for.

He realises he's still wearing his clothes from the night before, which is convenient, because there's a squished up pack of smokes crammed into his back pocket. He takes out a stick and lights it. "Building voice," he demands suddenly, because he's pretty sure the building's listening here, too.

"Where is Stark."

"Mr. Stark is currently in the company of Ms. Potts," the building responds coolly.

"Where is that."

"I'm afraid I am not authorised to disclose."

Fair enough. "Is it true."

"Access has only been granted to Mr. Stark himself."

"I meant. Is it true. Is she dying."

"Her vital signs suggest that mortality might be a possibility in the near future."

He imagines the building telling Steve the same thing about him. Hopefully they won't get that far.

"How near."

"Considering the number of unknown variables, I have insufficient data to compile an algorithm for a reliable calculation."
Bucky rolls his eyes. "Educated guess."

"Less than 36 hours," the building chimes immediately.

He finishes his smoke and chews on the filter absently. So he can't see Stark, or his girl. What else is there to do?

Belatedly, he remembers his grudging promise to Steve. Get it over and done with, then. "Building."

"JARVIS, sir, if you please."

It's a damn building. "Where can I find Banner."

The building directs him to a cozy-looking common room on the fifth floor that he didn't know existed. There's a small pantry near the door, but most of the room's taken up by a huge recessed sitting area in the middle, like a swimming pool filled with couch cushions. The doctor's having a nap across several of them, his hands at an odd angle and papers spilling across his face and chest, as if he'd fallen asleep reading them.

Bucky pours himself a glass of water and sits beside the sleeping man, drinking quietly and waiting.

He's on his second glass when a phone alarm sings, and Banner jerks awake and fumbles in his pockets. The papers slide gracelessly onto the floor. He makes small sounds and groans at his phone screen before pushing himself up slowly, scrubbing at his face and swearing under his breath as the rest of the documents fall away.

"Is this a bad time," Bucky asks quietly, and Banner yelps and scrambles backwards.

"Barnes," he gasps, looking pale and shocked. "Oh my God. Please don't do that again." He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. Is he counting to himself?

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you."

"No, no, it's okay," Banner says hurriedly, casting a despairing look at the papers scattered around him. "I was, um, looking at your file."

Bucky helps to gather the sheets back into a decent stack as Banner starts talking anxiously about what he's read so far. It doesn't really interest him, but he tries hard to pay attention.

"So apparently after they captured you in 1943 - look, here -" he flicks feverishly through the pile and points to some indecipherable scribbles. "- they gave you a few shots of something and you stopped dying."

James Buchanan Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038.

"- there's a noted increase in metabolism with each dose. Temporary cellular regeneration too. But the interesting thing is the changes in your circulatory system. Albumin levels stayed pretty constant, but the RBCs actually display some structural anomalies. That and your platelet count -"

His tone gets more energetic the longer he speaks, and he looks increasingly excited. Bucky decides to cut in before it's too late. "I'm sorry. Banner. I don't understand you."

"Oh. Sorry. Thanks for telling me. How do I say this?" He pauses and worries at his lip nervously, deflating a little. "To put it crudely, you're not super all over, only in your blood. Your white blood cells give you a terrific immune system. That's probably what saved you from dying from your lung
infection. And your red blood cells got the bulk of the healing factor. It's actually impossible for you to ever bleed out, I think, which is pretty neat."

"Winter cockroach," Bucky says sardonically, under his breath. His mouth has curled to the side in an ironic smile.

Banner blinks in confusion, startled out of his train of thought. "What?"

"That's what they called me. Some of them. Makes sense now."

"Well, that's a horrible way to put it, but it definitely gives us an idea of how the hell you managed to survive falling off a train," Banner concludes. "So you were actually okay until they put the arm in. The procedure itself would have killed you at least ten times over if you hadn't already been juiced up - I mean, the way it's attached? On that scale? I've performed less intrusive autopsies."

He remembers the pain, the fire in his veins. The thick smell of his blood, the heavy perfume of it sweet and cloying. The snapping of twigs. His bones. He tastes the green drink at the back of his throat again, and swallows reflexively against it.

If his expression has changed, Banner doesn't notice. "Anyway, that's when the shit hit the fan. You can even see when they started to freak out, when they realised you weren't recovering from the surgery. It shouldn't have been possible anyway, that arm weighs, what, thirty pounds? Not even counting the mechanism it's rigged to. Right here, in this report - they tried their other serums, three different kinds, even though they weren't approved for human testing yet. I think they were just trying their luck at that point, hoping for some miracle healing to kick in. In any case, it all backfired. Your DNA absorbed whatever it could, I guess. Here's where it starts to get a bit crazy." He stares down at his notes, deep in thought. Probably trying to translate the terminology to English.

"The conflicting serums were taken up by different chromosomes, and all of them started forming a new souped-up immune system of their own, which means you have three different super leukocyte armies battling for dominance right now. By right you should have gotten the healing factor they were aiming for, at least from one of the formulas, but the combination of all three is way too potent. So now your white blood cells keep targeting any trace of the opposing genomes. Which are already fused into your DNA, so, uh... essentially it attacks all your cells."

Bucky shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He wants Banner to stop talking. The memories are coming back to him. The cold table, the hard straps, the burning under his skin that wouldn't go away. The tightness in his shoulders.

"It stops there, though. There's a bit of redacted info that's impossible for me to recover, because it wasn't done digitally. Whatever they did to fix it, I have no idea," Banner points apologetically to a scanned copy of a blacked-out document.

"Convenient," Bucky supplies, and sets his glass down. Exhales slowly and tries not to think too much.

Banner sighs, looking thoroughly disheartened. "I know. I'm stumped. I'm not sure how they even started fixing it - three different problems in three different places? How did they even manage to target one of them, without destroying your entire gene sequence completely? It makes no sense. I've never seen it before."

Bucky hums sympathetically, not really understanding. He doesn't really need to. He'd been sure of it from the start: of course only HYDRA could save him. He wonders if Steve would believe him if Bucky told him. Maybe he'll have to ask Banner to tell Steve himself.
"I'm sorry," Bucky says finally. "I've wasted your time. You're supposed to be helping someone. Pepper."

Banner's face falls and he shakes his head. "It's okay. Really, it is. That's another nightmare in itself, but I don't think there's anything else I could do for her. We've exhausted our options."

"What do you mean."

"Well," Banner begins reluctantly, looking exhausted. "her case is actually a lot simpler than yours. I'm not sure how much you know - did Tony tell you? No? Well, the Extremis is the only serum affecting her, and only at one loci too. Gene therapy would fix it, but so far we haven't been able to find a compatible vector. Imagine that. High school science, and we can't do anything about it. So it's like cancer, you know? It's gone into overdrive. Just keeps producing more and more Extremis until it's physically impossible for the body to contain it. I mean, sure, the pressure lessens when she explodes, but -"

"Vector." Bucky frowns.

"It's like a carrier," Banner explains quickly. "Usually it's a bacterial plasmid, or a retrovirus. All you need to do is modify it to carry the functioning genes, make sure the right promoters are in place. The vector goes in and replaces Extremis with normal human genes. Like I said, really simple science. It's like we already have the recipe but we just don't have the right ingredient."

"A retrovirus," Bucky repeats incredulously.

"Yes, you know, like - the flu?" Banner gestures helplessly, looking flustered, apparently unable to explain further.

"I know what a virus is," Bucky assures him patiently. "Funny thing. I found one on a mission recently. HYDRA-made. Looks pretty rare, you should give it a go."

---

Thankfully, Steve is much calmer when he returns to the room. Bucky wonders what Wilson must have said to him, but he's not in their room anymore. At any rate, Steve seems to be cheered up at the thought of Bucky having a chat with Banner.

"How'd it go?" he asks lightly, not taking his eyes off the television.

"Normal," Bucky shrugs. "What are you watching."

"It's called Family Feud. Come watch it, it's hilarious -"

"Let's go back to Fort Greene." He doesn't know where the suggestion comes from, but he doesn't regret making it, because Steve turns to him looking a little stunned, but definitely eager. Something in his chest tightens at Steve's expression.

"What? Now?"

"Yeah. Come on. I want to see it. If anything's changed."

Steve breaks into a wide grin. "Oh, you have no idea. Don't get disappointed, it's nothing like what it used to be."

"Wasn't anything to begin with. I'll try not to hold my breath." Bucky manages a small smile in
Stealing the bikes from Stark is a little too easy. The building doesn't say anything as Steve races to the reception desk on the first level, shouting Captain Rogers and other fancy terms like matter of national security and immediate access. Bucky nods along solemnly and points vaguely to Steve, and says "For America", and they end up being ushered into the high-security garage within five minutes. They're even allowed to choose what they want to take, which is a little ridiculous. Bucky doesn't think he's ever witnessed such a blatant breach in security. As they speed away from the tower, each perched on a heavily customised bike with Stark's name engraved into the chrome, Bucky can't bring himself to care.

They race each other across the Brooklyn Bridge at dusk. The lights have just come on and the sky above them is a dusty purple-blue. They weave through the traffic like they're on a high-speed chase, and the wind roars in his ears and whips his hair into his eyes. Up ahead of him, Steve glances back occasionally to beam at him, calling out taunts that he never hears because they're going too fast for conversation. The metropolitan city of steel and glass falls away as they near the quieter streets, with low buildings and peeling signboards along the dusty road. They slow down their bikes as the stiller air subdues their initial excitement.

