Sleeping With Ghosts

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Summary

The first two years after Bucky gets out of the ice are-- surprisingly easy. Serve his country, learn to use his charmed robot hand, make friends, don’t think about the spark of magic in him that’s gone out, see the world, try to live with the grief (try to live with the grief, try to--)

Maybe they’re not that easy, in the end, but he’s settling - until he gets reluctantly pulled out of the Army and has Steve’s shield (Steve’s shield, its magic wary and curious and half-dormant) thrust onto him again, even though he’s already turned it down once before. The world has changed and so has he, but as he tries to immerse himself into a new life, he meets a ghost he could never leave behind.

Notes

This is my Captain America Big Bang 2018 fic, done in collaboration with esaael and Cobaltmoony. Big thank you to both of my lovely artists, Fox for gigantic help with the fic, and Alby for stellar beta work! Title comes from Placebo's song with the same name.
Chapter 1

The new millennium is strange and lonely.

The new millennium is strange and lonely and fast, all steel and glass and speed, no room for old-world magic murmured between the flickers of a campfire or a burning lamp, pulled out from between ribs, from the dark soil underneath.

Bucky thinks about it often during his first three weeks in the year 2012. He thinks about it in the SHIELD facility, as he slowly spells the sign language alphabet with his new hand to help the real and artificial nerves find their connecting pathways and settle down. He thinks about it on the train, or as he tries new foods, walks endless miles across the city, and reads through what feels like the entirety of Wikipedia.

Maybe that’s why the spark left him, snuffed out by ice and the long, freezing years in the ocean. Maybe the magic—inherited from his grandmothers who brought it from the old country on their backs and in their purses—saw how the world was changing while he was asleep, and knew that its era was over.

Bucky spends most of his first days as a free man on the subway, riding the lines from one end to the other like a lunatic, feeling self-conscious in his old haircut and out-of-place clothes. The subway is still mostly familiar, and underground, closer to where his roots grow. He feels safer down there, even though the rattling noise of the train makes something terrified and frantic rear its head in him. More than once he zones out on the platform because of the noise and the wind combined, and comes to minutes later with his hand stretched out, like he’s trying to catch something (someone) that’s just barely out of his reach.

He watches people there, how they cast their small spells of convenience: a closing door delayed, a stain on the seats cleaned up, nose slightly altered for a first date, flowers freshened up. There are spells made with small wrist watches, with handheld phones, with loops of headphones or lipstick scrawled on a napkin. They’re easy, quick, handy, like a party trick or a shortcut, with no personal price paid.

It’s easier to focus on the spells and modern habits than to stop imagining familiar faces in the crowd. Becca, Morita, Phillips; they all ride the subway with him and turn into someone else when Bucky opens his mouth to call for them.

He tries to not think of Steve, but Steve’s always there, in the darkness behind the subway windows: the windswept mess of his hair, the horrified look in his eyes, his calloused hand slipping out of Bucky’s hold.

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When Bucky had cracked his eyes open in the strange room and seen how hastily it had been constructed to look like a wartime hospital, he had closed his eyes and lain still for a long time, listening to his body. He had moved his toes, just a little, not enough to alert anybody watching (and there had to have been someone watching, in a room like that), tuned in to the way his leg muscles twitched with the movement; soles, calves, thighs. He had moved his fingers, right hand first, feeling the nerves sing all the way up to his shoulder.

There had been a baseball game on, the radio crackling in a way that uncared-for things often do.

Dodgers vs Phillies. Ebbets Field.

They had skipped church that morning and walked for over an hour to the stadium to save money; then all the way back after the game, because Bucky had spent their fare on an extra bottle of soda for Steve whose nose had been growing pinker and pinker under the sun.

Steve had been sniffing with hay fever the whole trip back from the game, wiping his nose absent with a hanky, his face shining with excitement and sweat. He’d been a little disgusting—they both had after a long day of sitting in the bleachers—and Bucky had looked at the sweat-stains under Steve’s armpits and the constantly dribbling nose, and thought that he sure had to love the guy a little to find him gross and still want to suck his cock.
Nearly five years; it had been five years since that game, and as Bucky had lain there on the metal-framed hospital bed, he’d wondered why that recording had been put on for him, and what would have happened with the radio if Bucky had slept past it. Maybe it would’ve started again, like a strange time loop stuck on that Sunday in mid-May, 1940.

Bucky had shut out the game, tried to move the fingers of his left hand, and found out that they weren’t there.

That had been when he had stopped, waited; and waited longer still. He’d been looking for the warm spot under his sternum, close to skin, that had been so familiar to him for such a long time; and when he couldn’t find it, he had searched for the cold and dark one on the other side of his ribcage, deeper and harder to reach.

He had tried to tap into those spots, and found out that they weren’t there, either.

That had made him open his eyes and realize he was in trouble.

The street’s rumble from outside the window had sounded slightly distorted, but not in a way being inside a building would’ve caused. The room had been bland, but not sterile enough to be an actual hospital room, and the light outside seemed strange, oddly colored.

His left arm had been gone, just a carefully wrapped stump peeking from the shirt sleeve; the room painfully fake; his magic gone; and when Bucky had slowly sat up and pressed his bare feet against the floor, all he’d heard was a faint tremor, like a tired sigh.

He’d been dressed in a t-shirt with a gigantic SSR logo across his chest, and wasn’t that the biggest joke of them all? Because SSR spooks weren’t Army or Navy guys, proud to flaunt their wartime profession; they worked in the sidelines, footnotes, in between what was right and what needed to be done. They didn’t have t-shirts. They didn’t even have insignia apart from the silver-winged pin on their dress uniform lapels.

So that was what he had: no arm, no location, no magic to help him out of there, but instead a five-year-old ballgame recording, an impossible t-shirt, and a ground that was eerily silent below his feet. None of them had been any good for defense, and Bucky had been tracking the room, calculating his possibilities, when the door opened.

When the woman came in, Bucky had wanted to laugh.

Everything about her had been wrong, from her uncoiffed hair to the men’s tie and the shape of her brasserie under the shirt. They’d certainly seen the effort to find a woman who bore some resemblance to Peggy, but the job had been way too shoddy to be unintentional; a test of some kind, but for what, Bucky hadn’t known.

She had called him Captain and looked startled and a little unsure when Bucky had laughed at her; she had fumbled to answer his question because he hadn’t asked Where am I, but When, like he’d already known something irreversible had happened to him. He’d told her about the game, but not about Steve’s sunburnt nose, or the pale, untanned rings on Steve’s right forefinger where a string had been tied to remind him to pick up some new patching needles for his Ma. Those were just for him; she didn’t deserve the details.

Steve was dead.

Bucky hadn’t run when she’d raised the alarm. No arm, no magic, no shoes; he would fight with his wit rather than his body.

You’ve been asleep, Barnes, the tall man with an eyepatch had said. For almost 70 years.

Instead of replying, Bucky had slowly turned on the bed so that his back was to them, a clear message of do your worst. He had pressed his bare feet against the cold linoleum, and listened to the emptiness left by something he’d once had; like air moving in a vast, dark cave.

Steve was dead, and Bucky wasn’t, despite everything, and the world had been strange and mute, watching him realize that.

My arm? He’d finally asked, and the man had said, We’re working on it, like Bucky was supposed to know what that meant.
He had freaked out, later, once the numb shock had faded and he had woken up from the surgery where they gave him the new arm; looked down at the matte black adamantium, and realized that enough time had passed for two generations to grow up and develop something like it.

They hadn’t let him out for a week after that.

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When Nick Fury comes for him, Bucky’s at the SHIELD shooting range, because it’s the only one that lets him in outside of normal hours. The rifle in his hands feels too new, but at least he has two hands to hold it.

The new arm is a miracle. He doesn’t know what they did to fit him with the anchor in his stump and an arm that responds like his right one does, but it’s sleek and new and working, like something out of the science fiction novels he used to read. The best part of it is how it reacts when Bucky touches the soil, how it feels the same coming-and-going echo of old magic as his right hand does; it’s definitely charmed by someone who’s mastered their craft, and Bucky’s thankful for that, at least.

“Some people might find it alarming that you train in the middle of the night,” Fury says behind Bucky just as he’s about squeeze the trigger; a perfectly timed test to see if his focus falters. It’s a nice try: Bucky’s been tracking his quiet footsteps ever since Fury walked in, hearing him without problems even with the earmuffs on.

“I don’t care,” Bucky says, and hits bullseye. He woke up to Steve falling three times in two hours before he gave up on sleep, put his pants on, and came in. He takes off the earmuffs. “Some people might also find alarming that I slept for seventy years and don’t know what South Park is.”

“Fair,” Fury says. When Bucky turns to look, he appears impassive. “Wrap it up, I have a job for you.”

Bucky rolls his eyes behind Fury’s back but takes the rifle back to the assembling station and starts pulling it apart for cleaning.

The job, turns out, involves a lot of strange names and the same stone Bucky witnessed dissolve Schmidt. He’d thought he would never have to see it again, in any form. “You should’ve left us both in the ocean,” he says finally as he puts the cleaned rifle back together. “You want Steve for this, not me. I’m a covert ops guy, and this doesn’t sound like one. I don’t even have magic anymore.”

“Rogers is dead, and you’re our guy now,” Fury says bluntly. “Would you rather sit on the goddamn subway all day long? Go to the library? I’m offering you a chance to do what you’re good at.”

“And what’s that?” Bucky asks, covering up the bile that rises in his throat, and turns to put the rifle away to hide his face. “You know I’m a sniper, it doesn’t help with retrieving the Tesseract.”

Fury’s not the first person to say Rogers is dead out loud, and he won’t be the last, but sometimes-

Sometimes it’s nice to fantasize that Steve is still alive, like him; that he managed to survive the fall and got to grow old somewhere in Europe with a nice wife and lots of children, not remembering who he is. Sometimes Bucky lies awake in the small hours and wonders what it would be like to meet that Steve-not-Steve, who’d probably be perfectly healthy and energetic even at the admirable age of 93, thanks to the serum.

Bucky wonders what he would to say to him. Thank you for keeping on living, maybe. I should’ve never left you behind, maybe.

I wish they’d never found me, certainly.

“Don’t play dumb,” Fury says, and Bucky’s fairly sure he would roll his only eye if he were the kind of person to do such an undignified thing. “I have read your file, Barnes, I know about the Pacific. Your combat skills are well-tested.”

That makes Bucky pause. Fury’s right, of course - he had enlisted after Pearl Harbor, in the first week of 1942, when the propaganda had gotten to him: there were open calls for mages to the
Pacific, promising better income for those with war-fitting skills, and he’d fallen for it hook, line and sinker.

He went down in history as one of the best snipers in the European theater, but before that he’d had to learn a lot of skills he later wanted to forget: hand-to-hand combat, strategy, knife skills, traps. Guerilla warfare.

Without his magic, all of that really might be the only thing Bucky can excel at anymore. He might be able to learn to do magic in the way the people nowadays do, even if his old spark is gone, but that’s not certain at all.

Body magic went out of fashion in the 60s - Bucky’s read a whole damn book about it - and the new generations have new theories and gadgets and so, so many spells. They don’t press their hands on their skin and pull out silky threads of magic like Bucky’s generation did, draw their power from the land and the soil. They like to take shortcuts, and there are so many charmed gadgets on the market, designed for those without any magic of their own.

Perhaps the land isn’t for them to tap into anymore, as plastic has overrun the world and the old, natural way of doing magic. He doesn’t feel like being a part of that.

Bucky takes the job.

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Agent Natasha Romanoff is a small, sharp-eyed woman with hair so red that she must have at least an ounce of magic in her. “Hey,” she says and sticks out her hand for a shake. “James, right?”

Bucky opens his mouth to correct her, then falters. It’s a new century, and to the world around them, Bucky Barnes has been dead for sixty-seven years. “Yeah,” he says, changing his mind, and shaking her offered hand. “James Barnes. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Romanoff says. Her gaze flicks down, minutely, assessing him, while Bucky does the same. She’s very good, he thinks, appearing easygoing and non-threatening in a manner that’s just slightly off, and Bucky’s able to put his thumb on it only because he spent at lof time with the SSR spooks. There are traces of something around her, like half-formed fingerprints, or a dusting of snow that’s already melting. Bucky wonders if she can see the void magic left behind in him as it went.

“Hope Coulson was all right,” Romanoff says, nodding back towards the guy who accompanied Bucky as they start towards the bridge. “He grew up with the Captain America comics. He might have some questions.”

Bucky snorts without mirth. Coulson had been fairly civil, but there had been something unnerving in the way he was eyeing Bucky’s… well, everything. “He was fine. And I hope he won’t. I’m not-- Steve.”

Saying Steve’s name feels like swallowing crushed glass, everything bleeding inside him, scraped raw. He wonders if it will ever get easier, navigating the hollow of the dried-out ocean inside him.

Romanoff shrugs. “He idolizes Cap. If you were him, Coulson might be too tongue-tied to do anything. You, on the other hand, are way more approachable, so watch out.”

“Great,” Bucky says with a long-suffering expression, and the side of Romanoff’s mouth twitches up in a genuine smile.

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“Jesus,” Bucky says when he sees the uniform. “Where the hell did you find this one?”

The uniform is in a lit alcove at the end of the aisle, proudly presented like it’s something to admire. It’s modeled after Steve’s USO suit: a brightly colored full-body clownsuit that offers zero protection, not to mention its utter impracticality and lack of actual tac belt with holster space. Steve would’ve run to the hills at the sight of it.

“Coulson had it made, he’s a little dramatic,” Romanoff says, looking bored. She’s probably cataloguing every single microexpression that’s passing on Bucky’s face. “I have better gear for
“Thank fuck,” Bucky mumbles. The shield is sitting in a glass box next to the uniform alcove with a *DO NOT TOUCH* sign next to it.

Bucky puts his right hand over the glass door of the case, and it pops open, just like that; maybe it’s synced to his fingerprints; maybe the shield knows it’s him. He takes the shield out slowly, letting his hand sweep over its smooth expanse. It’s heavy in his hands, drowsy and slightly bristly for getting woken up, and Bucky strokes the red band with his thumb, slides his left hand through the handles. It’s thrilling to feel the shield responding to him, a taste of the magic he’s now lost.

*Hey,* he thinks. *Good to see you.*

The shield is a foreign weight on his hand; he never had much time to get used to it, because it wasn’t supposed to be his to carry. The handle is warm against his prosthesis as if they’re communicating, and the shield’s magic is hesitant, like it’s trying to figure out why it can’t connect fully with Bucky. It makes something hot and lumpy lodge in Bucky’s throat.

The shield likes Bucky just fine, or it used to, because Steve loved him and that ran deep enough to convince the shield, but now Steve is gone, it’s been seventy years, and Bucky doesn’t know how it’s gonna react to being carried again.

Romanoff takes him to a locker room and digs out a black kevlar-lined tacsuit and a pair of combat boots. “Here’s your gear. I’ll wait outside.”

It takes Bucky an embarrassing long time to lace his boots; the fine motorics of his new hand aren’t yet fully under his control, and he’s been wearing slip-on shoes for a reason. The suit is comfortable and stretches fine when he tests the range of motion, rotates his arms and does a couple of squats. He’s definitely worn worse things to a fight, like his Sunday best, or whatever the hell the Army thought was jungle-appropriate footwear.

The next two days are a blur of new people, questionable morals, and fucking *aliens* descending on Manhattan. Bucky can’t decide what ends up feeling the worst: knowing that the Tesseract is out there and actively being used, finding out that SHIELD is experimenting on it, or having to look Tony Stark in the eye and see reflected back all the ways Howard fucked up. Bucky never liked Howard that much and the feeling was mutual - Steve was Howard’s pet project and Bucky just someone to make modified rifles for, and it helps somewhat with Tony. There’s a ton of resentment in Tony towards Steve’s memory, but not for Bucky.

The aliens are something fucking else, though.

Bucky uses Steve’s shield as well as he can, but he’s nowhere close to being as fluid and imaginative as Steve was - which makes sense, because it was made for Steve, and Steve only, hostile to most people trying to even pick it up. Even though the shield is working with him, directing his momentum and returning back to his hand perfectly, every block and swing feels wrong, like pressing down on a bruise just to see if it stings.

He’s much more comfortable with his handguns and his right fist, protected by a glove, because his prosthesis still needs improvements when it comes to speed and strength. It pulls its weight in the battle remarkably well, though, thanks to his accelerated healing and the spells woven into the tech, which has allowed the anchor to settle.

Yet, when his earpiece crackles into life and lets him know that there’s a nuclear warhead heading towards the city, he nearly throws away the shield and gives up. It’s so fucking unfair; he gave his life to save the city from the Valkyrie’s bombs, and now there’s a council of people somewhere who think that it was nothing, who think it’s better to sacrifice the lives of eight million people than try to save them.

He can’t really find the energy to be happy when they win.

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Fury’s standing in front of the locker room door when Bucky emerges from the showers, the shield leaning against the wall next to him. He doesn’t bat an eye when Bucky drops his towel and rips open the pile of plastic-wrapped clothes that have been left for him: boxer briefs, t-shirt, sweatpants, a pair of socks, all creepily in his size. He gets dressed in silence, not caring if Fury
gets an eyeful of his junk or his bruises. The fabrics are surprisingly soft; he’ll probably never get used to how comfortable clothes are in this century.

When Bucky sits down on the bench and starts pulling his boots on, he can feel Fury’s gaze on him, assessing and thoughtful, but doesn’t give him the satisfaction of returning the look.

“You could take the shield permanently,” Fury finally says, breaking the silence. He’s picked the shield up and is weighing it in his hands; he doesn’t look openly disturbed by holding it like so many others, but there is tension in the line of his shoulders. He’s wearing gloves, likely charmed to counter the shield’s magic a little.

“No,” Bucky says, not looking up from his shoelaces. He can’t get the image of blue-tinted weapons out of his mind: for him it’s been barely a month since he last saw a man vaporized by something that looked eerily like the ones in SHIELD’s custody.

Bucky doesn’t know why he’s so fucking surprised that SHIELD is researching Tesseract’s power. Maybe he just expected better from Peggy’s organization.

“Isn’t that what Captain Rogers would’ve wanted?” Fury asks. “You were his right-hand man, the one to take up the shield after he died. You’re good with it, as you saw in the battle.”

“No,” Bucky says again, finishes tying his boots and gets up, turns to Fury. Steve's been dead for two months and sixty-seven years. “It’s what you people think he would’ve wanted, based on what you read from history books and your fucking files. You didn’t know him, and you have no fucking right to try to use his memory to make me work for you.” He tucks his phone into his pocket and tugs a sweatshirt on. “I don’t accept it. Keep your spy shit, let the shield go back to sleep, and call the Army. I want to be deployed again.”

Fury looks at him for a moment, then inclines his head. “Consider it done.”

Three weeks later, after SHIELD and the Army strike a deal, Bucky ships off to Afghanistan.

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It’s a little lonely out in the desert, but Bucky likes it. He enjoys the easy camaraderie, soaking in more and more of the 21st century pop culture, and keeps very carefully silent about his backstory, surrounded by other soldiers who don’t know he’s as old as their grandfathers. It helps him a lot, makes him feel more at ease in the new era, and he learns way more than he did with the agents that spent three hours explaining the Internet to him, when he had already understood its tech in fifteen minutes.

Strict upbringing, he says when someone questions his momentary lapses. There are hundreds of books and movies loaded on his tablet, courtesy of Tony Stark who shipped it to him without a single accompanying note. Bucky loves it, the endless possibilities to read and adapt a little better, catch up on everything he missed, but it’s also bittersweet because he’s constantly reminded of why there are so many foreign things for him to learn.

War is very different in the twenty-first century, but the bare bones are the same: the waiting, the weather that seeps through, the frantic rush for field mages when someone gets injured. Bucky doesn’t know what strings Fury pulled to get him deployed with a fake arm, but at the base he finds out that there are at least three other guys and two women in his company with charmed prosthetics. Perhaps the evolution of technology and magic has made the military change their minds about it; when Bucky was young there was no way in hell anybody “lacking” would be allowed on the field.

