

miles to go before i sleep

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miles to go before i sleep

by [Avelera](#)

Summary

Steve finds Bucky outside of the Smithsonian and invites him home.

A hurt/comfort, wish-fulfillment sequel to "The Winter Soldier". Also contains angst because, really, how could it *not*?

Notes

This fic was brought to you by "The Winter Soldier", about 200 consecutive plays of "I Will Follow You Into the Dark" by Death Cab for Cutie, and copperbadge's fic [American Patrol](#), which I highly recommend if you enjoy this pairing.

I'd like to give a shout-out to my incredible betas: [determamfidd](#) and [amatara](#) for their tireless work in making this fic even slightly legible. Thank you so much, darlings!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [Miles to go before I sleep](#) by [cjx2228](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [И долог-долг путь домой](#) by [Loki \(secretlytodream\)](#)

Chapter 1

The target was waiting outside when he left the museum. It felt too early to call him anything else, with his mind still a muddle of instinct and fragmented memory. He couldn't even think of himself as the Winter Soldier, deserter that he was, but he had no other name. He had seen his own face plastered with impunity across the museum, on posters and newsreels, commendations and placards, on a gravestone, along with that of the target, the man he somehow *knew*. It was easier to continue thinking of him in this way. It simplified the world, dividing it along lines of what was important and what was not, the ending of a single heartbeat, a singular purpose that need not be examined. That he did not know himself was not important. He knew the need to hide his face from the world, to be the ghost, the one who could not be found.

Yet it had been found in there. There had been an entire *room* devoted to the face he saw in the mirror, the face he had killed to conceal. And, now across from him, the face he had been ordered to kill.

He knew there had been a memory wipe, and that it had been recent. He could tell, in an abstract sort of way, that he would have been refrozen by now were he still back there. Put away lest he crack like the fragile tool he was. The memory wipe was total; and he could usually only tell it had taken place by the odd blanks it left in its wake, the negative, the absence of proof. That he could not recall his last mission, or that the hair and clothes had changed since his last time awake. He did not allow it to distract him. At least, not until now.

He felt curiously blank as he stared at the target. A face as well known as his own, he would have once said it was because it had been given to him in a folder. Now it was because he had walked through aisles and rooms of a museum dedicated in his honor. It was only in the privacy of his mind-- a place so often trampled and stolen, given to others for their cause and only now vacated, left empty and *used* for him to make of the tatters what he would-- that he admitted he had known the target well before that.

The target was leaning against a tree, and there was a strange symmetry to their attire. Both wore caps to conceal their faces, jackets, and running shoes. The target's hat was blue to his black, and decorated with a logo. A letter, the symbol of a sports team, and a corner of his brain provided the name *Dodgers*, and the word *Brooklyn*, and it resonated through him as if he were a bell that had been struck.

The target smiled at having caught his eye. It was a shy smile, hesitant, though his body language spoke of confidence so easy it had become second nature. He felt in himself the skittish, animal-like desire to bolt and was poised on the balls of his feet prepared to do just that. The target puts his hands up, open, and though he knew how quickly they could become fists hard and fast enough to rival the metal arm, he was strangely soothed by the gesture and settled, eyeing the target as he approached.

"I thought you might come here," the target said. "You saw the exhibit?"

It was his turn to hesitate, but then he nodded.

“So you know now? That you’re Bucky Barnes?”

He realized he was shaking his head violently and stopped himself. “We share a face,” he said, a truth even he could acknowledge. There had been more too, a creeping sense of vertigo when he looked at the photos, a split-second where he could remember being on the other side of the camera. But they were only flashes, and could well be only his imagination. Still, he had to admit that the threat model for all of this being an elaborate trap was too high to be realistic. The evidence would have taken decades to plant, and he had always been too careful with his own face. Unless those who kept him had done this. He dismissed the possibility, acknowledging the far simpler possibility that there was a man with a face much like his.

The target nodded, not pushing further, laying out silence like a path at his feet.

“A face, that’s all,” he continued, and that anxious feeling, like something was crawling around inside him and trying to escape, rose again in his throat. He started walking.

The target stepped in front of him. Not stopping him, he could easily walk around, but he found himself arrested. “Where will you go now?”

“Away,” he said. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, though the word *Brooklyn* rattled at the back of his head, snatching at his attention like movement seen out of the corner of a sniper scope.

“You can stay with me, if you want.”

He stilled. Again, the target was not pushing, not stopping him from leaving. The hands were still flat, open, and unmoving.

“You don’t have to decide now. But if you want, if *you* decide it’s something you need, you’re welcome to stay. Any time.” Slowly, the target lowered his hands and reached into his jacket. He tensed. But the target only pulled out a small notebook and, with a stub of pencil lead that had been pinned between the pages, scrawled down an address. The target began to tear the sheet out, then stopped, considering. Then he bent down, hands still open and unthreatening, and placed the notebook on the ground.

He did not move to accept it, and the target stood again and took a step back.

“Hey, you may know all the stuff in there better than I do. But just in case... Y’know, if you’re interested. The address is on the last page. Key’s under the brick outside.” The target’s eyes searched his face at the last words.

It was only once the target had turned and walked away that he crouched down to retrieve it, metal fingers scraping the ground as he lifted the notebook. It was small, no larger than the palm of his hand, and he flipped through it with his thumb. It contained a series of lists, names and places and... things, all scribbled down in the same hand. There were dates next to some of the words, others had little notes explaining their function.

On the last page he found the address. Saw the word that had rung through him, echoing along that fault line that split him through, that threatened to shake him apart along rifts of memories that he did not yet wish to consider as his own.

Brooklyn.

He found a train headed to New York, and had no trouble slipping on just as it left the station, metal hand leaving its impressions on the railing as he hauled himself up onto the moving train. It was the midnight run, and the cabins were mostly empty. The few passengers on board were, for the most part, asleep. Normally he would ride on the top of the train, one shadow hidden amongst many, clutching to the edge of the car by the metal arm. But the journey was long, and he had other matters to attend to.

He felt his skin crawl as he walked down the aisles of sleeping passengers. Some gazed at him, sleepily, and an instinct rose in him to snuff those lives out, and with them the curious glances. But he had no backup, no cover and instead he found the first empty cabin and ducked inside, relieved when he could finally slide the door closed behind him. He had stolen a ticket from the pocket of one of the sleeping passengers as he made his way up to show any who questioned his presence on the train, though he did not doubt his ability to escape from, or kill, any who questioned him. But the idea was... unsettling, in a way that it had not once been. He had done undercover missions before, ones that had strict rules against any casualties except the target, but they had been tightly regulated, watched, backed up, supported to hide his identity. He was alone now.

He sat down, and took out the notebook. There were some words he knew in it. Moon landing. Berlin Wall. He'd had a hand in both, and remembered the lab assistants speaking of them afterwards, and for many years to come. There were others he did not recognize. I Love Lucy, Nirvana—his brow furrowed—disco?