They turn at the corner of Clermont and Myrtle, and roll to a halt. Steve is breathing raggedly from the exhilarating ride, his face coloured from the biting wind. "We're here," he says unnecessarily, looking about.

Bucky stares. The stoop of their building is gone, and even the walls are painted a different colour. What used to be their landlord's apartment at the bottom is now a -

"Walgreens." Bucky says in disbelief. Steve snickers, his mouth twitching to the side. "The fire escape is gone."

"Yeah," Steve agrees, looking wistful. "We had some good times there."

They walk around aimlessly for awhile in the area, ignoring the passers-by hurrying past and shooting them odd looks. "It's not exactly a safe area to stroll about," Steve explains.

The old bookstore down the street is no longer there. It's now some sort of childcare centre, painted a garish yellow and blue, with big cracks in the walls and a sad playground out back fenced in with warped wire. Further down, the diner's still a restaurant, but the old painted signboard's been replaced by a malfunctioning neon sign that says "Gao Sin Chinese". The only thing that's maybe the same are the alleyways. All alleys look the same. All of them look like places that Steve has christened with his blood.

Bucky finally turns to Steve, scowling. "You were right. It's different."

Steve kicks at the ground contentedly, nodding and shrugging his shoulders. Nothing you can do about it.

"This place blows," Bucky concludes. "Let's go home."

---

He turns in earlier than usual that night. It's been a long day, he explains to Steve. Still hung over from last night. Not completely untrue.

He wakes to the sound of violent thuds. A glance at the clock tells him it's almost 5am. What the hell is going on? With a concerted effort, he pushes the covers off himself. "Steve," he mumbles blearily.
"What." He's more tired than he was when he went to bed. He reaches out groggily and realises that Steve isn't lying beside him; he's standing silhouetted against the open door, talking urgently in a low, pleading voice. He drags himself out of bed to see who he's speaking to.

" - said that, Tony, I'm sorry. I was really insensitive, I know you've been having a hard time, and I'm sorry. You know I really care about whatever happens to Pepper. Are you angry about the bikes too? Because we didn't do anything bad, I promise, literally not a scratch - you wouldn't even notice the difference - Tony?" Steve's voice trails away, unsure.

It's Stark. He's standing in the doorway. His hair is dishevelled, and his face is pale. Maybe it's just the light in the corridor. It falls onto his face and Bucky raises his hand to shield his eyes as he slides quietly into its path. Stark's eyes are locked onto Bucky's, focusing intently, as if Steve weren't standing in front of him at all. Bucky walks closer, drawn by his indecipherable expression. Something important must have happened. He stops just behind Steve's shoulder and gazes back at Stark cluelessly. Steve turns around, following Stark's gaze, and finally notices Bucky standing behind him.

"What's going on?" he asks nervously. The silence stretches, thin and brittle.

Stark blinks once, twice, then finally opens his mouth to speak. "I was wrong about you."
Steve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What's going on?" he hears himself croak. It's too early in the morning, or too late in the night. Steve has no idea what time it is, but he blinks blankly as he follows Tony's gaze to where Bucky's standing behind him.

"I was wrong about you," Tony announces, then he's moving past Steve like he's not there.

He'd thought that Tony had come by to give him hell about borrowing the bikes, but he's obviously missing something. He looks from Tony to Bucky and back to Tony. Bucky won't meet his eyes. Instead, he's leaning against the counter, face shadowed with exhaustion, nodding absently as Tony grasps his shoulders and babbles words under his breath: didn't think and saved her and why did you do it and I didn't deserve it and if there's anything I can do.

The words pass over Steve like cold water. Then he thinks, Bucky, what have you done?

He doesn't know if he's heard any of it right. Bucky looks both guilty and relieved at the same time. His vision tunnels. He needs to move. He rips his gaze away from the two and makes to walk out the door. He needs to be somewhere, he doesn't know where, but he knows it's not here.

Tony reaches for him and says something, his voice soft and insistent, but Steve's ears are ringing. He pulls away and lashes out carelessly, and Tony tumbles into an ungainly sprawl on the floor, looking more defeated than hurt.

Bucky ducks to pull him to his feet. His mouth is forming words, he won't look at Steve. He leans towards Tony, talking to him in a quiet voice and shaking his head, all the while pointedly not making eye contact with Steve. He takes a breath, then he's out the door and moving desperately. His ears are ringing, and he doesn't know why.

Steve finds himself bursting through the lab doors with blood thundering in his ears. Bruce glances up from his table, beaming widely, eyes crinkling and looking ten kinds of relieved. The ringing in Steve's ears quietens and he stares mutely at Bruce's expression.

"Tony's told you? I was wondering where he ran off to. It's true, Steve, it's really worked." He looks so tired, so happy, that he's on the verge of tears. "I don't know how Barnes got his hands on that virus, or why it even exists. Maybe HYDRA was trying to formulate a bioweapon. I've never seen its kind before, but in any case, it worked. I managed to splice away the nasty bits, so it's harmless now. Pepper's responding to the treatment really well. Give her a couple days, she'll be up in no time."

Steve looks back at the doctor uncomprehendingly, his chest rising and falling like he's been running. "You didn't know," he blurs stupidly, feeling all the energy drain out of him. His arms are numb. "You didn't know. He didn't tell you."

Bruce's expression falters, his smile vanishing slowly. A look of confusion takes its place. "What do you mean? What's wrong?"

He wants to sit down. He doesn't. "His virus," he chokes out, through numb lips. "It was all we had. He didn't tell you. He didn't tell you, did he? He just gave it to you. Why did he - why did he give it to you?"
"What do you mean, his virus?" Bruce frowns quizzically. Then his face pales and his eyes widen in slow realisation. "A virus. With an elevated mutation rate, strong enough to keep an enhanced immune system at bay... to stop it from attacking all the other cells. Brutal, but effective. It's HYDRA all over." He stops, looking like he's about to be sick. "I didn't see it. Steve, I didn't see it, I didn't realise..."

He puts his equipment down and covers his mouth with both hands, sitting down hard onto the nearest stool in disbelief. "He'd need to keep using it, wouldn't he? It's not indestructible, once the immune system manages to build a resistance to it... you'd have to - isolate it, infect new hosts for it to mutate further, then reintroduce the improved virus back into the bloodstream. And... I've gone and destroyed it. Everything that made it work. Oh, oh no. No. Steve, tell me you have -"

"It's the only one we had." Steve's tone is accusatory, and he knows he's not being fair. They were all desperate to save Pepper, and it would be cruel to blame Bruce for jumping at the chance. Bucky just gave it to him. The air around him suddenly feels heavy. He slides into a low crouch in the middle of the floor, putting his hands on his knees and trying to remember how to breathe. "He was supposed to have more time."

Banner's face is twisted into a mask of guilt. "And now?" He asks quietly, reluctantly. Like he doesn't want to hear the answer.


Somehow, he manages to collect himself enough to excuse himself from the lab, brushing Bruce off abruptly. His legs take him to Sam's door and he knocks feverishly for what seems like ten minutes before he finally hears a faint rustle behind it.

"Wuh," Sam mumbles, blinking slowly in confusion as he swings his door open.

He pushes past Sam into the room without preamble and collapses onto the sofa. "It's over," he finally says, to himself more than to Sam. "It's over. There's nothing we can do. Sam, he's gonna die."

Sam settles down next to him on the sofa, still half-asleep, but listening as Steve spills everything out along with his tears. He lets Steve cry miserably on his sofa as the sky outside lightens, but his quiet presence does little to reassure Steve. He cries until his eyes are raw and aching from it.

"A week, Sam, just a week. A fresh wave of sobs pass through his body again as he pounds helplessly at his knees. "This wasn't supposed to happen, not now - we only just got him back, he's only just started to remember - I can't lose him again, I can't, I can't, I can't..."

He doesn't know how long he spends on the sofa blurring his grief incomprehensibly. It's probably hours later when Bucky comes looking for him, padding barefoot into Sam's room. He sits on the carpet in front of the sofa, curling his legs under himself. Steve gazes at him with red-rimmed eyes, taking in the slump of his shoulders and dishevelled hair.

"I wasn't thinking," Bucky admits quietly. "I should have told you. Forgot."

Steve jerks his head in an inadequate response. Of course you did.

"Steve, you need to understand. I had to do it."

A fresh wave of tears stings at the back of his eyelids and Steve squeezes his eyes against it. He wishes Bucky hadn't. What kind of a person does that make him?
It's Saturday and he finds a small handgun on the nightstand when he wakes up. Beside him, Bucky sleeps like the dead, like he has been for the past few days. Maybe it was the drinking, they'd said at first. You must have slept really late. We did have a long day. The bed really is very soft. There's nothing to do anyway.

They're running out of excuses.

No doubt Bucky left it there as a reminder to Steve. Cringing, he puts the gun out of sight and tries to forget what it's for, and leaves the room and Bucky's sleeping form behind.

Sam doesn't join him today, but it's just as well. In the park, he runs and runs and doesn't stop, trying to shake the cold burn of metal on his palm, from where he'd touched the gun by the bed. By the time he slows to a halt, the sun's blazing mercilessly on the back of his neck and his shirt is drenched right through. His chest aches with a phantom pain that reminds him of old Brooklyn and Bucky's low voice telling him to breathe slowly. This time, though, he knows it's nothing to do with his health. Grimacing, he trudges back to the Tower, shoving his hands into his pockets and not thinking about the gun.