There are drills and so much driving, no more trenches to shiver in. But the idle time is the same; filling silence with dumb spells that have no other purpose than to entertain, competing on who can build the most elaborate sand construction. It used to be snow and mud the last time he was at war, and he misses it sometimes, especially the snow, wet and cold as it was - sand is dry and hot but it gets everywhere, grating in his boots like it’s trying to turn into pearls.

His dreams keep revolving around Steve, but sometimes it’s not bad. Sometimes instead of nightmares about the Alps or the serum going wrong, he dreams of home; of reading long damp letters from Steve and Becca at the Pacific, hanging onto every word; of being cocooned in Steve’s embrace, their magic in perfect balance. He dreams of getting down on his knees, his mouth going wet with anticipation; of Steve pinning him against a door with that new, powerful
body of his, connection thrumming between them.

He keeps waking up in the middle of the night with the ghost imprints of Steve’s hands under his shirt, skimming past the dried-out pools of magic; glad that his pillowcase can’t tattle about the tears it collects.

He misses the shield. It went quietly back to sleep when Bucky left it in Fury’s care, like it had accepted that it wasn’t needed for now, but sometimes Bucky misses the weight of it on his arm, the feeling of being protected; the ghost of Steve that seemed to hover behind him, guiding his arm.

Natasha sends him emails at irregular intervals, and some months later, Bucky is astonished to realize that he’s got a friend. She’s cautious with him, of course, and Bucky doesn’t know why she singled him out as a potential comrade - but slowly, message by message, the personas she wears start to slip off and her own seeps in. If asked how he knows it's not yet another of her layers or games, he wouldn’t be able to explain it, but he knows: Natasha is a well, but the stone he accidentally threw in has finally hit the bottom.

Stark, after all his prickliness and badly concealed daddy issues, takes Bucky’s arm as his pet project, and sends long, rambling voice messages about the new tech he’s developing to upgrade it. Bucky finds them fascinating, the technology terms getting more and more familiar with every message and book he reads.

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Marksmanship doesn’t differ much; he began his second life when he picked up a rifle at basic back in 1942, and he still excels at it, the required math coming to him easily, quick as a breath. There’s way less hand-to-hand combat than he got used to in the previous war, but he collects small, deceiving weaponry anyway, just in case.

He used to have so many knives, he thinks as he spins the butterfly knife in his left hand, practising dexterity; and now he has just two, the rest long gone. They used to be charmed, of course, with tiny drops of sweat and body magic carefully rubbed in to make them work harder and better for him. He wonders where they ended up: he left most of them at the base when they stormed Schmidt’s stronghold, and during his short stint in New York he never saw a trace of the uniform he had been wearing when he took the Valkyrie down.

Pettily, he hopes that whoever took his knives gets nicks from the charms.

People writing the history books have made body magic sound like blood magic, and Bucky leaves more than one book unfinished because of that. Blood magic as people know it now requires a sacrifice, binding a piece of the mage into the spell, and it’s dangerous for fools who don’t know better - but body magic is magic from the earth; from the rich black soil where spirits used to dwell.

Back when it was still prevalent, body magic manifested in different ways from healing to constructive to elemental; nobody could predict what one was born with, if at all. Steve was a builder: of bridges, relationships, skills, connections. But he rarely used his magic before the war, and after the serum, even more carefully than before. He was the backbone, the cornerstone, something people instinctively relied on. Bucky used to be a healer, a repairer of things: where Steve built, Bucky took care that everything stayed in shape - or crumbled to nothing.

Most people had only one type of magic in them, but Bucky - Bucky had had two, a spot for both of his hands, the bigger pool in him light and warm, the repairer, the other something dark and left unspoken. He knew how to heal a broken leg or a strained relationship, but he also knew how to strangle a man without touching him, how to make sure that a friendship never got over the hurt. He knew rot and mold and the smell of damp earth, how to destroy someone’s reputation without a trace, how to burn a forest down with just a fingertip.

He knew death, and it terrified him. The only time he’d used it actively was in the war, always with the knowledge of the terrible things he could cause if his concentration slipped even a little. He’d never raised anything from the dead, but there was always the knowledge that maybe, maybe he was powerful enough for that, too, and that scared him more than anything.

So that was what they had been, Steve and Bucky: a trinity, a three-faced god, and sometimes Bucky’s fiercely glad that with the loss of Steve he also lost his spark.

Because what good is a god that can just repair and destroy, with nobody to build anew; with
nobody to say, *that's enough, Buck*, with nobody to stroke back sweat-stained hair and say, *you did good. You did good.*

Not worth a fucking thing, really.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The gorgeous art in this chapter is by esaael!

Warnings for chapter 2: mentions of suicidal ideation (Bucky), plus a reference to a suicide committed by a background canon character.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The morning Bucky finally shipped out for Europe, their goodbyes were on the verge of terse; they'd already said sort-of farewells once, at the Stark Exposition, and yet there Bucky was, at their apartment door. He hadn't seen Steve since he left him at the Expo; Bucky had wished his date and her friend goodnight merely an hour later, and gone home to get doted on by his parents and sisters.

Bucky had a bag at his feet, his hat perched on it, and he didn't know what to do with his hands; he and Steve had been sleeping together since before his first enlistment, but now he felt awkward, uncertain of what was allowed and what was not.

Steve resolved that for him by leaning up and kissing him on the mouth; considering the circumstances Steve was oddly chipper, but Bucky hadn't found it strange enough to be suspicious.

"Don't do anything stupid before I get there," Steve said, in an echo of Bucky's words on the fair night, and the idea was so absurd, so contrary to everything Bucky had fought against with tooth and nail; he had already gone to war once, in the Pacific, so that others wouldn't have to, and here was Steve, determined to do exactly that.

(Little did Bucky know that by then Steve was already guarding an 1A slip and Dr Erskine's card in his pocket. Steve had confessed to it, later, in a camp in the English countryside, and Bucky had turned away and pretended to sleep, because he had been so furious, so full of bitter resentment that he couldn't even bear to look at the strange, too-large shape of Steve in the darkness.

He'd regretted that later, too, of course. After Steve fell from the train, Bucky had regretted every instance in their short war-filled year together that he hadn't turned to Steve and let him hold him, taken comfort in knowing that their links and knots went so deep into the roots of the world that nothing could really break them. But break they had, unexpectedly and viciously, and when Bucky nosedived into the sea, his last thought had been that the earth had betrayed them both, in the end.)

Bucky barked out a laugh, but it came out oddly strangled, and in the next moment he was crying. It was heavy, violent; choked sobs squeezed out of him like he was a wet rag twisted to drain it, his chest full and impossibly weighted.

Steve didn’t try to hold him then, just took his hand and let Bucky cry, maybe sensing the enormity of his grief, and afterwards Bucky wondered if Steve ever regretted that. Had there been a moment, somewhere later on the line, when Steve looked at his war-stained wreck of a lover and realized that he had wasted his last opportunity to hold the person Bucky used to be, once?

Maybe that was why he was so adamant on keeping Bucky close later, at least when Bucky allowed it. Maybe that morning had shifted their dynamic irreversibly, or maybe it had been the shift of balance in Bucky’s magic after Kreischberg, the darkness in him heavier and just barely balanced by Steve.

All Bucky knew, afterwards, was that the morning he was leaving for the war again, he cried at their door like someone had died and he had just realized it. It didn't occur to him until he woke up in the 21st century, that he might've been grieving for them both in advance.

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The deployment lasts over New Year’s, and as soon as Bucky’s feet touch American soil, he takes
the leave slapped into his hand and goes back abroad. There’s nothing waiting for him in
America, not really, and Europe to him is a graveyard full of unmarked tombs. Three weeks in
Africa are grounding in a way he didn’t expect: he makes notes on how they use magic, eats
foreign but delicious food, does some soul-searching, misses Steve, and just keeps missing him at
every turn he takes, with every new thing he can’t show Steve.

Bucky bums around at the base for a couple of months after his leave ends, meeting with Natasha
whenever he can, and breathes out in relief when he gets news of another deployment, this time
taking a year. It’s a long time, but Bucky doesn’t know what else to do with himself, and at least
there he won’t be regularly reminded of everything he’s lost, like he would be in New York.

“We could use a guy like you,” Natasha says when Bucky calls her to share the news. “But unlike
Hill and Fury, I respect your decision. They think you’re wasting your time.”

Bucky shrugs even though she can’t see it. “I like being around other soldiers. I don’t think I’m
ready for covert ops yet.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Natasha says. “I’d love to see you more, but maybe next year.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees, lying through his teeth. “Maybe next year.”

* 

Months pass. Time is alternatingly slow like molasses or flying past, the days in the desert
blending together. Maybe it’s the job, maybe it’s just him; Bucky doesn’t have the energy to think
about it. Most of the time he feels oddly detached from himself, like he’s performing for the people
around him, playing the part of somebody who’s wholly there and invested.

He doesn’t know why, but the Pacific keeps coming back in waves, mixing with his experiences
in Europe and making him sleep badly. He didn’t have this problem on his first tour, but maybe
his psyche spent that one working through the sudden time leap and the latest war he’d been in,
and now has time to focus on the earlier one. It’s not pleasant, but Bucky bears it. Eventually it
will have to pass.

The Pacific for him was a deceptively short hell that felt a lot longer, something he liked to
actively forget; the atrocities he saw both the Allied and the Japanese commit were too heavy and
dark for him to bear. But it did whip him into an excellent soldier and helped him learn to hone his
magic, and by the time it was his turn for a leave and he made it back to New York, the call for
field mages to Europe was already on.

Where on his first tour Bucky dreamed of Steve dying from the serum injection, or falling off the
train, nightmares now blend Steve into everything: he’s sweating with dengue fever next to Bucky
in a jungle; losing his legs in a beach foxhole; getting gutted by an enemy soldier in the dark. The
worst are those where Steve is like the soldiers Bucky served with in New Guinea, pressing the
barrel of his rifle against the forehead of a surrendered enemy, spitting out outraged bullshit that
has nothing to do with commands and everything to do with race.

Rationally, Bucky knows that his brain is messing with him. It doesn’t stop him believing he
deserves it.

* 

On his mid-deployment leave, Bucky gives in to his head and goes east, trying to find some sort of
equilibrium within himself, a decades-old war that’s still plaguing him, and the culture of those he
fought against back then. It’s a hard two weeks for him, but it’s also cleansing, somehow; a piece
of tar-like terror finally dislodging in his chest.

On his last day, he picks up a golden ginkgo leaf in Meiji Jingu Gaien Park in Tokyo, follows the
curves of the leaf with his fingertip. He remembers reading about them: ginkgo trees can grow to
over a thousand years old, and they survived the nuclear blast in Hiroshima.
Bucky had already been in the ice for five months when the Little Boy was dropped. In a way he’s glad of that - if he’d still been awake to see that catastrophe, he would’ve put a gun in his mouth and finished it himself. Because wiping out entire cities with Valkyrie’s bombs had been exactly what he’d tried to stop from happening, and witnessing his own country take a page from HYDRA’s handbook would’ve been a betrayal too terrible for him to handle.

But he had been gone when it happened, and when he read about the ending of the war after his thawing, it had been nearly seventy years since the atrocities and he’d been so numb already that he just felt the shame, coating his throat like slime.

The absence of both Steve and his magic still feels like a void under Bucky’s skin; it’s nearly every day that he turns and expects to see Steve’s face and his looming bulk, or hear him laugh. The faint traces of magic come and go, like air pressure dropping before a storm; a distant echo. It’s easy to carry on during the day, make himself busy, but nighttime comes unfailingly, and when Bucky goes to bed, grief and guilt curl up at the foot of his bed like loyal companions.

He puts the leaf between pages of his notebook, careful to place it so that it doesn’t wrinkle. Resilience, adaptability; those he can do.

Forgiveness? Not just yet.

*

When his 12-month deployment ends in March, Bucky’s summoned to SHIELD HQ in Washington D.C. almost as soon as he’s back Stateside. It seems that SHIELD has seconded him from the Army under some kind of special arrangement, and Bucky can’t decide how he’s feeling about it.

Irritated? Sure. But there’s also the prospect of seeing the shield again, and that thought sits under his breastbone, warm and wistful.

Landing in D.C. feels like a repeat of his arrival on the helicarrier almost two years ago, because there’s a familiar redhead waiting for him in the hangar. Natasha squeezes his arm and leads him into a car, and only once they’re inside and setting off towards SHIELD, she looks him in the eye.

“Hey, James,” she says. “You need a shave.”

Bucky laughs, despite himself. “Yeah,” he says, scrubbing his face with his hand. “I feel like I haven’t slept since Kabul.”

Natasha makes a commiserating sound. “You’ll have four days off, and then we’re off to Costa
Rica,” she says. “We got you a new suit, and the shield is waiting for you. It’s fully awake now.”

So the circle is complete: he went back into the Army just to escape the prospect of being nominated as Steve’s successor, and now he’s facing the choice again. Bucky bites his lip. He doesn’t want the shield - or more like he doesn’t want the constant reminder of what he lost that comes with the shield, or feeling like he’s trying to replace Steve - but something clutches in his chest at the thought of getting to feel the warmth of its magic again. His fingers twitch, like they, too, are craving it, and he feels a little ashamed of his greed.

“It’s yours to have if you want it,” Natasha says, glancing at him, because apparently she can read him like an open book. “Fury, of course, didn’t say it outright, but it was implied.”

“Remember what you said last year when I called you about the second tour?” Bucky asks. She makes an affirmative sound. “You didn’t happen to have anything to do with the Army letting me go so easily?”

Natasha is quiet for a while, navigating the afternoon traffic with ease. “Not me personally, no,” she says then. That’s what Bucky likes about her: she might be secretive and keeping things from him deliberately, but she doesn’t lie when confronted directly. “But I knew you were going to be seconded. Your Army career was always gonna be kept short.”

Bucky pinches the bridge of his nose. “And telling me wasn’t a part of the plan?”

“Fury doesn’t operate like that,” Natasha says. “You better get used to it.”

“Where did I sign to hand my life over to SHIELD, again?” Bucky asks with a hint of bite in his voice. “Because I sure as hell don’t remember agreeing to being Fury’s tin soldier.”

“So you have anything better lined up, then?” Natasha asks, cutting straight to the core. “You’re a living legend - and the only one who can successfully go near that shield. You can’t seriously think that SHIELD would just let you go after all the effort to thaw you.”

“Jesus Christ, Nat, I didn’t ask to be found!” Bucky takes a deep breath and grinds the heels of his hands against his eyes to stop himself from yelling. “I went down hoping that I would die. I was living on borrowed time anyway.”

Natasha doesn’t even bother to fake surprise, which is even more infuriating, but there is a flash of something on her face, gone faster than Bucky can recognize it. “Do you still hope that?”

Bucky doesn’t reply.

After a long silence, Nat sighs. “Look, I don’t want to fight with you - just come to Costa Rica and a few other missions with us, and then make the decision. It doesn’t have to be now.”

“Fine,” Bucky says, knowing well that he sounds like a petulant kid.

Natasha takes him to the Triskelion, a soaring glass and steel monstrosity in the middle of the river, at the southernmost tip of the Theodore Roosevelt Island. It’s not a beautiful building, per se: it’s large and a little clumsy-looking, perched over the water like an enormous soda can left on a fence.

The view from the elevator is nice, though.

Bucky’s never been to Washington D.C. before, but at a brief glance it doesn’t look that remarkable, apart from the buildings on the Mall, clearly on display across the river. It’s a low-rise city, at least on the eastern side of the Potomac, built to showcase the Washington monument and the high dome of the Capitol rising above the rest, an imposing building even from afar, gleaming white under the midday sun. Cherry trees are already in bloom on the Mall.

Inexplicably, he suddenly misses New York: the Manhattan skyline seen from across the East River, how the skyscrapers taper down to the flat expanse of Central Park and Harlem; and the subway, the stations damp and dark, the bite of time’s tooth all over them. He hasn’t missed New York as it is now since he left for Afghanistan almost two years ago, too wrapped up in its lack of what used to make it home.

Natasha leads him into an empty locker room and digs out a t-shirt, a towel, an electric razor, and a pair of SHIELD-issued sweats from one of the lockers. “You have twenty minutes. Ten, if you
want to see your suit and the shield before we go to Fury. There’s shampoo and body wash in the showers.”

“Whose locker is this?” Bucky asks, sceptically. There are no names or any other identification on the doors, and the clothes aren’t new.

“Barton’s,” Natasha says. “He’s out of the country on a long op, and we couldn’t get your kit processed in time. Fucking bureaucracy. The lab can whip up a battle-ready op uniform for you in a week, but the requisition department can’t process an application for standard tracksuit in three.”

It makes Bucky laugh, unexpectedly. It’s good to have Nat taking his six in any form, even if she probably is reporting straight to Fury. He left his pack in the car: everything in it smelled of stale sweat and the desert anyway. “Thanks, Nat.”

“Anytime,” she says. “So. Suit?”

“I guess, yeah.” Bucky shrugs. “Better I see it before Fury, because I’m sure as hell gonna be mad when I’m done with him.”


*  

The new uniform is in a basement armory, behind heavy security - Bucky counts five doors, three retina scans and six fingerprint scanners on the way from the locker room down to the basement. “Are you sure this is enough doors,” he says after Natasha has done the - hopefully final - scans. “Maybe just a few more, to be safe.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Cute,” she says. “It’s because of the shield. We’re not just protecting it from people, we’re protecting the people from it. There have been some stupid but well-meaning agents who were eager to see Captain America’s shield and got too close.”

“Hm.” Bucky waits until the last door is open and Nat is waving him in. “Casualties?”

“Just some nightmares, and a broken ankle when one of the agents got spooked and tripped.” Nat turns on the overhead lights. It’s a fairly cramped room: the shield is in a glass case at one end, and Bucky’s new suit is hung up at the other. “They’re not allowing many people down here for a reason.”

The hostility in the room is palpable: the shield is properly awake now, cooped up in here alone like an angry cat without Steve to take care of it. Bucky can relate.

Natasha wrinkles her nose like she can smell it, staying at the threshold, but Bucky steps in, too tired to be wary of dealing with the shield’s bad mood. He goes directly to the shield, and the pressure in the room drops immediately, just a little, like fresh air breezing in.

“Hey,” Bucky says aloud, touching his knuckles against the glass. “Knock it off, it’s just me and Nat.”

The oppressive atmosphere starts to dissolve, and Bucky rubs his knuckles on the case like he’s petting it. The shield is preening, its chord striking in Bucky like it’s been waiting for him to come and be sweet to it. It’s weird, but Bucky’s been out in the world for two years, and he’s about ready to accept anything thrown in his path. The shield accepting him as pseudo Steve is definitely not a hindrance, at least.

“Look at you, shield whisperer,” Natasha says from the doorway, but her voice is amused and a little fond. “The suit is to your left. We gotta hurry.”

Bucky strokes the glass case once more and turns to look. The suit isn’t completely awful: it does resemble Steve’s old Captain America uniform a lot, with the light grey star on the chest and the assembly of the panels around the midsection, but it’s surprisingly subdued. Apart from the star and the decorative motif around the shoulders, it’s dark blue, way better suited for stealth ops than any star-spangled concoction could be.

“Thoughts?” Natasha asks.

“Could be worse,” Bucky says. “But also could be black.”
She snorts. “I’ll take it. Come on, Fury’s waiting.”

Bucky throws a last glance at the shield, his fingers still remembering the warmth of the borrowed magic, the shield’s excited trilling for being near Bucky again. I’ll be back, he thinks. Wait just a little longer.

*“Barnes.” Fury’s tone that makes it sound like he’s deciding on what to call Bucky instead of greeting him. He’s standing with his back to the door, staring out towards the Capitol with his hands behind his back. “Finished playing a hero?”

“Fury,” Bucky says, crossing his arms. The thrill of seeing the shield has already worn off, and now he’s just tired and still a little pissed off, overly conscious of how short the legs of Barton’s sweatpants are. He doesn’t like having his ankles so exposed. “Still spying with your little eye, I see.”

“Lose the attitude,” Fury says as he turns around. “I don’t have time for your posturing.”

“I’ll lose it when you start keeping me in the loop,” Bucky counters. “Like telling me the parts of your deal with the Army that directly affect me.”