The communications networks had changed too since he was last sent out on an undercover mission, some thirteen years before, but he recognized a screen when he saw one and had learned through quick observation how to make use of these new mobile telephones. He held the one he had stolen in the metal hand, and navigated with his right hand as he began to search the terms in the notebook.

He had skimmed through most of the list before he paused, his finger hovering over the screen, and typed in a search for two words:

Bucky Barnes

The sky was gray, overcast, and the city was equally gray. The cars rumbled through the streets. There were fewer taxis here than downtown, and he thought of how much had changed, and how little, though he couldn't place the source of the thought. He arrived at the address listed, and found a red brick apartment building there, wooden stairs leading up to the door, and the sight rocked him with its familiarity. He climbed the stairs to the door and stopped there, his hand poised to knock.

The instinct caught him by surprise. The Winter Soldier did not knock. He smashed through windows, doors shattered to kindling under the weight of his fist. He reminded himself again that this was an undercover mission of sorts, that he was not to draw attention to himself. The thought calmed him in the vague, swirling grayness of his mind. The emptiness that occasionally shifted and formed snatches of conversation, a remembered face, before the images melted back into the morass of wiped memories and blood.

This was just another cover identity, one he would shed when the mission was over, when the target was neutralized. There was no shiver running down his back, no sick, twisting feeling in his stomach. If his pulse raced it was not of any importance, only the body's natural response, like the rush that came before pulling the trigger. An involuntary reaction. He didn't need to stay here. He didn't have to knock on this door. But even the thought of walking away caused another panic to rise within him, the one that rode the currents of confusion inside his head.

I knew him.

He started, and his fist came down against the door. The flesh one, otherwise he might have broken through it. It was only then that he remembered the target's passing words, of the key beneath the brick. He did not even need to look, he could have closed his eyes and found its place and he turned to take it when he heard the door open behind him.

"Bucky?"

It was only the reminder of his cover that kept him from spinning to drive the metal fist through the speaker's throat. That, and a second instinct, as the sound of that voice spread through him like a drug, relaxing him and twisting him up all at once. He turned, slowly, keeping his arms rigidly at his side, and nodded.

"You came, I didn't think..." the target breathed.

He didn't answer. There was little need for a weapon to speak, and the target seemed to recognize this because he stepped aside, gesturing towards the inside of the apartment.

"Please, come in. I can make up the guest room for you. There's a shower, and uh, if you're hungry I can... make you something." The target paused, and something soft and bright came over his expression.

"What is it?" he said, and was surprised at the croak of his own voice, rough from lack of use. Not nearly as surprised as the target, but that brightness did not fade as a result. The target shrugged, looking sheepish.

“I’m sorry. I’m just... really happy you’re here.” And a smile broke across his face—

—*like a goddamn sunrise*—

The words rang through his head, an echo of his own voice, brash and laughing. He saw himself clapping the target against him one-armed, hugging him close, but the target was smaller, scrawny and pale, but with that same smile.

He realized he was staring at the target, the muscles of his face slack, expression blank as the vision faded and the larger man replaced the smaller one. Bewilderment flooded him, and he forced past it, instead walking into the house. He ignored every alarm in his head that warned him against entering a location controlled by the enemy. For some reason, the name no longer applied to the target. It had not applied since he had dragged him from the water, but now especially thinking of him as “the target” felt... imprecise.

He left the matter for later.

It had been thirty-six hours since he last slept, but even so he was surprised to awake, still wearing his shoes, on top of the blankets of the spare bed. He heard the clatter of metal from somewhere inside the house and slipped out of the bed, landing silent on the hardwood floor. He slunk through the hallway towards the sound. The target was in the kitchen, with his back to the door. He was cooking something on a frying pan, flipping its contents with an easy flick of his wrist. He appeared engrossed, not sensing his observer, or if he did he gave no sign of it.

It struck him again that “the target” really didn’t fit the man in front of him. He had read the file, seen the exhibit. Captain America might serve, but it was cumbersome, a rank and title, not a name. Not that he was one to comment, who had only thought of himself as the Winter Soldier for all the decades of his life that he could remember. He studied the man across from him, saw the shield falling from the helicarrier, the target refusing to fight him, even as he tried to break him with the metal fist.

“Steve,” he said. The frying pan banged against the stovetop and the tar—Steve’s back went rigid.

“Bucky?” Steve said, turning around, staring with wide blue eyes. He no longer wore the jacket and baseball cap of their meeting at the museum. Instead, a white t-shirt that outlined his torso, and simple jeans hung over bare feet. Steve was stronger than any man he had fought, but he did not appear strong now. If anything, he looked like the scrawny, frail boy of the flashbacks, stricken and lost.

He shook his head in answer. He was not Bucky, but then he wasn’t the Winter Soldier either. For now he simply... was. He took refuge in the impreciseness of it, of simply *being*. No identity, no mission except to remain undercover until something gave. He had no long term plans, but thought whatever he must do was somehow here. Finishing the mission or finding a new one, it was all wrapped up in the blond man before him. He could wait. The hopeful set of Steve’s shoulder subsided and he looked back to the frying pan.

“I, uh, made breakfast. More like lunch now, I guess. Do you still like omelets?”

He did not know that he had ever liked omelets. Choosing a meal was something left to targets and missions, their habits predictable, their choosiness a weakness that meant which poison could best be concealed within. There was no element of choice in his own meals. He ate without tasting. But when Steve nodded to the kitchen table, he found himself sitting, accepting the silverware that was passed to him while Steve did what he could to salvage the meal that had been so unceremoniously dropped.

In a few minutes, there was a plate set before him, and on it a rather rumpled looking yellow omelet. It was speckled with other colors, what appears to be vegetables and some meat. He did not examine it. His instincts were warring between the wariness that came with accepting a meal from a recent enemy, and the conditioning that forced him to eat whatever was set before him, without question, when not on a mission.

Logic won out, a reminder that he had come here on his own terms, that he had certainly eluded notice on the way, and that he had already slept in the guest room of this recent enemy, vulnerable to any number of attacks, without consequences. He ate one-handed, holding the fork in his right hand and cutting the omelet into pieces with its edge. He felt an odd sort of self-consciousness that kept him from making use of the metal arm, though the tool had saved his life so many times, and in many ways *was* his life. But in front of Steve it felt...wrong, like a blemish, and he kept it under the table, out of sight. Steve did not speak as he ate, but did occasionally sneak glances.

After he finished his meal he wondered if he should return to the solitude of the bedroom, perhaps try to sleep again. He was not used to being awake so long without a mission or training to fill his time.

“What did you think of the notebook?” Steve asked.

He looked up from his plate, empty now, that he had been staring at silently as he contemplated his options. He shrugged. “I knew some things. Others I didn’t.” The silence stretched, and once again he had the sense that it was as an invitation. “I didn’t see any pattern to it.”