Bucky isn't in the room when he comes back. The hollow feeling in his chest gapes a little bigger, but he tamps down his emotions and spots a recycled yellow sticky note on the bathroom mirror, its original message from Tony violently blacked out with a Sharpie. AT LVL5. The lounge area? He frowns and washes up quickly, wondering what must have happened to draw Bucky there. Something serious, no doubt. He prepares himself for the worst and leaves the room with his hair still dripping wet from the shower.

His jaw drops a little when he finally walks into the lounge. Bucky's in a corner leaning against a mountain of cushions, frowning at his phone and ignoring Tony, who seems to be trying very hard to convince him to do something. On his other side, Natasha's laughing quietly at something Sam's just said. The door closes behind him with a belated click and everyone looks in his direction. Well, everyone but Bucky, because apparently Candy Crush takes precedence.

"What's going on?" Steve walks forward cautiously, eyeing everyone. "Is everything okay? Oh, God, is the alien army back?"

Natasha elbows Bucky in the ribs and slaps his phone into his lap. He looks up and blinks owlishly. "No alien army," he drawls tonelessly.

Sam throws a cushion at him, and Natasha uses that distraction to make a grab for Bucky's phone. "It's an intervention," Tony quips lightly. "Barnes told me you were sick of his company, so I threw a nice Anti-Pity Party. This way, we can all be sick of his company. At the same time." Then he shoots Bucky an apologetic look. "I'm only joking. My offer still stands."

Steve narrows his eyes as he takes a seat beside Sam. "What offer?"

"He wants to give me a room. So I don't have to stay with you." Bucky hisses as Natasha elbows him again in the middle and twists away. "What's wrong with stayin' with me?" Steve asks hotly, shooting Tony a glare.

"Bad cooking," Bucky pants, trapped in a painful armlock with Natasha smirking triumphantly behind him. She pulls a little harder and he taps out grudgingly. "Worse singing. Kicking. All through the night. Don't look at me like that, Stevie, I told him no. Dying man doesn't need a room."
Tony ignores the last bit and throws up his hands. "What's a guy gotta do to make up for his mistakes?"

"You're a smart man," Bucky says snidely. "Figure it out."

They bicker passionately for a few minutes. Tony was right, Steve thinks. This is kind of a nice change, all of them sitting together and being civil. He'll miss this, he knows, when Bucky's gone.

Tony's Anti-Pity Party turns out to be pretty fun. They end up playing a drinking game even though it's still technically lunchtime. Steve lets it happen because he always wins at drinking games anyway. They form a loose circle around a ring of whisky glasses, discussing the rules seriously, for the benefit of Steve and Bucky.

"So if I've never done it before either, I don't have to drink?" Steve toys with his cup. He's going to be sitting here with a full glass for a big part of the game, no doubt about it. How is this game supposed to be fun?

"Yup, and no lying. Romanoff will know." Tony grins and starts drinking even though the game hasn't started yet. "You get the rules, Barnes? Wanna kick off the round?"

Bucky hunches forward, still glowering a little at Nat because she's sitting on his phone. He furrows his brows in thought, chewing at his lip in concentration, taking almost a full two minutes to respond. "I have never. Tried cyanide."

Steve shifts uncomfortably as Sam snorts some of his drink out through his nose and starts coughing. Tony just looks nonplussed. "You do know that if any of us have, we'd be dead by now, right?"


Steve nudges him gently. "Think of good stuff, Buck."

"Okay. Okay. Wait." They wait for another long awkward minute as he scrunches his face with the effort. "I have never killed a dog. On purpose." He smiles a little after he says it, as if that fact makes him immensely pleased. "A good thing."

"Sure it is," Sam says in a strangled voice, and they let it slide. Nobody takes a drink, and the game continues. When it's his turn, he has no difficulties thinking of something to say.

"I've never visited the Niagara Falls," Steve declares. All but Bucky make disbelieving noises and shake their heads in disappointment. "I know, I know. It's on the list."

"What list," Bucky asks.

"He has a list," Sam supplies helpfully. "It's all the things he's yet to do even though he's been on this good Earth for nigh on a century."

Steve rolls his eyes. "Gimme a break, I was frozen for most of it."

Bucky makes a small noise of assent and doesn't ask further. After a few rounds, he finds out why people play this game in the first place. He's not sure he wants to know, but he discovers that there isn't much that Tony hasn't done.

Sam's turn. "I've never worn ladies' underwear. Sorry, Natasha."

She shrugs good-naturedly and drinks her share, as Tony smirks and follows suit. What? No, that's
definitely not something he wants to know. Ever. Steve gapes at him, mortified, but Tony simply winks at him as Sam swears and says he'd guessed as much.

Soon, it's his turn again. "I've never gone skiing," Steve says cheerfully, grinning around the tight-knit circle. They roll their eyes and drink again, and beside him, Bucky remains still.

Natasha frowns and prods his leg with her foot, murmuring something in Russian, which startles Bucky enough to make him sit up a little straighter. They have a short but heated exchange which ends with Bucky huffing in defeat. "That's not the same thing," he mutters, but he takes a drink anyway, glaring daggers at Natasha over the rim of his glass.

"Share with the class?" Tony asks sweetly.

"Russia has a lot of snow," Bucky says cryptically, then he smiles a slow, sly smile and shoots Steve a look that shows just how much of the game he's figured out.

"I have never pissed myself in high school." Bucky keeps a straight face as Steve scowls.

"That's cheating," Steve complains. "He's just targeting me -"

His argument is lost as Sam surreptitiously takes a sip from his glass too. Bucky continues on brazenly. "I have never. Drawn Peggy Carter naked."

"It's not your turn anymore," Steve growls, his face scarlet and burning. The rest are hooting with laughter, and they don't seem to care, so Steve picks up his glass reluctantly. When he's done, he slams the empty glass on the table and glares at the guy across from him. "Quit going through my stuff."

"It was a good likeness," Bucky assures him stoically, then flinches as Steve throws an ice cube at him from the bucket. He rubs at his shoulder absently and smiles softly. "I like this game."

---

It's Sunday and Steve wakes to find the gun back on the nightstand. He chucks it into the drawer forcefully and heaves himself out of the empty bed, casting his eyes about. He finally finds Bucky's sleeping form hunched at his favourite spot by the window, head lolling on the glass as the morning light illuminates the corner with warmth. It doesn't look like a comfortable position, but at least it's a warm spot, and Steve doesn't want to interrupt his sleep, so he leaves Bucky there while he potters about and gets dressed.

He finally wakes up when Steve turns on the television to watch the news while drinking his coffee.

"What time is it, " he mumbles, stretching languidly against the wall.

"A little past ten," Steve says casually. Bucky hums and drags himself to the bathroom to wash up. By the time he emerges, he looks slightly more awake, though his eyes are ringed with something more than tiredness. Steve doesn't look long.

"Your list," Bucky says without preamble, pouring himself the remainder of the coffee. "Can I see it."

Steve feels his face colouring a little. "It's not with me. I left it in my apartment in DC."

"Oh," Bucky sips his drink carefully, staring at Steve unblinkingly for awhile. "If you want. We could do the list together. While we can."
A bucket list. Steve exhales slowly. How did it come to this so quickly? "Yeah. Yeah, okay." He forces himself to smile and tries to remember something from the list, something fun enough for them to do together, but not too crazy.

They end up going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Steve can't remember the last time he saw so many paintings and sculptures in one place, and he's so awestruck by the exhibits that he tears through the various galleries with a wild fervour, trying to take it all in as much as possible. He almost forgets about Bucky until he turns around and sees him bracing himself against a doorway, his eyes glassy. His heart leaps to his throat.

"Hey. Bucky, hey," Steve says, horrified and guilty, squeezing his way past the crowd to get back to him. "I'm sorry, we can go back now -"

Bucky waves him off irritably as the colour slowly returns to his face. "Just. Slow down."

They take their time after that, Steve darting concerned glances at Bucky every minute or so, but he doesn't look like he's about to fall over anymore. They pass by a plain nondescript portrait that makes him do a double-take and he stops and stares. The painting is of a lady gazing to her right, half her face thrown in shadow. The shade of her hair is a tad too dark, but everything else fits perfectly: the line of her jaw, the blue of her eyes, even the rouge of her cheeks. He inhales and can't tear his eyes away, wishing the portrait would come to life and look back at him.

"Bucky," he whispers, unable to say anything more. Emotion swells thick in his chest cavity.

Bucky looks dazed and awestruck, too. "If it ain't Mrs. Rogers," he murmurs under his breath.

It isn't, but the likeness is definitely there. They stare at the painting for a good twenty minutes more, two still figures in the sea of visitors rushing through to get to the Van Goghs and Matisses. This one's simply called Young Woman, and they're the only ones looking at it. Steve decides it's his favourite.

Afterward, they move through the gallery more cautiously, not simply tourists in a new environment, but archaeologists looking to excavate relics of the past. When Bucky falls behind again, Steve panics and doubles back anxiously, but this time it's because he's found something, too. It's a huge work, and Bucky's gazing at it with an unreadable expression on his face. Steve follows his eyeline to take in the details of the painting: the dark skies, the bleak sandy terrain. In the foreground, three figures trudge away from a city burning in the horizon, and leaving a dark motionless silhouette behind.

"The Burning of Sodom. I remember," Bucky intones as Steve draws near, gesturing at the title of the picture. "You were crying outside the church."

Steve nods. He remembers. The realisation hits him hard in the gut, and he feels a pang of melancholy. "God burnt the city and Lot's wife looked back and got turned to salt. You thought it was funny."

"Little punk crying over a big lump of salt. What's not funny." Bucky shoves his hands into his pockets, smiling slightly at the sombre painting.