“That wasn’t your concern,” Fury says. “You got to play the G.I. Joe like you wanted, and now you’re here. Take it or leave it.”

“Funny,” Bucky says. “You say that like I have a choice. It’s almost like you didn’t stack this chess game with all your pieces just how you want. Is this the part where I’m supposed to be eternally thankful for you gracefully allowing me to wipe my own ass for a while?”

Fury snorts. Somehow he manages to make it sound both amused and patronizing, but then he cracks a smile, and offers his hand for a shake, like Bucky’s passed some kind of a test. “You’re a good kid, Barnes. Take a seat.”

Bucky ignores the offered hand, sitting down.

“We had our reasons when we made the deal over you,” Fury says as he takes a seat behind his desk. “It was critical to stabilize you and get you integrated; the Army worked well for that. I could’ve briefed you about the secondment plan, that’s true, but would it have helped? Or would you have spent your tours constantly thinking about how it was going to be over soon?”

“That’s what most of us think out there,” Bucky points out. “Only we think it will be driving into an IED or getting cut down by enemy fire. Not many of us have the luxury of dreaming about going home.”

“Maybe,” Fury says like he’s the first and foremost authority on the subject. “In any case, you are now here, and we have prepared the shield and a suit for you. I assume you already saw them.”

“I did.” Bucky crosses his arms and leans back in the chair. “The shield is angry.”

“Aren’t you sharp,” Fury says drily. “It was asleep for the first year, waking up briefly when you were back in the States between your tours. But it woke up for good about a month and a half ago, mad as a goddamn wasp. We don’t know what causes it.”

Bucky frowns. It’s hard trying to think back, with the past months so blurred together, but he can’t remember anything that would trigger the shield, either. “Nothing unusual happening at that time?”

“Not as far as we know,” Fury says, but there’s something in his tone that suggests that he, in fact, does know something that he doesn’t want to share.

Bucky decides to let it lie.

* Bucky gets four days to try to catch up with the jet lag. He sleeps most of the first day and then doesn’t much afterwards, startling awake nearly every hour at the sounds of traffic or a floorboard creaking in the staircase outside his apartment door. He’s skittish and restless, unable to adapt to
the cacophony of a city after the stillness of nights at the desert. He walks around and runs a lot: D.C. is pretty, at least once he gets away from the Mall and its governmental buildings and out to the suburbs and parks.

It’s a relief when Natasha turns up at his door and says, “Let’s go. Heard Central America is hot around this time of year.”

After Costa Rica comes Detroit, followed by Tallahassee, Ireland followed by Malta, and Bucky eases into the lifestyle with surprising grace and very few hiccups. It’s way easier than it used to be with the Commandos, because in between the ops he gets to come home; gets a warm shower and dry clothes and good beer that doesn’t get him drunk. There’s no more shivering in the woods in enemy territory for days on end, frightened out of his mind, waiting for Peggy to contact them about either a new mission or pickup.

The shield is less angry and more satisfied the longer Bucky has it, and Bucky can’t help the thrill that comes from having its magic coursing through him. He alternates between loving it and being sick with shame and guilt, because he never wanted to replace Steve, and yet he’s so greedy for the borrowed magic that he can’t help himself. He’s not sure what to make of the rising thirst for blood in the shield, though: despite its initial anger slowly dissipating, it rejoices in a way Bucky doesn’t recognize when it gets to go into a fight.

After Malta, it takes him a week of hemming and hawing before he braces himself and looks Peggy up. She’s still alive, and according to news reports in remarkably good condition although Alzheimer’s is slowly eating her memory. It takes some digging to find her whereabouts, but she turns out to be in D.C. - way closer than he’d thought. He calls the care home one morning to see if she takes visitors, and jumps into the shower as soon as he hears an affirming reply, knowing well that if he puts it off now, he will be putting it off forever.

He looks at himself in the bathroom mirror after he’s showered and shaved, pushes a mess of curls off his forehead. He looks older, wearier, like the 21st century has ground him down with its warfare and rush, like the new life he has had to learn is sitting on his shoulders, heavy as lead. His cheeks have sunken in and he has curious tan lines than will fade soon. It’s been a long year in the desert.

When Bucky left for Afghanistan, his head had been swimming with new gadgets and a ton of history to catch up on, and he’d been eager to learn it, jump headfirst into new things. What came back was yet another hollow-faced man, excited no more about video calls and canteen snacks. You could say you grew up in a cult, Natasha had said over a year ago when Bucky was last in the States. Doomsday bunker. The weirder it is, the more likely people will take it as a joke and not ask more questions.

But that hit too close to home, didn't it? He had been enclosed in something he couldn't escape, and if he’s honest with himself--

Given the chance now, he isn't completely sure if he would even want to.

The care home is situated in a small, pretty park, the trees in full bloom. It’s quiet at midday, a calm bubble in the hustle and bustle of D.C. Bucky’s squeezing a bouquet of peonies so hard with his left hand that he almost crushes them as he signs his name in the visitor book.

“She’s having a good day,” the nurse says as he leads Bucky down the hall. “But it can change suddenly. Try to be patient with her if her memory fails.”

Peggy turns to look when they go in, and Bucky almost halts at the door, because he’s been trying to adapt as well as he can for the past two years, but--

The reality of the passage of time has never felt so palpable as it strikes him there, looking at the
long life etched onto Peggy’s face. It’s been barely two years since Bucky squeezed her young, smooth hand tight before jumping aboard the Valkyrie, but Peggy’s hair is grey now, her youth gone long ago.

She looks odd without lipstick.

They stare at each other as the nurse busies himself with finding a vase for the flowers, but once the nurse is gone and the door is closed, Peggy says, “James.”

“Hey, Peggy,” Bucky says, feeling like his heart is bleeding out of his mouth with the greeting.

“A nice young woman visited me nearly two years ago and told me that you’d been found,” Peggy says, crooking her finger at him, and Bucky goes without hesitation, like she hooked him under the sternum and tugged. “I saw you on the news with the shield.”

SHIELD never made Bucky’s return public - there was a lot of speculation during and after the battle of New York, of course, because Steve’s shield was something many people recognized, but when Bucky was deployed and disappeared for two years, the commotion slowly died down. The public didn’t know how the shield had been found, just that it had, and on the scale for newsworthiness, aliens on Manhattan went miles before one masked weirdo with a long-lost weapon. It’s just a matter of time, though, he thinks, in this new age of social media and Reddit discussion boards.

Bucky sits down in the chair next to her bed. “I’m--” He swallows, looks down at his fingers, twisting the hem of his shirt. “I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier. It’s been-- hard.”

“Oh, James,” Peggy says softly, reaching a hand out for him. Bucky takes it with his right hand, but as an afterthought puts his prosthetic over it as well, curls his fingers around Peggy’s. Peggy’s gaze drops down to it, and she sighs, squeezing gently. Her magic warms Bucky’s hands and heart: there’s familiarity in it, like a well-loved blanket enveloping him, the sharp edges of it only slightly smoothed by time.

When she looks up again, she reaches to stroke Bucky’s cheek, fingertips grazing his ear.

“My god,” Peggy says, strangled. “You haven’t aged a day.”

“Can’t say the same about you, Carter,” Bucky tries to joke, but it falls horribly flat with how thick his throat is.

Peggy smacks him on the forearm, and suddenly they’re sitting behind the barracks again, sneaking cigarettes and quarreling about whose magic is more helpful for the war effort. Bucky turns his head instinctively, opens his mouth to say, Shut it Rogers, all you can manage is a magical disk, because he’s fully expecting to see Steve leaning against the wall, arms crossed and rolling his eyes, replying, You know perfectly well that I can manage you like nobody else, Buck.

But the corner of the room is empty, no ghosts except the one he put in there, and he turns back, rubs his cheekbone against his shoulder to hide the tears that are threatening to spill out.

When Bucky learnt to use the Internet, he had thought of looking up his people to see what happened to them after the war. He’d been taught about SHIELD and Peggy and Howard’s part in it, of course, but the history of SHIELD didn’t include Morita, or Gabe, or Monty, not to mention Bucky’s family.

In the end, he had decided against it, and the decision had been solidified when he found out in one of his books that Dugan had been buried less than four months after the war in Europe ended. The book didn’t say it outright, but Bucky had looked at the date of Dugan’s death - August 9th, 1945 - and the elaborately crafted sentences that managed to leave the real cause of death out, and he had known. Beneath all his bluster and bravado, Dugan’s heart had always been spacious and empathic and so, so tired.

He had also fought in the Pacific.

After that, Bucky had consciously avoided any mentions of the people he had loved back in the old world. It was like dreaming of that Steve-not-Steve who got to live - it was easier and kinder to imagine them having long, full lives after the war, getting to enjoy the fruits of freedom they had fought for. Of course it was unlikely that all of them had been able to do that to the fullest - Gabe and Morita especially, with how the 20th Century America must have treated them just
because of their heritage - but it was nice to imagine.

In Bucky’s head, Dugan was still sitting in his rocking chair, maybe with great-grandchildren on his knee listening to his circus stories.

That was why he had pushed seeing Peggy aside for so long: in his imagination, she was healthy as a horse. With his magic gone, not being able to relieve her condition in any way felt like a slap, so it was an easy decision: if he didn’t know that she was sick, he could ignore the guilt of not being able to heal her.

“I wish I could help you, Peggy,” Bucky manages, realizing how long he’s been silent, twisting his fingers together, staring at the bedspread. There are tiny birds embroidered in the quilt. “But I can’t.”

“Help me how?” Peggy asks absently, drinking his appearance in, but then her eyes widen, and she sits up a little straighter. “Oh.”

“It’s gone,” Bucky says, and there’s something desperate in his tone that he’s never heard before; a prisoner he’s tried to keep locked up and out of sight for the past two years. “It’s gone, Peggy, and I don’t know how, but I woke up and it wasn’t there anymore. I can’t do anything. I’m completely without magic.”

“Bloody hell, James,” Peggy says, and it’s so familiar, her blunt way of speaking, the incredulity in her voice. “I noticed there was something missing but I thought that you’d just learnt to hide it better. Completely?”

Bucky nods. “I still feel the earth,” he says. “Sometimes, like an echo. But I can’t draw from it.”

There are many days when he wishes he didn’t have that echo, either. Rather not have anything than just the bittersweet kiss from a ghost.

Peggy’s brows are halfway up her forehead, arched in surprise. “I’ve never heard of anything like that,” she says. “Do you think it has something to do with Steve?”

It has occurred to him, coming back to haunt him once in a while: they were so tightly woven together, and after Steve fell--

“Maybe,” he says. After Steve fell, Bucky had still had magic, but the goodness in it had been gone: all he’d cared about was the dark. He swallows. “That’s-- that’s actually related to what I came to ask you.”

“Oh, so you didn’t just come to meet an old friend?” Peggy jokes, but takes Bucky’s hand again and squeezes encouragingly. “What is it?”

“The shield,” Bucky says, looking down at their joined hands. He hadn’t realized how badly he had missed her, and how much Nat resembles her, in spirit if nothing else. “Well, no. Did you know I’ve been in the Army?”

“No,” Peggy says. “Or I don’t think I did. My memory is like a bloody sieve nowadays, nothing stays in.”

“I spent two years in Afghanistan,” Bucky tells her. “S H I E L D seconded me just a few weeks ago.”

“And?” Peggy gestures towards a glass of water on her nightstand, and Bucky gives it to her, supports her as she drinks.

“Fury gave me the shield,” Bucky says. “I’ve had it now for a couple of missions, but I’m-- I’m not sure if I want it.”

“Why?” Peggy asks, cocking her head exactly like she used to when she was about to call Steve or Bucky out on their bullshit. “Because of Steve?”

“Yeah.” Bucky puts the glass back on the table and rakes his hands through his hair. “I just can’t look at it without thinking of him constantly, but it has magic and I don’t, and I’m just--” He huffs a breath. “Is it terrible that I still want it just because of that? Borrowed magic, not even my own, but I just miss it so much.”
Peggy regards him in silence for a while, and then she pinches his arm hard, making him flinch back.

“What the hell,” Bucky says, rubbing the spot. Her fingers are deceptively strong. “What was that for?”

“For being daft,” Peggy says. “That shield - that’s the only thing you or any of us has left of Steve. That’s where his memory lives, and will keep on living after we’re both gone. Take what you can from it. If I’ve learnt anything about mementos with this disease, it’s that one day you will cling onto anything if it has even the slightest potential of jogging your brain.”

She leans forward and takes Bucky’s face into her hands, her no-nonsense expression the perfect carbon copy of what it used to be, and Bucky’s suddenly so fiercely glad that she came into their lives, even for the briefest of time.

“You don’t think it’s greedy?” Bucky asks, and she shakes her head.

“If the shield wants to share it with you, let it. You’re the only thing it has left as well.” She’s quiet for a long while, mapping Bucky’s face with her dimmed eyes, thumbs pressed against Bucky’s cheekbones. Bucky wonders if she’s harbouring any resentment for him and his youth.

On the other hand, she likely knows that for him it’s not a blessing, but a curse.

“I lived a life after Steve and you were gone, James,” Peggy says finally, but her voice is quiet, the old shadow of tragedy written all over her face. “Maybe it’s time for you to start living yours.”

*

When he goes home that night, Nick Fury is shot in his living room, and Bucky meets a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

August 9th, 1945 was the date of the second atomic bombing of WW2, in Nagasaki, Japan. Hiroshima was bombed three days earlier, on August 6th.
Chapter 3

Chapter by esael, rohkeutta

Chapter Notes

The stunning art in this chapter is by esael!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The shield’s alarmed twittering is still all over his hands when Natasha turns up in the observation room, slightly out of breath, and says, “Tell me about the shooter.”

Her eyes are glued to Fury’s prone form on the operating table on the other side of the glass. Bucky doesn’t know what modern medicine is like these days, but he hasn’t seen a single spell drawn out to help Fury. Perhaps it’s reserved for battlefield use only; the doctors in hospitals back home sure didn’t seem to want to use magic to heal Steve’s ailments, either, but Bucky saw more than one wound closed in the field by a mage’s hands in Afghanistan. In the old world, he might’ve been the one doing it.

There are rats in the basement, Fury had said, and that had been easy enough for Bucky to understand; something rotten in SHIELD. But as he laid on the floor in a puddle of blood, Fury had rasped out, These are the times that try men’s souls, and that’s-- that’s what he needs Natasha for.

“He was faster than even me,” Bucky says. “Built like a fucking tank, wore a black mask.” He rubs his hands together in an almost nervous gesture, trying to get the trembles of magic out of them. “He caught the shield, Nat.”

That gets Natasha’s attention. “What?”

“Yeah.” Bucky rubs his hands harder, because he’s suddenly fucking terrified, unnerved and anxious about it. The shield had chosen Steve and Steve only, and nobody else was ever supposed to be able to catch it, not even Bucky; the shield only accepted him later, maybe thanks to Steve’s devotion - and whatever Zola injected him with in Kreischberg.

So the fact that there’s someone out there, someone who’s almost as good a sniper as Bucky is and has charms to catch the shield is--

It shouldn’t be possible, that’s the thing. Nobody knows what Howard Stark put in the spells he made to enhance the connection between Steve and the shield, because some of them were made to work with the serum Steve had - and nobody knows what was in that, because Abraham Erskine is long dead and cremated to keep anybody from raising his body from the grave. So either someone has gotten their hands on Howard’s shield spells, or managed to recreate the serum to perfection, and Bucky doesn’t know which terrifies him more.

The door swishes quietly, and then Maria Hill is standing next to Natasha, badly-concealed shock all over her face. Bucky hasn’t seen her in two years.

“Ballistics?” Natasha asks.

“Three slugs, no rifling,” Maria says. “Untraceable, but charmed.”

“Big game,” Natasha murmurs, her mouth pursed in thought and distaste. “Whoever it was came prepared for catching a grizzly.”

“Yeah,” Maria sighs. “I sent the charms data to Stark to see if he can track it, but he’s a little… preoccupied at the moment. Trouble in Malibu.”

Something has been itching under Bucky’s skin, hesitant and curious, since he looked the mysterious shooter in the eye on the roof, and when he slides his right hand under his shirt and presses on his sternum, it feels warmer and reacts to touch, lighting up.
He draws a shaky, surprised breath, and Natasha shoots a curious glance at him but doesn’t comment on it, her attention shifting back to the operation room. Bucky pushes his left hand under his shirt, too, like he’s hugging himself because he has to know.

He touches his right flank, slotting his prosthetic fingers in the dips between his ribs. It’s not the same as his original hand, but it’s charmed and it’s his, and he has to try, so he presses just slightly, and--

Everything goes suddenly very, very cold, and very, very still.

*Jesus Christ,* Bucky thinks, dazed. *It’s back. It’s back.*

The magic feels strange, not fully like Bucky remembers it, but it’s there and reacting to his artificial limb just as well as it did to his real one. Both of his hands are shaking as he pulls them out and looks down at them.

He opens his mouth to say *Natasha,* but at that same moment Fury’s condition sharply deteriorates, and the operation room becomes a blur of action.

Fury flatlines on the table not fifteen seconds later, and Bucky’s first, panicked thought is *I did that.* His hands are trembling almost violently now, and the prosthetic still feels a breath of the dark and the cold and the damp he touched for merely two seconds. No, he couldn’t have done that, body magic needs conscious willpower to work, but it sends him reeling, anyway.

It’s back. Both of them are, the warm, comforting pool on his sternum, and the one he’s been terrified of his whole life. He doesn’t know what kickstarted it, but it has to have something to do with Fury’s assassin, and ain’t that worth some panic.

So Bucky does the only logical thing he can: he hides it, takes it and folds it and tucks it away just like his grandma once taught him.

*There will always come a time when you will need it to stay out of sight,* his mother’s mother had said, her old, wrinkled hands cupping Bucky’s face, the warmth in her eyes like a kiss. Bucky had been her favorite: the first grandchild, the only one with two oceans in him instead of just one.

*There will always come a time,* she had said, and because she was Bucky’s grandma and seemed to know everything, she’d been right.

When he’s done, he wipes his hands on the back of his jeans, hoping to get rid of the last traces of magic and trying to hide how badly shaken he is, both by Fury’s death and his own discovery. He touches Natasha’s tightly clenched hand instead, and she lets him, even sways just slightly closer so that her shoulder touches his arm; a small, vulnerable movement she allows them both to have.

“Why was Fury in your apartment?” Natasha asks when Fury’s been taken away and they’re standing in the hospital corridor trying to pretend like she didn’t just have to say goodbye to a person she was very close to. Maria is already gone, and the agents that accompanied them to the hospital are slowly filing out too.

Bucky glances around, checking that there’s nobody listening, and says in a low voice, “Can’t talk here. I gotta go, I’ll meet you in Rosslyn in a few hours.”

Natasha cocks her head, attention sharpening. “Backup?”

“No need,” Bucky says. “I just gotta get my suit. Heard someone saw a rat in the basement and I don’t want the suit to be chewed up.”

His suit is in the B5 floor locker room in the Triskelion. He doubts that there is actual fishy business going on in the Triskelion proper, but it doesn’t hurt to go snooping.

Natasha’s eyebrow twitches, and then she nods. “Sitrep at 6 a.m. sharp.”

“Will do,” Bucky says, squeezes her shoulder, and goes.

*The Triskelion is quiet in the hush of the small hours: the lobby is empty save for the night guards who glance at the big, circular shield bag on Bucky’s back and then promptly look the other way, letting him bypass the scanners. They probably know better than to ask questions, or maybe the shield is broadcasting something unwelcoming - Bucky can feel its uneasiness, not yet completely faded.*
Maybe the word about Fury’s death hasn’t gotten here yet despite the flock of agents in Bucky’s apartment and in the hospital; time seems unreal, warped around the last few hours.

The glass-walled elevator down to the basement feels somehow eerie despite the A.I. talking to him - or maybe because of it. Bucky rides it to the training and storage floors, constantly catching himself expecting the lights to flicker. He’s seen way too many horror films.