“There really isn’t one.” Steve chuckled. “I just put down any old thing that gets recommended to me. It’s funny, everyone has a different idea of what was important these last seventy years.” He trailed off. “I, uh, missed a lot of it, y’know. During the war my plane crashed in the Arctic...”

“You were then rediscovered three years ago, and thawed out by SHIELD. The serum preserved your life while you were buried in the ice, a known side effect of the drug,” he interrupted. His voice remained flat, reciting a rote lesson, and his gaze did not shift. “All facts from your file.”

Steve nodded, but seemed unperturbed, as if he were used to people quoting the facts of his life to him. “It wasn’t long after you fell. I got a bit reckless after that. I was...angry. I just wanted the war to be over. I got what I asked for, I guess. It ended while I was on ice.”

“The war didn’t end there,” he said. “It never ended.”

Steve looked up, and his eyes were sad. “No. I suppose you would know that better than anyone.”

The next week passed very much like the first day. He would sleep, eat the meals Steve prepared, and speak perhaps three sentences as Steve attempted to draw him out with conversation.

Steve never left the house. What groceries they had were delivered. Once, when the bell rang, he looked to the door and Steve answered his searching look without prompting. “I’ve earned a bit of time off, and the others can handle any trouble. Truth is, I’m afraid you’ll vanish again if I go anywhere.”

He blinked in acknowledgement, but said nothing to dissuade Steve of that assumption. He *would* leave immediately if Steve did. There would be too great a risk of discovery, of being found in enemy territory by those who were not so forgiving of his past. But so long as Steve was here he could not work up the motivation to go. He felt as if he were waiting, but for what he could not say.

It came to him that night.

The tiniest movement sent waves of agony through Bucky, and he knew his body had been shattered by the fall. Cold did not even begin to describe the water that trickled around him, over him, dragging him down. It was heart-stopping, it robbed the breath from his lungs with its chill as much as from the impact, and left his brain fogged and numb. That numbness might have been a blessing, if not for the fact that all that remained was pain screaming through his body, tearing his thoughts to shreds.

Somewhere beyond the agony, Bucky remembered. He remembered Steve’s outstretched hand as he fell from the train, remembered looking up as he shrank to pinprick. The explosion of impact. The darkness that followed. It all happened so fast, and yet he could see each millisecond of it as if he stared at the frames of a film reel one by one.

He knew Zola when he saw him, and Bucky screamed, fighting like a mad thing. He tore at his bonds with his nails, struck out with his remaining fist and sheer brute strength, but could only watch helplessly as he was strapped to the operating table. A mouth-guard was shoved between his teeth and the first wave of electricity washed over his brain, removing his memories like a wave destroying lines in the sand. Bucky woke with a metal arm, and half his life stolen away.

It was not over the first time. It took dozens of attempts to wipe his brain clean and he remembered shivering in the cell, searching desperately for the faint flickers of memory in his mind, for any sign of who he had been. Remember, remember, remember, he whispered over and over to the pitiless dark. Remember him, remember your name, remember who you are.

After the next wave he was down to rank and serial number. A string of meaningless phrases that somehow made up an existence. There was something else, something important, that flashed like sunlight in his mind, but he could no longer place it. He stared up at the blank walls of his cell, and felt tears running down his face for reasons he could not name.

There was one more shock treatment before they began to train him. They put a gun in his hand and set him loose at the practice range. He killed two of the guards before they brought him down again. That night they froze him for the first time, and he recalled his last minutes of consciousness the feeling of ice, of the river washing around him and pain aching through every nerve of his body, as he was dragged down into the depths.

He came awake screaming, limbs thrashing, metal fingers shredding the sheets and blankets. The door banged open and Steve was there, clad only in pajama pants, his expression terrified.

“Bucky!” Steve said and dashed to the side of the bed, hands hovering over his thrashing body. He stopped at the name. His chest was heaving and he looked up into Steve’s familiar face, lips parted, eyes wide. “Bucky, it’s ok, I’m here. You’re safe.”

His arm moved, compulsively, beyond his control and his hand seized Steve’s just as he had tried to all those years ago, just as he had been unable to. Yet he felt nothing, no brush of air or imprint of touch, and realized that he had reached for Steve with the metal arm. He was clenching too tightly, he could tell by the tension that ran through Steve’s arm, how he winced with pain.

“Don’t leave,” he said, and his voice was harsh with panic. He didn’t know why he was asking this, or what he thought to gain. He only knew the shadows were receding with Steve there, the world was no longer tilting on its axis.

“Of course. I’m here, Bucky. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

His breathing slowed, and Steve eased into the bed beside him. Their hands remained linked, and he settled back against the pillow. Too soft, but he had never questioned such things. His eyelids fluttered and his last thought before drifting off again to sleep, his fluttering gaze fixed on Steve’s face, was that he needed a name again.

Bucky. It was the name Steve had given him, and as good as any. It felt... right.

Bucky fell back to sleep, and dreamt no more that night.

The morning sun streamed through the slats in the blinds, stirring him from the darkness of sleep. He grumbled, and moved to turn away from the light...

... only to be stopped.

He—Bucky, he had decided to be Bucky, at least for now—looked over to see Steve beside him on the mattress. He was sitting upright against the headrest, his head lolling against his

shoulder. His hand was still wrapped around Bucky's, tan fingers intertwined with metal. Bucky stared at their hands, then back up at Steve's face. The light slanted in bars across his features, highlighting his throat and cheek, glowing in his eyelashes and hair.

At Bucky's movement he stirred, eyelids fluttering, and looked down, smiling shyly. "Good morning."

"You stayed?" Bucky said, stupefied. Sleeping upright could not have been comfortable, and even if Bucky had done the same many times on many missions, it had not been by choice. The metal fingers had left their segmented imprints across Steve's hand, which must be numb from the grip. Steve only shrugged.

"Said I would, didn't I?" Steve said. He adjusted his seat, scooting further onto the bed, then arched his back to stretch, wincing as it popped. At no point did he let go of Bucky's hand. "That was some nightmare you had last night."

"I... uh..." His words were changing, his thoughts. When before he had spoken with the cold, simple precision of a weapon given voice, now he had somewhere to stand within his own mind. An island of identity, only a fragment, and made up of the horrors of that first wipe session, of screaming inside his cell, but it was something. A starting point that was altogether separate from the life of the Winter Soldier. "I remember... when it all began."

Relief broke across Steve's face, but swiftly behind it came grief, crumpling his expression. Steve clenched his hand harder around Bucky's. He could not feel it, only saw the knuckles whiten. "Do you want to talk about it?" Steve murmured.