Steve shrugs and stares at the human-shaped pillar of salt, illuminated by the fires in the distance. "Didn't seem fair, is all."

---

It's Monday and his phone alarm is ringing, signalling the time for his usual run with Sam.
"So help me God," Steve bites out into his pillow, as his hand finds the gun instead of his phone. Bucky's got to know how unnerving that's getting. And possibly dangerous.

In the late afternoon, they go on an ice-cream hunt around the city, courtesy of a web article provided by Sam. He'd even printed it out for Steve's convenience. Fittingly, the list is titled "The Ultimate NYC Ice Cream Shop Bucket List", and Bucky's face lights up when Steve tells him about it. He's not sure if Bucky's more excited about the ice cream or the fact that it's another list.

"Why does everyone put sea salt in ice cream," Bucky comments, flipping through the pictures and captions appraisingly.

"Dunno, I guess it's a 21st century thing." The pictures do look amazing, though. Steve has his eye on #12.

"And why is it called sea salt. Isn't it just. Salt."

Bucky passes the list to an eager Stark Industries intern who immediately arranges for a chauffeur and car for them. "Are you sure about this?" Steve asks cautiously as he's escorted into a spacious SUV like he's the president or something. The bikes he was okay with, because at least there wasn't anyone driving him around. This feels a bit much.

Bucky waves him off and piles into the backseat with him. "Stark loves me now. Don't worry about it."

They start with #15 and work their way up, but after #10, even Steve starts to feel a little disgusted with himself. Bucky seems determined to finish the list, though, and polishes off whatever they're having with way too much concentration. Steve can't remember ever seeing him eat so much.

After #8 and its amazing rainbow cake cookies, Bucky hurls all over the upholstery. "M'fine," he mutters after a mouthful of expensive bottled water their driver produces. "Just. Too sweet."

They give up on the ice cream list, catching a cab back to the Tower while the hapless driver speeds off for some emergency clean-up. Bucky jokes weakly about how everything still tasted pretty good the second time around, while Steve thinks about the Derringer on his nightstand, feeling like he might get sick himself.

---

It's Tuesday and Steve keeps the gun automatically, like it's part of his morning routine. Bucky insists on going out, even though Steve had woken up all three times that Bucky had gotten out of bed to throw up in the toilet the night before. Steve adamantly refuses until Bucky pouts unhappily.

"But it's my dying wish, Stevie," he whines, and Steve feels like clocking him right across the face just for saying that. He only just stops himself because he's pretty sure Bucky wouldn't be able to get up after. Instead, Steve forces himself to overlook the sallow skin and faintly yellowing eyes, and nods tersely.

So that's how they end up at Coney Island. It's vastly different from the Coney Island of their childhood.

"What happened," Bucky says, looking around in alarm. "Steve. Luna Park. This isn't Luna Park."

"I know, it blows," Steve agrees. "I looked it up. The real one burnt down in '44."

Bucky makes more disappointed noises as they walk slowly through the strange space that used to be
their favourite hangout. It's just as busy as it used to be, but somehow it's like the air is different. Bucky does stop and gaze appreciatively at the new rides, though, with their fresh paint and gleaming tracks. "Let's try that one out," he says, pointing to the craziest one that Steve would definitely not have thought to try at all.

"Are you sure?" He asks hesitantly. Old Bucky had loved the Cyclone, and had made him ride on it on his 18th birthday until he threw up all over Bucky's favourite shirt. This one - Thunderbolt - looks like a whole new level of crazy. And he doesn't know what New Bucky can handle. "It's a long way down," Steve points out.

"You'll be fine," Bucky retorts dismissively, like what Old Bucky would've said. "Don't be a dame." With that, Steve lets himself get dragged into the queue.

The ride is insane. Steve's done some crazy things and fought aliens and everything, but this roller coaster damn near makes him squeal like a dame, all right. Relief floods through him as he steps out of his seat after the ride, feeling like he's left most of his skin somewhere along the tracks. Bucky trails after him silently, looking shaken and white-knuckled. Steve pats him on the back reassuringly.

"Hey. You feeling okay? You gonna throw up on me?" Wouldn't that be a funny thing.

Bucky nods tightly, his lips pressed into a thin white line. "It was. A long way down."

They avoid the rest of the rides and amble about the crowded boardwalks, Steve making random comments to break the tension of Bucky's strained silence. They last about an hour before Bucky catches him by the elbow, breathing heavily and shaking his head. His eyes are closed as he sways slightly as if a strong wind might knock him right over.


---

It's Wednesday afternoon and Bucky has been sleeping for more than twelve hours. Steve sits on his side of the bed, his back to Bucky, the small gun in his lap. Its weight feels more significant than it looks, but he tucks it into the waistband of his pants anyway.

Bruce comes in to check on him, and that's when he finally wakes up. He won't say how he feels, just complains about them interrupting his sleep, and about feeling cold. Steve overhears Bruce prescribing Bucky something bordering on illegal for the pain, which Bucky gladly accepts. He doesn't get out of bed, though, just pushes himself into a slouching, half-sitting position against the headboard as Bruce comes round to speak with him.

"I'm sorry," Bruce apologises before Steve can even say anything. "I swear, I've been looking. I'll keep looking."

Steve nods automatically, but it's just a reflex. He'd stopped believing in a cure a long time ago.

"How is he?"

Bruce lowers his gaze. "Without any actual tests, it's hard to say. But the symptoms and the old medical reports are pretty clear. It's going for everything at once. Bones, muscles, organs. I'd give him more narcotics, but I'm not sure if it'll make things worse if his body can't process it properly."

Steve nods again, at a loss for words. The solid press of metal against the small of Steve's back seems to throb an ominous reminder against his skin.
Bruce is biting his lip nervously as though there's something he wants to say, but can't bring himself to say it.

"You have something." Steve says slowly. "Tell me."

"It's a bad idea," Bruce stutters, wringing his hands slightly. "I don't - shouldn't -"

"HYDRA was full of bad ideas, and it worked," Steve points out plainly. At this point, he's not above bad ideas.

"It's not a solution," Bruce says hurriedly, lowering his voice. "But we could buy him some time... with cryofreeze."

"No." Steve and Bruce look up in alarm at Bucky's harsh interjection. His head is leaning back heavily against the headboard, but his eyes are bright and focused. He rolls them to make his point. "I'm dying. Not deaf. No cryo."

Steve almost thinks of overruling his decision, but he remembers the pain and disorientation of thawing out from the ice. It's happened to him twice now and he never wants it to happen again. He thinks about how many times it must have happened to Bucky since 1944, and swallows hard. "No cryo," he agrees throatily, nodding his thanks to Bruce all the same.

Bruce looks almost relieved that his suggestion has been shot down. "I'll keep looking," he promises, then he excuses himself awkwardly and leaves the room.

He's not even gone for more than half a minute when Bucky starts begging Steve to fetch his phone from the kitchen counter, whinging about all the hours he's wasted sleeping instead of using his hearts.

"You're not spending the last days of your life playing that dumb game," Steve chides, as Bucky opens his mouth in protest. "And no more 'dying wish' bull. You used it up on Coney Island."

The glare that he gets from Bucky is watered-down at best. "But I'm so close. To beating Wilson."

"If you're gonna die, I'm not gonna let it be from brain rot," Steve retorts irritably, grabbing his jacket and making for the door. "I'll get you more books. No Candy Crush. I'm putting my foot down."

Bucky finally stops complaining when Steve really does come back laden with books. He pours them out of the bags onto the sheets as Bucky runs shaky hands over the glossy covers reverently. He finally picks one up and stares at the cover for a long time, his face crumpling slightly.

"Buck?" Steve questions softly, watching his expression closely. Bucky tears his gaze from the book and smiles at Steve sadly, waving the book in his hand a little.

"Macbeth," he explains. "Nikolai - Monty. He let me read it." Still smiling, he settles back against the pillows and starts reading it again, the other books lying in a forgotten heap about him.

---

It's Thursday and Steve wakes up to an empty bedside table because he'd fallen asleep fully clothed, with the gun still tucked into the back of his pants. He rolls over onto his back and winces as it digs into his flesh.

Bucky's still in a half-sitting position, looking uncomfortably cramped, curled to one side with *Macbeth* hanging loosely from his fingers. He looks terribly gaunt in the pale light of dawn, but
his breathing is even and pulse thunders insistently against Steve's fingers when he holds them beneath Bucky's jaw. He manhandles Bucky into a proper sleeping position and clears the rest of the books that he'd kicked to the foot of the bed in his sleep.

The day passes in a slow blur of nerve-wracking silence. Bucky wakes up at half-hour intervals then drifts off again, while Steve lingers by the bed cluelessly. Eventually he gets Bruce to come up, and he fixes up a drip and injects something into his neck that seems to help a little, because Bucky's sitting up and pleading for his phone again within twenty minutes of it.

"Whatever it is, can you give him more?" Steve asks hopefully, ignoring the hoarse pleas from the other side of the room.

Bruce fixes him a grim look, his face heavy with exhaustion. "I gave him the plague," he states bluntly. "So no, I can't give him more."

As crude as Bruce's temporary solution is, it works enough to stall his slow and painful decline, though he springs a terrific high fever that scares Steve into realising that Bruce wasn't joking about not giving him any more. Bucky sweats and swears for hours, trying to bury himself into the warmth of the blankets and looking so miserable that Steve relents and hands him the phone to take his mind off his discomfort. The fever peters out by sundown, thankfully, and Bucky even has the strength to get out of bed to shower for the first time in two days.