There are two women training in one of the glass-walled rooms as Bucky passes, but they don’t pay him any attention, too focused on the hand-to-hand they’re practising. They’ve clearly been at it for a while, their faces sweaty and pinched, and Bucky sympathizes with them: he’s not a stranger to training in the middle of the night, just to have something to do other than wandering around his apartment.

Once suited up, he takes the stairs: it’s easier to sneak his way to the lower floors without the elevator’s AI monitoring him, and he’s not really sure what he’s looking for, anyway. He passes the B6 floor entirely since it’s just more training rooms, but B7 is already more promising: as far as he knows, it’s one of the research floors, and a likely place to start. The door of the stairwell is locked when he first tests it, but then there’s a spark in his palm, almost like static energy, and the electric lock hisses and pushes the door open. He stares into the unlit corridor, blinking in surprise, then down at his prosthetic, still gripping the door handle.

Huh. Maybe Fury had Bucky’s bioscan access rights updated without telling him, since Bucky remembers being given the list of floors and rooms he had access to, and instructed to keep to it to avoid problems.

The floor is quiet: the motion sensor lights are off and aside from a few glowing wall fixtures, no overhead lights blink awake. The corridor remains dim, but while the shield is wary on his arm, it doesn’t seem worried or anxious. It’s the best indicator of things going to shit that Bucky’s ever met, and right now it feels almost… excited? He stops, frowning, and tries to parse the complicated tone the shield is singing to him.

Wariness, yes. Itch for action, yes. The uneasiness lingers, but overpowering it is definitely excitement, and Bucky almost laughs when he realizes what it is, fondness surging through him.

The shield thinks they’re going on an adventure.

_That’s where his memory lives,_ Peggy said, and suddenly instead of laughter there’s a lump of grief in Bucky’s throat.

Bucky swallows it down and pats the shield like it’s a well-behaved guardian dog, and creeps down the corridor. Most of the doors are unmarked but for the room number and they’re shut well and tight, probably protected with technology as well as spells to keep the research safe. But when he happens upon a door that says *Archives, 1945-1955,* he tries the handle, and the door clicks open easily.

Either there’s absolutely nothing worthy of protecting down here, or someone is being very, very sloppy. Bucky’s not sure how post-war files from over 60 years ago can help him, but it never hurts to take a look; after all, if the researchers have nine-to-five work hours, he has the whole night to snoop. He steps cautiously inside, but it’s just as empty and quiet as the rest of the floor seems to be, lit by emergency exit signs and the pale light streaming in from the corridor. He lets the door close with a soft _snick_ and sets the shield down where he can reach it easily. His night vision got enhanced with Zola’s serum, and there’s just enough light coming through the small window in the door for him to see perfectly.

The cabinets are bursting with files, some of them so full that there’s loose paper piled up at the bottom of the drawers. Bucky selects one in random, flips it open and skims through it. It’s from 1948, a standard mission report, much like the ones SSR did, and there’s nothing remarkable in it. Most of the files Bucky goes through are very much the same, and he’s about to abandon the archive room to continue, when the shield suddenly perks up.

Just as Bucky looks up, the motion sensor lights outside the room turn on, and the sound of rapid footsteps echo down the hall, only slightly muffled by the closed door. Bucky ducks into a shadowy gap between two file cabinets, glad that the shield is not on his back. The clang would’ve probably awakened the dead.

“What do you mean, you lost it?” A man’s angry voice carries up along with the footfall, and the
shield’s magic shivers with something Bucky doesn’t recognize. “How is that even possible?”

“It escaped, sir,” another voice says. Bucky counts seven pairs of feet as they approach in hurry. “Never got back to the pickup point. The tracker spell is damaged, but we’ve got people looking for it.”

“Fuck,” the first voice swears, and Bucky watches through the small window as six STRIKE-suited agents and an older man in a lab coat rush past the archive room. “Why didn’t you alert me earlier?”

“The pickup wasn’t until 1:15 a.m., sir,” the second voice replies, sounding nervous. “We tried to locate it after that, but so far no success. It’s hidden well.”

Bucky frowns as he creeps closer to the door, picking the shield up. What the hell is it, and why does it sound like they are talking about a person? Missed pickup point, tracker spell; someone with no autonomy, it seems.

He opens the door quietly and slips out. He’s got two options: keep snooping, or follow the crowd and possibly find out more about it, and why they are in such a hurry at this hour of the night.

Pickup wasn’t until 1:15 a.m., Bucky thinks, and suddenly vividly remembers glancing at his watch when he found Fury in his living room, the glowing numbers reading 11:35 p.m.

He makes the decision in a split second, turning to follow the STRIKE team. The motion sensor lights blink off ahead of him as he gets closer, almost like they don’t recognize him as a trigger, and that’s either comforting or alarming - he has the advantage of the darkness, but he can’t help but question if he’s alone in it, after all. There’s something sinister going on, and he doesn’t like it a bit.

There’s still a light on in front of the elevator, and the scientist with his STRIKE team are filing in through the open doors, but that light turns off as well when Bucky reaches it. Maybe the shield has something to do with it: its magic is older than anything Bucky’s ever encountered, and it manifests in ways he knows he hasn’t seen all of.

“Hold the doors,” he calls out loud, and pushes his hand holding the shield between the closing doors.

The agents and the scientist all jump visibly in surprise - Bucky can be stealthy as hell when he wants, and the lights going out definitely helped with that - and the atmosphere in the elevator is suddenly charged with nerves. When Bucky steps into the elevator, he’s met with astonished and slightly panicked faces, and one of the agents even steps a little backwards, staring at the shield. Bucky thinks that if the shield had teeth, it certainly would be baring them right now.

“Captain,” the STRIKE team leader says, his voice just barely even. Bucky can’t remember his name, but recognizes the faces of the agents: it’s STRIKE Team Beta, as opposed to the one Bucky and Nat usually join on missions. “What are you doing here?”

“Night stroll,” Bucky says and grins with teeth. The shield is thrumming on his arm, and he knows even without its excitement that this elevator trip is going to turn into violence: the agents are looking less panicked and more shifty, some of them moving behind him in a way they probably think is subtle. He raises his voice a little to catch the A.I.’s attention. “B1, please.”

“Medical floor confirmed,” the A.I. says drolly. Bucky has no desire to actually go to B1 where the infirmary is located, but, well. If this goes where he thinks it will, somebody is gonna need the medical anyway.

The elevator doors close, and it starts moving up.

“So,” Bucky says, because he’s always been a fucking dumbass, and because he’s realizing that just like the shield, he’s itching for a fight. There’s so much pent-up adrenaline and energy coursing through him thanks to everything that’s happened in the few short hours since he got home, and the prospect of letting it out is tantalizing. He cocks his head and looks past the agents at the scientist who’s standing at the back of the elevator. “This thing you lost - it doesn’t happen to have anything to do with Director Fury being dead?”

The scientist stares at him with an unreadable expression, glances down at the shield and then at the STRIKE leader, and says slowly, deliberately, “Kill him.”
The breakout of the fight feels fucking amazing. It’s been a week since Malta, Bucky’s ready to fuck something up, and the shield is elated as he bashes the closest agent in the face with it.

There’s six agents, all highly trained, but Bucky’s learnt to fight many times in his life, always in a different way: in alleyways to save Steve’s nose from yet another bump, at night in a jungle, in a trench in Europe; with guns, with magic. It was Peggy who taught him and Steve to fight like a woman, dirty and smart and in close quarters, and it’s her tactics that Bucky employs now.

The agents are good and they do their best: jamming the elevator with the stop button, pulling out charmed stun batons and magnetic cuffs. They’re visibly bracing themselves against the shield’s ancient and unsettling magic, the look in their eyes focused but strained. But even though they do manage to make Bucky drop the shield, and to mag-lock his right hand to the elevator wall, the prosthetic is something their equipment wasn’t prepared for. Tony’s spells are in full force, unfazed by the charmed cuffs, blocking stun baton swings easily, and as Bucky uses the wall for leverage to kick off an agent with both legs, he puts that hand on his flank and pulls.

Magic surges up from him, unfolding like an explosion, and when he yanks his hand back, there’s a sizzling ball of black energy on his palm, smelling of graveyards and earthen-floor basements. It’s new: Bucky’s never been able to make the dark body magic manifest in a physical way.

The agents scramble back in surprise, and the scientist yells, “Stop him, you idiots, it’s just body magic!”

The cuff that’s holding Bucky’s right hand to the wall suddenly clicks open as if the electric current in it abruptly died, and Bucky drops his arm, pulling out a knife as he goes. He dispatches the closest agent easily, just two of them left now, when the scientist abruptly seizes Bucky’s left elbow and yanks it, sending the concentrated magic flying off Bucky’s metal palm.

The black ball of light hits the wall with an explosive force, eating its way across the surface and swallowing one of the two remaining agents whole. The scientist stumbles away, taken aback by what he caused. Bucky blocks another attack with his left arm and wrenches the last agent forward so that he hits the wall with a sickening crunch; the prosthetic is ecstatic to get to show its strength, almost vibrating with magic and its thirst for violence.

He stomps on the edge of the shield to kick it up and back into his hand, turning towards the scientist. Bucky feels like a live wire, tight and electric, a strange thrill under his skin in place of the terror the dark spot used to wake in him, before. The shield is steaming with energy in his hands, its chord striking in him like a craving for blood, and that’s when the screaming starts.

Bucky doesn’t understand it at first. It’s such a high, unnatural sound to come out of a man that size and age - but while the scientist is flattening himself against the glass wall, his mouth open in terror, the sound isn’t coming from him.

A gust of wind breezes through Bucky’s hair, smelling of cold, damp earth and rot.

Bucky blinks at the lab coat in confusion, but then he catches his reflection in the glass, and nearly yells himself.

There is a hole in the wall behind him where his magic hit: a man-sized, door-shaped black hole. That’s where the breeze is coming from, bringing the smell of mold and unforgiven things with it.

The worst, though, is the shield.

Where the white star usually sits is a mouth, full of an unsettling number of unnaturally sharp vibranium teeth. They snap hungrily together as Bucky looks down at it, and the sound the shield makes is something he wishes he’ll never have to hear again.
“Jesus Christ,” the scientist screams over the screeching of the shield, and the mouth snaps harder, like a dog fighting against its leash. “Jesus Christ!”

Bucky swallows, his heart beating madly in alarm, and then steels himself, stepping a little closer so that the man is just barely out of the teeth’s reach. “What’s going on?” he asks, feeling almost dazed, the cacophony making his ears ring. “What did you lose?”

“No! No!” The scientist scrapes against the glass like he’s trying to burrow out through it, and then the teeth are reaching out of the shield, sinking into the man’s chest.

There’s no blood bursting out like Bucky expected. He tries to yank the shield off, but he can’t move it: the mouth bites harder, the scientist going limp and quiet and wide-eyed, and suddenly there’s an audible crunch as something inside the scientist snaps in half, and Bucky’s thrown back a few steps, stumbling. There’s a sharp tang of ozone in the air; the unmistakable reek of blood magic, and the scientist sags down onto the floor like a sack of flour.

The teeth are glittery with darkness, but the screaming has stopped. Now that his magic is back, Bucky’s more in tune with the shield than he’s been since he briefly carried it in 1945, and it’s a little unnerving to feel how the shield is thrumming with satisfaction, alarmingly smug. It resonates with the magic in Bucky’s body, like they’re congratulating each other for a job well done. Whatever the teeth severed in the scientist, it must have been bad.

He leans down and pulls the scientist’s ID off his coat. His name is Arthur Baranski, and his home base is marked down as the Maryland branch of SHIELD, which sounds odd. Bucky doesn’t remember a Baltimore office, and it seems unlikely that there would be a separate branch when the Triskelion is a few hours’ drive away at maximum. He’s also pretty sure SHIELD wouldn’t allow blood magicians in, because it’s still a highly illegal practice.

He pockets the ID just in case, and startles when he hears muffled footsteps thundering towards the elevator: Baranski’s backup, or regular SHIELD personnel alerted by the screaming, maybe. He has no desire to know who’s behind the elevator doors just in case it’s more of Baranski’s pet agents, but there’s no other way out.

A breeze sighs through the elevator, and Bucky freezes.

There is… another way.

He turns slowly to look at the door to darkness. The smell is unpleasant but not vile, and the pool of magic on his flank pulses, like it’s answering the hole’s call.
“Jesus,” he mutters, straightens his spine and pulls his shoulders back, squaring his jaw. He walks cautiously closer, amazed by the density of the darkness, how solid it looks. “Nat is gonna kill me.”

He huffs a shaky breath, grits his teeth, and steps in.

* 

He comes to in a forest.

He's lying in the undergrowth, beneath the cover of ferns and grasses, breathless and dizzy. The world is spinning, and when he tries to sit up, nausea hits him like a fist, and he leans to the side and vomits violently. Almost nothing comes up but it burns in his throat, making his eyes water.

It takes a while before everything stops tilting and he manages to take stock of the situation. Magic in him has calmed down to a faint, steady thrum, and he folds it carefully away again, his whole body trembling with the effort. It’s already light out, which is disconcerting: the dawn was still a few hours away when he left the locker room in his uniform, and he’s fairly sure he didn’t spend three hours sneaking around the basement and fighting in the elevator.

He finds his phone a few feet away, with a mysteriously full battery, and checks the time. 6:13 a.m., full five hours since Fury’s death, and four since he last checked the time as he changed his clothes.

The shield is gone.

He panics a little, crawling around the underbush on all fours, trying to find it. It's the only thing he has left of Steve; the only weapon that he has an upper hand with, and if he's lost it by being a dumb fuck and stepping into a literal black hole, he'll fucking punch himself.

He doesn't find it, and he grits his teeth, gets carefully up to check his surroundings.

He's in a wide, forested downward-sloping gorge, near a small stream and a narrow path. It looks oddly familiar, and under the birdsong he can hear the hum of traffic; the road has to be nearby.

Suddenly his phone lights up with a message.

★ in Rsln? Sitrep.

Nat. Shield in Rosslyn, and how the fuck did it end up somewhere else?

He fucking hopes it doesn’t still have teeth.

FUBAR, he texts back, and opens the map application to check where the hell he has ended up.

Dumbarton Oaks. No wonder it looked familiar; he went for a run here on one of the first mornings back when he couldn't sleep.

He worms out of the uniform. It’s too conspicuous, especially since there’s something rotten going on in SHIELD, and he doesn’t want to pull any more attention to himself than necessary. Getting out of the suit takes longer than usually, his body aching and stiff, but finally he manages to peel it off so that he’s wearing just his underlayer, the black compression tights and dark navy shirt. He contemplates folding the suit and tucking it under his arm for the trip, but then remembers the listening devices in his apartment and decides against it. He can’t take the risk of the suit having a tracking device or spell on it as long as he doesn’t know what’s going on.

He stashes the suit in a hollow under the roots of a nearby tree, and puts the shield harness back on. ETA 20min, he sends to Nat and starts a lopsided jog downhill. His knees are hurting like hell, and he has to squeeze his hands into fists to stop them from shaking. His shoulder feels dislocated, and there’s a twinge in his ankle; magic taking its toll. Once he sits down, it’s gonna hit him hard.

Nat owns a studio apartment near the Francis Scott Key Bridge: just a kitchenette, a tiny bathroom, and two single beds crammed in the only room. She had taken Bucky there after they got back from Tallahassee, bruised and sore. Tallahassee had been a spectacular shitshow thanks to poor leadership from the commander of the STRIKE team Alpha, and when Nat had unlocked the door, she’d said, “I’m showing you this in case something goes to shit the next time and we need a place to rendezvous and lie low.”
Bucky’s glad for it now, since his apartment is probably still swarming with SHIELD’s crime scene investigators. He knocks, and after a beat the door cracks open; Bucky limps in with his hands first to show their emptiness and let Nat know it’s him.

It’s dim in the apartment, the curtains drawn against the morning light, and Bucky’s grateful for the shadows. His pulse is pounding against his temples, making the edges of his vision zig-zag. The shield is leaning against one of the beds, thankfully looking normal.

“James.” Natasha’s voice comes behind him, and the door closes with a click. “What the hell is going on?”

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Bucky quotes without turning around.

There’s a short, stunned silence. “Say that again,” Natasha says then, and there’s something urgent in her tone.

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Bucky repeats. “That’s what Fury said to me, after telling me that there are rats in his basement.”


“What does?” Bucky asks, and wobbles a few, unsteady steps forward, grasping the bathroom door handle for balance and swearing when the motion jars his shoulder.

“What happened to you?” Natasha asks instead of an explanation as she breezes past him, tucking her gun back into her hip holster and picking up her tablet. “Where’s your suit?”

“I got cornered at SHIELD,” Bucky mumbles, leaning heavily against the bathroom door. “By a group of agents and an old guy in a lab coat. There’s something weird going on.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” Nat says, already tapping away, and Bucky feels sick all over again, dizzy and nauseated. His knees feel like they’re on fire after enduring the jog back to Rosslyn, and he wishes he could just lie down and sleep for a week. “Hill called a couple of hours ago to let me know that she’s got six bodies in the elevator in B4, three dead, three unconscious. Smell of mold and magic everywhere.” She glances at him. “You look like shit. What did you do?”

“I don’t know, Nat,” he says, raking his prosthetic through his hair. “I don’t know. It’s-- my magic is back.”

“What,” Natasha says sharply, turning around. She’s one of the very few people who know that Bucky used to have magic, once upon a time. “Since when?”

“I realized at the hospital,” Bucky says. His head is hurting like someone took a sledgehammer to his skull, but he unfolds his magic, just a little, to let Nat feel it. “I think Fury’s killer has something to do with it.”

Natasha is quiet for a long time, holding the tablet but not making a move to continue working. “How did you get out of the Triskelion? And why is the shield here?”

“I’m not sure,” Bucky says, tries to swallow around his parched throat. “I-- I made a way.”

“Explain.”

“There was a hole behind me,” Bucky says. “Into darkness. And I stepped into it, and woke up in fucking Dumbarton Oaks without the shield. I don’t know how I made it. It’s never happened before.”

He tries to say, *the shield, Nat. The shield had teeth*, but the words stick in his throat. He doesn’t understand why the teeth appeared and the screaming started only when he was face to face with the scientist - the shield clearly knows something he doesn’t, and it makes him uneasy.

“Shit,” Natasha murmurs, putting the tablet down. She steers Bucky to sit down on the edge of the bed and goes to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. “One more thing we need to figure out, and we have a ghost to catch.”
Bucky takes the bottle gratefully and chugs half in one go. Everything is aching: magic has never drained him like this, and his body is scrambling to keep up. “A ghost?” he says, wiping his mouth. “He better get in the line, ’cause I got plenty of them.”

Natasha quirks a smile. “You drama queen.”

There’s the flash of Peggy in her again, calling him out on his shit, and something lurches in Bucky’s chest as he remembers the way Peggy’s magic held out a hand to him, only to find nothing in return. There would be something for her to reach, now.

“What’s the deal with the Paine quote?” Bucky asks as he shuffles slowly, painfully to horizontal position and closes his eyes. It feels fucking heavenly to lie down, his body sinking into the mattress with a sigh.

“You recognize it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says. “The Crisis. I read it in basic, the guy in my upper bunk was an American Revolution scholar.”

“Your memory is ridiculous,” Nat says, but her tone is fond. “Do you know the whole quote?”

“‘The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country’, et cetera,” Bucky quotes obediently.

“Exactly,” Natasha says. “A while back, Fury got wind of unauthorized operations run from within SHIELD, and called Hill and me in to help investigate it. We found a trail of missions, all black ops, deploying an asset with the code name Winter Soldier, no identity given. From what we’ve gathered, this has been going on for several years - decades, even - so our best guess is that the code name is something that gets passed down.”

“Winter Soldier,” Bucky murmurs. There’s something off in the way the name sits in his mouth, but he doesn’t have the energy to focus on it. “He killed Fury?”

“Seems so.” Natasha’s fingers make a dull tap-tap-tap as she types. “We found a possible location lead within the data caught on the Detroit mission. If Fury sent that code phrase with you, he must have confirmed it. I can track it, but it takes a while.”

“The people who attacked me in SHIELD,” Bucky says. “I heard them talking about something that’s escaped. They said it, but it sounded like an agent.”