The words stuck in his throat and a shiver ran through him, as he felt for the first time in years the need to *speak*. The nightmare images were rising in his mind, building in his throat, such that he gasped the words. "Zola. Found me, after the fall, knew it was me. He was looking. Said I had escaped." He shook so hard his teeth were chattering, but the words were pouring out, halted and stuttering, but bringing a beam of light to thoughts long buried in darkness. "I tried to hold on but c-couldn't. I f-fell and my name... t-they said I had no name...."

Steve made a soft sound at the back of his throat and bit his lip. He was blinking rapidly, and his lip trembled as he looked up at the ceiling, before turning his gaze back to Bucky. "You have a name," he said, his voice rough. "James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky. From Brooklyn, the 107th, the Howling Commandos and my..." He stopped, his words choked off. "I'm sorry. Tell me the rest."

"C-Can't, there's nothing. Nothing else," Bucky said. Nothing else he could put into words without screaming. He tried to sit, pushing himself up with his good hand, but it still shook and he flinched. He could hear it still, his own voice reciting name, rank, serial number, until the words ceased to have any meaning. He saw the coffin-like steel chamber closing around him, the ice flooding his veins and dropping him into darkness that stole consciousness and years. No homecoming from the war, no home to return to at all. Only war without end, as time ran out behind him, and missions lined up before him in a wash of red.

Warmth encircled him and he seized, his body stiffening, before he realized Steve had twisted around and was kneeling behind him. His arms were wrapped around Bucky's shoulders. He still held the metal hand, pressed now to Bucky's chest, and his grip was tight, but not so much so that Bucky would have to fight to escape. Bucky's breath was like thunder in his ears, and the room spun as his every instinct screamed at him to break the grip and pin his assailant to the ground.

Instead he went still, then he tilted his head back, resting it on Steve's shoulder as he looked up at the ceiling, trying to process it all. The nightmares were losing some of their luster, and he could no longer feel the steel chamber closing around him with such sharp clarity. The memory of cold was beaten back by the warmth of the body pressed against him. Another memory rose, soft where the other was jagged.

Steve, the smaller one, thin and pale and cold, curled up on the shabby bed under a thin blanket. He was coughing deep, wracking coughs, so hard that it reddened his face and brought tears to his eyes. It was winter, and the snow swirled as Bucky shut the door behind him. He kicked off his shoes, hung up his hat and coat, and knelt beside the bed. The floor was cold as ice. Steve forced a grin at the sight of him, tried to gasp out a greeting, waving with his hands to say he was fine, but Bucky wasn't smiling. Instead he lifted the blanket and slid beneath it, his larger body curling around Steve's. Before long, even with the thinness of the blanket, the press of bodies and clothes heated the small bed to something close to bearable. Steve's coughing eased, but he was pale and exhausted. Bucky pressed his chin against Steve's frail shoulder, then gently kissed Steve's neck, drawing a fluttering sigh from him. He held the smaller man close, and they drifted off to sleep together, while outside snow fell above the city.

"Your what?" Bucky said. "James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky. From Brooklyn, the 107th, the Howling Commandos and your...your what?" He turns his head to look at Steve, their noses inches apart. "What was I to you?"

"Who," Steve corrected softly. "You were... my first friend, my best friend, and my..." he took a deep breath, "You were *mine*."

Bucky was quiet, his mind drifting back over this newest memory, until he could almost smell the threadbare wool, feel the prickling of his skin as sensation returned to his toes. Remembered Steve's breathing ease as they melted against one another.

"I'm sorry," Steve said, making a little sound of frustration. "It's not... it's not like I *owned* you. I'm just not... really good at saying it, even now. It's better today, people don't have to hide as much anymore. But it was hard then, and it's hard now. I don't think either of us had a name for it. All I knew was there were always dames who wanted to dance with you, that you could have had anyone you wanted, but at the end of the night I was the lucky one who got to keep you."

"Is that what you're doing now? Keeping me?" Bucky said. His voice was not accusing, it held no tone at all. He was used to being kept, used, released only to be hauled back again and put to sleep.

“I couldn’t stop you from doing anything back then, and I couldn’t now,” Steve murmured. “You can leave whenever you want. But I’ll always be waiting for you to come back, and I’ll be there to save you if you can’t. I always will.” Bucky felt the arms loosen around him, and wasn’t sure he was pleased by it as the other man released him.

And Bucky thought he might not mind so much to be kept, and freed, and brought home again, if Steve was the one to do it.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by “not all who wander are lost” by fideliant (different fandom, some similar themes?), about 150 more plays of “I Will Follow You Into The Dark” by Death Cab For Cutie, as well as “Kody” by Matchbox Twenty, and “Cat and Mouse” by The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus.

I’ve also discovered the fantastic Steve/Bucky fics of Odsbodkins, which have very much defined my vision of the boys pre-serum, so you should go read them. All of them. Right now. Well, after you finish reading this. Thank you so much to everyone who has commented, bookmarked, or left kudos for this work so far, I’m very pleased that you’re enjoying my little story!

After the nightmare, the act of simply existing was no longer enough to satisfy him. Bucky noticed it the first time while he was sitting at the kitchen table, after they had finished their meal, and saw his fingers tapping against the table. The movement was not random, not a muscle spasm, and he frowned in confusion at his own dancing fingers as if they had personally offended him.

“Got a song stuck in your head?” Steve remarked with a faint grin.

“A song?” Bucky said, perplexed. The smile melted from Steve’s face, as it so often did whenever Bucky asked what to him seemed a simple question. It was beginning to bother him more and more when those smiles vanished.

“A song. You know, like music? Geez, you’re probably going stir-crazy in here with nothing to do.” Steve rose from the table and immediately set to work, explaining to Bucky the television, something called “Netflix” and giving him a flat device, which supposedly held thousands of books. There was also another small box with a headset attached, which Steve said had hours’ worth of music stored on it.

Steve seemed to have some expectation that these things would fill his days. And Bucky tried, for Steve more than for himself. If he failed it was not due to a lack of interest or patience, but rather of understanding. The works of fiction could not hold his attention, he could not grasp the purpose of focusing on the lives of others, especially lives that had never existed and never would.

Nonfiction was worse. Anything from the last century—news, biographies, history books—awoke in him that sick, twisting feeling of vertigo. *This is wrong*, his mind would whisper at an account of the fall of the USSR. He had nearly broken a window when he’d chucked a paper copy of New York in the 1930s across the room. Steve had offered to find something

more to his taste, but at the wild look in Bucky's eyes had stopped. The reading device and the TV were available to him, but their screens remained dark.

Music, though, music was another matter. Steve had been hesitant at first, but finally pointed Bucky to playlists on the device labeled "1930s" and "1940s". There were others collections too: modern music, classical, something called "disco" that he recognized from Steve's list. But the moment he heard the first strains of jazz—the word arrived fully formed in his brain, without Steve's prompting—Bucky sagged into the couch. His head fell back, and the feeling of the earbuds faded to nothing as he was lost in a wash of sound and sensation.