His phone buzzes on the counter just as Bucky steps into the bathroom and closes the door behind him.

_Tony Stark: Helipad. Top flr 15m bring Barnes_

Steve frowns at the screen. He's about to type out his reply to express his general confusion when it buzzes again.

_Tony Stark: Actly 10_

>You: I don't understand you, Tony. Please use your words.

_Tony Stark: My apologies good sir
Tony Stark: I have heard tell from one who goes by the name of Sam Wilson
Tony Stark: He has informed me of your quest to accomplish a list of feats before the unfortunate demise of one James Barnes_

>You: Stop annoying me

_Tony Stark: Come up to the fucking roof then jackass before I change my mind_

Right on cue, Bucky emerges from the bathroom, steam billowing about him as he walks gingerly to the couch and settles down with a sigh. "So much hot water. So good."

"How're you feeling?" Steve prods, giving him a quick once-over. The shirt he's wearing is a little on the loose side, and he's wearing a pair of shorts that reveals a terrible twisted scarring running the length of his right calf and beyond, as if most of the flesh had been cut away and couldn't quite grow back to its original state. He tries not to stare, and his phone buzzes more in his pocket.

"Better," Bucky hedges, shaking out the water from his hair. "Another wasted day. Sorry."

Steve bites his lip. It's not his fault he's dying. "Don't apologise. But I have good news."
Bucky raises an eyebrow. "Day's not over yet," Steve points out, and forces Bucky to change into warmer clothing. They make it to the roof, but Tony's nowhere to be seen. There's only a helicopter with a pilot who admits that he's not allowed to say where he's been told to take them.

"But it's a really nice place, trust me," he says desperately, wilting at the look on Steve's face. Steve sighs and climbs in, pulling Bucky with him. In the darkness of the night, he vaguely guesses that they're flying west, but he only begins to realise where they are when the helicopter lands in a remote clearing on the borders of a dense forest. Far away in the distance, Steve hears the roar of rushing water.

"It's less than a two mile walk," the pilot says helpfully, pointing them in the right direction.

Steve doesn't think Bucky can do two miles, but he nods and thanks the pilot all the same, and they set off in silence. Bucky doesn't ask where they are, too busy concentrating on staying upright and refusing Steve's help. After about a mile in, Bucky's strength wanes and he leans heavily on Steve to walk the rest of the way.

They end up on a rocky outcrop, where the treeline ends suddenly and the ground falls away below their feet. It's a completely isolated spot, a tiny ledge of which no trail leads to. Bucky stumbles forward and sits down hard on the precipice, as if the sight before him has knocked him to his knees. Steve's equally shocked as well, but he remains standing behind Bucky, gazing out at the huge waterfall spilling torrents right in front of them. The sound of the water is a steady barrage of white noise, calming in its ferocity.

"Niagara Falls," Steve says softly, awed. The whole column is lit up by colourful lights that change hues almost continuously, giving the water an ethereal glow.

"Bigger than I expected," Bucky adds weakly. They rest in the cool dark and watch the colours change, shielded by the trees from the cold night wind. A heavy sort of peace blankets the area they're in, and they're quickly shrouded in the dream-mist of the crashing water. Steve studies Bucky's shadow against the illuminated water, hunched and small, and feels the bite of the gun in his back more keenly than ever.

Bucky shoves a cigarette between his teeth and fumbles for a lighter, his thin fingers spindly and shaking. Steve watches as he finds the lighter, drops it, swears under his breath, drops the cigarette too, and takes thirty seconds to light up properly. He sucks at the stick like a drowning man given air, then exahles shakily, all the while looking out at the water, and its colours that change gently as if by the gentle breeze.

"I remember falling off the train," he says suddenly, loud enough for his voice to carry through the air to Steve behind him. "I woke up. In so much snow. Thought maybe something was wrong with my eyes. Everything was black and white. No colours."

The night is mild and not even that chilly, but Steve's fingers are numb from cold. He looks down and finds the gun is in his hand, small but heavy, its metal gleaming wickedly in the dark.

"It's good. That I didn't lose the colours, I mean. It helped me remember a lot, I think. Blue. Red. Good colours."

Steve's thumb drag across the safety. He closes his eyes, his cheeks are wet.

"I don't think I ever really forgot. You know. You. I mean. I didn't remember you, but I was always
remembering other things. And thought they were important, somehow. Or saying things without
really thinking, and not knowing what it meant even after I'd said it."

Steve steps closer, and sees that Bucky's shoulders are trembling finely. His own hands are, too. He
tightens his grip.

"I think once. I told Rumlow that his eyes were the wrong colour. He looked at me funny. He said,
what the fuck is the right colour, huh." Bucky laughs darkly.

"And I had this habit. Hoarded chocolate when I could. On missions. Go to the store, buy the
chocolate, keep it beside my bed. They let me do it because I wasn't doing anything wrong. Didn't
compromise the mission. I didn't even eat it, so it didn't bother them. They just laughed at me and
said it was probably a brain damage thing."

His raises his hand, levels the muzzle inches from the base of Bucky's skull. Do it. Do it. Don't.
Can't. All around them, the muffled roar of water and more water. Steve's drowning in the sound of
it.

"Failed a mission, too. I remember. I was tracking my mark. It was so dark, couldn't see anything.
Had Rumlow on the comms, and. He was telling me where to go, and he said. Just use the damn
flare. I shot the thing into the sky and then. I stared at it. God knows how long. I just looked and
looked, didn't even know I had fired the damn thing myself. Thought maybe it was someone's
birthday. You should've seen Rumlow's face, when he finally came. To look for me. His face when I
asked him why the fireworks didn't start."

Steve doesn't know if the wetness on his cheeks are from the mists of the waterfall or from himself.
It's probably both.

His hand's shaking so badly he doesn't know if he can manage a clean shot, not even from a couple
of inches' distance. Time flows by, thick and suffocating, dragging Steve along with its tide. His
finger lies heavy on the trigger, refusing to move. The colours of the waterfall blur and bleed into the
silhouette of Bucky's head. Do it.

"I can't," he gasps out loud, shuddering all over and grabbing at his hand, trying to still his own arm.
He can't see past the film of watery colour in his vision. In the darkness and his confusion, Bucky's
already faded away, his form dissipating into the shifting vapour. "I can't, God, Bucky, please don't
make me - please -"

Cold fingers close on his outstretched wrist gently, and he blinks away his tears with great effort. The
shadows sharpen and separate from the light. Bucky plucks the gun carefully from his grip and drops
it to the ground. It's too dark to read Bucky's expression, but Steve doesn't need any light to imagine
his small crooked smile, the one he's seen a thousand times, disappointed but forgiving. Always
forgiving.

"I know. You're shit at keeping promises."

They hike back to the waiting helicopter, and Bucky lasts all but five minutes before he gives up and
lets Steve carry him the rest of the way. He feels like a child in Steve's arms, small and vulnerable in
his sickness, and is quickly lulled to sleep from the rhythm of Steve's movements. The pilot looks
stricken when Steve climbs back into the helicopter with Bucky in tow, and hightails it back to the
Tower without further question.

By the time they're back in their room, it's almost midnight and Steve puts Bucky to bed. He stirs a
little, opening his eyes and blinking in confusion. "Where."
"Hey, Buck. Don't worry. You're back home, you can rest now." Steve sets about pulling off Bucky's shoes and socks for him, an automatic gesture. He's been doing it all his life.

"Home." Bucky mumbles into his pillow, his breathing ragged and strained. "Bed is soft."

There's a flurry of knocks on the door and Tony barges in without waiting for an answer. "How'd it go?" he asks, his voice loud and jarring. "That was a good one, wasn't it? I think I outdid myself there."

"Tony," Steve hisses, trying to pull the covers from under Bucky's body. "Not now."

Tony ignores him. "How was the flight, Barnes? Enjoy yourself? The lights were good, weren't they?"

"Lights. Yes. That was good, Tony," Bucky babbles. "Although. No fireworks. Wanna see some... Stark, show me some goddamn fireworks."

Steve scowls and tries to push Tony out of the way, feeling very exposed and very aware of the tear tracks still drying on his cheeks. He turns the bedside light on and fiddles with the medication on the table. Bucky could use something for the pain right about now. "Go away, Tony," he snarls, grabbing for Bucky and trying to hold him still as he looks for the vein.

"Fireworks!" Tony exclaims, sidestepping out of Steve's reach. "Great idea - I could even try to use the leftover Extremis for special effects -"

"Get out," Steve repeats passionately, trying to still Bucky as he attempts to thrash his clothes off on his own. "Buck, stop moving, I'll help you with that later -"

" - I mean, I can't destroy it and Pepper won't wear it around her neck - yeah, I can't figure that out, either - so if I can turn it into everlasting fireworks, it's not a waste, is it -"

Tony ducks as Steve lobs an old used syringe at his head, then exits the room. "Yeah, and you're welcome for the helicopter ride, Rogers!"

The door slams and the room falls into an abrupt silence, with Bucky still shifting feebly and muttering incomprehensibly under his breath. Steve finally manages to still his own hands enough to slide the needle into his neck.

"Bucky. Talk to me. How're you feeling?"

Bucky's laugh is watery. "Like I'm dying. Slowly."

Forgive me. I'm sorry. I couldn't do it. I wish I could. You wouldn't be suffering if I could. What kind of a person does that make me?

A selfish one.

A hand falls lightly onto Steve's, breaking his train of thought. "Macbeth. I'm not done. Read it for me, please. Act two."