“Huh.” Natasha types a little more. “If they are connected to this like it seems, the Winter Soldier might be a loose cannon. We need to be careful.”

“The lab coat was a blood mage,” Bucky says, wrinkling his nose as he remembers the stink. “Arthur Baranski, Maryland branch. The shield did something - I think it might’ve severed a blood bind.”

“A blood mage?” Natasha sounds incredulous. “I highly doubt that Fury would’ve allowed any of those into SHIELD.”


People have always been ready to do terrible things in the name of their leader, but there’s unfailingly some bastard who’s willing to make them go just that one step further, to do a blood bind, force them to work harder and be crueler.

“Jesus,” Nat says. “I gotta tell Hill, have her start digging. Maryland branch you said? That’s interesting.”

“There’s no Maryland branch, is there?”

“No,” Nat confirms. “That’s why I need to track the data.”

“Give me three hours,” Bucky says. “I don’t think I can walk now that I’m lying down. Everything hurts like hell.”
"You have two and half, then we need to move," Natasha replies, coming to sit down on the edge of the bed. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," Bucky sighs. "It’s never been like this before, my body is killing me."

"When you came to D.C.," Nat starts, brushing her hand through his hair. Her skin is dry and cool and feels like balm on Bucky’s heated forehead. "You said you were living on borrowed time."

"Yeah," Bucky mumbles.

"Because of Steve?"

"Steve kept me in balance," Bucky says tiredly. "After he was gone, I was gonna end up dead sooner or later. The Valkyrie was just an excuse to make it quicker and less painful. Body magic always needs to be balanced or it will eat you up, and after Zola--"

After Zola his balance had shifted, and only Steve, the golden, forgiving sun, had kept him levelled. The serum had amplified everything Steve was, and maybe that was why it could counter the growing darkness under Bucky’s skin.

"You were unbalanced," Natasha fills in. "And now that's the case again."

Bucky nods. "I can’t say for sure yet, but likely. If he were--"

If Steve were here, Bucky would never even have to think about it. But Steve isn’t; Steve’s long gone, and the only thing Bucky can do now is accept the inevitable and settle in for the long, painful slide as his body eventually breaks down under the strain.

Natasha is quiet for a long while, and Bucky’s just started to slip towards sleep when she says, "I’m a fire mage."

Bucky opens his eyes, squinting at her in surprise and confusion. "Huh?"

"I’m a fire mage," Natasha repeats, looking him in the eye. "As far as I know, I’ve been the only agent with body magic in SHIELD for years." She hesitates a little. "When I met you, there was something in you that was calling out to me. The echo of your magic, maybe - that was why I wanted to become your friend."

Bucky opens his mouth, not really sure what to say, but Nat puts her hand up to signal him to be quiet. "It was selfish, really," she says. "I had something that you knew intimately, and I thought that connected us, that it was a good basis for a friendship. That’s why I pushed you to join SHIELD; I got greedy."

Bucky lies there in silence when she stops talking, trying to wrap his head around it. He had wondered why Natasha had singled him out and been so ready to drop the disguises she wore, but he’d never even stopped to consider that she might’ve had anything like that behind her reasoning. But it makes sense - Bucky knows what a rare breed body mages are nowadays, the practise fallen out of use, and how tightly it could knit people together back before the war.

He doesn’t blame her at all. Hell, he’s thankful for it; she’s the only one who’s been consistently trying to get to know him since he got defrosted, and still the only friend he’s actually made.

"It’s alright," he murmurs finally. "It’s been nice to have a friend. Thanks for telling me."

Natasha takes his hand and squeezes it. "I know it won’t be the same," she starts, tentatively, "but maybe after we solve this mess, we could see if I’m able to balance you out? Or find you someone who does - Barton does that for me, even without body magic of his own."

Bucky squeezes back. "Yeah," he says, even though deep down he knows that nothing and nobody will ever be able to replace what Steve used to be for him. "We can try."

* 

He dreams of Steve.

He dreams of kneeling at the feet of that Steve who survived the fall in his old fantasy; the Steve who got to live a long and happy life without Bucky. Steve’s hair is white, his face lined and
wrinkled like Peggy’s, but there’s a content light in his eyes, and his hands still carry the strength of his youth, warm and calloused.

In the dream, Bucky puts his head in Steve’s lap. Both of his hands are muscle and bone, useless, cold and coarse and trembling on his thighs. He’s wearing his dress uniform, and he knows that if he opened his eyes and looked up, they would be sitting in the bombed-out pub in London where Bucky had taken his grief, given it a name, and folded it away to wait for a time he could address it properly.

That grief had stayed folded and tucked away for nearly seventy years.

You have kind eyes, Steve-not-Steve says in the hush of the night. You remind me of what I haven’t thought of in years. The first boy I ever kissed. The night my mother died. The friend I lost to a war.

My eyes haven’t been kind since they first saw a man die, Bucky tells him, and Steve puts his hand on Bucky’s head, strokes through his sweat-stained hair.

Kindness isn’t something you lose, Steve says. He’s warm and smells the same, and Bucky wants it to be real so badly; he wants to have even the slightest echo of Steve he ever can.

I should’ve never left you behind, Bucky says, just like he thought two years ago when the fantasy first came to him, and suddenly he’s armless again, barefoot and wearing the SSR shirt he woke up in. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, I should’ve jumped after you.

Look at me, Steve says, and when Bucky reluctantly does, he’s young and golden, wearing uniform trousers and an undershirt, his dog tags tucked underneath. His arms are solid and powerful, helping Bucky up easily, and Bucky’s heart twists so sharply and painfully in his chest that he thinks it might never unclench.

Steve folds him into his arms, and Bucky tucks his head under Steve’s chin, breathes in the smell of cologne and sweat, listens to the steady thump-thump of Steve’s heart. Steve kisses the crown of his head, holding him close like it’s the last time he will get the chance.

I don’t want to live without you, Bucky says in the dream, hurting again and again, and Steve brushes his hand through Bucky’s hair, presses his lips on his forehead, on his cheek, on his lips.

Not for long, now, sweetheart, says Steve. It’s time for you to stand up one last time and show the world the weight you can carry.

Not for long, says Death with Steve’s mouth, kissing the wet corner of Bucky’s eye, embracing him like a long-lost lover. When that is done, I will come for you.

*

When Bucky wakes up, a damp patch on the pillowcase under his cheek, Natasha looks away and doesn’t say a word.

Chapter End Notes

This Saturday, we’re going ghost-catching.
They drive towards the ocean.

They’ve been quiet since Bucky put on the off-brand hoodie and sweatpants Natasha had given him, forced down a smoothie, and grabbed the shield. Contrary to what she’d said, Nat had let him sleep for three full hours, and Bucky’s grateful for it, as well as for the two-hour drive to her coordinates.

He still feels like shit, and every pothole and bump on the road sends a fresh round of ache through his body, but at least he has some of his energy back, and walking to the car didn’t feel as painful. To recover properly he would need to rest for a whole day, likely. Maybe two, with how much he used magic in the Triskelion.

They end up on the cape between the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay, driving through farmland and patches of forest, passing small towns and Navy outposts as they go. The road narrows down from four lanes to two, and then Nat takes a turn after a tractor retailer and takes them onto a single-lane paved road that turns into a dirt track. Bucky grits his teeth as they bump down it, grateful that Natasha at least somehow found them a Jeep instead of a sedan.

She turns the car abruptly into what seems like a leafy bush but turns out to be a small side track, and steps hard on the brake. Bucky grunts as he’s yanked against the seatbelt.

“Let’s leave the car here,” Nat says. “The coordinates point to a couple hundred yards up ahead.”

The forest is full of birdsong as they creep up the small hill. Bucky’s feeling a lot better after the energy bar he had on the road, but his knees are still hurting, and he longs to go home and have another nap, maybe eat a full meal as soon as his stomach can handle it.

At the end of the road in a small clearing stands a warehouse. It’s in a sorry state, rust blooming on the metal roof, and the narrow, high-set windows so dirty that they’re opaque. But the yard is paved and there’s cameras and wires of a security system visible, so someone is clearly taking care of it, or at least interested in protecting it against break-ins.

Natasha pulls out a pair of small binoculars from her utility belt and examines the warehouse while Bucky moves the shield from his back to his arm and taps into its magic just a little, to see if it’s alarmed. It’s quiet on his arm like it’s nervous, magic thrumming like a hummingbird’s wings, and that makes Bucky uneasy as well.

“The cameras have been disabled,” Nat says in a low voice. “So’s the alarm system; the wires have been cut. Looks like someone got here before us.”

They round the building silently. There’s a side door that looks like a good point of entry, so they creep to it, finding it locked, but Natasha has a keypad cracker that’s got Tony’s spells written all over it, and the lock clicks open in barely five seconds.

The warehouse is eerily silent: by its location and exterior, Bucky was prepared for dingy, shadowy rooms, and that’s exactly what they get. It’s the perfect horror movie set-up, but neither of them is fazed by a little creepiness, and when they search the building, there’s nobody in.

There are a couple of rooms on the northern side of the warehouse that look like they’re used as an infirmary and offices, and a big space on the southern side, taking up almost half of the building. That’s where all the interesting stuff is: workstations and desktop computers and what looks like a row of file cabinets. On the desks, there are half-full coffee cups and pens scattered haphazardly, like their users left in a hurry.
But there’s also a big, chamber-like construction sitting in the middle of the room, wires and tubes going in from all sides. The door has a window but it’s broken, like someone smashed a fist through it, and the chamber is empty and lifeless, not plugged in. Bucky flinches back at the sight of it anyway, and Natasha shoots him an alarmed look. The pod eerily resembles the iron maidens Bucky saw in history textbooks when he was a kid, but he knows the shape and the looming sense of dread from somewhere a lot closer.

There was a chamber like that in the corner of Zola’s laboratory in Kreischberg: dim and unpowered, the door always open, and Bucky remembers staring into its dark mouth when he was left strapped to the table, exhausted and hallucinating, his head lolling to the side. He’d never seen the chamber operational or understood what it really was, but he’d watched it in the dusk of the laboratory and known that whatever it was, it was meant for him if he survived all of Zola’s tests.

Steve had saved him before that, but seeing the chamber again makes his skin crawl.

“What the hell is that?” he asks, his voice sounding a little strangled. He’s got no desire to get any closer.

Natasha rounds the pod carefully, examining it. “A cryogenic chamber,” she says. Her expression is pinched. “I saw one of these when I was a child, in Stalingrad. It’s meant for suspended animation.” She looks up and meets Bucky’s eye, and the look on her face is unreadable. “I think we’re looking at the explanation to the Winter Soldier’s long timeline.”

“Jesus,” Bucky murmurs, feeling sick. “He could’ve been there for years?”

“Yes,” Natasha says. “Just like you in the ice, frozen up and thawed.” She pulls at the handlebar, and the heavily enforced door opens slowly. Inside, the chamber has been torn apart: the restraints have been ripped out, tubes cut, and there are bullet holes in the padding. It’s exactly like someone wanted to ensure that it would never work again.

Suddenly Natasha inhales sharply, and when Bucky turns to look, she’s staring at something on the inside of the door. “Fuck,” she says, and her tone is incredulous.

“What is it?” Bucky asks, unwilling to get closer to have a look. In response Nat pushes the door wider open, until it clangs against the side of the chamber. There’s a white symbol painted on the inside, the paintwork worn and peeled. From what Bucky can parse, it’s some kind of--

“...dinosaur, or Loch Ness monster, curled up into a circle.”

“That’s the logo of the Leviathan,” Natasha says. “It was the Soviet Union’s response to SSR. There was-- a man, when I was young, who sometimes trained with us. Tall, broad. Blond hair. They called him The American, but he had a mask, so I never saw his face.”

“Are you saying--”

“I’m saying that if this is the same chamber like the symbol of the Leviathan indicates, the Winter Soldier taught us in the Red Room,” Nat says, her jaw tight. “Twenty years ago.”

“Shit.” Bucky tries the drawers under one of the desks, and when it turns out to be locked, he yanks it with his prosthetic hand, putting more force into it. The lock breaks, the topmost drawer opening, and lo and behold, there’s a manila folder that looks very promising. “We better find out what’s the deal with this.”

“Yeah.” Natasha follows him to the workstations, nudging the mouse of one of the computers, and the screen lights up, washing her in its glow. “These people left in a hurry, this PC isn’t even locked. Let’s see if we can find a name and face for our ghost.”

Bucky puts the shield on his back, turns the desk lamp on and opens the file. It turns out to be a handwritten maintenance log of some sorts, detailing equipment and damage control. The first logs are from 2009, so it’s fairly fresh.

“I found an activity log,” Natasha says, typing away on the other side of the desk. “He was last defrosted on February 3rd and sent off to Johannesburg to participate in a mission. No mentions of cryofreeze between then and now. Looks like he’s been mainly used for strategy and blunt force on black ops.”

Bucky frowns, flipping through the file he’s holding. It’s mostly medical reports, with very few
photos that are mostly extreme closeups of equipment or of half-healed wounds on the Soldier’s torso, but there are also mentions of enhancements and blood tests, commenting on how attempts to recreate a satisfactory copy have failed. It all sounds strange and eerie, reminding him unpleasantly of Kreischberg and Zola, and Bucky flips further, hoping to find a proper photo of the Soldier.

He turns to a page with a full-color photo, and pauses. It’s a half-body shot of a man, his back to the camera, with dirty blond hair that’s curling at the nape of his neck, like he’s missed a haircut or two. It’s the first picture in the whole file that has something more than just a flank or a shoulder, and Bucky angles the desk lamp closer to get a better look.

The photograph was taken in 2011, according to the handwritten date under it. The Winter Soldier is standing in front of a wall, naked from the waist up and his arms spread out to the sides. His physique is incredible: his arms and torso are roped with solid muscle, powerful and imposing against the surprising narrowness of his waist. It’s the kind of body people spend their lives trying to achieve, but there’s something unsettling in its sheer perfection, probably due to the enhancements mentioned in the file. It reminds him a little of Steve, post-serum: the Soldier is stockier, heavier, a real powerhouse of a man, but the triangle of his torso is similar.

*Three days after Somalia,* the note attached to the photo says. *Fractured femur and several back lacerations completely healed, no evident scarring. No disruptions in the blood bind, will proceed with storage.*

“It says here that he had an active blood bind in 2011,” Bucky says out loud. “Baranski’s doing, no doubt.”

Natasha makes an intrigued sound but doesn’t comment. Bucky squints at the photo, and the note is right - the Soldier’s skin is smooth and unmarred, except for a jagged, faded scar on his right shoulder. *Broken soda bottle,* Bucky thinks absently, already moving to turn the page.

Then the thought sinks in, and he halts, frowns, looks up.

There’s something off here, *badly.*

“Nat,” he says slowly. “When did you say his last mission was?”

“February 3rd,” Nat repeats, eyes glued on the monitor, nails clicking rapidly against the keyboard. “Before that he was in cryo for nearly three years. I wonder why they sent him to kill Fury - judging from his missions, he doesn’t seem like the obvious choice for an assassination.”

Bucky’s hand feels cold and clammy as he brushes his hair from his forehead, and his throat is almost painfully dry, dread settling in his stomach. “When did the shield wake up?”

Nat freezes minutely, her hands stalling, and then she’s looking slowly up and meeting Bucky’s eye, her face pale and alarmed in the glow of the screen. They stare at each in total silence.

“February 3rd,” she whispers, just as a bullet ricochets from the shield on Bucky’s back.

Bucky doesn’t stop to think, leaping over the desk and flipping the shield from his back as he lands next to Nat, who’s already pulled her gun out, crouching behind the desk. The corridor is dark, but Bucky can just make out the shadow of someone standing there: the elusive Winter Soldier, no doubt.

There’s another gunshot that Bucky blocks with the shield, and Nat returns the fire, urging Bucky out of their vulnerable position with her hand. He rolls to the side, towards the cover of the cryo chamber, dodging more bullets coming his way. There’s something off in the targeting - Bucky witnessed the Winter Soldier shoot Fury through the wall with almost unnatural precision, but these shots are sloppy, not what he expected. It’s like the Winter Soldier is trying to smoke them out of the warehouse with his bullets, not kill them.

As he gets up, half-hidden behind the chamber, he flings the shield out, pushing his left hand hastily under his hoodie to find the dark spot under his skin, but it doesn’t answer his call. Alarmed, he tries harder, growing frantic, but all he gets is a nervous shifting of the magic, unwilling to surge. Did he spend it completely in the Triskelion, trying too hard all at once?

The shield ricochets from the doorway, bouncing around the walls before returning to Bucky’s hand. When he catches it, the shield’s magic *sings* inside him in a way Bucky has never felt,
bright and awake and ready, and its intensity flushes through him, making his aching knees weak. Natasha fires more shots as she kicks a desk on its side and uses the distraction to scurry across the floor, finding cover behind the chamber like Bucky, but when she straightens, they both realize that the gunfire has stopped. It’s eerily quiet in the warehouse, and the ground under Bucky’s feet is suddenly still, like it’s drawing a deep breath.

Then the Winter Soldier steps out of the shadowy corridor, and the bottom of Bucky’s world drops out.

Because in front of him stands Steve, tall and imposing, dressed in a black uniform that resembles Bucky’s new suit so much that it can’t be a coincidence. He’s so big, a real tank of a man, more muscle around his shoulders and torso than there used to be, and there’s a shadow of stubble on his face.

When he comes closer, his straw-blond hair catches the desk lamp light, and Bucky’s momentarily light-headed, thinking that he’s finally lost it and teleported back in time. But Steve walks differently, his gait purposeful and menacing as he advances, a gun in one gloved hand, his other hand curled into a fist.

“Steve?” Bucky asks, the sound sticking in his throat, because it can’t be true, it can’t be, but the shield is ecstatic on his arm and there are so many puzzle pieces falling together in Bucky’s head. The stretched-out timeline, the ability to catch the shield. The enhancements, that engineered-to-perfection body with a soda bottle scar on the shoulder, just like the one Steve got in a fight when they were teenagers.

February 3rd. The shield’s magic surging up with snapping teeth when confronted with the blood mage that held the Winter Soldier captive.

Steve frowns and halts, jaw tightening, and then he says, “Who the fuck is Steve?”

It's his voice, raspy and unused but familiar; that voice used to murmur comforting words to Bucky when he was plagued by his time in Zola’s lab. Bucky’s known it intimately for so many years that he could recognize it even in his sleep, and that’s what makes it real for him. Reanimated bodies don’t talk. Robots can’t catch the shield. But the Steve standing in front of him can do both, and the shield’s magic is strung tight with excitement and affection.

“Steve,” Bucky repeats, stunned and overwhelmed, as he tries to wrap his head around it. Absurdly, his brain keeps circling through that old fantasy of Steve-not-Steve; Steve the European; Steve who lived. Had someone found Steve after all, not a benevolent farmer but maybe an enemy, taking him and shaping him and putting him into storage, while Bucky and the shield slept in the ice, unable to protect him? Had someone--

Bucky draws a shaky breath, feeling sick. Had someone managed to tap into the connection between him and Steve and sever it, drain Bucky of magic to warp it and stain it and use it to make Steve work for them? That definitely would explain why he’d woken up without his magic and why Steve’s return made it resurface. “Sweetheart,” he says, helplessly.

Steve’s determined expression falters, and for a moment he looks confused, like he’s trying to figure out why anyone would call him that.

Natasha is stunned to silence next to Bucky, and he inches forward from the cover before her arm swiftly blocks him.

“Let me go,” Bucky whispers, “I need to--”

“To what?” Natasha hisses. “Get killed? We don’t know what’s going on here. Stay put.”

“It’s Steve,” Bucky tries again. “I have to help him.”

At that, Steve’s face goes hard, and he moves towards them again, raising the gun, and they both duck back behind the chamber as he fires. “Nobody here by that name,” Steve says, and Bucky barely manages to get the shield up again before Steve’s upon them, tossing his gun aside and raising his fists.

Of course, Bucky thinks as he ducks, catching Steve’s punch with the shield, and dancing out of the way. Steve might not remember Bucky, but something’s keeping him from killing Bucky and Natasha anyway, making him throw away his gun and try to flush them out. He’s pulling his
punches when he could be steamrolling over Bucky, and then he does the most Steve-like move he ever could, and grabs the shield.