Shadows danced behind the darkness of his eyelids. He saw the flash of stockinged feet, the whirl of skirts and the cut of suits, untucked shirts and glinting belts. He did not need to be told this was a memory, but it was a pointless one, an amalgam of a thousand nights overlaying one another. All he knew was that he had once danced to jazz, and what use was a memory like that?

"It is useful. You loved to dance," Steve said, and Bucky only realized then that at some point he'd begun to murmur aloud, and been unable to hear himself through the blare of the headphones. Bucky's eyes fluttered open.

Steve was standing in front of him, in the middle of the living room. He was dressed in a simple t-shirt and jeans, much like Bucky himself, who had dressed from Steve's wardrobe.

Steve offered his hand. Palm up, as if expecting Bucky to take it. The music player was in Bucky's right hand and so he had no choice but to reach with the metal one, feeling nothing when Steve's hand closed around his. He rose to his feet as the jazz wailed and skittered through the headphones, taking some portion of his mind elsewhere, high above and floating on tones of angels, turning his muscles to liquid.

The music changed. Grew mournful and slow. Bucky saw from the way Steve tilted his head to the side that he could hear it too; with the serum-augmented senses it may well have been loud enough for both of them. His other hand found Steve's waist without prompting, still holding the music player pressed between them, and Steve's arm wrapped around his shoulder. Steve looked down, unable to meet his eye, and a faint blush was staining his cheeks. "Should have known you'd take the lead," Steve said.

"Well, you were always smaller," Bucky replied without thinking. He felt the hairline jolt go through Steve, felt him shrug it off.

"Right, and you had to practice somehow. Not that the practice helped me much, no dame as tall as you was going to want to dance with me," said Steve.

"I never said that."

"Nah, I just knew it from experience," said Steve.

"You're not small anymore," said Bucky.

"So maybe one of these days you'll let me lead?" said Steve.

“Don’t push it.”

“Aw, Buck...”

Bucky froze, and Steve nearly pulled him off balance as he continued to sway. The entire conversation flashed before him. Where had any of that come from, and why had it seemed so natural? Who the hell was this man, who had danced in a frigid little apartment in Brooklyn when Steve was small and frail? Who had laughed as they tripped over one another’s feet, fighting for who would take the lead?

Who the hell was Bucky?

Steve caught him as he tried to pull away, fingers pressed around his wrist. Bucky’s long hair whipped across his face as he turned back.

“Wait,” Steve begged. He eased his grip on Bucky’s wrist, but did not fully release it. “The next song’s a waltz. But if you don’t like that, we could always jitterbug.”

Bucky stared, the wildness fading from his eyes to be replaced by confusion, and something rose in him, light and bubbling.

He barked a startled laugh.

Bucky turned back, putting his hand once more at Steve’s waist. The words came naturally this time, and he didn’t try to stop them. “Sounds good. Felt like I was at a funeral there. You got any ragtime?”

“Isn’t that a bit old-fashioned, even for you?” said Steve.

“You’re just saying that because you don’t know the steps.”

“Don’t ...? Oh, we’ll see about *that*. You know, I’ve been waiting a long time for the chance to spin *you* around,” said Steve.

“I ain’t giving up the lead without a fight,” said Bucky.

“You’re on.”

Two weeks later, Steve delivered the news.

“I’ve been called in for an assignment,” he said, not quite meeting Bucky’s eye.

Bucky had been sitting on the couch in the living room, looking out the window with distant eyes as he listened to the songs that played on the radio. Newer music, not the kind he had known as Bucky Barnes. As the Winter Soldier, he had only heard such music as a background buzz, the ambient noise of the lives of others. To listen to it now, even with its strange tones and harsh harmonics, was like following a rope that wound its way out of a cave. He didn’t know where it would take him, only that the darkness and cold were receding, and he felt closer to the world outside than at any time he could remember since the

fall. Bucky realized his mind had been wandering, unwilling to lock on to the meaning of Steve's words.

Called in. Leaving. Sent on a mission, for who knew how long. He felt that blankness return, the shielding nothingness that had prevented the Winter Soldier from thinking beyond the reality before him. He nodded.

"I don't have to take it. The others can manage on their own."

"But not as well," Bucky said in a monotone.

Steve swallowed and nodded. "It's pretty serious. I wouldn't even consider it otherwise."

Bucky would have been curious at that. Bucky would have wanted to know more about this mission, about what kind of threat could seem overwhelming to even Steve's teammates. He didn't feel like Bucky right now. The numbness was rising up around him, the music breaking down in his ears into a discordant collection of sounds.

"Will you still be here if I go?" said Steve.

Bucky looked up. Steve's jaw was tight with apprehension, his face a picture of misery.

"Do you want me to?" said Bucky.

"Yeah," said Steve. "Yeah, of course I do. But I know I can't force you. If you're not comfortable—"

"I'll wait."

Steve drew up short. The tension in his shoulders eased, but he still looked uncertain.

"Really?"

Bucky hesitated. He was still in enemy territory, and it wouldn't be easy to explain what the Winter Soldier was doing in Captain America's apartment without Steve there. Any number of disasters could occur.

But Bucky couldn't keep Steve there, and it's not like he wanted to go. The apartment was simple, white walls and wood floors with only some basic amenities. Luxurious compared to what the Winter Soldier was used to. It had lost the edge of strangeness, become home. He found that he didn't want to leave, even if the Winter Soldier chafed at the risk.

"Yeah, if you want me to. I figure I owe you," Bucky said. The other boy from Brooklyn knew Steve had done a lot for him already, not just the cooking, or holding his hand after that first nightmare. He might have been a bit embarrassed at being tended like this, like a child, but it was so far away from anything the Winter Soldier had known that those pockets of memory that made up Bucky couldn't summon the impetus to care. He had been used to being tended as the Winter Soldier, cleaned and stored like the weapon he was. To be cared for as a human being, without expectation... he wasn't even sure he could process it, so he simply accepted it.

The relieved grin that broke over Steve's face might have been worth it on its own.

Steve arranged for food to be delivered to the doorstep, not just groceries but frozen meals too. It was all pre-paid, so during his absence Bucky wouldn't have to interact with anyone he didn't want to, only pick up the food from the front door once the deliverer had left.

He also left Bucky a mobile phone, a glittering device with a transparent screen, the numbers skittered across the surface in little flecks of light. High-tech, even for this time. There was a button on it that Steve explained would go straight to the earpiece embedded in his helmet, bypassing all signals and safeguards. The line was only meant for their teammates and closest contacts, which was why Steve said it went to Bucky without question. If anything happened, if he felt threatened, or if he just wanted to leave, Steve asked only that Bucky call him first.

Then he was gone.

The silence and boredom weren't a problem. The Winter Soldier had once hidden under the snow for two days without moving, just to take a shot. But by the second day alone, Bucky began to feel restless. The apartment was small, suffocating, without Steve to make him forget its isolation. And he had the nagging sense that something pursued him. Not an enemy, though he thought of trapping the windows and doors just in case, to warn him if anyone tried to enter.