He exhales long and slow. That he can do. He drags a chair over to the side of the bed and picks up the book, turning to the page Bucky had carefully bookmarked with a sticky note that reads Pay for your own porn channels.

Steve clears his throat quietly.
"A bell rings. I go, and it is done. The bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell; that summons thee to heaven, or to hell."

---

It's Friday and Steve wishes they hadn't left the gun at the waterfall, because he's not prepared to see this. He stands vigil by Bucky's bed as his condition deteriorates rapidly, all of a sudden, like it's multiplying itself exponentially. It starts in the early hours of morning with the fever coming back and Bucky throwing up every hour again, all over himself and all over the sheets, and there's no way Steve can sleep through that. Eventually he struggles so much with breathing that he can't even go back to sleep comfortably, and he lies there with his eyes closed and his brows furrowed, gasping like he's drowning. His lips and fingernails take on an ominous blue tinge.

By midday, both Sam and Bruce are here as well because Steve can't handle it alone. It's the longest afternoon of Steve's life, and he moves as if someone else is in control of his limbs. He's lost count of how many times he's changed the sheets. Bruce desperately makes the painkillers stronger, but it's not the pain that's the issue anymore, so all it does is make Bucky extremely confused. When the seizures start and Bucky starts raving, Steve runs to the bathroom to vomit, but he can't escape from Bucky's hoarsely chanted mantra.


It carries on for hours and it's all his fault. He thinks he's back in Austria. Steve had the chance to save Bucky from this, and he didn't. Sam takes Steve's place in the chair by the bed and stares stonily at the space in front of him, swearing to himself occasionally. Steve leaves and goes to the gym and destroys three sandbags, thinking about the gun at the waterfall, his ears ringing with the echoes of James Barnes Sergeant 32557038, before he finally musters the courage to go back.

It's already dark by the time Bucky shifts into another more forgiving stage of his predicament, which sets alarm bells ringing in Steve's head. It's like hypothermia, he realises. Towards the end, you feel warm and sleepy, in spite of the cold. He wonders what Bucky's feeling now. He's stopped gasping for breath but his face is equally pale, his fingertips almost black from the lack of oxygen. His jaundiced eyes are sealed shut. Steve takes a weak hand and squeezes it desperately. It doesn't squeeze back. He forgets that Sam and Bruce are there with him.

Not now. Not now, I'm not ready.

"Bucky. Wake up, come on, Bucky, don't leave me." A few agonising seconds of nothing, then Bucky slowly opens his eyes. He blinks a few times, then recognition dawns on his face like he's seen the sun. It's the same look he had when Steve had stormed the labour camp.

"Steve. I thought. I thought you were smaller."

Steve falls against the side of the bed, clutching the bony hand in his fingers like a lifeline. "I was," he agrees, trying not to lose it. "I was."

"Captain Rogers," a metallic voice sounds from above, and Steve jerks in surprise. "Mr Stark has informed me to -"

"That's a terrible announcement, JARVIS, I'll do it myself," Tony's voice blares from the overhead speaker. "Barnes, I hope you're awake to see this, because in about three minutes, you're going to see the best fireworks in your life. Think epic. And everlasting. Okay, at least I hope so, because I haven't actually tested it yet, but in theory it should work. Though I didn't exactly have the time to get it approved by the ATF. Cap, as a cautionary measure, just prepare for the possibility of maybe"
getting arrested by a SWAT team in the next 15 minutes."

Bruce raises his eyebrows at Sam and Steve. "Everlasting fireworks?" he repeats incredulously.

"Don't look at me, I don't know how anything works," Steve rubs at his eyes distractedly. He shouldn't get angry. Tony's trying, in the only way he knows how. "He said something about using Extremis to make the fireworks indestructible or something."

Bucky makes a pained but eager sound. The muscles in his neck twitch, like he's straining to lift his head. "Wanna see."

"Come again?" Bruce asks, his voice going uncharacteristically loud. "What did you say?"

"He said he really wants to see those fireworks," Steve says patiently. He tugs at the pillows behind Bucky's head and tries to prop him up better.

"He means what you said," Sam says sharply, sitting up a little straighter in his chair.

Steve frowns, still beating at the pillows absently. "I only said - Tony used Extremis to make the fireworks indestructible -"

"Indestructible," Bruce echoes deliberately. He gets to his feet slowly, looking at Steve with wide eyes. "JARVIS, stop the show!"

Chapter End Notes

Art references:

- Young Woman by Abbott H. Thayer
- The Burning of Sodom by Camille Corot

I know nothing about NYC, but I found this list and it made me hungry and I thought I'd use it in the story:

- The Ultimate NYC Ice Cream Shop Bucket List

I also know nothing about the Niagara Falls, but the lights look pretty on the Internet. So I used my imagination.
Bucky

His bed is soft. He can't feel his limbs. It's cold, very cold, but his bed is soft and someone is close by and his eyes are blue, so the cold isn't all that bad.

There's a whole lot of shouting going on, but he can't hear what they're saying. He thought he'd heard someone saying there'd be fireworks, but he hasn't seen any yet. He doesn't think he can stay awake long enough to catch them, because his eyelids are so heavy. He can't move. He's so cold. He tries to say as much.

"Cold," he mutters, but nobody hears him because the people around him are moving urgently about and they're still shouting. He focuses on the person hovering by his side - hiseyesareblue - and smiles. His name is Steve Rogers. At least he remembers. That's all that matters, in the end, that he remembers. The cold isn't all that bad.

He closes his eyes and dreams, in full colour and with proper sounds.

---

He dreams of sitting in a hot crowded church, feeling very uncomfortable and listening to the priest drone on about sin and punishment. His neck itches under the stiff collar of the shirt his ma had forced him to put on. There's a little boy sitting in the pew in front of him, a little to the right, who can't keep still. Bucky gets distracted by his endless fidgeting and barely listens to the sermon. The jerky movements make him feel antsy, too, but he does his best not to move. If Pa found out, he'd have Bucky's hide. He sits still as stone, letting only his eyes follow the movement of the small head.

Twenty minutes in, the boy begins to cry, wheezing wet in his lungs and coughing loud enough to upset the churchgoers around him. They scoot away discreetly, muttering and glaring. His mother turns to him and tries to shush him gently, but he's inconsolable and sobs harder like he's about to stop breathing any moment. His mother's voice raises slightly. "Steven. Don't make me send you outside."

The boy shakes his head vehemently and gets even louder, so he's marched out of service in front of the gaping congregation, his wails echoing down the long aisle. The priest carries on like nothing has happened, and the boy's mother returns two minutes later without him, looking flustered and apologetic.

Bucky starts to squirm in his seat, kicking at the bench in front of him and elbowing the stranger on his right. Ma brings a sharp hand down on his knee, but he keeps doing it until she gets angry enough to drag him out to the front of the church, too. "Your Pa will hear of this," she hisses, and leaves him at the doors with a warning glare. Bucky finds the boy sitting on the steps and wiping at his snot-covered face with a grubby hanky.

"Hey, kid," he says brightly, sitting down next to the boy. He can't be more than eight, Bucky thinks, because he's about to be twelve and the boy is much smaller and shorter than him. "I know it gets boring, but crying to get out of church? You must really hate the priest."

The boy shakes his head and cries some more. His flaxen hair gets into his eyes and becomes damp from the tears.

"You're from my school," Bucky carries on conversationally. "I seen you in the halls."

Shuddering and gasping, the boy finally manages to fall silent, with the exception of the occasional
sob. "What'd you get sent out here for?"

Bucky shrugs nonchalantly, grinning. "Same as you."

The boy grimaces and sniffs more. "You in trouble?"

Bucky thinks of Pa and how he gets when he's angry. "Nothing too bad," he mutters, kicking at the ground nervously.

"He killed everyone in that city," the boy finally blurs, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"What? What city?" Bucky frowns, then laughs in surprise. "You were crying about the sermon?"

The boy glowers at him. It would be a lot more scary if his face weren't covered with a film of tears, and if his head didn't end two inches below Bucky's nose. Bucky laughs some more. "There were good people in that city. God should've saved them. An', an' the lady who looked back - I bet she wanted to go back to save them, but - quit laughin' at me, you jerk!"

Bucky can't stop. He's never met a more ridiculous person. "Kid, it's a story. It's not real, you know. My Pa says it's all lies."

The boy hisses crossly, looking scandalised. "You can't say that in church."

"We're not in the church, and I'll say what I goddamn wanna say." Bucky grins, and before he can blink, the boy whacks him hard on the nose with a slippery fist. "Ow! Jesus, you're disgusting!"

"You shouldn't swear when you're in church," the boy says stubbornly, his eyes blazing. His fist is still raised, shiny with tears and mucus. "You gonna hit me back?"

"It's like you wanna fight or something," Bucky grumbles, wiping the slimy snot from his face with his sleeve and grimacing. "Christ, I got beat by a little punk. How old are you, anyway?"

The boy deflates a little like he'd been expecting Bucky to hit him back and has been severely disappointed. "I seen you at school, too," he mumbles sullenly. "I'm a year below you. I know I don't look it."

"Don't act it, either," Bucky snaps back, but it's without heat. His nose doesn't even hurt anymore.

The small boy wipes at his face carelessly. "Look. I'm sorry I hit you."


"Steve. Rogers." He blows his nose noisily into the damp hanky, and Bucky looks on in amusement.

"Well, Steve. Quit crying about a hunk of salt already. If there's a God, you're not him. You don't need to save anybody."