For a fraction of a second they stare at each other over its dome. Then, suddenly, there’s a loud sucking sound and the sensation of the floor dropping out beneath Bucky, and he lets go, shouting in surprise. He tumbles through darkness, the glittering of stars all around him, and then there’s a burst of magic that feels like the shield’s singular frequency explodes in the dark, and he’s spat out and rolling onto his feet.

He just manages to take a look at their surroundings - a small clearing in a dense forest, devoid of any birdsong or wind - when he’s tackled by Steve, thrown on the forest floor on his back. Bucky uses the movement to flip Steve over his head and twist up and into a crouch, hands up in a placating gesture, palms towards Steve.

“Your name is Steve Rogers,” he says, a little breathless and nauseated from the wormhole they just fell through. “It’s me, Bucky. We met when you were eight years old.”

Steve looks angry, his face twisted in frustration. Under the wan spring sun his hair and face look oddly washed out against the scuffed black of his suit. His hair is short-shaved at the sides of his skull and longer at the top, much like Bucky’s first Army haircut in the 21st century. He looks barely a couple of years older than he was when he fell off the train: the serum and the cryofreeze at work, most likely.
The shield is nowhere to be seen; maybe it got left behind in the blast. Steve bares his teeth in a snarl, crouched down to mirror Bucky, and Bucky’s heart is beating so fast that it feels like it’s trying to escape from his chest. For the past two years, Bucky’s always had an upper hand in hand-to-hand combat because of his enhancements, but he knows that against Steve he can’t win. He can give his best, but Steve's too big and strong, and Bucky's body is still recovering from what went down in the Triskelion.

All Bucky has are his wits and his magic, and even that is refusing to respond. He needs to be fast, and clever, and try not to think that Steve is alive, that Steve has been alive all this time.

If he lets himself realize that now, he will start crying instead, and if he starts crying, he’s never gonna be able to stop.

“You're safe,” Bucky tries, fumbling his hand against his sternum to tap into the lighter well of magic in him. Perhaps there’s something he can do with his magic; heal some cut pathway in Steve’s memory. “We caught Baranski. Nobody will hurt you again, I promise.”

Steve growls at the name like a cornered animal.

“Come with us,” Bucky coaxes. “We can help you.”

In hindsight, it’s probably not his sharpest idea to first say that they caught Baranski, and then ask Steve to come with them. Steve makes a furious sound, and then he's leaping up and attacking Bucky.

Fighting him is a whirlwind of blows and kicks. Bucky does his best to block them, trying to defend rather than attack, but Steve’s quick and unnaturally powerful, and soon enough Bucky has to reach out of the ring of defense he tried to upkeep. “Steve, stop it,” he begs, “don’t do this.”

Bucky’s significantly slowed down by the price he paid for the magic he used in D.C.: his knees and ankle feel like they’re on fire, his arm tired and aching, and compared to Steve he feels like he’s in slow motion, no matter how many dirty tricks he tries to employ. His prosthetic is keeping up better than he is, but it’s a cold comfort when the shoulder it’s attached to hurts like hell.

Steve’s in a full tactical suit so the punches Bucky lands don’t do much, but Bucky himself has no protection between the fabric and his body. Every hit Steve gets through lands straight in its target, and Bucky bites his lip to keep from crying out. He has a couple of cracked ribs already, that much is clear from the flares of pain on his chest, and then he trips on a root, his balance faltering, and Steve’s fist cracks him in the jaw.

Bucky’s head snaps back and he stumbles, and Steve’s on him in a blink, sending him down to the ground. The back of Bucky’s head hits the ground painfully, making him groan and blink black spots off his vision. Steve’s weight is heavy and pressing against his ribs and stomach, right where he’s hurt, and Steve fists the front of Bucky’s hoodie tightly in his hand, yanking Bucky’s head up.

“Who are you?” Steve asks, mistrust written all over his face. “Who do you work for?”

“You know me,” Bucky chokes out. “Please Steve, come on.”

“Shut up,” Steve snarls, hand tightening on Bucky’s hoodie until the fabric is choking him, making it hard to breathe. He hits Bucky again, and Bucky can hear his cheekbone crack under the force of it. Pain blooms on his cheek, sharp and overpowering. “Don’t call me that.”

“As if,” Bucky croaks, struggling for breath, not sure where the attitude is rising from. Steve looms over him, his fist raised up for the final, lethal strike that undoubtedly will smash Bucky’s head like a melon. “I’ll call you whatever I want, I thought you were fucking dead.”

Steve’s eyes narrow in suspicion and he loosens his hold just a little, almost hesitantly, but his fist stays up. Something in Bucky is building up, coursing through his veins in a mad dash: the magic that was so reluctant to answer his call is reaching out, seeking Steve now that he’s close enough. It’s a new feeling, but then again - he’s never been so long without Steve before.

“I’ve had to live without you, and I don’t want to do it anymore,” Bucky says, and his voice sounds thick, maybe with blood, maybe with grief and the weight of the years. He can’t decide what he’s feeling: remorse, regret, anger at the universe that ripped them apart and then tried to
correct it by throwing them together like this. Relief, that maybe he finally doesn’t have to hang on
alone. “I’m fucking tired.”

Steve stares down at him, frowning a little like he’s trying to solve a puzzle, and Bucky closes his
eyes just as the magic building up inside him reaches its crescendo and bursts out, desperate to
connect, tearing its way through his body and towards Steve. It hurts like nothing ever before;
worse than Kreischberg, worse than watching Steve fall into his death, worse than waking up and
knowing that he would never see his Ma or Becca or Steve again. He opens his mouth to scream,
but no sound comes out.

Steve’s weight disappears like he’d been thrown off, and when the darkness comes for him,
Bucky lets it in.

The Soldier--
The Soldier doesn’t know what happened.

One minute he was ready to shut the man up for good; stop the repetition of you know me, and
Steve, please, and the next he was thrown several feet away, bouncing off a tree and hitting his
head.

He blinks once, twice, and then his training kicks in and he rolls to his stomach and up into a
crouch, ready for another attack. But his opponent isn’t waiting for him to resume the fight: he’s
still lying where the Soldier threw him, unmoving, head lolling to the side.

The Soldier knows the man’s name. He’s never heard it before, but he
knows it.

The Soldier pushes himself up to his feet, approaching James Barnes’s body. Something inside
him is singing, a warm throb in his bones; it’s the same thing he felt when he first caught Barnes’s
shield, or when he was fighting hand-to-hand with him, but larger, more overpowering. The
Soldier doesn’t have magic, it was burnt out of him ages ago by the spells set upon him, but what
else could it be, now?

Barnes is out cold, his prosthetic arm lying limply at his side. It’s powerless, the circuits fried and
the charms undone, and for some reason the Soldier feels sick, looking at him. He creeps closer,
pulls off his gloves and crouches next to Barnes, touching his face. The touch causes sparks to
light up under his skin, like static electricity.

He traces the sharp curve of Barnes’s jaw with his fingertips, seeking out the dip in his chin where
the Soldier knows his thumb will fit perfectly. He sweeps his hand down Barnes’s shoulder and
arm, grabs the clammy hand. Barnes’s fingers look terrible, broken in several places, joints limp
and loose, but the palm of his hand is warm when the Soldier cradles it in his, savoring it.

“Stand down, Soldier.”

He tenses and pulls a gun as he turns to find the woman from the warehouse standing a few feet
away, holding Barnes’s shield. She must have used magic to find them: her clothes are slightly
singed at the edges. A fire mage, and a powerful one, then - it had been so carefully hidden that
the Soldier hadn’t realized it when he fought them.

They stare at each other for a moment, the Soldier kneeling by Barnes’s side, still squeezing his
limp, mangled hand. Then, the Soldier says, “Who is he?”

His voice sounds hoarse, and his body is slowly starting to ache from the blast of Barnes’s magic.
The Soldier has never seen anything like it: the magic he’s used to seeing and being the target of
doesn’t build up like that, or cause injuries to the mage. Still, there’s something niggling at the
back of his mind, like it’s not unfamiliar.

“Your key to freedom,” the woman says. “But I think you know that already. I’m Natasha
Romanoff.”

The name rings a bell somewhere in his head, but he doesn’t have the time to start looking for it.
The Soldier glances down again. James Barnes’s face is bloody, a livid bruise already forming where his cheekbone was broken, his eye swollen shut, and the Soldier’s hands twitch with regret at spoiling something so beautiful. He’s deathly pale, and the Soldier can almost see the magic eating its way through his body, nesting in the injuries.

“Did you kill him?” Romanoff asks. She’s tense, the barest hint of strain in her expression, and the Soldier looks down at the shield on her arm. A chord of something vibrates inside him at the sight of it.

“No,” the Soldier says, defensive. He grips Barnes’s hand tighter. “He’s alive. It was his magic.”

“I can smell it,” Romanoff says, and when the Soldier sniffs cautiously, he realizes that the whole clearing reeks: a strange mixture of hot resin and damp earth, thyme and rot. “I need to check him. Step back.”

The Soldier crowds closer to Barnes instead. “No,” he says again, with growing certainty.

Romanoff narrows her eyes, her calculating look shifting between Barnes and the Soldier. Then she pulls back her arm and hurls the shield, quick and sudden, and the Soldier doesn’t think: he drops the gun and catches the weapon coming at him. His body knows how to do it; knows exactly how to position his hand to catch the straps instead of the sharp edge, how to turn his body into it.

What his body didn’t expect is the way the shield’s magic rips through him, magnified by the hold he still has of Barnes’s hand, feeling like he’s being cut in half. A door bursts open in his head, and suddenly he’s--

--thirteen and waiting for Ma to come home from work, copying Bucky’s math problems because he’s sick again and falling behind on schoolwork--

--building a house out of matches without touching them, even though he knows using magic will make him feel weak for days, and that Bucky will yell at him when he finds out--

--twenty-four and writing a long letter in the dark, starting again and again because he keeps writing I wish I were there to hold you, sealing kisses into words--

--watching Bucky’s blissed-out face in their moon-bathed tent, trying to keep from swearing aloud at the way Bucky clenches around his cock, their breaths making puffs in the freezing air, magic wrapping around them--

--falling and falling and trying to build himself a rope, a bridge, anything, but the ground is rising up to meet him so fast and Bucky is so far away--

He lets go of Bucky’s hand, staggering back under the landslide of memory, his body uncooperating and hurt, his head going a mile a minute, and doesn’t stop until he stumbles on a tree stump and falls down to the forest floor.

Romanoff dashes forward as soon as the Soldier (--no-- Steve-- no-- the-- the--) is out of the way, checking Bucky’s (who the hell is Bucky) pulse, and then she’s glancing back at the Soldier, sympathy in her expression.

“No,” he says weakly, “don’t, don’t, Bucky--”

But she’s already gathering Bucky into her arms, flames aiding her in carrying him, saying, “Hill, I need that airlift and fast,” and--

--Bucky’s laughing as Steve leans down to kiss Bucky’s chest, smooth and young and unscarred--

The Soldier struggles to get up, but the memory of Bucky’s hand in his hair is pressing down, keeping him in place, and the only thing he can do is reach out, fingers closing on empty air.
When he wakes up, there is a brimming ocean in his chest.

There hasn’t been magic in him for such a long time that the appearance of it is strange and a little terrifying, but when he puts a hand on his sternum, he’s met with warmth and a sense of satisfaction.

He doesn’t know what to call himself. There’s a man in his head who has a name and a rank and a beautiful, dark-haired lover; but in his body is an asset who has a call sign and knowledge of so many ways that people can be hurt.

He gets up to his hands and knees gingerly. It must have been barely half an hour; the sun is still close to the same position as it was when he followed the two unknown agents into the warehouse and found out that one of them was Bucky Barnes.

Bucky. Jesus Christ.

He sits back down, his knees shaky, and suddenly he’s choking with emotion, covering his face with his hands. The last time he had seen Bucky, there had been a fast, frantic thank-god-you’re-alive kiss, cut short by the blast that blew out the side of the train car.

He had followed mere seconds later, the sharp tang of Bucky’s fear still on his lips.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Bucky shouldn’t be alive, that’s the thing. Time, for the Soldier, has passed in sharp bursts and long sleep, the weapons and defenses shinier and more alien every time he awoke, but Bucky’s face was the same, barely aged; almost like he’d been encased in the cryo chamber with the Soldier, cocooned in the same freezing slumber.

Maybe it’s not Bucky at all, even though he sure as hell seemed to be. He wouldn’t be the first charmed body double the Soldier has seen, and even though the likeness of him was very good, keeping up even when he was hurt, there must be a limit to it. If he can find Bucky again, he can try it: cut Bucky’s skin and see if magic bleeds out of him like he expects it to.

His gaze falls onto something big and round lying on the ground next to him. It’s his shield, exactly like he remembers it, still sporting the red, white and blue color scheme.

He runs his shaking hand through his hair, and then picks the shield up. As he touches it, something inside him swells, impossibly large and warm, pieces clicking into place. The shield’s magic is singing, happy as a clam, humming as he strokes his palm over its expanse.

It’s been waiting for him for a long, long time.

The Soldier had been confused that whole tension-filled night, ever since he caught the shield thrown at him on the rooftop. He had skipped the pickup point and found himself a vehicle, left D.C. as soon as possible; he’d known how to disable the tracker spell that was embedded in him, but not sure how he’d known that. He’d been sitting at a McDonald’s parking lot, perusing a map to see the best way back to the warehouse when there had been a sudden, bright burst of pain in his chest that had him gasping for air.

When he’d managed to focus his eyes again, he’d realized that he felt lighter, like something had been cut out of him.

The blood bind. It was all he’d known for years, and its loss left him light-headed, woozy, as if there had been a steel band restricting the circulation of blood in his head and now it was gone.
But now his head is clear; bright and sharp albeit confused, and as he gets up, he’s feeling better than he has in years.

* 

The warehouse is quiet when he finally makes his way back to it: Bucky and his friend are long gone, the base abandoned. He goes back to the storage room, studiously avoiding looking at the cryo chamber - he’d destroyed it when he first arrived, torn it apart so that nobody could ever put him back in again.

Most of the desktop computers are unharmed despite the gunfire, and he logs in with a username and a password he doesn’t remember learning. He tries to be as fast as he can, just in case there’s somebody on the way, but also because he doesn’t want to spend any more time in the warehouse than absolutely necessary. He had flashbacks as he walked in and checked the building - of getting hosed down in the rooms used as infirmary, being prepped for cryo after a mission - and those are ghosts he doesn’t want to be around. There will be more, he’s sure of it, the past decades coming back to him in bits and pieces, but at least for now he can run from it.

He makes a plan, because that helps him concentrate and avoid falling into the dark pit of his awaiting past. He will copy the digital files, fingers already flying on the keyboard, and grab anything relevant on paper. Then he will find himself a safe house, and figure out what to do next. It’s safer to have all the information with him, so that he has the chance to go through it and make his own deductions, and so that Baranski’s men won’t have the tools to break him again.

Last but far from least, he will try to track Bucky down. The thought makes warmth flutter under his breastbone, and he puts a hand on his chest, pressing, trying to calm it down.

He looks up, and the shield chirps on his arm, agreeing with the plan, and suddenly the room around him dims and shifts, changing shape, and he can see Bucky, like they were standing next to each other.

They’re in a narrow room with steel-clad walls, like the belly of a ship, and the floor is trembling slightly, indicating that they’re on the move. Bucky’s dressed in a pair of khakis and a leather bomber, looking exactly as he did back in the war, but there are purpling shadows under his eyes, and the uptick of his mouth is soft and a little sad as he brushes his hand over the dome of the shield, rubs the red band with his thumb.

Romanoff is standing a few feet away, her hands in the pockets of her jacket, observing Bucky. Her hair is a lot shorter and curlier than in the present, and her expression is intrigued, maybe even excited. The shield is drowsy, bristling like it’s just been woken up, but its magic is pushing into Bucky’s hands like it’s missed him, finding just empty space where Bucky’s own magic should rise to meet it.

It’s-- a memory, the Soldier thinks, astonished. The shield is showing him how Bucky found it again, perhaps, or woke it up from a slumber. But the strangest part of it all is the void the shield’s magic encounters when it reaches out for Bucky, grasping only the spells woven into his prosthetic hand. There’s always been magic in Bucky, more than in many - and still is, judging from the blast in the clearing. But in this memory it’s gone, drained out to leave just a dry hollow behind.

Come on, Romanoff says, checking her watch. Let’s get you a suit, unless you want to wear the costume.

Yeah, no, Bucky says. He closes his eyes for a second, mouth twisting with grief, and then he swallows, steels himself, turns to go, and the memory dissolves.

As the files are transferring, he sits with the shield in his hands, looking down at it. The metal is
smooth and flawless, the colors just as vivid as they used to be, and he strokes the red band with his thumb, just like Bucky in the reconstructed memory. It feels right, and the shield’s magic curls into his hands and his chest, sighing with contentment.

He holds the shield, and tries calling himself Steve again.

It doesn’t sound bad in his mouth.

*

The safehouse is on the Virginia side of the Potomac, south of D.C.; a little two-room shithole adjacent to an abandoned garage. There was some furniture and a thick layer of dust when he broke in, but he wiped the dust off and aired the place out, careful to cover all the windows come sundown. It’s dirty, but not the worst place he’s been, and he brought ammo and canned foods from the warehouse so it’s good enough for him as he recovers. The building even has fairly good soundproofing so that nobody’s alerted if he screams in his sleep.

Most of the files he brought with him detail only his history in the States, starting on his arrival to a facility in Boston in 1992; the only ones that go further back are the instructions for his handlers, and his medical files.

There’s also a log of all the blood binds he’s had, and it makes nausea coil in his stomach. He knew that Baranski hadn’t been the first blood mage to have him, not with how long the timeline is, but it’s different to see it written down and realize how endless his captivity has been, even though it feels so much shorter. There had been others, back before he woke up and was told that he was in the United States and had a new master, and all of them had wanted him to stay quiet and complacent. He’d struggled, pushing his bonds as far as they could go, testing them over and over again, but in the end, they had always subdued him with their spells and their violence.

It’s exactly as he thought: the flashbacks and nightmares descend upon him on the very first night, and just keep going from there. What the shield’s magic gave him in the clearing was Bucky, and everything that came with, from growing up to going to war to falling from the train, but it couldn’t tell him what happened after that. The rest of the 20th Century comes back to him on its own now that the blood bind is gone and the spells have been wiped off, and handling it is hard labor.

He spends a lot of time throwing up. They’d had him for a very, very long time.

The shield helps him: it oozes calm when he needs to be soothed, helps him to get a grip on his magic again, sings him stories when he can’t sleep. Bucky resonates through each and every one of them, that sweet sense of a hot summer day, dark storm front lurking in the distance.

He thinks about Bucky a lot as he lies awake on his ratty mattress, staring at the ceiling. He thinks of the familiar slate-grey color of Bucky’s eyes, pale and nearly translucent in the right light; he thinks about what it would be like to touch Bucky again, lay his hands on Bucky’s back and keep him there, folded into his arms. The magic in his chest keeps billowing, looking for its counterpart to the point where it feels like it’s burning, longing for Bucky with everything it has.

The Internet doesn’t know much about Bucky: him being alive doesn’t seem to be public knowledge, because all Steve finds is Wikipedia articles about the war and footage of the Battle of New York two years ago, where Bucky had used the shield, and some conspiracy theories about the wielder’s identity.

If facts are to be believed, Bucky is dead, gone down into the Arctic Sea less than two months after Steve fell from the train. That would mean that whoever he met in the warehouse indeed was a doppelganger - but there are more of the shield’s strange 3D memories, and in them Bucky is always present, his cheeks a little more sunken in the further they go in the timeline, his eyes a little more haunted, while the shield gets angrier and thirstier for blood. But whenever Bucky picks it up, it’s thrilled, affectionate, its magic constantly pushing towards him, tuned to protect - just like Steve used to feel about Bucky.