Rather, it felt like an approaching storm, the air pressing down on him with palpable weight, and there was a distant rushing in his ear like an approaching torrent. The unease followed him from room to room, which may be why he finally sat down on the couch and turned on the TV.

His keepers had ordered him not to watch television, though his undercover missions afforded him the opportunity. But Bucky at least recognized the device, even if he and Steve had never had the money to own one. He had some vague memory that the news should be on one of the two channels, and his instincts proved accurate, not that it would have been hard to find what he was looking for.

The Avengers were plastered across every channel. Downtown San Francisco was in shambles, as the team fought a pair called "Quicksilver" and "Scarlet Witch". He saw a silver form racing over the bay, so fast it could skate across the surface of the water. A red haze exploded, dropping a truck from the sky, the source a petite brunette that the camera could only glimpse from afar.

That's when he saw them. Steve outfitted for war: helmet, shield, and body armor with a white star emblazoned on his chest, the uniform Bucky and the Winter Soldier knew well. It was the man beside him that arrested his attention. Like Bucky, his arm was sheathed in metal, as was the rest of him. Iron Man had been in Captain America's dossier, a potential threat and ally that he would have to be prepared to face.

He knew Iron Man, had seen him before, but never so long after being wiped, not since the memories had begun their steady drip back into his brain, and he realized he knew that face. Bucky and the Winter Soldier both knew it.

Tony Stark looked just like his father.

The memory clamped around him like a steel trap, and refused to let go. Bucky seized on the couch, his breath freezing in his throat as metal fingers clenched around the cushion. His eyes were open, wide and staring, but the images played before his waking eyes in a merciless torrent.

His hiding spot was miles from the road that led to the Stark mansion. A long shot, even for him. He would have to take more than the wind into account; he would have to take the curvature of the earth itself. But this target was important. This one had changed the world, and the world would change again at his passing.

He had not asked why the wife needed to die as well.

It was far, though, too far for him to make out the face of his target through the scope, save as a speck in the distance. They took this route every Sunday, her hair bound in a handkerchief, sunglasses flashing. He always drove. Their son was at home, the order had been clear that he was not to be harmed. Another would take the heir in hand—Obadiah Stane—the one who had given them access and the information needed to set up this hit, or so the Winter Soldier had overheard. He had not sought the information, or cared. It had been spoken openly in his presence, as if he were no more than a gun hanging on the wall.

There was a spot on the road, a narrowing of the pass where the coastal highway twisted like a snake around the edge of a cliff. The truck was coming from the other direction. It would arrive at the predetermined location in forty-five seconds. The driver did not know of the assignment, he was only making a delivery.

The Winter Soldier lined up the shot, aiming close to the ground. In the wreckage, there'd be no way to tell what had punctured the tire and made Stark lose control of the car. He was an excellent driver, better than most professional racers, and a flat tire would not be enough to send him careening over the edge of the cliff on its own. The projected loss of control would be brief, and expertly handled. That was where the truck came in, going too fast for so narrow a road. The driver was running behind schedule, held up by last minute changes in the delivery location, rushing. He was not used to navigating such treacherous lanes, and his cargo shifted and buckled with each turn, unbalancing the vehicle.

The Winter Soldier inhaled, and with the next exhale, squeezed the trigger. The car swerved as the truck came around the narrow turn. He did not hear her scream, or see Stark spin the wheel. He did not stay to ensure the work was done. If he had missed, they would arrange another attempt, at another time and place.

The Winter Soldier never missed. He did not feel remorse, his hands never shook. So he did not understand why he felt cold and sick that day as he packed up and left the site. Why he could so easily imagine Stark's face when it had been so far away on the other side of the

scope. Why he could not decide whether it made it better or worse that he had not watched their final moments.

Bucky snapped back to the present bathed in a cold sweat, his fingers buried in his scalp and his head shaking back and forth. The TV prattled on in the background.

Howard.

The Winter Soldier knew him. Bucky knew him too, but from the mess hall, from the back rooms of the barracks, laughing and talking and sharing a beer. Always a bit odd, a bit too 'mad scientist' for Bucky to connect with, but Steve had liked him, which meant Bucky at least had to try. And he'd found he did, in his own way. It was useful to have a guy like Howard along. He'd been one of them. Bucky would have laid down his life to protect him as much as any of them, only a little slower than he would have for Steve.

The car would have swerved straight into the oncoming truck.

Nausea swept him, like being dumped into ice water, like falling from an unimaginable height, and Bucky was up off the couch. He'd only just reached the bathroom when the bile rose, and he vomited until his skin was clammy and he shivered from the force of it. The visions did not die with the nausea and he felt, like a crack in a door, that more lay beyond. Hundreds of kills, and all those ghosts waiting, as silent and judging as the faces of the saints in a church. Waiting for their turn to remind him of their final moments.

His hands shook as he reached for the phone in his pocket. The battle was probably still raging. Bucky knew he should resist the temptation. Couldn't. The Winter Soldier didn't know how. But he was neither of them, and he was both, something newborn and frightened. And even if he didn't come—Bucky's thoughts rose in him—even if Steve didn't come, Bucky needed to confess, needed to say something to appease those specters waiting on the other side of the door in his mind

He may not answer, he thought, and Bucky's chest tightened with fear even as the part that didn't want to reach Steve eased. But the phone was ringing and he scrubbed the back of his hand over his mouth as he put the device to his ear.

"Bucky, what...? What is it, are you ok?" Steve answered. There was chatter in the background, but Steve's voice was clear and steady, his breathing only slightly labored.

Bucky hesitated, the words rising up inside him like a cry. He wanted to apologize and hang up; he wanted to play it off as if nothing had happened, a wrong number. Those happened, right?

"I killed Howard," he said.

Silence on the other end of the line.

"Please come home," he begged. He imagined Steve faltering, doubt entering his eyes. It was one thing to save a lost friend, but a murderer? Bucky hadn't fought back, hadn't resisted for even a second when ordered to kill a comrade in arms, the father of one of Steve's

teammates. There had not been time. Half a second would have meant a failed mission, and the Winter Soldier didn't fail.

He thought he would be sick again.

"I'm on my way. Give me six hours. Please don't leave," Steve said. The chatter on the other side grew louder; there was a distant explosion.

The line went dead.

The phone slipped from Bucky's hand, clattering to the floor, and he leaned against the wall. Then his head slipped back, pressing against the tiles. His throat worked silently as the first tears blinded him.

Steve arrived six hours later, true to his word. Bucky heard the car pull away, and Steve's steps as he pounded up the staircase. The door bounced off the wall when Steve slammed it open. Bucky hadn't moved, hadn't dared, not knowing when he would be sick again.