---

He's being shifted. The movement jars his tired bones, and he aches everywhere. The room is spinning and there's a terrible taste in his mouth and he feels like he can't breathe. An involuntary sound bursts past his lips as he strains to take in his surroundings to find out what's going on. It only makes him more tired, so he gives up and lets his muscles slacken again.
Something warm presses against his neck, against his forehead, a burning brand. Too many lights, too many sounds. He hears voices passing through the air, warped like it's moving through thick honey.

He tries to listen to what they're saying. Maybe it's all in his imagination. The words filter slowly into his foggy brain, words like need and time and try. The warm pressure returns to his neck again, and he hears more words like please and stay and fight.

He doesn't understand any of them. The sleep is better, the dreams are clearer. His eyes flutter shut. He dreams.

---

He dreams of crouching in a foxhole for so long he can't feel his legs anymore. It doesn't help that they've just sat through about two hours of chilly pre-dawn rain, which leaves them shivering and huddling together miserably, their boots squelching and sticking into the soft clay. Yet another well-planned mission by Captain America, the man with shit for brains.

"The next idea he has, I'm sayin' no," Bucky mutters, resting his face in his hands and trying not to keel over out of exhaustion. He wonders how the others are doing in their foxhole just thirty feet away, but he can't hear anything over the sound of his own complaining. He's good at waiting, that's true, but only when he knows what he's waiting for. Squatting in a wet hole in the ground for hours on end just to see if they can find anything is not the kind of waiting he likes.

"You said that the last time," Morita answers back, rubbing at his calves.

"Only works if you little shits stopped agreeing with everything he says."

"He's Captain America, though," Monty points out evenly, as though that's supposed to solve their problems. He seems to be the least bothered by their predicament, but Bucky knows from the squint of his eyes that he's getting a little antsy, too.

He rolls his eyes. "Exactly. He knows more about dance routines than how to reload a damn gun. And shut it, you ain't even American."

Monty doesn't rise to the bait. He sighs and shoves his weight back against Bucky heavily, trying to get warm. "Should've brought a book."

Bucky nods in agreement and unsticks his boot from the ground, trying to get some feeling into his toes. His socks are soaked through completely, and he contemplates the best place to leave them later. Dugan's field pack would be a wise choice. "Trade a lifetime of smokes for The Hobbit in my hands right now."

Monty snorts. "Try Shakespeare. Now that's real literature."

"Christ, don't go all Lord Falsworth on me right now," Bucky complains. "Not while I can't get away."

"You've never even tried -"

"Have too. Shakespeare's a load of bull, don't know what he's on about half the damn time."

"Not so loud," Morita admonishes sternly, looking wary. They ignore him.

"Wait till we get out of here, Barnes, I'll lay them on you until you change your mind. Hamlet."
"Keep waiting," Bucky advises him disdainfully. "I'll think about it when you're old and grey."

Monty scowls. "You'd be old and grey too, you bloody pillock."

Bucky smirks and smooths his hair back with a mud-streaked palm. "Not me. I'm stayin' like this forever."

Morita cuffs him across the back of his head in annoyance, just as Monty shoves at him. It escalates and soon they're trying to goose each other with the barrels of their guns, scuffling and yelping like children.

A sudden shout of warning pierces the silence.

"JAMES, LOOK OUT!"

Falsworth and Morita dive to the ground reflexively, face-first into the mud, throwing their arms above their heads. Bucky's heart leaps into his mouth but he blinks down at them dumbly, frozen. After a full five-second period of tense silence, they hear Dum Dum hooting from his hole. Another prank. Monty and Morita groan and curse, rolling in the muck.

"Reaction time like that, Sarge, you're a sitting duck," Morita says sourly, trying and failing to wipe off the clods of mud stuck to his face and hair. The brown gunk shifts and spreads across his skin and he slumps miserably.

"James Barnes. James. That's your name too, isn't it? Could have fooled me," Monty complains, rolling over and sighing in defeat. His whole front is brown and sticky, and he spits a little mud out of his mouth in disgust.

Bucky lets out a shaky breath, then grins when he discovers he's still mostly clean. "James is my father's name. My name's Bucky."

A minute later, when his guard is down, they tackle him into the ground and hold him facedown until he's snorting mud up his nose and he can barely breathe.

---

His eyes open because someone is screaming in his ear, high-pitched and insistent, and he can't breathe. The sound's so sharp it makes his eyes water and he tries to twist away from it. That's when he realises his body is on fire. No, not this. Not again. Not the table. He groans and slams his head backwards, but it hits a soft pillow instead of hard metal. He can feel his chest heaving, the up-down motion of it like someone punching him repeatedly in the chest, but he can't breathe.

Everything is white hot pain. There are many sets of hands holding him down. He can't feel his limbs, he's hot and cold all over. The screaming continues incessantly, a tinny whistle. It's not a person. It's a machine. His lungs are on fire. His skin, fingers, eyes are on fire. He's on a soft bed. He's on a hard table.


He's not sure if he says it out loud or just in his head. There's another sound, too, apart from the screaming - distant but only just discernible. It sounds like Bucky no please don't Bucky Bucky.

He closes his burning lids. There is no fire in his dreams.
He dreams he's back home in the ratty apartment in Brooklyn, and Steve's eye is swollen shut and oozing black blood down one cheek.

"God. You trainin' me to be a nurse, that it? Look at you." Bucky's tone is sharp and cutting, but he dabs at the tender skin gently. "You're lucky I learnt some stuff from your ma before she left, God rest her poor soul. I should just sign me up at the Red Cross."

"You'd make the worst nurse," Steve insists thickly, twitching with each soft press of the cloth. "You have terrible bedside manner."


Steve continues to squirm. "Yeah? Remember that time you recited Faulkner at me on my deathbed?"

"Tell me how many nurses care enough to read to you when you're too sick to wipe your own ass."

Steve flushes under his hands as he tries to twist away again. "That was one time."

"Sure," Bucky says sarcastically, turning away to give the rag a good rinse at the sink. "If not for me, you'd be one uneducated gimp rollin' in your own shit. Face it, Stevie. You can't live without me."

An almost-empty box of band-aids hits him in the back of the head and Bucky grins to himself.

"I can too," Steve insists stubbornly from behind him.

"Hittin' your face on every fist in the city, that's no way to live."

Steve sighs sadly. "You know I can't stand for it. If I see a situation pointin' south -"

"Yeah, I know. I know. You'll fight for what's right, won't ya? Saint Stephen, patron of headaches. God help me, you'll be givin' me headaches for the rest of my life." He wrings the wet cloth hard, then turns back to Steve. "I'm serious. You gotta learn to take care of yourself. Stop doing all these stupid things. What if one day something happens to me, huh? Who's gonna look out for you?"

Steve rolls his one visible eye. "Nothing's gonna happen to you, Bucky, don't be ridiculous."

"I swear. If I left you alone for one damn second, you'd jump into the Hudson and freeze your Johnson right off."

---

He's in a soft bed. He opens his eyes then closes them immediately, because the room is too bright and hurts his head. The ceiling above him is white. Too white.

He tries to speak but his throat is on fire. His stomach churns even though he's sure there's nothing inside for it to churn. A fire simmers underneath his skin. He opens his eyes again and there's white, but there's also blue.

Stevie?

His brain stutters and he goes back under.
He dreams of going home after a tiring day at the docks. His shoulders ache from the heavy lifting, worse than ever, and all he wants to do is lie down and never get up. He's so exhausted that he's not looking forward to preparing any food at all, even though he hasn't eaten anything since noon.

Still, he hopes Steve didn't try to cook anything for him. He'd rather go hungry, or eat the damn food raw.

He almost trips over something along the dark hall leading to their front door, but he catches himself just in time. "What -?" he blinks and realises it's Steve.

"Jesus Christ," he breathes, his exhaustion forgotten. He drops to his knees. "Steve, hey, Stevie, can you hear me?"

Steve's eyes flutter. His lips are pale, and he lifts his hand to tap weakly at his chest. Bucky puts it together quickly.

"You're okay," Bucky babbles automatically. "Just breathe slowly, that's it. Don't you dare stop. I'm gonna get you the nebuliser, okay? You stay here, you keep breathing, just hang on -"

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The screaming sound is back.

No no no keep breathing don't give up just a few more hours hang on we'll fix you up it's almost over I swear okay just hang on don't you dare stop breathing now

Someone get him outta here I can't work like this

Don't touch me Bucky hey you're okay just get off me Sam hang on Bucky Bucky

Too noisy.

---

He dreams he doesn't want to go home. He lingers at the back of the school by the creaky old swings, staring at the bottom of his shoe where the sole has peeled right off, like it'll magically fix itself if he looks hard enough. That's the second pair this year. His Pa won't go easy this time. It's his fault. He has a bad habit of kicking at the ground when he walks.

"Bucky?"

Bucky looks up and sees Steve approaching, and he glances away quickly, swiping at his nose. "Hey," he says quietly.

"Looked all over for you." His gaze falls on Bucky's wrecked shoe. "Aw, again?"

"Shut up," Bucky snaps, then sighs. "Pa's gonna kill me."

Steve looks at him sympathetically, biting his lip. "He won't be that mad. It's only a shoe."

"Last time I went home like this, he told me he'd skin me and use it for my next pair of shoes." It was a dramatic thing to say, but even when he doesn't make good his threat most of the time, he usually comes pretty close. He doesn't feel like getting nearly flayed alive, not today.
"Your old man sounds pretty scary," Steve admits, resting against the swing.

Bucky nods mutely and they stare at Bucky's torn shoe in silence.