Steve watches Bucky fight Schmidt and take the plane down, standing behind Bucky with his hands helplessly outstretched, desperation and panic squeezing his throat, unable to do anything. History records show that Peggy was the last one to talk to Bucky, begging him to report his coordinates so that they could retrieve him after he landed, but he’d told her that the plane was too damaged.
It sits like a stone in Steve’s stomach, weighing him down, because the shield shows him the truth: the naked relief Bucky had felt as he lied to Peggy about the state of the plane, knowing full well that it was fit to land but deciding to crash it instead.

Steve stands next to Bucky’s unconscious body in the wreckage, smoothing his hand over Bucky’s cheek, the cut on his forehead, watching as the plane slowly tilts and sinks into the ice. Bucky’s left arm is pinned under debris, the shield lying nearby, and as the memory dissolves, Steve closes his eyes and grieves for them both.

* 

His magic gets more and more restless, desperation rising inside him. It doesn’t understand why Steve can’t go to Bucky and complete the impossible knot of their magic. It doesn’t feel shame at the ghost of violence and the bad deeds done with his hands.

Steve tries to ignore it, use it to build things in an attempt to calm it down, but it doesn’t obey. He didn’t really expect it to; it yearns for Bucky as much as he does, and is even dumber about it than he is.

The shield shows him how it broke Baranski’s hold over him: he stands in the corner of a glass-walled elevator, watching as Bucky fights his way through the agents. It’s a beautiful thing to witness, every move economical and ruthless, all the way to the sizzling ball of magic that Bucky pulls out of his flank. Then, the star on the shield forms into a mouth full of teeth, biting into Baranski.

* 

Romanoff finds him first.

“If you want, she says as she stands at the door of the garage, arms crossed over her chest. “I’m here to help.”

Steve looks at her speculatively, assessing. Her magic is folded away, and her hands are free of weapons, but it doesn’t mean anything - if his hazy memories are right, she’s capable of causing serious damage just with her magic. He doesn’t know why she’s here. She could be trying to lure him to come back to SHIELD with her, just so that Baranski could try another bind.

But she’s also the shortest route to Bucky, and just the thought makes Steve’s heart clench with hope. It’s been six days, and he’s been thinking about Bucky constantly, comparing the grinning young man he once knew with the one that faced him in the warehouse, replaying everything Bucky had said, over and over again.

“What do you want,” Steve says flatly, but lowers the gun and steps aside to let her in. His voice sounds gruff, thanks to the nightmares and lack of use.

“To offer a trade,” Romanoff says as she breezes in. She’s cut her hair boyishly short and is dressed in corduroy trousers and a sweatshirt, possibly to stay unnoticed in the neighborhood. “Information for information. If you ask me, you could use an ally. Nice place, by the way.”

She sits down on the dusty couch and gestures for Steve to do the same. It’s odd to see her as a grown woman - the memory of a small, red-haired child and others like her came back to Steve as he was inspecting the safehouse for surveillance. He had trained them, once, helped them with strategy and hand-to-hand combat.

“The memory had made him throw up into the sink. Not his proudest moment.

“What kind of information do you want?” Steve asks as he reluctantly takes a seat. He’s still gripping the gun, not willing to trust her that easily.

“Anything,” she says. “But especially from the files you took.”

Steve eyes her. He has already gone through the files, so maybe it wouldn’t hurt to let her copy some of the data, depending on her purpose. “What are you gonna do with it?”
“We’re building a case.” She fiddles with the hem of her sweatshirt, but the movement is practiced, designed to make him feel at ease, perhaps. “What we thought was a small group of rogues looks to be a lot bigger. Fury wants us to be thorough and weed them out.”

Steve frowns. Fury? But-- “Nick Fury is dead,” he says. Steve had shot him through a wall, employing tricks he didn’t realize were originally Bucky's until days later, and even though he hadn’t stayed behind to see the results, he knew he’d succeeded.

Romanoff shakes her head. “He faked it. Even I didn’t know.”

It’s a relief - Steve knows that there must be a longer trail of bodies in his past that he has yet to uncover, but at least he hadn’t really finished the last mission Baranski had sent him on.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asks. He’s seen the headlines about Fury’s death, but nothing to contradict that, so it can’t be public knowledge. “Is this your exchanged information?”

“No,” she says, and from the look she gives him Steve realizes that it must be some kind of kindness, from one forcibly trained operative to another. “What I am offering you is an update on Baranski’s plans. And on James.”

Steve’s heart jumps in his chest. “Is he--”

“Still in hospital.” Romanoff cocks her head, studying him. “His accelerated healing can’t keep up with the damage, so it’s slow going. He just woke up today - they’ve kept him sedated because of all the operations and trying to stop his magic from causing any more damage.”

“You can copy the files,” Steve blurts out, startling himself. He wants to take it back as soon as it’s out of his mouth, knowing that he’s shown his full hand with his eagerness. He bites his tongue, and then says in a more controlled manner, “But you can’t include any information about my identity.”

“Fair,” Romanoff says. Her expression is carefully smooth, but the corner of her mouth is tugging slightly up, maybe with satisfaction or amusement, before she soberes. “It’s for the best, to be honest - that’s not a can of worms I want to open just yet. We’ll try to keep you secret for as long as we can, but eventually there’s gonna be an enquiry, and we will need you to step up.”

She digs a smartphone out of her pocket and extends her hand to Steve. “We have a deal?”

“Deal,” Steve says, and they shake on it. “Half and half. You get to photograph part of the files, but you need to give me your information before seeing the rest.”

She gives him a sharp nod. “Let’s get into it, then.”

They’re quiet as Steve spreads manila folders on the rickety table and she takes photos of them on her phone, skipping the pages that mention anything about who Baranski’s asset might once have been.

“Ohk.” Steve clears his throat when she’s about halfway. “Your turn.”

Romanoff takes a seat on a wobbly dining chair and says, “We did some digging.” She slides her phone across the table towards Steve so that he can see the screen. It’s an old photo of a man in a German dress uniform. There’s a clear resemblance to Baranski, but it’s not what draws Steve’s eye.

On the man’s lapel is a pin that nearly makes his stomach turn: a skull with six tentacles.

“Baranski’s father, Otto Schneider, worked for HYDRA,” Romanoff says. “He was posted in the Kreischberg factory and got twelve years in the Nuremberg trials. Baranski - originally Rolf Schneider - was just two when his father went to jail.”

Steve stares at the photo. He hasn’t seen that logo in a long time, but the disgust and hate it evokes has never left him, not really.

“According to the records, Baranski changed his name in 1984, before he immigrated to the States from West Germany. He had established business connections to the Soviet Union, and we suspect that that’s how he got wind of you.”
Romanoff swipes to the next image: a photo of way younger Baranski. There’s a date stamp of 1986 in the corner. “Baranski was recruited to SHIELD two years after he came to the States, thanks to his research about different types of magic as warfare. From what we’ve gathered, he did the deal over you shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the Leviathan got rid of a lot of evidence. They sold many of their assets in the chaos, not caring what - or who - they were.”

“But you stayed,” Steve interjects, looking up, and she blinks at him, surprised. “You and the other girls - you stayed in Stalingrad?”

There’s a long, heavy pause. “We were a lot easier to hide,” Romanoff says then. “Our cover was a ballet school, after all. Nothing compared to a man in a cryogenic tank.” She takes her phone back and closes the photo app. “I didn’t realize you remembered me.”

“I didn’t,” Steve says truthfully. “Not at first. The shield brought Bucky back to me, but the rest has been coming in waves. There are still gaps.”

“You taught us for a year,” she says in Russian, like she’s testing his language skills. “In 1990.”

“It felt shorter,” Steve replies in English, not comfortable with conversing in their other shared language. He understands her just fine, but he doesn’t remember learning the language, and it unnerves him. “I think I was in storage for a part of it.”

“You disappeared for a few months during the summer and came back different,” Romanoff says. “You gave me an apple, right before. Maybe that’s why they shelved you.”

It wouldn’t be surprising. Steve’s handlers never wanted him to show humanity, not to mention kindness. “Maybe,” he says, looking down at the files. The Soviets had told him that Bucky was dead; after that, all he could do was hope for the same fate. “Why do you think Baranski bought me?”

“Truthfully?” Romanoff is quiet for a moment, weighing her words. “We assume that he was trying to re-establish HYDRA.”

Steve reels back, magic surging in his chest in surprise and shock. “What?”

“Yes,” she confirms, looking grim. “But he didn’t have connections powerful enough, and wasn’t able to rise to the top himself because of the profession he’d chosen. We’re keeping an eye out on anybody who’s acting suspicious now that Baranski’s in custody. If you have any inside information, I need it.”

Steve shakes his head, feeling nauseated. HYDRA, after all these years, right under his nose - and worst of all, holding him, making him work for them. He wants to punch himself for letting it happen, for not fighting more against Baranski’s bind when he had the opportunity; he should’ve been quicker on his feet, tried harder to escape.

“I was sent out with a STRIKE team,” he finally gets out. “I don’t think I ever saw anyone but agents and scientists.”

“All right,” Romanoff says. She pulls out a piece of paper and slides it over. There’s a cell phone number written on it. “If you remember something, let me know. Do I get the rest of the files now?”

Steve gestures mutely at them, and she starts flipping through the rest, expression unreadable.

Steve sits with his head in his hands, keeping an eye on her. The air in the apartment feels stuffy, his chest too tight with distress. What if Baranski had succeeded? Would he have made Steve his Captain, sent to dispatch those who opposed his regime? Would he have sent Steve to kill Bucky next?

The shield’s magic reaches out for him, and there’s a vein of threat running under its comforting hum, reminding him of the sharp teeth that snapped the blood bind like it was a stick. Jesus, he’s so fucking lucky that the universe seems to finally be on his side, bringing Bucky and the shield back to him and breaking him out of the chains he’s been held in.

He’ll have to go through the files again, to find everybody who worked on him, and get as many of them into custody as possible. He’d sworn to bring HYDRA down when he’d seen the damage Zola and Schmidt did to Bucky, back in 1943, and he’s always been good at keeping his promises. It’s the only thing he can do if he wants to keep Bucky safe now.
“You might want to stick around,” Romanoff says as she gets up to leave. Her tone is mild, but Steve knows that it’s less of a suggestion and more of a command. “Virginia is lovely in April.”

“You might want to grab your surveillance equipment before you go,” Steve says in the same, pleasant tone, arms crossed over his chest. “You forgot it under my table.”

Romanoff grins, slow and sharp. “Consider it a gift,” she says. “Goodnight.”

When she’s gone, Steve exhales and forces his shoulders to relax. Then he unfolds his arms and watches the shivering lock of silky, golden magic unfurl on his palm, shooting out through the door after Romanoff and then vanishing out of sight. It’s a simple pathbuilder, not even an effort on his part; it’s just nice to use magic again for something easy like this.

He sweeps the apartment and crushes all the listening devices he can find, shaking his head at the number of them. Technology might’ve changed, but the techniques are still the same, no matter who’s employing them.

*

The hospital is big, but when Steve observes it from a small park on the other side of the road, his pathbuilder wriggles and shimmers on the pavement, leading to a side door.

He drops down from the tree he was hiding in, waiting in the dark for the lull of the small hours. It’s the only hospital Romanoff visited within thirty-six hours of her departure from the safehouse, and once Steve had the location, it was fairly easy to crack into their database and learn Bucky’s room number, the floorplan, and the staff schedules. He’s got a spare set of scrubs and a stolen I.D., and there’s a bright, hopeful flame in his chest, the magic straining towards Bucky.

Steve puts on the scrubs and takes off his ballcap, pushes his fingers into his hair to shake it loose. Absurdly, he feels a little vulnerable and unsafe without the hat, even though his beard covers his face up well enough. As long as he gets in without a hitch, he’ll be fine, but he longs to keep his hat anyway.

The side door is locked, but he builds a key, weaving strands of magic together until the lock clicks. It causes his flank to ache like his ribs were bruised, but that’s a minor price to pay for the advantage it gives him. The hospital ward is quiet, and he’d studied the blueprints of the floor to map out the best route from the door to Bucky’s room, so it’s easy to avoid the more crowded areas like the nurses’ station. He has to sneak into an empty room to wait until a nurse and a janitor with his cleaning cart have passed by, but finally he finds the room the pathbuilder is curled up in front of, and the number confirms it to be Bucky’s.

When Steve slips into the dark room, Bucky is sleeping. Steve listens to his heavy, steady breathing for a moment to ensure the door didn’t disturb him, and only then he dares to slink closer to take a look. In the orange light coming from the streetlamp outside the window, Bucky’s face looks pale, gaunt, and still a little rough. His prosthetic arm has been removed, except for the anchor in his stump, visible under the thin hospital gown. His flesh arm is tied up in a loose sling across his chest and his fingers are in splints: magic did a number on him, like it did to Steve’s head.

Without the metal arm he looks smaller and frailer, swaddled under the duvet. Steve closes his eyes for a few seconds and thinks of Bucky like he used to be, with two flesh-and-blood arms, strength and youth under his tanned skin; smiling. In Steve’s memory, Bucky’s always smiling, even after the war came and made its nest inside him.

There are small moles scattered on Bucky’s chest and shoulders, peeking from the large collar of the gown, and Steve suddenly, vividly remembers kissing them over and over with soft presses of his lips. He’s inching forward to press his fingertip on Bucky’s skin before he realizes what he’s doing and pulls his hand back.

The magic in Steve’s chest is burning, like it, too, is trying to reach out and touch Bucky, find its equilibrium. He grits his teeth and clasps his hands together behind his back to keep them still, rubs them to get rid of the craving.

It’s not safe for him to be around Bucky yet; not until he’s taken care of any stragglers from Baranski’s team he finds, to ensure that they can’t hurt Bucky or him again. He’s here just to check on Bucky and trying to appease his yearning magic; he’ll have to settle on observing from
afar until he can be sure that Bucky is safe from HYDRA.

It’s a good, sensible plan, made with logic instead of emotion. But *God*, it feels like a punch to know that he’ll have to walk away from this room when all he wants to do is climb into the bed, curl around Bucky, and never leave.

“Steve?” Bucky mumbles sleepily, and Steve freezes momentarily, before quickly drawing his magic and casting a mask to hide himself, retreating into the shadows where the light doesn’t reach.

Bucky snaps fully awake and launches upright from his pillows, not remembering his injuries until he’s sitting and the pain makes him gasp, his face contorting in agony. He waits for a bit, breathing heavily. Then, slowly, he looks up and around the room, his slinged arm wrapped across his chest, hugging himself.

“Steve?” Bucky asks again, but his voice is brittle and unsure. Steve holds his breath under his spell, stays absolutely still. Bucky sits for a fleeting moment, listening, but his gaze never settles on Steve, and then he slowly bows his head, covering his face with his hand.

Steve isn’t surprised when Bucky’s hunched shoulders start to shake, and a sob wrenches out of his chest. Once the first sob gets out, it’s like a floodgate was opened, and Steve watches as Bucky weeps hard, raw and savage and with so much hurt that Steve aches for him in sympathy.

Bucky cries for a long time, alone in the dark room with only ghosts for company, calling out names of the long dead in a breaking voice, and when he falls back asleep, worn out and exhausted, Steve slinks out of the room, feeling like he’s leaving his heart behind.

He smoothes the hair back from Bucky’s forehead before he goes, feeling the rising fever on Bucky’s clammy skin.

Natasha Romanoff is waiting for him in the corridor, blowing bubbles with her chewing gum. She’s leaning on the wall, but there’s a gun in her hand, trained on Steve, and the heavy, hot oppression of her magic is in the air.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she says, tilting her head, her dark eyes staring at him over the barrel of the gun. Steve really should’ve known better; she was trained by him, after all. “Nice outfit.”

“I’ve heard that green is my color,” Steve says, lifting his chin in defiance. He doesn’t pull his own gun even though his fingers are itching for it: she’s clearly ready to put a bullet into Steve if
he hurt Bucky, and raising a gun at her now wouldn’t end well.

She studies him for a while. Then she lowers the pistol, pulls back her magic and jerks her head towards the exit, and Steve falls into step with her.

“Baranski hasn’t exactly been cooperative,” Romanoff says once they’re outside. “I think we’d need to catch a bigger fish than a couple of STRIKE agents to make him talk.”

*Bigger fish,* Steve thinks, and his magic shifts, restless. It doesn’t like being away from Bucky again, but there’s something else to it, something like--

“Baranski brought somebody over,” he says suddenly, trying to grasp the memory. “I was getting maintenance.”

Romanoff’s head turns sharply. “When?”

“After Johannesburg.” The memory unfolds like a map, thanks to his magic making the connections, building a path through it. “A tall man, middle-aged, balding. Nice suit. They laughed and watched.”

“Johannesburg was in February,” she says. “That’s recent.”

Steve frowns, delving deeper. The wan wintry light filtering into the warehouse, the Soldier half-naked, his suit stripped down to his waist, the technicians refreshing the spells that kept him forgetful. And, penetrating through the hot, red haze of agony in the Soldier’s mind, Baranski’s voice, raspy with age, saying, *You see, Harold, our little soldier is behaving well--*


Romanoff blinks a couple of times, and then she’s pulling out her phone, typing something quickly. “Harold Owens, the second deputy director of SHIELD,” she says as she dials. “Well--now the first deputy director. Maria? It’s Owens, get him in.”

As she puts the phone away, she looks up at Steve. “I’ll let the tracking spell slide for this information, Rogers,” she says as she turns to go, “but next time, just call me.”

Steve watches her disappear into the darkness, then glances up at Bucky’s window. *Just a little longer,* he thinks, pressing his fingers against his mouth and then against his heart, like a promise. *Just until it's safer.* He leaves for his safehouse, ignoring the desperate pull of magic in his chest.

* He goes through the files again, slower and with more care, searching for any information about people who worked on him under Baranski’s orders. The digital folders and files have metadata detailing user information for all saved logs, and in the end, it doesn’t take very long to compile a list of names. The first person on it lives in Baltimore, so Steve waits until night falls, and then steals a car. He brings the shield with him, just in case.

Before dawn he’s pulling the duct-taped, terrified scientist out of the trunk near the Triskelion, and returning the car to where he found it, its tank filled up.

*Got you a present,* he texts Romanoff, followed by the coordinates.

*Sounds promising,* she texts back. *Is it still breathing?*

* “It’s not your fault, James,” Romanoff says.

They’re sitting in the hospital yard, and Steve is tucked into a nook of the roof above the entrance, spying on them. Bucky looks tired, hunched in his wheelchair, tugging listlessly at the blanket spread over his legs.

It’s been two days since Steve’s midnight visit; as far as he knows, it’s the first time Bucky’s been out of bed since he was brought to the hospital. The splints are off, and they have given him proper clothes instead of the hospital robe; he’s even gotten a new prosthetic, black metal fingers poking out from his sleeve that’s pulled low like he’s trying to keep them warm.
Steve’s there just to see Bucky up and awake, and hear him talk. It has nothing to do with the way the shield has started to send him confused signals, its distress striking a chord inside him. *Nothing.*

Romanoff is sitting on a bench next to the chair, and when Bucky doesn’t reply, she repeats, “It’s not your fault.”

“Well, whose is it, Nat?” Bucky asks bitterly. “I let him fall, and then I let him down, and now he’s in the wind and I can’t do a fucking thing because of this piece of shit.” He slaps the wheelchair with his metal hand. “They controlled him with *my* magic, Nat. I keep fucking failing him.”

*Wrong,* Steve thinks vehemently. *You’ve never failed me.*

He doesn’t know if what Bucky said about his magic is true - it certainly would explain why Steve had initially succumbed to their power so easily, but how could that be Bucky’s fault? He was frozen in the goddamn *Arctic Sea,* not making Steve’s shackles himself. If there’s anybody to blame, it’s the people who took Steve, and Steve himself for not fighting hard enough.

“If your roles were reversed,” Romanoff starts, and Steve flinches hard at the mere thought, not willing to imagine even a fraction of what he went through done to Bucky, instead. “Would you blame Steve?”

“No,” Bucky says, hunching in tighter. He’s angry, blazingly so, and Steve imagines the dark, earth-smelling ocean in him conquering more space for itself. “Because Steve would’ve at least *tried.*”

“You did your best,” Romanoff says. “And we still don’t know if it was your magic that was used to hold him. He had a blood bind, after all.”