Steve hadn't even taken the time to change, but he shucked the armor as soon as he was inside, tossing the helmet onto the couch, dropping the gloves on the floor outside the bathroom. That's when he caught sight of Bucky, still sitting on the ground, and was at his side in an instant. Steve's bare hands rose to cup Bucky's face.

"Bucky? Hey, are you alright?" Steve said, his blue eyes searching. Bucky's gaze drifted down, noted the stains and already-healing cuts on Steve's hands. He still smelled of smoke and sweat. His face was smudged with dirt, his hair standing up straight and wild from the helmet.

"Were they still fighting when you left?" Bucky said, his voice slurring. He saw the flinch that confirmed it, but then Steve shrugged.

"We had 'em on the ropes," Steve said and Bucky knew he was lying.

"You shouldn't have come all the way out here," Bucky said.

"Is this your way of telling me you feel better now?" Steve said.

Bucky thought about it. Found he didn't have the energy to lie, and shook his head.

"Then don't worry about it. This is more important," said Steve. He was leaning in, inches away from Bucky's face. The tiles of the bathroom floor were cold beneath Bucky's legs, but he had stopped noticing the discomfort hours before. The house felt full again, warmer with Steve there, and that was the problem.

"I'm just causing you trouble," Bucky said, and it *was* Bucky, through-and-through. The Winter Soldier didn't worry about excess damage, not unless it disrupted the mission.

"It's the kind of trouble I can handle. Anyway, you would have done the same for me," said Steve.

“That was a long time ago. I—I don’t know if I’m that person anymore,” Bucky looked at Steve with child-like panic in his eyes. “That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? You want him back. But I don’t know if I can, Steve, I don’t—”

His words choked off and he looked away. Steve’s hand fell from his cheek, and Bucky closed his eyes, thinking that touch was gone for good. Then he felt Steve’s fingers trail lower and to come to rest, wrapped around his good hand.

“Bucky, hey, look at me,” Steve said. “It’s alright. You don’t have to be.”

“How can it ever be alright?” Bucky gasped, keeping his eyes closed, his throat so tight he could barely breathe. “He was your friend, that’s why you’re doing all of this.”

“I’m doing this for *you*, whoever that turns out to be. You don’t have to be him for my sake. You don’t need to get your memories back on anyone’s clock but your own.” Steve said.

“And what if Bucky’s don’t come back?” he said. “Or what if the other memories do and they just...drown him out? I was the Winter Soldier longer than I was him. And they’re waiting for me, Steve, they’re waiting to jump me and there’s *more* of ‘em. A lot more.”

Steve hesitated, then settled back and reached out his arm. “Come here.”

Bucky stiffened, feeling a reflexive rush of shame at his own outburst, at the tears burning his eyes. “I’m not some kid you need to hold,” he protested.

“Well, do it for me then, ‘cause there’s something I never got to tell you, and it scares the hell out of me,” said Steve, his arm still outstretched.

Bucky gave him an incredulous look. “You? Too scared to tell *me* something?”

“Hey, it took me a year to work up the courage to kiss you and I was blind drunk at the time. Since alcohol doesn’t really work anymore, I guess I just need to soldier up and take a hug instead.”

Bucky snorted in disbelief, but some of the shaky, haunted feeling was leaving him and he shrugged, scooting over so he leaned his back against Steve’s chest, and predictably Steve wrapped his arms around him and put his chin on Bucky’s shoulder.

“Right, so, after I took the serum I was always worried you wouldn’t want anything to do with me anymore. If you just stuck around to look out for me, or worse, if you’d leave because I wasn’t *me* anymore,” Steve said.

“That’s the single dumbest—” Bucky snapped, then paused, his voice softening but still outraged. “There’s no way that was gonna happen. The serum didn’t *change* you, Steve, you came out the same guy you went in. They didn’t mess with your head like they did to me.”

“Then what do you think they did?” Steve said, his tone solemn.

“Nothin’. Sure you got stronger, and you don’t get sick anymore, but you were always a hero. That’s what they call it, right? When you’re too stupid to back down from a fight?”

Steve snorted a laugh, but sobered, and shook his head. "But the serum *did* change me. I wasn't the little guy anymore. I have to remind myself what it feels like to be helpless, to be weak, in case I turn into a bully. It changed my head too: I learn faster, pick up things more easily. And I started to ask myself: what if I'm not him anymore? Because the old Steve Rogers couldn't do those things, and you gotta ask yourself how that changes you. If he had died with the experiment. And no one would know if he was dead, none of them knew me the way you did. So I was scared that when I saw you, you'd know that Steve Rogers was dead. I mean, what even are we, if not what we do?"

"We're memories," Bucky said, and he leaned his head back against Steve's shoulder, looking up. "Even if you're not that Steve anymore, you've still got his memories. You still know what it was like to be the little guy. Without my memories, what have I got, Steve?" he said looking over, even though he hadn't managed to push all of the tears back and his vision wavered. "What have I got?"

Steve pressed his cheek against Bucky's, tightening his arms around him. "You've got me, for as long as you want me around."

"Yeah? And what do you get out of it?" Bucky said.

"You. Whoever you are, and that's all I need," Steve said. "And it's ok if that's different. We're both different. Now it's just my turn to be there for you."

Bucky started up, straightening in Steve's arms. "I don't want it if I'm just gonna be your damn charity case!"

"So was I your charity case when you stuck around?" Steve said.

Bucky turned back to glare at Steve. "If you keep saying dumb shit like that I swear I'm gonna punch you."

"Then just trust me on this, ok? I want to be here. There isn't anywhere else in the world I'd rather be," said Steve.

"I don't even know who you're staying for," Bucky said bitterly.

"We can both figure it out," Steve said, settling back against Bucky as if he really would hold him as long as it took.

A chill ran through Bucky.

"What about Howard?" Bucky said. Steve tensed, and Bucky could almost feel how the heat went out of the room. "I killed him in cold blood. Lined up the shot and pulled the trigger. He'd still be alive, if not for me."

"Probably not to today, not with the way Howard lived," Steve joked, but his voice was hollow.

"Yeah, and his wife?" This time Bucky felt Steve flinch. "There's more than them, Steve. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. The Winter Soldier killed them and he's me, there's no way

around it.”

“Did you want to kill them?” Steve said. His voice was calm, and measured but there was a fragility to it, a brittleness. “Did you get a choice? Pick the targets yourself, volunteer for assignments? Were you following orders, or did you just do it for fun?”

“What? No!” Bucky said. He didn’t know much about the assignments, they were all still blurred together in his head, but he knew that at least. “I got the file, they shipped me out to the spot. I took the shot. Sometimes I had to go undercover for a couple days first. I didn’t—it’s not like I *got* anything out of it. They just froze me up again after and...and wiped me, if I started thinking too much. If I started thinking at all.”

Steve hesitated, looking lost and terribly young. “So you didn’t know what you were doing, who he was?”