"You could wear mine."

"What?" Bucky looks up incredulously.

"Yeah, why not? My ma always buys 'em a couple sizes too big, see?" Steve shows him, stripping his shoes off quickly without even undoing the laces. Bits of newspaper fall out onto the leaf-strewn ground, and Bucky gazes in astonishment.

"You wear newspapers in your shoes," he croaks. He feels like he should be laughing, but nothing about what's happening is very funny at all. He works his throat around a lump that's forming.

"Shut up. They probably fit you just fine," Steve pulls the rest of the stuffing free, unabashed.

"Don't be stupid," Bucky says immediately, tearing his eyes from Steve's feet and scowling darkly at his eager face. "I'm not gonna take your shoes."

"It's only for today, you can wear 'em back tomorrow," Steve reasons. He dangles his shoes before Bucky casually. "You got enough savings to buy your own?"

Bucky shakes his head, his face turning hot, pressing his lips together uncomfortably. He doesn't get lunch money, but Steve doesn't need to know that either.

"Look, just wear mine home today. I'll buy you another pair, okay? I got some money saved up, been wondering what I'm supposed to do with it."

"I can't - no, Steve, I'm not gonna take your shoes," Bucky says, getting flustered. He hates it when people pity him. "And I'm not gonna take your money. I'm not a - a charity case, all right -"

"You're not takin' it. It's your birthday present," Steve says brightly. He's already barefoot now, and grinning like it's all a huge joke. Bucky feels like maybe it is, but the lump in his throat keeps him from laughing. He watches dumbly as Steve squats down to tug Bucky's shoes off, too, like he's been doing that his whole life.

"My birthday isn't for months," Bucky points out weakly. "Steve. You don't have to." But his fingers close on the shoes that Steve presses into his hands.

Bucky pulls the shoes on mechanically. By the time he fumbles the laces into a decent knot, his vision is blurry.

Steve tugs Bucky to his feet when he's done. "Come on, it's just a pair of shoes. Don't start cryin' about it."

They walk home together, Steve's bare feet slapping on the hot pavement.

---

He's in darkness. In the darkness, he hears voices.

"He was my first crush, you know, when he was training us in the Red Room."

"Yeah? Let me guess. He showed you how to handle his gun."
"Get your mind out of the gutter, Tony, I was fifteen." Silence. "He used to give me chocolate when nobody else was looking."

"Huh. That's all it takes? You're easier than you look. I could win you over a few thousand times without even trying."

"Yeah? They used to punish him with electrocution, so I guess it was kind of sweet of him to risk it. How were you gonna win me over again?"

"I take it back, you're just as psycho as I thought. But it's okay, I think you have a soulmate. His name is Bruno Mars."

"What, the singer?"

"Yeah, you know, the fella says he'd catch a grenade for you. Right up your morbid alley. Hey, Cap, didn't you kind of catch a grenade back when you were in the army? And jump in front of a train - well, I guess in Barnes' case it was off a train. Wow. Maybe the song was inspired by true events -"

"Please stop talking about grenades. And trains. Please just stop talking."

"Why? Didn't Banner say it worked? Isn't he supposed to be waking up anyway?"

"Not right now, he needs time, he almost died -"

Has he stopped dying?

Darkness.

---

He dreams of sitting on the damp grass in the park, waiting for the show to start. The place has plenty others around, but it's not too noisy or crowded, and the view will be decent. He digs into his pockets for the smokes and lighter, then gets up and stands a few metres downwind to light up. Steve purses his lips at Bucky from where he's still sitting on the grass.

"You should stop stealing those from your old man," he scolds gently, as Bucky blows a mouthful of smoke in the other direction.

"I'll stop when he stops pokin' me with them." Bucky flicks at the pack with his fingers casually. "Aw, no, I didn't - it's not as bad as you think. Quit lookin' at me like that."

"He shouldn't be hurting you at all," Steve says seriously, for the millionth time.

"He's my father," Bucky says firmly. "Most of the time I was askin' for it, anyway, so don't get all angry at him. It's my fault, too."

"You're a real dumbass sometimes, you know that, Barnes?" Steve huffs and lies back onto the grass, staring at the stars.

He chuckes the butt into the ground when he's done, then goes back to Steve and settles beside him. The sky remains dark. Bucky wonders what time it is. It should be starting anytime now.

"Hey, Buck?"

"Hmm."
"You should just stay with me, you know."

"I just did. Last night, remember? We had cake? Or was I with the wrong Steve the whole time?"

"Don't be a jerk. I mean for real."

"What?" Bucky raises his head to take a good look at Steve's face. It's difficult to read his expression in the dark. "You want me to run away? Are you crazy?"

"Is that such a bad idea? Think about it. Your folks wouldn't even care. Sorry, I mean - they'd let you do it, wouldn't they?" Steve sits up and looks down at Bucky seriously. "You really should, Buck."

"Don't be stupid, I can't just leave like that," Bucky says, but he feels a thrill of excitement flutter in his chest.

"It'll be swell. You know how much my ma likes you already. Some days I even think she likes you more than she does me. You already have that job at the docks, an' you wouldn't have to worry about - about gettin' beat an' all -"

"It's not so simple. I can't run away from home," Bucky insists, but he only half-believes the words that come out from his mouth. He can, can't he? There's nothing stopping him. They won't even come looking. He's been gone for days on end without them even asking about it. He could really just go.

"It's plenty simple. It ain't your home if you hate going back there," Steve reasons. His eyes are bright and eager.

Bucky takes a deep breath. "Well, Rogers. Fifteen and gettin' wiser by the day."

"Well? Whaddaya think?"

"I think the show's about to start," Bucky points out, as the other picnickers around them start to murmur excitedly.

"But -"

"Shh." He kicks at Steve's ankles gently and they lie back again, pillowing their heads with their folded arms. The sky lights up with red and blue. It never gets old. He watches the lights reflect on Steve's pale face, and on the wet surface of his too-big eyes. So many colours.

The world rolls over slowly, its dark belly round and silent. The stars wheel overhead. The fizzle of sparks in the sky make Bucky's eyes water, but he forces himself to keep his eyes open. He doesn't want to miss anything at all. Beside him, he feels Steve quiver willfully against the brightness, against the deafening bangs of crackers. Nothing else matters.

It's over too soon. The smoke in the sky drifts slowly away and the excited crowd disperses. The park darkens again without the light of the fireworks, and they gaze at the silhouettes of strangers melting away into the night. In the gathering silence, Steve's face is illuminated, very faintly, by the sliver of moon uncovered by the haze of smoke. He finally turns to Bucky, his eyebrows raised. "Well?" he asks again, his mouth curling to the side like he already knows the answer. Little punk always gets his way.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay," Bucky agrees shakily. He scrubs at his face with dewy palms, and is faintly surprised when they come away wetter than before. "Okay, I'll stay with you."
He opens his eyes. The light of the room is soft, and so is the bed he's in. He blinks. It's not so difficult to breathe this time, even though his throat feels like it's been scraped clean with a grater. He tries to move his fingers. They come to life slowly in a shower of pins and needles, and he stills immediately, gritting his teeth against the sensation. At least he can feel them. At least he still has arms. He stares at the blank ceiling and he knows he isn't dead.

There's a low drone of someone speaking, and the sigh of paper being turned. He closes his eyes for a moment, listening to the evenness of the sound and its timbre. It's familiar and it's warm, and he knows that voice. He'd recognise it anywhere.

It reminds him of the war. It reminds him of fistfights and hurtful words. It reminds him of countless military cards and the one letter he never wanted to receive. It reminds him of waking up on a table, and of gunpowder and dirt and blood and the sound of fingernails rattling in a tray. It reminds him of quiet nights by the fire and loud nights with the drinks. It reminds him of buildings crumbling all around him, of the ground exploding blue at his feet. It reminds him of the satisfying crack of a rifle, resounding like thunder across a field. It reminds him of a deep cold winter. It reminds him of how it felt to be ripped from the side of a train by sleet and wind. It reminds him of how long it took for him to hit the snow.

But it also reminds him of before, of life in a ratty old apartment in the bad part of town. It reminds him of waking up to getting kicked in the shins. It reminds him of sneaking into theatres and competing to see who could get more popcorn into that one boy's hair before he noticed. It reminds him of pressing wet cloths to bloodied lips and bruised knuckles, and of sitting by a bedside for hours and wondering if he'd have to call in the priest by nightfall. It reminds him of when he ran away from home, and of how he couldn't stop crying when Mrs Rogers kissed his forehead for the first time. It reminds him of a little boy hitting him on the nose with tear-stained knuckles outside the church, his eyes red-rimmed but blazing.

It reminds him of walking home in a pair of shoes that weren't his own.

"You and me - why, we're all that's been," the voice intones quietly. "The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us."

He turns his head towards the sound. A name escapes his lips, an almost imperceptible exhale of breath. He says it because he remembers it, and he says it because he knows now he'll never forget.

Steve looks up from the book he's reading, and he smiles like the sun.

His eyes are blue.

"It's a thing to see when a boy comes home."

- John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Thank you for giving this story a chance, and sticking with me till the end. I never expected the story to be so long, or even have an ending at all, but this is where we've ended up and this is where I have to leave you. It's been a hell of a ride, and I love you all so, so much.

Update: We Were Like Lions is currently a WIP. It’s a prequel spinoff of sorts, covering the origins of the Black Widow and her connection with the Winter Soldier.

Find me on tumblr: yourmorningwar

Works inspired by this one: We Were Like Lions by morningwar

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