“My best wasn’t enough,” Bucky snaps, turning his head away.

Romanoff sighs and pats him gently on the shoulder. “Let’s go inside,” she suggests. “Maria said she’s coming over.”

Bucky shrugs unenthusiastically, flexes his right hand just a little and grimaces like his fingers are still causing him pain. “Whatever.”

As Romanoff stands and rounds the wheelchair to push Bucky back in, she looks up and straight at Steve, holding eye contact until they’re out of sight.

*

He dreams of his mother.

They’re back in Brooklyn, and he’s in bed, his new large body crammed in awkwardly, shuffling to find a better position. His ma is sitting next to the bed, the mending forgotten in her lap, watching him with a smile curving her mouth, and Steve has to squeeze his eyes closed because it hurts so much, *so much,* to see her like this again, untouched by illness.

“Oh, my boy,” Ma says, combing hair back from his forehead with her fingers. “Why did you have to go to war?”

*Because Bucky did, and you weren’t there to stop me,* Steve tells her.

Ma laughs at that, fondness written in every line on her face. *I should’ve known,* she says.

Steve turns his face into her hand, hiding the way his eyes sting. *I did great things, Ma,* he whispers, *good things,* or *at least for a while.* *After that--* 

The room is suddenly cold and silent, devoid of any sound like he’s underwater, and he inhales shakily, raising his hand to touch the glass on the cryo chamber door, and--

_Frisch weht der Wind, der Heimat zu,* his ma says softly into the silence, quoting the book of poetry she’d had on the kitchen shelf when Steve was a child. He’d eventually taken it with him to war, where it had ridden in his pocket, damp and stained and slowly falling apart, and by the time he fell from the train, he’d known it forwards and backwards, the lines etched onto his memory.
Her accent is soft and lilting and not making the words sound like German at all, her native tongue pushing through. *Mein Irisch Kind, wo weilest du?*

*I don’t know, Ma,* Steve says, choking back tears, both hands pressed against the door. *I’m so far from home.*

*Then make a new one,* Ma says, and then there’s a kiss on his cheek, cool and feather-light, like a ghost. *Then make a new one.*

*"

“Turns out that Owens is a talker,” Romanoff says on the phone three days after Steve spied on her and Bucky at the hospital yard. “Baranski probably thought that by killing Fury he could spook Owens into submission. It seems that they had a disagreement on who should be leading the new rise of HYDRA.”

“Good for us,” Steve says gruffly. He’s sleeping badly, his magic aching like an inflamed wound, and he’s been killing time by hunting down the people on his list, delivering them to SHIELD with FOR ROMANOFF written on their shirts with a marker.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “I’m gonna be out of town for a few days, so keep me updated if there’s anything new with you.”

“Got it,” Steve says, rubbing his chest. The magic flinches, roiling harder, and Steve thinks about the curve of Bucky’s neck, the dip between his collarbones. It doesn’t help. If anything, it makes the ache worse, and he pinches himself to get something else to think about.

“Look, Rogers,” Romanoff says, her tone serious. “I’m thankful for all the people you’ve brought us, but I need you to let us handle HYDRA. Until we know how large Baranski’s group is, you’re a sitting duck. We can’t risk you getting caught again.”

Privately Steve knows that HYDRA getting their hands on him again is a lot less likely than before, because the spells binding him have already been broken once by magic more ancient and complicated than theirs, and it will be a lot harder to repeat the process now. The shield’s magic is sitting on him like a protective armor, Bucky woven into every seam.

“Fine,” he says, even though he bristles a little at the order. After a moment’s hesitation he adds, “Stay safe.”

There’s a short silence, and then Romanoff says, “James is getting worse. Thought you might want to know,” and the line goes dead.

*"

When Steve reaches the hospital, a nurse has just pushed Bucky out into the yard to enjoy the spring sunshine. Romanoff wasn’t lying: Bucky’s knees are sharp under the blanket, and the light is gone from his eyes. He’s been losing weight, like there is something gnawing away inside him; the curves of his cheekbones are more angular, and his spine is visible through his shirt. He looks pale and tired, and Steve watches from the roof above the entrance, his body aching and shivering with the proximity and distressed magic.

The nurse who escorted Bucky out - Willem - seems nice: he keeps chatting to Bucky, not caring that more often than not he doesn’t get a reply. They round the yard slowly, Willem pointing out the spring flowers and admiring the blooming trees aloud, until his pager beeps, and he pulls it out, frowning.

“Hey, James.” Willem touches Bucky’s shoulder gently. “I need to go back in, there’s an emergency. Will you be fine alone for a few? I’ll come back as soon as I can, or send someone else.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, mustering up a weak smile. “Go ahead, I’ll be fine. There’s no hills to accidentally roll down, right?”

Willem laughs, patting him on the back, and heads towards the door. Bucky watches him go, and then carefully puts his hands on the wheels, avoiding bending the fingers of his right hand, and tries to push. There’s some loose gravel on the path though, and he doesn’t have a good enough grip to get both wheels moving, so the chair just turns slightly and then gets stuck.
“Fuck,” Bucky mutters, squares his jaw and tries again, this time with more force. The chair rocks forward and Bucky’s determined expression unfolds into triumph. It looks lovely on him, that short, bright burst of joy, and Steve’s heart does a complicated little twist at the sight.

But then, forgetting the healing joints in his excitement, Bucky goes to grab the wheel properly with his right hand and flinches violently, letting out a small noise of surprise and hurt. Steve jerks forward on automaton, his boots scraping against the roof.

Bucky’s throat works a few times, his mouth trembling as he slowly lowers his damaged hand onto his lap, tucking it under the blanket. Then he sighs, putting his metal hand over his eyes.

“Jesus fuck,” he says out loud. “Gimme a fucking break.”

Steve stands up.

He’s dropped down from the roof and taken several steps towards Bucky before he even registers what he’s doing, and then he halts, just to take a deep breath and assess the situation. He’d sworn that he wouldn’t face Bucky until he had secured everything he could, until it was finally safe to come home - but Bucky has been waiting for so long, and Steve can’t ignore the direness of his condition any more. He can’t ignore the waxy pallor of Bucky’s skin, or the discussion he caught between two nurses, murmuring about Bucky’s time running out if they couldn’t find a way to balance out his magic.

Bucky is dying because they’re separated, and the ache in Steve’s body is getting harder and harder to bear every passing day. He can’t fuck this up now, he can’t, because it means that the unbalanced magic will eat Bucky up, and eventually Steve, too. It’s time for him to be selfish, for both of them. He squares his shoulders, tugs off his hat and pushes it into the back pocket of his jeans, cards his fingers through his hair, and starts walking.

He dreamt about this, he realizes as he slowly approaches Bucky, back when he was lying in the snow and waiting for death. He dreamt of a miracle happening and someone finding him, and - after recovering and paying his debt, maybe years later - going home. Maybe by then Bucky would already be married, having kept on living; but perhaps--

Perhaps he was still waiting. Perhaps he would be chopping vegetables in their old apartment, his back to the door, and Steve would sneak in, pull him into his arms from behind. Bucky might sock him in the jaw, or drop the knife and lean back into him; Steve didn't know which version of the fantasy he liked more. He never imagined getting back to Bucky like this: decades heavy on their shoulders, full of unforgivable things.

When he gets closer, Bucky says without turning around, “Willem?” When there’s no reply, he continues, sounding exhausted and angry, “I’m tired, I’d like to go back in.”

“Bucky,” Steve says, and Bucky stiffens.

There’s a long, heavy silence between them, Steve’s heart fluttering anxiously in his chest. He clears his throat, twists the hem of his hoodie in his hands to have something to do.

“Is this a joke, Willem?” Bucky asks, his voice trembling, trying to muster up anger but failing. “Because it fucking ain’t funny.”

“It’s me, Buck.” Steve swallows, forces the nervous lump in his throat down. His hands are trembling with the need to touch; to make sure that time won’t suddenly fold up and toss him back into the Alpine ravine, having fever dreams of coming home to his sweetheart. “Just me.”

Bucky turns the wheelchair slowly, until he’s facing Steve, and the expression on his face will forever be etched onto Steve’s memory: amazed and hopeful, shining eyes and mouth half-open. Steve’s never seen anyone as beautiful as him.

They stare at each other for a moment that feels so much longer than it really is; Steve watches the wind move in Bucky’s hair, ruffling it. It’s longer than it used to, curling just below his ears, and Steve itches to touch it, run his fingers through it. There had been a time when Steve had had a lock of Bucky’s dark hair taped inside the cover of his journal: a token, a good luck charm, a piece of him to carry wherever Steve went.

“Steve,” Bucky says after a long silence, stunned, and then he’s scrambling to get up from the
wheelchair, his feet trying to find their balance on the ground.

Steve didn’t even realize he was moving, but between one blink and another he’s there, putting his hands on Bucky’s waist and helping him up, and then Bucky’s collapsing against him, trembling all over, his arms tight around Steve’s shoulders.

When Steve slides his hand up to rest on Bucky’s upper back, taking his weight, he can feel the ridge of Bucky’s spine, the curve of his shoulder blades. The anger and frustration that rears its head in him is sudden and directionless, bouncing without a target: Bucky got hurt, and at least some of it is his fault. He tries to push it away, enveloping Bucky in his embrace, regret heavy in his stomach.

“Steve,” Bucky chokes out, and Steve hugs him tighter, tries to pull him impossibly close, and his whole body is so, so wonderfully warm, magic singing through them. “Jesus Christ.”

“I’m so sorry,” Steve says, his face buried in Bucky’s hair. “I’m so fucking sorry, Bucky.”

“Shut up,” Bucky says. “Shut the fuck up, shut up, Steve,” and he hits Steve’s shoulder weakly, voice thick with tears.

Steve holds him, feeling the pools of magic under Bucky’s skin respond to the one in his own chest, invisible threads reaching out and grasping each other, weaving into one. It leaves him short of breath, his magic’s intensity and greed and one-minded need to be connected; the echoing surge of Bucky’s magic, just as fast and frantic.

His eyes are hot with tears, Bucky’s face wet against his neck, and Steve doesn’t know how he ever imagined that Bucky might go on with his life and marry someone else: there was never going to be anyone else, not for him, not for Bucky.

“Fuck you,” Bucky says, muffled, but he’s gripping Steve tight, his whole body yelling the opposite. “Fuck you,” and he’s crying in earnest now, the past two years bleeding out of him and against Steve’s skin. “Stay. Stay.”

Steve can’t even bear to think of how hard it’s been for Bucky since his defrosting. The mere idea that Steve himself would’ve had to live two full years without Bucky, a new millennium around him, seventy years gone by but grief and war fresh in his chest, is almost impossible to handle. He would’ve probably gone crazy, every step followed by Bucky’s ghost, but Bucky’s always been resilient and kind and so, so fucking brave.

Steve pushes his shaky hand into Bucky’s hair. It’s silky and soft like the strands of magic Bucky used to pull out of his chest when Steve had gotten a shiner or busted his nose, or anyone in their
team had been hurt on a mission.

“I love you,” Steve says, because he forgot to say it that fateful morning in the Alps, and vows to keep saying it until Bucky grows tired of it.

Bucky draws a hitching breath and curls deeper into the embrace. He feels painfully thin in Steve’s arms. “Say that again.”

“I love you,” Steve says, and swears to never let him go again.

Chapter End Notes

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?

Fresh the wind blows
towards home:
my Irish child,
where are you now?

Steve’s Ma quotes from T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, but the lines are originally from Richard Wagner’s opera Tristan and Isolde.

This is the last full chapter of this fic, the last part will be an epilogue.
“I've got something for you,” Romanoff says as Steve lets her in. Her expression is carefully neutral as she hands Steve a thin manila folder and strips her coat off.

It’s been nearly a month since Bucky was let out of the hospital, and after keeping vigilant watch for the first two weeks, Romanoff has slowly let them be alone more, cooped up in the safehouse Maria Hill arranged for them.

Having Bucky back is--

Well. Steve doesn’t really have words for it, because how does one put into words what it means to have his whole life returned to him; to have his magic evened out into perfect, powerful balance. They're still relearning each other, finding the new sharp corners and smoothed-out curves that make up both of them now, stumbling upon hollows left by abuse and grief. But the magic between them is strengthening day by day, boosting Bucky's recovery, and they're still under the layers of the years past, and they've always adapted just to stay together.

“What's this?” Steve flips the file open, greeted by his own face. It's a mugshot, probably from the early years judging by the haircut, but his eyes are unfocused and his mouth slack, indicating that he’s charmed to the gills. On the other page is a long list of typed addresses. Some look distantly familiar, scattered all over Europe.

“I called in a favor, and a friend dug deeper into this,” she says. “That's a list of all the locations you've been stored in before they brought you to the States. Some of those might still have your blood in their possession.”

When Steve glances up sharply, she cocks her head and eyes him up and down. “We can't allow the risk that someone finds it and tries to make another blood bind.”

“No,” Steve says and follows her to the kitchen, where Bucky’s swearing at the height of the kitchen counter. He’s still in the wheelchair most of the day, his magic-torn knees not yet fully supporting his weight.

Their life isn’t perfect - nobody thought it would be perfect, considering the circumstances, but they are trying their best to make it work, and Steve doesn’t think he’s been this happy and grateful in his whole life, even with the nightmares and guilt that plague him and Bucky both.

“Hi, James,” Romanoff says and kisses him on the cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Not bad, even though I'm still in this race car,” Bucky says, maneuvering the chair around with both hands. Then he glances at Steve, reading that something’s wrong from whatever expression is on Steve’s face, and his face darkens. “What's going on?”

Steve hands him the file wordlessly. Bucky frowns as he reads through it, his pale gaze flicking up to Romanoff. “Explain.”

“We’re covering our backs,” she says. “Even an attempt at another blood bind would be highly dangerous for you both. I have a guy in Europe who's ready to help out, but he can't do it alone.”

“I have to go,” Steve says, skimming the address list, and when he looks up, Bucky’s jaw is tight. His heart twists painfully, knowing that he’s abandoning Bucky once again, and he hates his next words before he’s even said them. “You know that, Bucky, I have to. If they’ve got even a drop of my blood, it could be enough. We can’t risk it. I can’t risk you.”

Bucky nods, but the twist of his mouth is bitter. “I know,” he says. “I'm not angry at you. I'm just fucking tired of having to let you go, and-- well.”

He gestures at the wheelchair, frustrated, and Steve takes his prosthetic hand and squeezes, still wary with displays of affection around Romanoff. What he and Bucky have is theirs, not for other
eyes, and he wants to guard it - because he’s always had to. “Yeah, Buck,” he says, hoping his voice conveys that he’s not happy about it either. “Hopefully this will be the last time.”

“It fucking better be,” Bucky says, squeezing back, and takes a deep breath. “Okay. What’s the plan?”

Romanoff stays for half an hour, going through possible options with them, but once she leaves, a long, heavy silence descends onto the house. Steve fiddles with the file, following the timeline with his finger just so that he doesn’t have to see the expression on Bucky’s face.

“Take me to bed,” Bucky says then, holding his hands out, and Steve helps him up and does as he’s told.

Bucky’s pale and slim in the warm light of the bedside lamp, but he doesn’t look like a starved animal anymore, his ribs and spine less prominent than when he got out of the hospital. He’s starting to get his muscle mass back, but it’s slow going, his body still trying to settle down from the strain it went through.

Steve’s loved every single version of Bucky through the years, but he just might love this one the most, with all the marks of hardship and resilience, because he has that Bucky now, and hopefully will have for the rest of his life.

“Promise me,” Bucky says as Steve kneels between his open legs, his fingers folded into Steve’s shirt. “Promise me you’ll come home.”

It hits Steve right under his breastbone, then: the steel in Bucky’s eyes paired with the plea in his words, how much it takes for him to let Steve go this one last time. “I will, honey, I promise I always will,” Steve says, framing Bucky’s face with his hands, leaning in to kiss him, and Bucky makes a small, hurt sound against his mouth.

He kisses Bucky because he doesn’t know how else to convince him, to show how serious Steve is about returning to him, and eventually Bucky’s fingers tighten in Steve’s shirt and he kisses back, open-mouthed and desperate.

“Once it’s done,” Steve says when they part, pushing Bucky to lie down, running his fingers down Bucky’s torso to the waist of his sweatpants, skimming past the brimming pools of magic under Bucky’s skin. “Once it’s done, I’ll never leave again. You’ll get bored of my dumb mug before we’re done, sweetheart, I promise.”

“Never,” Bucky says seriously, and pulls him in for another kiss.

It takes over two months.

Bucky gets a postcard, occasionally - always blank except for a small star drawn on the back, and he tracks Steve through them, collecting them on the fridge door. Natasha brings news from Barton, who turned out to be the guy helping Steve in Europe, and they’re encouraging even if it’s slow going: they’re gathering intel as they go, tracking Steve’s trail across the old Soviet Union.

“He might not return,” Hill says sceptically in late June, as she and Nat come to visit, eyeing the colorful mural of postcards. Bucky just had to buy more fridge magnets to hold them. “You know that, James. The investigation waiting for him - and you - here is enormous. I wouldn’t be surprised if he never came back, because the shitstorm is going to be damn awful once the press finds out about you.”

“Nah,” Bucky says. He’s almost fully balanced out even after Steve’s prolonged absence, the memory of Steve’s touch keeping him afloat, and the pools of magic in him have settled down. His body feels like it’s finally starting to relax after months of not using magic - he’s out of the wheelchair, his knees finally holding his weight. It’s a good day, and his hands aren’t shaking as he measures coffee for three. “He will come back. I know that.”

He knows it in his bones, the weight of Steve’s promise in every healed fracture and joint, and as the pain’s slowly lessened or he’s learned how to live with it, the certainty has grown. Steve will
return. Sooner or later, eventually, he will, and the knot of magic they form will be complete again. Bucky waited for Steve for nearly seventy years, even if subconsciously. He can wait for a little longer.

Hill sighs behind him and thankfully drops the subject, instead asking him about his recovery, swapping idle gossip.

It takes two and a half months, but one July evening, when Bucky’s slicing shallots in the kitchen, going slow because his joints are aching with the stormy weather, the silence in his apartment grows suddenly heavy.

There’s someone else in the apartment with him, and Bucky grips the knife tighter just in case, preparing for an attack. He’s slower than usual today, the rain seeped in, but he doesn’t need hand-to-hand to fight. It will cost him and set him back in his recovery, but if it’s necessary, he will do it.

But suddenly his whole body warms, the flush of magic through him so fast and delighted that it makes him dizzy, gripping the counter with his free hand, and he knows who it is.

“Bucky,” Steve says, and Bucky knows that when he turns, Steve will be standing there in the kitchen doorway, golden and beloved; a soldier finally coming home from the war.

Bucky had thought about it when the honorable discharge had been offered to him after the rescue from Kreischberg: of going back to New York and waiting day after day for Steve to come back to him; of them both getting to return home. He had refused, then, too aware of how the distance affected them and reluctant to leave Steve alone on the front, but the thought had lingered through the war, up until Steve fell. A homecoming; something to wait for, a happy ending for them both.

He can’t bear to turn, not yet. The moment is so heavy, the possibilities endless, and it feels like his heart is a hot lump of coal behind his Adam’s apple, ready to burst. He thinks about the past two and half years, the bottomless well of grief he’d been falling down, too tired to try scrambling for purchase, just to find out that there was an end to it and that it was worth it all, sweet and sorrowful and all-encompassing.

“Bucky,” Steve says again behind him, his footsteps quiet against the floor as he closes the distance; and Bucky’s body is singing, aches and pains forgotten, his hands trembling with happiness.

Steve steps closer, his chest pressed to Bucky’s back, his breath warm against Bucky’s ear, and Bucky lets himself tip back into the embrace, closing his eyes.

“Sweetheart,” Steve murmurs into his hair, soft and low, one arm circling Bucky’s waist, his other hand coming to cup Bucky’s own, and Bucky lets go of the knife, and drops it,

and drops it,

and drops it.

****

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who held tight and managed to keep up with my trainwreck of a writing process, but most notably to Esaael and Moony for cheering and incredible art, and to Fox and Alby for saving the whole thing. xx

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