Bucky looked down. Know what he was doing? Bucky hadn’t even known who *he* was, but he had known about the target, and how to take him down. He was a weapon, no different than his gun, to be aimed and fired at the chosen target. “Maybe. I don’t know. But I should have fought it.”

“Could you?” Steve said.

Bucky kept his eyes lowered and after a moment shook his head. “I—I don’t think so. I don’t know. I never tried until you. I knew him and I didn’t even *try*.”

Steve’s arms shifted around him and for a single, heart-stopping moment, Bucky thought Steve would pull away. Then he felt the press of Steve’s face against his neck. “I don’t know, Buck. I don’t know everything that happened to you, how much of you there was, how much was them, and how much... A lot could have happened in seventy years, and I can’t guess what that was, I just have to wait for you to tell me. But there is one thing I need to know.”

“Yeah?” Bucky said his voice tight, hoarse with apprehension.

“If you had known who you were then, and who he was... if you knew as much then as you do now, would you still have done it?” said Steve.

“No,” Bucky said, and relief washed him that he knew at least that much was true. And then, like all thoughts of the gray numbness of the Winter Soldier’s memories, dread came close behind. “But I don’t know if I can say that about all of them, I just don’t know yet. I only know that for Howard and Maria... I would have stopped it if I could.”

Steve relaxed against him, and when he spoke his voice was worn and exhausted, “I guess that’s got to be enough for now.”

He remembered the other kills too, with time. They struck at random moments: when he was listening to music, or when he stood at the microwave, waiting for his meal to warm.

Eventually he started helping Steve with the cooking, but found the Winter Soldier's skill with a knife didn't translate at all to the task. Fortunately, Bucky did remember how cut vegetables without hacking them to pieces, until the sound of the blade striking the cutting board came too close to the sound of knife on bone. He would drop the blade and back away as the memories rose up around him. Screams in waterlogged cells beneath Berlin, of abandoned apartments in Leningrad and a figure bound to a chair. His fingers would grip the kitchen table behind him, fighting for breath.

Bucky came back. Bit by bit, but never quite as he had been. He was a kid from Brooklyn, a soldier in the Howling Commandos, but he was an assassin too, a tool that had spent the better half of a century on missions or on ice. And that didn't go away. It only drew him out, drew him further, and the growing was painful.

Steve waited for him; waited for the dust to settle, taking only those missions that could bring him home quickly, in case one of those memories hit too hard, leaving Bucky lying dazed, panting and unable to move until they loosened their grip.

Sometimes, on the bad days, they did nothing but sit together in bed while Bucky shivered, eyes screwed shut against the memory of blood. Steve would wrap his arms around Bucky and wait for him to come back, exhausted and worn, holding him until dawn.

Sometimes, on the good days, they danced.

"I want to go back to the museum."

Steve looked up in surprise. Bucky stood in the doorway to the kitchen, wearing a jacket and baseball cap in addition to his usual t-shirt and jeans. He couldn't meet Steve's eyes.

Steve regarded him for a long moment. Then he put down the rag he'd been using to wipe the counter, and after a moment's thought he said, "Ok. It's gonna take a few hours, but we should be able to get there before close."

Bucky had braced himself with his question, but started, and eased at Steve's answer. "You're not worried about me going outside?"

Steve shrugged. "Not unless you are? You've already been there once. Or I can call in a favor and we can go after hours, if it's the other people you're worried about."

"No. It's not them, it's..." Bucky said. How could he explain? It would be the first time he'd be out of the house since he arrived, the first time interacting with people who weren't Steve since he went rogue. What if a memory struck while they were out there? What if he hurt someone? Wouldn't Steve's team be worried about the Winter Soldier out and walking around civilians? He'd never even asked if they knew he was here, or if they had allowed it because they saw him as Steve's prisoner.

And just like that, Steve was standing in front of him, his hands lightly placed on Bucky's shoulders. "Buck, you're a U.S. veteran, a former P.O.W, and recovering under my supervision as far as anyone who matters worth a damn is concerned. The only reason anyone

needs to know where you go or what you do is if *you* want them to. So if you want to go to the Smithsonian, we can head there anytime you like. Heck, if it wasn't free they'd probably have to give you the military discount."

"I killed people for HYDRA," Bucky protested, his voice hollow. What little humor that twitched the edges of Steve's lips vanished.

"There's a lot of folks who can say that these days. Doesn't seem fair to be picking favorites," Steve said. "But if you want my opinion, from where I'm standing? They just had to trick us. With you they had to wipe every single memory you had before you would take their orders. And that's got to count for something."

Bucky knew there was more to it than that. Knew the kill count, the years it had taken him to throw off the conditioning –the times where the mission hadn't called for a quick death and he hadn't given one – also had to count for something. And there'd be a reckoning for it, someday. But for now Steve was looking at him like he could do no wrong. The same way Bucky had always looked at him all those times before and he thought, just for a little while, he'd like to believe it.

"Hell, as long as I'm not getting special treatment, I guess I can live with it," Bucky said. "Come on, are we gonna go or are you gonna spend the rest of the day cleaning the kitchen?"

Steve's mouth opened, and he seemed to catch himself, and rolled his eyes. "Jerk."

"Punk." Bucky laughed as he turned and walked out of the kitchen, with Steve following behind. But he stopped at the front door, hand hovering over the knob.

They hadn't had a name for it then. Girls were for stepping out with, for dancing, for holding hands with when you walked through the park. But there were exceptions, Bucky remembered that much. How when spring came, and their frigid apartment in Brooklyn became their sweltering apartment, he and Steve would take the afternoon to go for a walk in the park. Just two guys out for a stroll, nothing to see here. So it was always before they left that Bucky would lean down, tipping Steve's chin up for a kiss that was sometimes hard and passionate and needy, and sometimes soft. Only the second one if he really needed to get out of the apartment. Kiss too fiercely, and Steve would be kissing back and in a couple seconds they were frantically unbuttoning each other's shirts and before they knew it half the day was already gone...

Bucky spared a moment to be bitter that *these* memories were the faint ones, teasing at the edge of his consciousness, sliding back into place so quietly he didn't realize they were there until they ghosted across his mind with a memory of breath on his lips and a gentle touch on his skin. Bitter that it was the Winter Soldier's memories, drenched in blood, that hit him like a train, took his breath away, and trapped him in his own mind until they faded and released him.

Steve was grabbing his baseball cap from the closet by the door when Bucky turned and caught him. He didn't have to reach down anymore, which was a lot easier on his neck. He traced a finger under Steve's chin, drew him close, and just like that, seventy years were no more than a day. A foot of height and Steve still moved the same way, still leaned into the

kiss the same way, and Bucky made it a gentle one, because he really did want to get to the museum before it closed.

Steve was grinning when they pulled apart, and it was soft and bright like a goddamn sunrise, like the light that flooded the room when he pulled open the door and kissed Bucky one more time on the front stoop, for all the world to see.

End Notes

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